

Dancing on the Brink of the World

(also known as the River Song)

1. On the seventeenth of October,
In seventeen sixty-nine,
Don Gaspar de Portolá
Camped by the riverside.
'Mid the alders and the cottonwoods
And roses of Castile,
Singin' to the redwoods
Ran a river, wild and deep:
2. Long before Don Gaspar came,
Ohlones made their place here;
The river their companion
For at least five thousand years.
They made up their own language,
We know only seven words
Of a song: They sang of "...dancing
On the brink of the world..."
3. For sixty million years or so
The river has been flowing,
If we could ask her just one question,
Here's what it would be:
When the mountains rose up from the sea,
Oh did you feel the shaking
Of Mother Earth as she gave birth
To all the lands we see?
4. In December nineteen fifty five
When the rains came pouring down,
You carried all that water
And you poured it o'er our town.
Then the engineers, the very next year,
They put you in a channel:
Our river, once so wild and free
Felt like an enemy.
5. On the seventeenth of October
In nineteen eighty nine,
Santa Cruz deep down was shaken
By nature's design;
From the mountain tops to the ocean cliffs
There was a mighty roar
We found that we were "...dancing
On the brink of the world..."
6. In our vision for the future
There's a river running clear,
Where the salmon and the steelhead
Raise their young ones every year;
'Mid the alders and the cottonwoods
And roses of Castile,
We shall all be "...dancing
On the brink of the world..."

Notes: This song was written in 1994, during Celia's campaign when she was running for election to the Santa Cruz City Council. In thinking about appropriate campaign issues, we realized that the San Lorenzo River was the central geological feature that has guided the evolution of the City. Consulting Don Clark's *Santa Cruz County Place Names*, we discovered that Portolá first camped on the river on October 17, 1769, the very same day of the year that we experienced our most recent major earthquake—October 17, 1989. It was a magical coincidence. Crespí, in his diary recording the discovery in 1769, notes that in the bed of the river, "...there is a thick growth of cottonwoods and alders ..." and that "Besides the growth along the river there are many redwoods ..." and that "Not far from the stream, we found ... [a] variety of herbs and roses of Castile."

Then, looking in Malcolm Margolin's *The Ohlone Way*: "There is an Ohlone song ... from which only one evocative line survives: *Dancing on the brink of the World*. We know nothing more about this song, just that one haunting line." Could this refer to earthquakes experienced by the Ohlones?

These lyrics, the score, and a MIDI file may be downloaded from
<http://maxwell.ucsc.edu/~drip/songs/riversong>.