

# Clara's Song: Writing Songs from Interviews

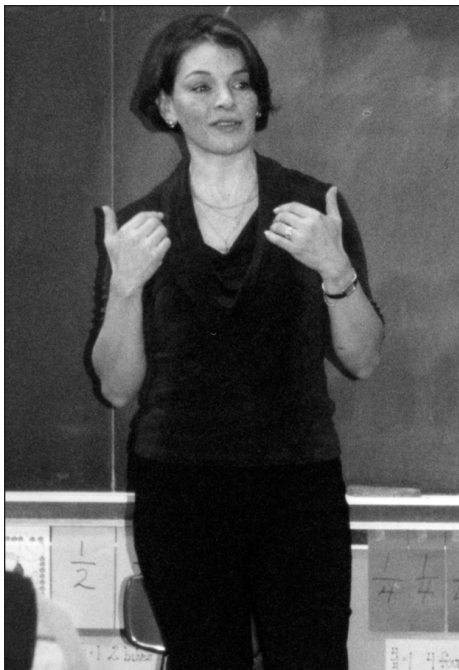
by Leo Schaff

*In City Lore's Songwriting Artist Residency, students write songs inspired by their interviews with family, school, or community members. Two 3rd grade classes at PS 11, in Woodside, Queens, interviewed Clara Lopez, a classroom teacher and Colombian immigrant. Teaching artist Leo Schaff and classroom teachers Kathy Giannitsanos and Eleni Fotakis helped prepare students for the interview with listening exercises (see page 26) and practice interviews. The residency lasted several weeks and culminated in a CD recording in a professional sound recording studio and a performance, where students performed the song they had written for Ms. Lopez and for the school community.*

## The Interview (Excerpt)

**Leo:** I'd like to introduce Ms. Clara Lopez. Ms. Lopez, our class has been learning about Latin America and about Latin immigrants living in New York. We're interested in hearing about your memories of Colombia and why you came to the United States.

**Clara:** My name is Ms. Lopez, and I guess I'm going to start from the beginning all the way up to now. I'm not that old, so it's not going to take that long. I was born in Colombia, South America. A hundred percent of the population speaks Spanish, and a large percentage is Catholic and goes to the same church. It's very different from the United States, and the city where I was born is a very different city from New York, because most people were born there. They don't come from all



Clara Lopez

Photo by Amanda Dargan

over like the people that come to New York.

I was born in a small city that is surrounded by mountains. The Andean Mountains are on one side, and if I opened my kitchen window I'd see a chain of beautiful mountains, among them a snow mountain. There's a story about snow mountain, because it's not a snow mountain anymore. It melted about 15 years ago. I was not in that town anymore; I had moved, but I heard how it happened.

For two years ashes came down over the city, and everybody talked about the volcano erupting, because on top of the mountain there was a crater and a volcano. Then the snow on the mountain melted. The snow followed the course of the river, and one river goes into another, and a town about six hours away from there totally vanished. This is called an avalanche. It brings with it the snow turned into water, and mud and trees and houses that it encounters in its wake. And six hours away from that place, there was a very big river, and a small village, and the whole village vanished with 30,000 people.

Let me go back to my family. My father died when I was 13 years old. I spent a lot of time with him, but he wasn't there after I was in junior high school. I have two brothers and two sisters. We had a large back yard, and we would spend a lot of time playing there. Back then it was safe.

After high school; I went to college. From college I moved to a larger city where I worked in a bank, but I don't like banks too much. I like children. During the day I worked in a bank, and in the evenings I worked with children. Teachers don't make as much money as they do in this country. They are not well paid. That's why I decided to move here, because I like to work with children. I've been teaching for the last 11 years. I am

## Clara Saw an Eagle

Clara saw an eagle up in the sky  
The wind was blowing in her face causing her to cry  
Clara saw an eagle way up high  
She thought she saw her father  
At the same time

Chorus:

And a tear ran down her lonely eye  
She wondered why, she wondered why  
It reminded her of when she had  
To say goodbye, to say good bye  
Manizales, Colombia – Manizales,  
Colombia  
Manizales, Colombia – Manizales,  
Colombia

Clara saw an eagle up in the sky  
Looking for the river where many people died  
She thought she saw an angel way up high  
And thought about her country  
Why must people die?

(Chorus)

Clara saw an eagle up in the sky

- 3rd grade students with Kathy Giannitsanos and Leo Schaff

very happy in PS 11, because I love to be with children; I learn a lot from them.

Let me tell you what I love to do besides working. I love to go hiking. I started hiking with my children when they were about a year and a half. I would grab them by the hand, and we would go up the mountain. We have seen beautiful animals, and learned to appreciate nature. Three years ago we took a canoe to three little islands. And guess what we saw. Let me give you a hint. It was flying over us.

**Student:** Seagulls and birds?

**Clara:** Yes there were lots of seagulls, but a bird even larger than a seagull.

**Student:** An eagle?

**Clara:** An eagle, exactly. We had heard that there were eagles on those islands and that one of the eagles had a nest, so we followed it to find the nest. But what the eagle was doing was taking us away from the nest to protect their babies. So we didn't see the babies, but we saw the eagles flying above us. That's what I find very exciting. I find it very exciting working with children, because I learn a lot from

children, and I find it very exciting going out in nature because I feel that we have a lot to learn from nature.

**Leo:** Before you raise your hands, I just want you to think about this. I don't know if Ms. Lopez realizes this – but what we're going to be doing with all this wonderful information you're telling us is to write a song about you. So, with that in mind, I wonder if anybody has any question for Mrs. Lopez that might help us know how we're going to write this song.

**Student:** What did the eagle look like?

**Clara:** It's a very large bird, with huge wings.

**Student:** What color was it?

**Clara:** It was a bald American eagle, black and white.

**Student:** What was your city called?

**Clara:** Manizales. Manizales is made up of two words. "Mani" means nut and "zales" means salt. Because there was a lot of salt in the area.

**Student:** How did you feel when 30,000 people died in the avalanche?

**Clara:** I felt very sad, especially because I had a very good father and many of his relatives died there, and somebody who worked with me, a coworker, had 29 relatives who died in that area.

**Student:** When your father died did you cry a lot?

**Clara:** Very much. When my father died I was only 13. He just got sick one night, and he passed away. I was used to being with him, and he was a very good father. So, yes, I cried for weeks. Later on I began to feel better. And now I feel that he's around all the time.

**Student:** When your father died and you went to school, did your friends make fun of you?

**Clara:** No, I don't remember any of that.

**Leo:** What kind of music did you like growing up, and what music do you like now?

**Clara:** Growing up I liked dance music. But I don't dance any more. As I grew up, I slowed down, and now I like very soft music with no words.

*Singer-songwriter, Leo Schaff, leads songwriting and theater residencies for public school students and workshops for multi-age and at-risk populations. He co-wrote "Give Us Hope," performed by the San Francisco Boys and Girls Chorus at President Obama's inauguration.*

## Leo's Songwriting Process

When writing songs with children, keep the process fun and interesting. It's important to be flexible and open to whatever happens in the room. I use these steps in songwriting with children, although the order may change and often we move back and forth between steps.

**Generate Ideas** – Songwriters get ideas from many places: from their own experiences, from news stories, from signs they see on the street. Many songwriters keep a notebook to write down ideas, phrases or titles to use for songwriting. Encourage students to start a songwriter's journal.

**Select Key Words, Phrases, Images** – From what you heard, or from your notes, let's list some words and phrases you remember from our interview; include images or feelings of your own that may have come to mind while listening.

**Organize and Categorize** – Organize words/phrases into groups based on a particular aspect of the interview: an event, a description, a story, a feeling, a memory.

**Analyze and Interpret** – Is a theme emerging – a struggle, journey, longing, hardship, hope, loss, the importance of family ties? Is there a story we want to tell? Start a list of possible themes.

**Add Rhyme** – Take a group of phrases and transform them into two or four lines that rhyme. (This can be done as a whole group incorporating individual suggestions; or it can be worked on individually or in small groups).

**Select a Musical Style or Form** – What kind of music would be appropriate to the theme, mood, or identity of our interviewee? What mood should the music convey – spirited and energetic, quiet and peaceful, somber and sad, comical or inspirational? What kind of music did our interview subject say he/she liked? Should we try to write music in that style?

**Add Melody and Rhythm** – As rhyming sections emerge would someone like to try to sing a couple of the lines (i.e., make up a melodic phrase)? Or, would someone like to say this section a couple of times over, but give it a beat as you say it (ie, make up a rhythm) If not, let's play a chord or two on the guitar, and see if that helps us come up with a melody or rhythm. [OR: Take an existing song – either traditional to the interviewee's native country, a song they like, or a song the class and the teacher are familiar with – and write a new lyric.]

**Give It Structure and Form** – Do we have a section that sounds (lyrically and/or musically) like a verse – sections that move



Leo Schaff

Photo by Amanda Dargan

the story along? Or do we have a chorus – a section that repeats and that captures or sums up the theme of the song? Or, do we have a section that can work as a bridge – a section that crosses the song over from the main part of the story to a new and culminating part?

**Put It All Together** – In groups (or as a class) let's work on the sections and bring them together.

**Keep It Interesting** – Just as a story needs to move to different places, so, the music has to move out of its loop of melodic verse repetition into a chorus that sounds different, that usually lifts the song – in melody and spirit. A bridge or even a spoken word section is another way to move the story along, change the melody and/or the rhythm, and keep it interesting.

**Give It a Title** – Do we have a title? The title helps define the message of the song.

**Edit and Revise** – The process of writing a song is like a journey to an unknown country: exploring new combinations of words, new feelings and images, new ways of telling and re-telling a story, new melodies and rhythms. But have we taken on too much baggage? Do we have too many verses or too many subjects or words in the lyric? Have we kept to our theme or themes, or have they been lost along the way? Do we need to return to the familiar roots of the song: the catchy phrase or melody that repeats (i.e., the "hook"); the central story line; the central image or feeling? Do the melodies of the different sections work and flow together?

**Perform It and Pass It On** – Once the pieces begin to fit, the song comes to life – when we sing it. And it takes on a life of its own when it's then sung and played in new and different ways – by other people!