AL MARTINEZ
BARD OF LA

MARCH 17–JUNE 25, 2012
LIBRARY, WEST HALL
THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, ART COLLECTIONS,
AND BOTANICAL GARDENS
Columnist Al Martinez, born in 1929, has for five decades inspired readers to think more deeply about the world around them and to see more clearly the qualities that bind people together in common humanity. Echoing the poet Walt Whitman, Martinez notes, “I sing the people.” Writing for the Richmond Independent, then for the Oakland Tribune, and later for the Los Angeles Times for more than 35 years, Martinez explored every facet of the human experience, celebrating those who shine in the face of overwhelming burdens, condemning bigotry and intolerance, or chuckling at our capacity for folly. His popular columns earned many awards, including three Pulitzer Prizes and the prestigious Headliner Award for the best feature column in the United States. Martinez also has published several books, ranging from compilations of columns to a novel, and he earned an Emmy nomination for his television writing. Today, Martinez produces featured columns for the Los Angeles Daily News and the Topanga Messenger, he writes a blog, and he teaches writing seminars. This exhibition draws from the archive of his papers, generously donated to The Huntington.

Sara S. “Sue” Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts

Special thanks to Al and Joanne Martinez, Nicole Martinez, and John Robertson.
DAYS OF DRUMS AND BUGLES
A child of Oakland who grew up in hardship, Al Martinez went on to study at San Francisco State College before leaving to serve with the U.S. Marine Corps in 1950–52 during the Korean War. First as a rifleman and then as a combat correspondent, Martinez experienced the raw fear and brutality of war—forces that did much to shape his views. His horrific experiences, and his efforts to make sense of them, fill scores of letters sent home to his wife, Joanne. These letters show us the young writer, honing his innate talent for prose that touches, amuses, and inspires his readers.

Over the years, he has mined his experiences in Korea for short stories, columns, and essays. In these writings, he recognizes and honors his comrades in arms, but he also condemns the senseless killing that often seems to achieve nothing.

The day we stop thinking of young men killed in war as heroes may be the day we begin wondering why we keep fighting wars. It will be the time to ponder how the human race, alone among mammals, could ever allow such a periodic slaughter of its own future. The morning will come when we’ll ask, Why do we do this to each other?


ON THE PLANET OAKLAND
After his military service ended, Martinez briefly attended the University of California, Berkeley, but left so he could get started on a career in journalism. He worked as a feature writer and reporter for the Richmond Independent from 1952 to 1955, when he moved to the Oakland Tribune, staying there from 1955 to 1971 as a feature writer and columnist. Later, in 2000, Martinez turned to his familiar Bay Area for the setting of his novel, The Last City Room.
I’LL BE DAMNED IF I’LL DIE IN OAKLAND

By 1971, Al Martinez left the *Oakland Tribune*, having been recruited by the *Los Angeles Times*. Martinez knew the time was right, as he had grown ever more liberal politically while the *Tribune* had begun to lean ever further in the opposite direction. Al, Joanne, their three children—Cindy (23), Linda (18), and Marty (10)—and their dog, Hoover, moved to Topanga Canyon, turning the relocation into a two-month tour of the United States, via rented camper. Al and Joanne’s trek to Southern California by way of the 50 states fueled their wanderlust, leading to years of travel adventures both grand and whimsical. All their journeys became fodder for essays and for Al’s regular newspaper columns. In these, as in many columns, Al’s wife appeared as “Cinelli,” her maiden name.

CITY OF ANGLES

On moving to Southern California in 1971, Martinez joined the staff of the *Los Angeles Times*, working as a reporter and features writer. In 1984, the paper offered him his own column, and he became one of the most popular of all the writers at the paper. In 2007 the *Times* let Martinez go, as part of its downsizing, but thousands of his fans stormed the editorial offices with calls, e-mails, and letters, protesting his release. Astounded, the paper reinstated him, only to let him go 18 months later, and this time the newspaper did not relent. Far from retiring, though, Martinez began writing columns for the *Los Angeles Daily News* and the *Topanga Messenger*. 
He also writes a blog and teaches writing seminars.

During his long career at the Times, Martinez earned three Pulitzer Prizes and a Headliner Award for the best column in the nation. He was named Journalist of the Year by the Society of Professional Journalists, and he received scores of other awards from such organizations as the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, the California Newspaper Publishers Association, and the San Francisco Press Club.

L.A. El Lay. La-La-Land. The Land of Fruits and Nuts. The City of Fallen Angels, of palm trees, smog, and kosher burritos. Aldous Huxley described it as a place of dreadful joy. Raymond Chandler said it had the personality of a paper cup. A downtown street corner evangelist named Bobby Bible calls it the Mother of All Whores. I call it Mom.

400 EPISODES OF SITCOMS AND STILL ABLE TO DRESS HIMSELF

In the 1970s through the 1990s, Al Martinez wrote extensively for television, turning out scripts for both series and films for the small screen. His credits include episodes for such series as “Hawaii Five-O” and “Bronk,” starring Jack Palance. He created the series “Jigsaw John,” starring Jack Warden and based on an L.A. detective Martinez had profiled in a column. His screenplay for the television film “Out on the Edge,” starring Rick Schroder, earned Martinez an Emmy nomination.
Editors and publishers come and go, typefaces change, formats shift, columns move from here to there. I endure, writing the words and singing the songs, prowling like an old alley cat through the lives of those I father into my paragraphs.

Al Martinez, I’ll Be Damned If I’ll Die in Oakland, 2003.

RISING VOICES
In his columns, essays, and books, Martinez often focuses on the racial diversity that provides Los Angeles with both cultural richness and social difficulties. With his abiding interest in all people, Martinez seeks to find the human characteristics that unite all of us, rather than the unimportant differences of ethnicity or skin color that too often divide us. In his 1974 book, Rising Voices, Al Martinez profiled Latinos who had attained positions of leadership in a variety of fields, including politics, sports, business, the arts, and social services. He sought to recognize individuals who made a difference and to provide positive role models for young people.

BARKLEY, A DOG’S JOURNEY
The Martinez family always includes pets, usually several at a time, and they might encompass not just dogs and cats but the occasional goat or rabbit. Over the years, the antics and foibles of these four-legged family members became familiar to readers of Martinez’s columns. Barkley, a bouncy, curious Springer Spaniel puppy with an intense gaze, joined the household in 1997. Just seven years later, when Barkley received a diagnosis of terminal lymphocytic leukemia, Al and Joanne determined to give him a final road trip, through California and Oregon. The columns that Martinez wrote during the journey generated the most reader response of any of his writings, as scores of fans followed Barkley’s explorations. A few months after their homecoming, Barkley passed away, and Martinez began working on a book based on his columns.
Sometimes I’m not sure where reality ends and hallucinations begin. That’s why they made me a columnist.


**RELATED PROGRAMS**

**A Conversation with Al and Joanne Martinez, with host Larry Mantle**  
*April 4 (Wednesday) 7:30 p.m.*

Larry Mantle, host of KPCC’s Air Talk, will conduct an informal chat with Al and Joanne Martinez about their lives, Al’s columns and other writings, and their memories of travel and family. Reservations are not required and the event is free and open to the public. Friends’ Hall.

**Curator Tour: “Bard of L.A.”**  
*April 19 (Thursday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.*


**Wednesday Afternoons with Al:**  
**A Writing Workshop**  
*May 30, June 6 and 13 (Wednesdays) 2–4 p.m.*

Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and author Al Martinez will lead this three-part workshop for writers of all levels and interests. Participants will be assigned writing exercises that parallel their interests and receive guidance and editing. Martinez will talk about his own writing experiences and provide direction and feedback for participants as they develop and share their work. (Each participant will be asked to submit a short writing sample to Martinez so he may evaluate the writer’s styles and interests.) Members: $150. Non-Members: $165. Registration: 626-405-2128. Space is limited.

This exhibition is made possible by the Robert F. Erburu Exhibition Endowment.

Al Martinez in his study, photograph by John Sullivan, 2011.