

# 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..."

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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>.

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Words and music by  
Celia and Peter Scott © 1994

*Moderately* D G D G D G

1. On the sev-en-teenth of Oc-to-ber, in sev-en-teen six-ty nine, — Don Gas-par de Por-to-lá camped

A<sup>7</sup> D G D G D G

by the riv-er-side. — 'Mid the ald-ers and the cot-ton-woods and ros-es of Cas-tile, — sing-in' to the red-woods ran a

A<sup>7</sup> *Chorus* D G A<sup>7</sup>

riv-er wild and deep\*: — San Lor-en-zo, you're the ri-ver, flow-ing down, from the moun-tains to the

D G D A<sup>7</sup> D

sea. — By the ri-ver, San-ta Cruz: You're our home, and the place we want to be.

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of four systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line with lyrics, a piano accompaniment with chords, and guitar chords indicated above the vocal line. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Moderately'. The first system starts with a '1.' indicating the first verse. The second system continues the first verse. The third system begins the 'Chorus' section, which includes a time signature change to 2/4 and then back to 4/4. The fourth system concludes the chorus. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

\* Sing the lower note for first verse only.