

# King OF NEW YORK

**T**wo Saturdays ago at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Harlem, Father Luis Barrios was helping to crown Antonio Fernandez the new leader of the Almighty Latin King Queen Nation, Inc. "They killed Christ because he went against the Roman Empire," Barrios said in a heavy Spanish accent, blessing Fernandez, a/k/a King Tone. "I'm not saying that the system is going to kill you; I'm expecting that you're going to kill the system."

The New York chapter's latest Inka, as the supreme leaders are called, Fernandez was flanked by comrades brandishing swords and garbed in gold hooded sweat-shirts, black jeans, and sneakers. One by one, Kings and Queens recited elaborate poem-prayers that seemed like Our Fathers crossed with Tribe Called Quest verse. They made intricate hand gestures that formed the shape of a five-pointed crown, then pounded their hearts. Testimonials and roasts were offered by ex-Black Panthers, Young Lords, ex-rival gang Netas, and radical lawyer Ron Kuby. >>



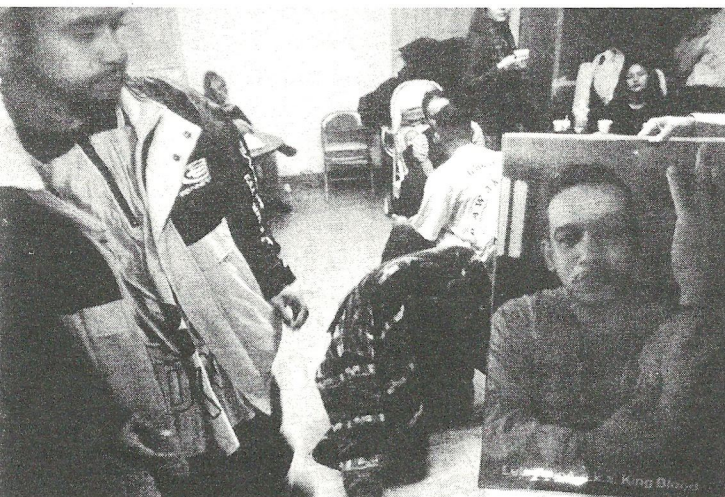
ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN

Newly crowned King Tone with members of the Almighty Latin King Queen Nation's New York chapter.

# Can Antonio Fernandez Change the Mission of New York's Notorious Street Gang? By Ed Morales



The new Latin Kings renounce violence and start getting out the vote.



Portrait of former leader Luis Felipe, a/k/a King Blood

On this day, his 30th birthday, in a striking ceremony Barrios called "a manifestation of popular religion," Fernandez was taking control of one of the city's most notorious gangs. Over the course of several prison visits, he has wrestled power from Luis Felipe, known as King Blood. "I showed him that he could let go of the nation, still be a part of it, but he couldn't lead," said Fernandez in a *Voice* interview. "Because we needed a change."

The week before, Felipe, charged with orchestrating three brutal murders of fellow gang members, had been convicted of 18 counts of racketeering. Blood, who claims he was framed by members who plea-bargained to lesser

charges, has acknowledged that Tone should be the one to replace him.

"Amor de rey!" Fernandez led the congregation of over 500 Latin Kings, Queens, and guests in chanting their slogan, which literally translates as "King's love" but in this Christian setting sounded more like "The lord be with you." "I love that man," said Fernandez, referring to King Blood. "We all make mistakes. Some get away with them, some don't." Then, gesturing to a trio of newly initiated Kings, he proclaimed, with a preacher's intensity, "Stop the killing. We have 360 degrees of pure love here. Brothers did it without guns or knives. They did it by turning the other cheek."

Indeed, there was new evidence of gangsters stopping the violence. A chieftain of the Hartford, Connecticut, Latin Kings chapter offered to negotiate a truce with the rival Solidos as a birthday present to King Tone. "What I've learned from the brothers here in New York is that the path of peace is a much more rewarding one," he said. "I was a little hesitant at first, because we've lost many brothers and there are many out there who have deep in their hearts a lot of anger. I believe that we have much to gain by working with one another rather than tearing ourselves apart."

Truces among Southern California gangs after the 1992 Los Angeles riots were the first signs that many gang members were feeling that enough is enough. While there will always be an untalented tenth that love dysfunction and chaos, many of these guys are getting older and want to go home and spend time with their families. Fernandez, himself now 30, seized on this alienation. After securing beloved King Blood's endorsement, he began to send a message of antiviolenence to bad-seed leaders. King Tone refuses to inherit a throne of blood, having spent almost 10 years incarcerated, and claiming to be crack-free for more than five. He hungers to redeem the battle-scarred youth in New York City's gangs through an unprecedented brand of popular religion (a mix of Catholicism, Santeria, Islam, 12-step programs, and Scared Straight), prison-gang mythology, and grassroots leftism.

Antonio Fernandez grew up in the East New York section of Brooklyn with his parents, who are still married after 36 years, and three sisters and brothers. His mother is a staunch born-again Christian known as the "mayor" of their section of East New York, and his father delivers bread for a local bakery.

Nicknamed 'Pache, short for Apache, as a youngster, Fernandez was teased about his light skin. "You look Jewish, you look Greek, they said, 'cause of my nose," said Fernandez. "I'm bowlegged, pigeon-toed. I was kind of a wreck."

By the time he was 13, he left home to "freelance" on the street, a path which would soon lead him to crack addiction. "I was the drug dealers' nightmare," said Fernandez. "The way I got high was stealing from other drug dealers. I was like Robin Hood, you know. I would get the guys all high in the neighborhood who couldn't afford it." Fernandez's luck ran out quickly. For almost 10 years beginning in 1982, he was under some form of supervision by the criminal justice system. Fernandez feels the demands of his culture's religious zealotry fueled his descent. "I had to live with always trying to reach the expectations of the pastor, which kills a lot of the youth in New York," said Fernandez. "I dropped out. I didn't have a GED. I'm a crackhead now. What more can I do? It's over. Society, my parents, everybody wrote me off. I'd go through church programs, then come out and go back to the pipe."

He eventually landed in Rikers, where he was first introduced to the Latin Kings. While awaiting trial, he opted for the Cuomo-mandated Shock program, a military-style rehabilitation camp available for nonviolent offenders. It was in Shock, Fernandez says, that he began to recognize his leadership potential. "When I was in Shock, I used the five steps of decision making: see the situation clearly; know what you want; evaluate your possibilities; weigh the risks; and act. I took the five Shock points and put 'em with some of what Blood wrote: respect, honesty, unity, knowledge, and love. Plus I had my foundation in the Bible."

When Fernandez got back on the streets in 1993, he undertook the enormous task of rehabilitating a nation of gangsters, starting with himself. "I had to bury 'Pache, 'cause 'Pache smoked crack. 'Pache robbed. 'Pache hurt his mother. I actually took 'Pache and said, 'I love you and the whole nine, but you ain't no fucking good.' I needed a new identity, and King Tone brought it."

Within the 360s, the circles in which local tribe leaders confer, Fernandez lobbied vigorously against random violence, and he openly disagreed with criminal-minded Kings, some of whom pleaded guilty in connection with King Blood's case. "The feds did the best thing they could ever do for me, by sweeping them up," said Fernandez. "Instead of me having to fight to take over leadership, they cleared the board for me."

King Tone knew he had to surround himself with new, inspirational peers. By almost divine providence, he was soon courted by vestiges of the '60s radical left. In the spring of '95, Fernandez met Hector Torres, an ex-gang leader of the '70s gang South Bronx Bachelors, who had been radicalized by his lawyer, the late William Kunstler. Torres, now working for Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network, has a smooth street background that allowed him to waltz into a Kings meeting in the middle of Crotona Park. He immediately clicked with Fernandez, seeing him as a potential leader. Torres began introducing Fernandez to a series of grassroots activists, some of whom were old Black Panthers and Young Lords, a Puerto Rican activist group of the '70s to which the Kings are now often compared. "We took members of the Kings to leadership

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classes run by [ex-Black Panther] Charles Bar-  
ron. He taught us how to do a press conference,  
taught us how to do conflict resolution, how to  
incorporate the Latin Kings," says Torres.

Soon after appearing on Sharpton's WLIR  
radio talk show in which he criticized a Giuliani  
plan to put police in the schools, Fer-  
nandez was arrested in the Bronx.  
Ironically, he had gone uptown to  
confront a renegade King who had  
ordered gang members to throw  
garbage cans at police officers. Fer-  
nandez says he had first marijuana,  
then a gun, planted on him. (The  
presiding judge in the case, Shira  
Scheindlin, also "raise[d] a serious  
question as to how and when" the  
evidence obtained by police came in-  
to Fernandez's possession.)

After spending eight months in  
Rikers, in March 1996, with former  
Kunstler partner Ron Kuby as his  
lawyer, Fernandez was released in  
time to participate in a City Hall rally against po-  
lice brutality. One of the rally's principal organiz-  
ers, Richard Perez, is an ex-member of the Young  
Lords. Perez, along with fellow ex-Lord Vicente  
"Panama" Alba, was a little cautious about work-  
ing with Kings at first, but Torres convinced them  
to give Fernandez a chance.

"We made it clear that we would offer leg-  
al assistance if they got busted for being in  
demonstrations or political activities," said  
Perez. "But definitely not for drug busts. If they  
carried on that kind of activity, we would end  
the relationship immediately."

Perez, Alba, and Torres also taught Fer-  
nandez about the mistakes of the Young Lords:  
how a cult of personality shattered the group,  
and how, in its deteriorating stages, it beat  
members who tried to leave. Fernandez has  
since devised the Golden Gates, a doctrine  
which allows initiates to leave after a hearing  
with the Supreme Team council, instead of be-  
ing "beaten on sight" or "terminated on sight."  
But Young Lord comparisons are too easy.

## FOREVER A KING

**A**lmighty Father King Of Kings, I Am An Almighty Latin King War-  
rior To No End. I Vow This Day To Drink From Your Cup And  
To Sacrifice My All To Serve You And The Nation You Have  
Blessed Me With. I Raise My Crown To You On Bended Knee, And Ask  
That You Shine Your Light On Our Crown For Always. Almighty Father,  
Give Us The Strength And Knowledge To Carry On Our Faith And Un-  
derstanding Of The Metaphysical And Physical Worlds We Roam. Bless  
The Family Of Kings And Queens And The Children Born Into Our Na-  
tion. Carry Us When We Cannot Walk. Feed Us When We Hunger, And  
As We Follow, Reward Us With Your Blessings. Forever Your Son.

Forever A King  
Amor De Rey

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The Lords began their activist reign by taking  
over a church at which they were not welcome;  
the Kings have taken sanctuary in a church that  
received them with open arms. The Lords were  
essentially working-class radical students in-  
flamed by the '60s; the Kings are apolitical un-  
derclass gangstas who are adopting a political  
conscience. It can almost be said that the Kings  
have recaptured the Lords' spirit, which was de-  
stroyed by COINTELPRO, loony Maoism, and  
criminal thuggery. Under the tutelage of their ac-  
tivist mentors, they have conducted voter-regis-  
tration drives in the Bronx and Brooklyn, and

run a food-giveaway program for the homeless  
on the Lower East Side. Though the Kings have  
yet to gain respect from mainstream Latino or-  
ganizations (despite a brief involvement with a  
1994 Nelson Denis campaign), there are now  
many young Puerto Rican activists in New York  
who, though more like the Young Lords in back-  
ground, are coming to appreciate the new Kings.  
At a recent workshop at the annual Muevete  
conference, which has become a center of young  
Latino organizing, chairperson  
and Wesleyan grad Lisette  
Nieves said, "In the past I'd only  
heard about the bad rep the  
Latin Kings had. But now they  
have my full support."

The Kings began to be no-  
ticed as a positive community  
force when they gained the trust  
of the Baez family in the wake of  
the Livoti verdict, in which po-  
lice officer Francis Livoti, who'd  
placed 29-year-old Anthony  
Baez in an NYPD-banned choke  
hold, was acquitted of criminal-  
ly negligent homicide. The con-  
troversial verdict set off a storm  
of protests in which the Kings played a key role.  
According to Torres, the Kings' working  
Parents Against Police Brutality had the effect of  
symbolically reuniting families: mothers who  
had lost their sons felt like they had regained  
new ones. Anthony Baez's mother, Iris, was  
even at King Tone's coronation, hugging him in  
the pulpit at the climax of the ceremony, declar-  
ing, "I'm gonna be there for him until the end."

If they have truly moved beyond their vio-  
lent past, the Latin Kings' greatest threat to the  
powers that be is their refusal to live in quiet  
conformity. Father Barrios thinks Fernandez is

seen as a threat by police and city government  
because the Kings are "going in the same direc-  
tion as the Young Lords." In fact, Fernandez  
freely pontificates about politics. "If I endorse  
Sharpton, it's because he's doing things for our  
community that [Fernando] Ferrer isn't. If Fer-  
rer came to me and asked for my support, I'd  
say, 'Mr. Ferrer, you got a lot of things you got-  
ta prove to me, and to do that it takes time; peo-  
ple don't change overnight.'"

One of Fernandez's most passionate beliefs  
is that he has been spiritually charged to give  
New York Latinos a voice. He senses the rum-  
bling undercurrent the community has about its  
political leaders, and even if he is not now ac-  
cepted by mainstream Latinos, he is expressing  
their dissatisfaction. "We're building a bridge to  
the 21st century? Yeah, the Puerto Ricans and  
blacks are the stones you're building it on. You  
ask me what I think revolution is? My revolution  
is making sure the Latino people cross the  
21st-century bridge with everybody else."

**B**ack in the church, the nearly two-hour cer-  
emony is coming to an end. King Mis-  
sion, a 17-year-old Brooklyn Tech student  
who is also chair of Aspira, a major Puerto Rican  
youth organization, reads a poem he's written  
for King Tone. "Every act of love is a miracle,"  
says Mission. "The onyx warrior, Blood, is pass-  
ing on mythic power to the gold warrior. There  
was a time when pain was so intense that it was  
mistaken for pleasure."

But when the Kings and Queens speak,  
they're saying that time has passed. King Tone  
has taken on the burden of healing his nation.  
"Yes, I'm at war," he intones. "But it's a war of  
peace. Bullets can't harm me. If I die, I multiply."

And the throng chants, again and again.  
"Amor de rey!"

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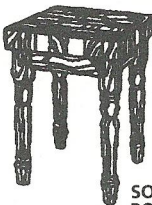


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