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FACT

ON THE AIR
ARRIBA!

by DAN BAUM

A Latino radio scold gets out the vote.

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Shortly before five o'clock one morning not long ago, a dozen people waited outside the locked glass door of a nondescript office building on West Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. Sunrise was still an hour away. Teen-agers buried themselves against the chill in hooded cotton sweatshirts; an older woman wrapped herself tightly in an acrylic shawl. They hardly spoke; mostly they stared glumly at their feet. Inside, they knew, was the man they consider confessor, mentor, social worker, civic conscience, scold—Renán Almendárez Coello, better known to millions of Spanish-speaking radio listeners as El Cucuy de la Mañana (the Bogey-man of the Morning).

Brenda González, a round-faced teen-ager from East L.A., told me that eight days earlier her fifteen-year-old sister, Maria, had been struck in the head by a bullet while they were driving home from school. "When we opened the door, she was sideways, and her eyes were looking up at Heaven," she said. González wanted to ask El Cucuy to announce that the family was going to hold a car wash to help pay for funeral expenses. When González finished speaking, a big, sad-looking man in a cap embroidered with the Virgin Mary stepped forward and introduced himself, in Spanish, as Arturo Santos, from Guatemala. He said that his younger brother, Jorge José, had been shot dead on the street two days earlier, and he showed me a photograph of a long-haired man in a black leather jacket and sunglasses.

At that moment, a sharp-looking young man in an open-necked black shirt appeared on the other side of the glass door. After hesitating a moment, he let the entire crowd into the lobby. He walked me to the elevator and introduced himself as Ernesto de Santiago, a member of El Cucuy's small on-air cast. As the door closed, he gestured toward

the cluster of people and said, "*Así es, diario.*" This is how it is, every day.

When we arrived at the top floor, de Santiago led me through a door marked with a lit "On Air" sign, and we stepped into a large room filled with light and noise. At a central island of computer screens, control panels, and microphones on stalks sat a stocky, animated man wearing headphones: El Cucuy. Almendárez, who is fifty-two, is short, with longish shiny black hair, a boyish smile, and features that suggest both the Native American Indian and the Spanish roots of his birthplace, Honduras. He wore a lime-green shirt, a blue tie, and a red-and-black floral-printed satin vest. Around him, several young men and women were laughing and shouting in Spanish into microphones of their own. The din was overwhelming: canned laughter, an instrumental version of "La Bamba," barking dogs, crowing roosters, gongs. On the walls hung American flags, a rendering of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and many posters featuring Almendárez's beaming face.

"One hundred and fifty-eight days until Christmas Eve!" he shouted above the din. "One hundred and sixty-five days until New Year's!" After some noise and laughter, he punched a button; the music switched to soulful Andean flutes and, in a whiplash change of mood, he dropped his voice to a whisper. "A thought for the blind," he breathed. "These people develop senses different from our own. While the wise ones stumble against a wall, the uneducated, the irresolute, the lazy, and the conformist remain peacefully in the corner." He pushed another button, a recorded crowd applauded, and he underwent another flash personality transformation. "Get up!" he shouted, throwing his arms in the air. "Getting up is only the start! We face thousands of challenges!"

Almendárez's morning show, which has been on the air since 1989, and on KLAX La Raza since 2004, is a seven-hour torrent of puns, pranks, and play-acting, with the loopy mood and cacophonous, somewhat forced hilarity of a drunken office party. It is one of the biggest Spanish radio shows in the nation, which helps make KLAX one of the top radio stations—in any language—in Los Angeles. As many as three million people listen to El Cucuy every weekday from four to eleven and Saturdays from five to ten. Most shows begin with the deafening burr of an alarm clock and Almendárez yelling, "*Arriba! Arriba! Arriba! Arriba! Arriba!*" Up! Up! Up! Up! Up! Up! "This

is why we came to the United States!" he shouts. "To work!" The show's demographic is broad: the program runs ads for Toyotas, Lasik eye surgery, and Disneyland vacations, as well as for Office Depot and "the perfect diet." Through KLAX's owner, Spanish Broadcasting Service, El Cucuy also broadcasts to, among other places, Denver; Seattle; Tulsa; San Francisco; Atlanta; Salt Lake City; Minneapolis; Jackson, Mississippi; Fort Smith, Arkansas; Medford, Oregon; and Greenville, South Carolina.

Almendárez is Latino America's cheerleader. "Hello, construction workers, garbagemen!" he says. "Hello to those who work in the strawberry fields, in the vineyards, in the lettuce fields!" He is also the community's self-appointed father figure, and, as such, he can be patronizing. "I told you: you follow me, and I'll guide you" is a favorite refrain. His "grand crusade," which he mentions several times in the course of every show, is "Votos por America," a campaign to register a million new voters.

After a couple of hours of energetic banter, de Santiago handed Almendárez a slip of paper about the people waiting in the lobby. "Have they eaten anything?" Almendárez whispered. He reached for a leather fanny pack and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill. "Get them some breakfast." A short time later, the crew set up Arturo Santos, the man whose brother had been killed two days before, in a room with a phone, next door to the studio. When Almendárez answered his call, Santos exhaled a bottomless sigh. He said that his brother had been eating tacos at an open-air stand in L.A.'s Koreatown, when someone opened fire with a shotgun from a moving car, striking him in the heart. "Your brother wasn't a gang member or anything?" Almendárez asked.

"No, no, no, no, no. He was a good worker, not a gang member."

Almendárez pressed Santos for the exact location of the shooting; he seemed eager to warn his listeners about an intersection to avoid at night. "Normandie and Eighth," Santos said. "By the freeway entrance? Where Western crosses? A lot of Hispanics live there." Almendárez asked what else he could do for him, and Santos shyly said that he needed help repatriating his brother's body to Guatemala. At that moment, a gravelly voiced women called Señora Ahumada came on and said that she would help with the arrangements.

Later, Almendárez heard from Brenda González, the young woman whose sister had been murdered, and, after a great deal of sympathetic murmuring—"Because the paths of God aren't straight, they wind among rocks and thorns"—he again introduced the mysterious Señora Ahumada. "We've spoken to the funeral home where she is," Ahumada said, in the same gravelly voice. "The cemetery, too. Everything will be arranged." (The family later declined the help, though they did hold a car wash.)

Señora Ahumada turned out to be Maria Ahumada, a sixty-year-old Mexican-American who first got involved with the show eleven years ago when, working as the office manager in a law firm, she heard a young woman call in to Almendárez's show and get bad advice. Though she is not a lawyer, she says that her intervention helped the woman win a two-million-dollar settlement. Ahumada quickly became a regular on the Cucuy show, helping people navigate bureaucracies, communicate with doctors and lawyers, and get answers to their questions. "I'd call an office that was giving some poor immigrant the runaround and make them pay attention," she told me. "Often people are afraid to push. They think Immigration will trace their call and deport them." Before long, Ahumada was receiving offers of services from Los Angeles businesses, and, in 2000, she established a tax-exempt foundation—unaffiliated with KLAX—to provide financial help for listeners as well. "All these people need is a voice," she told me. "Renán is that voice."

A disk jockey at a sister station in San Francisco broke into the show to tell Almendárez about a nineteen-year-old named Michael who had been killed in Van Nuys the night before. "We are all Latinos! We are all Hispanics!" the boy's father wailed when Almendárez patched him in. "We are from different countries, yes, from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, but why do we have to kill ourselves? Why are so many young people losing their lives, why are there so many who don't have the least fear of God?"

"God has chosen you for this," Almendárez told the weeping father. "You will live through it, and be strong for others." He motioned to the sound engineer, who handed him a worn Spanish paperback titled "Guide for the Modern Orator." The book bristled with yellow Post-Its. One, marked "for a dead spouse," indicated a poem called "In the Same Grave"; "How Will I Forget Her?" was "for a dead daughter"; and "Upon Separating" was "for a betraying woman." Almendárez

opened the book to "My Son," a poem by the Chilean folksinger Tito Fernández. He hit a button that brought up a syrupy piano-and-violin tune reminiscent of a soap-opera soundtrack. "Every time I remember my son, I get a pain inside my chest," Almendárez began reading. He continued for nine stanzas. Then, when the poem was over, he leaned into the microphone with eyes half shut, set aside the book, and began to riff in the voice of the father. "Mike was in love, as I was when I was his age," he said softly. "I was only out looking for the woman who would be his mother, who would share her love with him, and with me. . . ." His extemporaneous monologue lasted five minutes.

De Santiago held up a handwritten sign—"Comerciales"—but Almendárez ignored him. "How I miss my son! How I miss my boy!" Almendárez wailed. His voice dropped to a whisper, punctuated with sobs. De Santiago, in his sharp black shirt, sniffled and reached for Kleenex, as did the engineer and Mayra Berenice, who reads the traffic report. As Almendárez finished, his voice barely audible, he reached for a roll of toilet paper to dry his streaming eyes. He leaned into the microphone again, eyes closed, and whispered as though into a lover's ear, "Above, there is a God, and Mike has gone to him. May God now be merciful to me and my wife, so that one day, from the depths of our souls, without forgetting our son, we may soothe our pain." A few bars of a love ballad, with swelling violins, came on. Then an announcer cut in with a carnival barker's bleat: "Don't go away! In a few moments we'll be back with the show 'El Cucuy de la Mañana' !"

American radio stations have been broadcasting in Spanish for more than sixty years. In the past two decades, the number of Spanish-language stations has grown tenfold, to seven hundred, making "Spanish-formatted" the fifth-biggest radio category. (It just edged out "music-intensive religious.") Immigrants now constitute more than twelve per cent of the population, and the nation's forty million Hispanics, whether immigrant or native-born, are now the largest minority in the U.S. They also listen to the radio more than non-Hispanics do—three hours a week more—perhaps because they often work in places where it's O.K. to have a radio playing.

The Hispanic *locutores* of today—like immigrant radio hosts from the past—both strengthen the culture of origin and help to hasten

assimilation. "This kind of thing—I hate to use the words 'multi-cultural diversity'—in broadcasting is unique to the United States," Henry Sapoznik, an American cultural historian, said. "There is no corollary, even in Canada or England or other countries with big immigrant populations. In every other country, to get access to radio, you needed political power. Here all you needed was money."

Carlos Alcázar, the president of Hispanic Communications Network, a media company based in Washington, D.C., says that there is a disjunction between what Latinos listen to in their own countries and what the big media companies offer them in the United States. "In any country in Latin America, the highest-rated shows on the radio are political-debate shows," he said. "They're not entertainment-based programs." He considers the noisy American style of Latino broadcasting not just reductive but also outmoded. On his company's programs, including an hour-long public-affairs show that is partly funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, his staff interviews Spanish-speaking senators and activists for broadcast on public radio. "There's a perception that there's no interest among Latinos in news analysis," Eduardo López, the show's urbane Salvadoran producer, said. "But education, the economy, the minimum wage, wiretapping—who makes more overseas calls than immigrants? We've discussed planning a future segment about the war in Iraq because the Department of Defense has declared that it's going to recruit heavily among Latinos. We're trying, for the first time, to break Spanish into the quiet, serious environment of public radio."

Almendárez, meanwhile, invokes God as often as a Christian broadcaster on the English-language dial. The United States can be a cold, frenetic, dollar-chasing world: *puro reloj*—nothing but the clock—is the way Latin Americans often describe life north of the border. *Norteamericanos*, in their feverish desire to control every detail of the present and even the future, often seem to Hispanics to lack a fundamental faith. Almendárez appears at such religious occasions as the Crossing of the Virgin at Mission Dolores in San Francisco, and he encourages church attendance. "What happens in your neighborhood if they give Spanish-language Masses and you don't go? Pretty soon, if nobody shows up, they cut out the Spanish Masses."

The piety of Almendárez's show is laced with mild raunchiness. He is

sometimes called the Hispanic Howard Stern, though his sexual humor is much tamer. One day, he joked with his engineer and mostly male crew about the odd places where they had had sex. "For me," he said, "safe sex is making sure the car doors are locked." As usual, Almendárez negotiates between the Latino way of thinking—with a strong undercurrent of machismo—and a more modern, *norteamericano* way that brings women in on the joke. One morning, he fielded a call from a young Hispanic woman in Park City, Utah, who told of trying to enjoy her first sexual experience beside a road that was streaming with Mormons "on some kind of pilgrimage." "I couldn't concentrate!" she cried. Almendárez kept her on the phone for five minutes, alternating between sympathetic murmurs and punching the laugh-track button.

Almendárez, however, spends most of his time instructing listeners in the practical minutiae of life in the United States. He tells them how to obtain immigration forms, how to fill them out, and how to register to vote. He urges the undocumented to get documented, the documented to get a green card, those with green cards to become citizens, and those who are citizens to vote. "You have to be optimistic," he said on a typical show. "And you have to work, paying attention to those holy and blessed words: Help yourself, so that I may help you."

"Many people say you shouldn't answer the census," he said one day, and then affected a high, panic-stricken voice: "Don't take part in the census! Don't fill out that paper! Noooo! Don't you see that you are undocumented?" He resumed his normal voice: "But the census is completely separate from Immigration. If you answer, and the government knows that on this street live so many Hispanics, so many people, they'll put a school here, a park there, an added bus route." Even the jokes and skits contain subtle messages about the peculiarities of the United States—that you have to carry change for parking meters and toll roads, that you have to pay for the food in hotel refrigerators, that when you buy furniture on time and miss a payment somebody will show up at your door.

Eddie Sotelo, a Mexican who broadcasts on KSCA La Nueva every morning as Piolín—Tweety Bird—and is Almendárez's biggest competitor in Los Angeles, also attempts to explain the bureaucratic mysteries of El Norte. If a listener calls in trying to find out, say, how to get treatment for drug addiction, Sotelo's staff, working on

laptops, researches the question quickly and Sotelo repeats the information on the air. Like Almendárez, he focusses on the complexities of obtaining legal-immigrant status. "Information is so hard to get," he said. Sotelo, who twenty years ago came to the United States illegally, dodging Border Patrol helicopters across the Southern California desert, is now planning to become a citizen. "I'm going to take my listeners all through the process," he told me. "I'm going to show them every step of the way." Sotelo and his cast close each segment of their show with a call-and-response: "Why did we come to this country?" "To succeed!"

Almendárez is careful to keep his show nonpartisan. He hasn't invited the Republican governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, to his studio, he told me, because "I don't want to have to hide my feelings and I don't want those feelings on the show." Berenice, the traffic-news reader, leaned over to whisper that Almendárez had declined to be photographed with President Bush when he visited the White House for a dinner with Hispanic leaders, a few years ago. "He went and got photographed with the portrait of President Kennedy instead," she said. Yet, at the same time, Almendárez's message—work hard, become legal, pay taxes, vote—would please even the most anti-immigrant conservative. Almendárez told me that he sees no contradiction. "We may both want immigrants to succeed, but we differ on how hard we should make it," he said. "I think it should be easier, not harder."

Almendárez himself took a soft route to the United States. In the eighties, as a young announcer on Honduran national radio, he interviewed the American Ambassador to Tegucigalpa, John D. Negroponete, who is now the director of National Intelligence. Soon after, Negroponete arranged a visa for him, and Almendárez moved to Los Angeles. He married a Mexican woman named Virginia Peliyo, and they have three daughters: Francia, Italia, and Irlanda. He became a U.S. citizen in 2000, twenty-four years after his arrival.

For all the talk about becoming American, Almendárez never exhorts his listeners to learn English. The closest I heard him come to promoting English was an advertisement he aired for *Inglés sin Barreras*—English Without Barriers—which warned that new immigration laws would require better English. It ended with a note of encouragement: "Listen, if you made it across the border you can make it over the barriers to English." Almendárez, however, has

never studied English, and still speaks it haltingly. "I'm crazy. It was a caprice of mine," he told me. "I had some idea that if I learned English my daughters wouldn't speak Spanish. So they speak Spanish with me and English with their Mexican mother and with each other." He said that immigrants should learn English. "The conservatives are right about that." But then he winked and said, "*I oprimo el número dos*. In reality, you can live well in America without English."

As recently as five years ago, crossing the border was easy enough so that Mexicans could view the United States as a kind of high-wage zone of their own country. They would venture north for a few months to take jobs as roofers and dishwashers, and return home with presents at Christmastime. They'd continue the cycle until they'd earned enough cash to get married or to start a business in Mexico. Many had no intention of staying in the United States, or of becoming American citizens. After September 11, 2001, border enforcement grew more stringent; immigrants can no longer count on being able to go back and forth. The number of immigrants in the United States—overwhelmingly from Mexico—continues to rise (an astounding sixteen per cent over the past five years), and the new barriers to crossing the border seem to have changed their attitudes about staying permanently in the United States. In August, the latest month for which the government has figures, twenty-six per cent more people applied for citizenship than had done so in the previous August. (Citizenship applications also spiked in 1994, when California passed Proposition 187, which barred illegal immigrants from receiving state-funded health care or from sending their children to public school.) "Whenever there's an anti-immigrant backlash, people lose their ambivalence about becoming Americans," Clarissa Martinez De Castro, of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic-rights organization, said. "They figure they're here, they're rooted in the community, they're working, and, because they feel excluded by the backlash, that creates an incentive to take that last step."

On December 16th of last year, the House of Representatives passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, or HR 4437. Almendárez and many others call it simply "the Sensenbrenner bill," after the Wisconsin Republican F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr., its principal author. The bill authorized a seven-hundred-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexico border. But its most

incendiary passages would require state and local law-enforcement agents to turn over to federal authorities any undocumented immigrants they encounter, and would make it a felony to assist illegal immigrants in any way that might be construed as helping them stay in the United States. Churches and charities, in principle, could be penalized for providing food or shelter.

In response to the Sensenbrenner bill, a coalition of churches and immigrants' rights groups in Los Angeles began planning a demonstration for March 25th, and Almendárez and the other *locutores* began denouncing the bill on the air; Almendárez has said at least once that it "offends God." Sotelo invited several d.j.s from other stations to call in to his show so that they could promote the protest together. "It's a peaceful march, a civilized march, an organized march," Sotelo said, as El Mandril (the Baboon) and El Gordo (the Fat Man) chimed in. "We have to support each other," El Gordo said. "If they take away all the wetbacks, who is going to listen to us? But, seriously, this isn't about radio stations and competition. It's about something bigger." The *locutores* urged their listeners to wear white, and to carry American flags. "Don't forget to march with us! People!" Almendárez said several days before the march. "We'll be leaving from Broadway and Olympic, and end up in front of the City Hall of Los Angeles, the first day of spring, to protest this terrible law, HR 4437, that practically turns the undocumented into criminals."

On March 25th, the English-speaking population of Los Angeles was largely surprised to find more than half a million demonstrators in the streets—one of the largest demonstrations in the city's history—wearing white and carrying American flags. "We cannot criminalize people who are working, people who are contributing to our economy and contributing to the nation," Los Angeles's mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, told the crowd. In demonstrations over the next couple of weeks, thousands of people also marched in Denver, Seattle, and Atlanta—all cities where Almendárez broadcasts.

A national "Day Without an Immigrant," intended to demonstrate the country's reliance on immigrant labor, and promoted heavily by Almendárez and the other *locutores*, was held on May 1st. In a spot recorded over a rousing brass rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner," Almendárez said, "We will be totally united in a day of action—four o'clock in the afternoon, from MacArthur Park to the little

park at La Brea—to say no to the anti-immigrant laws and yes to the legalization of twelve million of our undocumented countrymen. Wear your white shirt, carry your American flag. We wait for you with open arms. We are the working class. We are in the United States to work. And also the students—go to school, and afterward support us! All united, we will make the difference.”

Factories and businesses closed across the country, schools reported high rates of absenteeism, and crops went unpicked throughout California, as hundreds of thousands of immigrants boycotted work to march in about seventy cities, including Providence, Rhode Island, and Salem, Oregon. In Los Angeles, Almendárez marched at the head of about half a million people, alongside Cardinal Roger Mahoney.

A third big march was planned for Labor Day, but Almendárez did not participate, nor did he urge his listeners to march, which may explain why only a thousand people turned out in Los Angeles. “We’ve already marched,” he said. “Now it’s time to vote.”

In August, Almendárez took his Votos por America crusade on the road, in a big red bus festooned with images of his face—the Cucuymovíl. He and eleven crew members travelled to ten cities, broadcasting from affiliate stations, and occasionally from a little studio built into the back of the bus. At six o’clock on the morning of August 10th, Almendárez was wearing an “I ? NY” T-shirt and pacing the sidewalk beside the Cucuymovíl, which was parked in front of the Natives Restaurant on Northern Boulevard in Jackson Heights, Queens. Inside the restaurant, several hosts of the New York station 93.1 El Amor were broadcasting from long folding tables. Around them, staff members of the Hispanic Federation, a nonprofit organization devoted to Hispanic rights, set up stacks of voter-registration cards and sipped from bowls of Colombian hot chocolate. More than a quarter of Queens’s population is Hispanic, and the Natives, which also houses a theatre where Caribbean musicians perform, is a center of neighborhood life. Almendárez had been working since before dawn, making guest appearances on El Amor and signing autographs, then returning to the Cucuymovíl to broadcast his own show to Los Angeles and elsewhere. “We are here in New York to continue our grand crusade, Votos por America!” Almendárez yelled into the microphone. Pedestrians peered curiously into the bus’s big picture window, and the Q66 Flushing bus roared

past in a cloud of black diesel smoke. “We have been to San Diego, San Francisco, Tucson, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Atlanta—aye, that was a long drive, thirty hours!—Chicago, and, now, New York! We are trying to register one million new voters!”

Over the next six hours, Almendárez hosted Andy Andy—the popular Dominican singer Angel Villalona—a string of *locutores* from El Amor and other New York Spanish-language stations, and a crew from the New York bureau of the Spanish-language television network Telemundo. At one point, nine people packed themselves into the bus’s eight-by-eight-foot studio. Around ten o’clock, Hiram Monserrate, a former N.Y.P.D. officer of Puerto Rican origin who represents the Jackson Heights area on the New York City Council, showed up to urge listeners to become legal residents, and, if they already were, to become citizens and vote. “If you’re not legal, you get no disability, retirement, or Social Security benefits,” Monserrate, who was then running for a seat in the state Senate, said in crisp Spanish. “You have people here twenty-five and thirty years entitled to nothing.”

“That’s right,” Almendárez said. “The Asians have good salaries, health benefits, everything—because they vote.” Pouring sweat, and hoarse from shouting, he took a call on the bus from a listener who asked him whether he objected to the term “illegal” for immigrants without visas or work permits.

“I don’t like ‘illegal’ or even ‘undocumented,’ and ‘wetback’ even less,” Almendárez said, and touched a button to silence, for a moment, all the laughter and the sound effects. “There are just those who haven’t yet arranged their papers.” He paused long enough to wolf down a couple of tortillas from a foil package, while an ad for Travelocity.com blared jarringly in English. “Brothers, sisters,” Almendárez said, leaning into the microphone and brushing crumbs from his chest. “I am not political. It doesn’t matter to me who you vote for. When you put your ballot in the ballot box, all of us are equal—rich, poor, white, Hispanic, Asian, skinny, ugly. But follow me here: we Hispanics do everything in this country. We clean the buildings. We build the roads. We pick the crops. The only thing we don’t do is vote.” †