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NICARAGUA LIBRE: A CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI
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The first campaign to be carried out in Nicaragua after the July Revolution of 1979 was a literacy campaign. Campesinos, workers, the unemployed, the alienated, the young and old, even captured members of the ex-dictator's army were taught how to read and write: they were given the basic, functional, formal powers of The Word. Symbolically, this fact in a country which is predominantly Catholic and has often been called 'the land of the poets' is highly significant, as well as being practically useful,

given that Nicaragua is preparing to have its first democratic elections in over 50 years. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, always the poet, the painter and the citizen, spent the week of January 27th to February 3rd, 1984, in Nicaragua. He was invited there by the Minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal, when he came to San Francisco in December. Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books has recently published a book of poetry, *Volcan*, that has introduced many voices from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, that are being heard for the first time in North America. The following interview was conducted at City Lights Bookstore on March 18th, 1984.

DAVID: Did you have any preconceived notions of the poetic and political climate in Nicaragua before you went there? If so, what were your thoughts?

LAWRENCE: Oh yes, I had a lot of preconceived notions about Nicaragua before I went there. Like all American citizens I was a victim of the propaganda of the Reagan Administration against Nicaragua. You know, Nicaragua is supposed to be this Red Communist state. I went to see for myself. I paid my own way to Nicaragua because I didn't want to burden the Nicaraguans with my expenses nor did I want any accusations being made by the CIA. The Reagan Administration would have us believe that there are Red Communists everywhere, just like Senator McCarthy and the old UnAmerican Activities Committee. The fact is that three percent of the Nicaraguan population belong to the Communist Party and eight percent belong to the Socialist Party. That's eleven percent of the population. If people would only read a few basic texts they'd see what the difference is between Socialism and Soviet Communism. The Nicaraguans want to build a democratic socialist government. They are going to have elections there in November. I had a long talk with Foreign Minister Miquel D'Escoto and Daniel Ortega about this. People there are studying electoral law. There is a Socialist Government in Greece. The U.S. isn't supporting Contras to invade Greece. There's a lot of commerce between Greece and Nicaragua. Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister of Culture, has even invited Ernesto Cardenal over there.

DAVID: Did you have any preconceived notions of the poetry in Nicaragua before your visit?

LAWRENCE: Well I knew that there were basically two schools: the interiorists and the exteriorists. Ernesto Cardenal is an exteriorist. His poetry is essentially documentary poetry. However he does have a few poems that I would say encompass both the interior and exterior realities like "The Arrival," a poem he wrote when he was coming into Nicaragua right after the Insurrection.

DAVID: There's a very well known poet in Nicaragua, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, who is an editor of La Prensa. Pablo Antonio Cuadra says, as do others, that there is censorship in Nicaragua. Did you see any poets being censored? Did you see anyone being censored? Did you see Pablo Antonio Cuadra being censored?

LAWRENCE: I met Pablo Antonio Cuadra at La Prensa. I thought that it was symbolically interesting that La Prensa was next door to where the Banco de America is. There were no guards at the front desk like you'll find at the [San Francisco] *Chronicle*. The first thing Cuadra said to me was: "Sorry we can't publish any of your poems, because they won't give us any paper to print the literary supplement." The fact of the matter is that the Sandinistas give La Prensa paper to publish the daily news editions, and La Prensa is the opposition paper. There is a shortage of paper. The paper has to be bought with U.S. dollars. There is a shortage of U.S. dollars. There is a shortage of all manufactured goods. You go into the stores and the shelves are empty. We had to go into six stores to find batteries for Chris Felver's camera. Medical supplies are scarce. It's more important that money be spent on people's needs rather than literary supplements. People talk about censorship. There's censorship in this country. Try getting a Marxist article in the New York Times. You have to read a lot to find out what's happening in Nicaragua. You have to read the English papers, the New York papers, and you should read a French newspaper. The Europeans have a different perspective.

DAVID: Now while you were in Nicaragua...

LAWRENCE: Of course I don't believe in censorship. It's true that there's a review board of some sort that La Prensa has to submit its articles to. The Sandinistas want to build democratic socialism in Nicaragua, and they're committed to democratic elections this year—but, if there's any censorship involved in it, I'd deplore it. Ernesto Cardenal told me that their model isn't the Russian model and it isn't the Cuban model and that they are trying to avoid the mistakes Cuba made—which they were actually pushed into by U.S. policy.

DAVID: I understand that you are writing a book on your experiences in Nicaragua entitled: *Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre*. What will be in it and when is it coming out?

LAWRENCE: It's a City Lights Book and it will be out in the fall of '84. Chris Felver took over one thousand photographs for it and I filled a couple of notebooks while I was there which I'm editing now.

DAVID: While you were in Nicaragua you were interviewed by KPFA and that interview was broadcast here. One of the things you said was, and I'm paraphrasing this: "I think that all the poets and artists in North America who aren't aware of what's happening in Nicaragua are being stupid." What did you mean by this?

LAWRENCE: No, I didn't say they were being stupid. I said they should try to understand what's happening in Nicaragua, and then speak out about it instead of maintaining "a silence closely resembling stupidity." In Europe the poets are considered intellectuals. Here most of them aren't intellectuals. Poets for the most part here are apolitical. They've been tranquilized. They've been too well fed with all the grants and other sources of money. It's a fat country!

DAVID: What poets in North America do you see as being political, and what could they learn from their Nicaraguan counterparts?

LAWRENCE: The poets and translators who published *Volcan* are artists and activists. What could they learn from their Nicaraguan counterparts? I'd say poets should actually go there and go with an open mind. It's true that I was on a guided tour. I'm not an expert on the country. Now in terms of being on a guided tour, when we have visitors here in San Francisco we show them the Golden Gate Bridge and the Opera House, etc. They did the same with me. But I also saw a lot more. We visited prisons and went to the border where the fighting was going on. I met the Chief of Police. He didn't impress me as being a regimented military man. I met Tomas Borge. He was tortured in prison. After the 1979 Triumph he confronted his torturers and said: "My revenge is for you to shake my hand." I met six of the nine Sandinista commandantes and they impressed me as being basically humane, reasonable intellectuals, rather than military men or dictators.

DAVID: What's the status of women in the Nicaraguan Revolution?

LAWRENCE: I talked with the poet Daisy Zamora about that. She told me this story. She was with her husband the night before twelve Sandinistas were going to take a barracks. She told her husband: "You can't go out of the house without me because I want to fight too." He told her that she had never fired a rifle. Daisy is a very frail and very beautiful woman. She was in the Ministry of Culture but she had to take a less demanding job because of her health. Well, she insisted on going. So they got her a .22 rifle and taught her how to shoot it. They took the barracks that night. In Nicaragua, women and men fought side by side throughout the revolution, more so than in Cuba. Daisy told me that in Nicaragua women have absolute equality with men and have rights which she feels women in the U.S. are still fighting for.

DAVID: What do you feel North American poets and artists can do right now in terms of the Anti-Intervention movement?

LAWRENCE: They should go down there and come back here and tell people about what they saw and experienced. That's what I'm doing. On April 7th at the San Francisco Art Institute I'll be participating in a reading from the new book, *Volcan*, and also talking about my trip to Nicaragua.