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:

   Chorus: San Lorenzo, you’re the river,
   Flowing down, from the mountains to the sea.
   By the river, Santa Cruz:
   You’re our home, and the place we want to be.

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. Crespi, 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.
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Words and music by Celia and Peter Scott © 1994

1. On the seventeenth of October, in seventeen sixty nine, Don Gaspar de Porto lá camped by the riverside. ’Mid the alders and the cotton-woods and roses of Castile, sing’in’ to the red-woods ran a river wild and deep: San Lorenzo, you’re the river, flowing down, from the mountains to the sea. By the river, Santa Cruz: You’re our home, and the place we want to be.

* Sing the lower note for first verse only.