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# How A Pioneering Chicano Film Is Enjoying Rediscovery

BY JUAN CASTILLO

**Y**ou could say "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" is back from the dead.

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The seminal indie film about the Chicano experience in poor South Texas barrios rocketed to regional fame in the 1970s, surprising even its novice and maverick director, Efraín Gutiérrez, who feared it would flop.

With no formal training, Gutiérrez, a Chicano community theater director in San Antonio, all but taught himself how to make the movie. He borrowed a camera and editing equipment, and got help from young, Anglo student filmmakers. Gutiérrez was actor, director, producer and distributor.

But before the movie even opened in San Antonio, where he shot its gritty scenes, Gutiérrez was already in the hole for thousands, which he spent to rent a theater and on advertising. Then on opening night in 1976, to his open-mouthed awe, lines curled around the block for



"We blew San Antonio's mind," the now-68-year-old filmmaker told NBC News Latino. "The movie took off like wildfire."

Gutiérrez soon heard from theater owners in small towns with heavy Mexican American populations who wanted the movie and wanted it fast. He was happy to comply, crisscrossing Texas with his breakout film, then crossing over to movie houses in Colorado, Michigan and other states. "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" made \$300,000 in three months, he says.



A still from the movie "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!"'s opening funeral scene. The movie's maverick director, Efraín Gutiérrez, is in the black shirt at the far right, playing the lead role of Alejandro.

But the movie's candle burned wickedly fast, and in three months it was gone. How exactly that happened is another tragic story, ripe for a Hollywood script.

Forgotten for decades, the movie, however, is now enjoying renewed attention. Recently, the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress selected "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" and 24 other movies for preservation in its archives, joining influential, previously inducted films like "Casablanca" and "Gone With the Wind," chosen for their historical, cultural and cinematic value and relevance.

Considered by many to be the first Chicano feature film, "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" deserves its place in the national archives, says Chon Noriega, a film historian and director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center.

At its surface, the movie tells the story of a young Chicano, Alejandro, (played by Gutiérrez) wrestling with the death of his brother killed in Vietnam and trying to find his place in the world. But

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"It is less about trying to figure out what is going to happen to the young man than it is about the environment in which he is coming of age," Noriega explained. "That's what's extraordinary about the film. It captures the political scene, the cultural scene, the family context. It's really giving a very complex view of that moment in time."

Noriega was a California graduate student working in film studies when he heard of an obscure, groundbreaking 1970s feature film made outside the Hollywood framework by a Mexican American. That bilingual film was "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" and for years Noriega searched for a copy of the movie and its director. He believed the movie was worth saving and he wanted new audiences to see it.

Then in 1996, Noriega says, he came home to find a telephone voice message from a stranger.

"I told him, 'Hey, I hear you're looking for me,'" Gutiérrez told NBC with a hearty laugh.

The renegade filmmaker had long ago lost track of his film, but he had just tracked down a 16 mm copy. A friend had stored it in his attic for 15 years.

The film was restored and Noriega became its champion, nominating it for inclusion in the National Film Registry.

Gutiérrez said he and his writing partner, Sabino Garza, who has since died, captured, "good or bad, what was going on at the time, especially the part of the young people getting lost in drugs and stuff."

"Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" delves into the sacrifices of young Mexican Americans killed in Vietnam and the devastating impact on their families and communities. In a memorable opening scene, a soldier's mother is presented with his Silver Star at his funeral. "I don't want no medals. I want my son," she spits back.

"What Gutiérrez was doing was trying open up a space to be critical of some of the things happening in the legal system, in popular culture, in education that were very detrimental to the Mexican American population, and to be able to address that without sugarcoating it," Noriega said.

The politics of "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive," were unflinching and in your face.

Gutiérrez says he and Garza had other intentions, too.

"I remind people that, really, our goal was to put brown faces on the

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had no voice, and we still don't in the film industry," Gutiérrez said.

I grew up in San Antonio seeing Mexicans and Mexicans all around. But what we saw on the screen, if they ever mentioned us, was superficial. We were just this rowdy, stupid people, whatever they wanted to portray."

After a long hiatus, Gutiérrez is again making films, currently working on documentary projects.

Of the National Film Registry induction, he says, "I'm honored. Seems like it was yesterday we made it, but it was a whole long time ago."

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### JUAN CASTILLO

Juan Castillo is an award-winning writer and journalist based in Austin, Texas. His work has been featured... [Expand Bio](#)

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