

Chapter 6

The Sociopolitical Discourse of Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara – The Culture of People’s Power: Giving Voice to Social Justice in Chile’s New Song Movement

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ABSTRACT

While its roots lie deep in Latin American culture and history, the New Song music was first brought to the attention of the world when totalitarian military regimes seized power in South America during the 1970s. Torture, death, persecution, or disappearance became the tragic fate of thousands of citizens including Violeta Parra and Victor Jara of Chile, popular and talented singer-songwriters (cantautores), the latter executed for his songs of justice and freedom. Other New Song artists were driven into exile to avoid a similar fate. Later, during the 1980s, a second, deadlier wave of terror swept through Central America in genocidal proportions. Again, New Song artists urgently sang about these horrific human rights violations, denouncing the perpetrators of this violence and telling the story of the struggle of people resisting. Beyond the desired social space in which to talk about horrific human rights abuses, there is a deep history of social commentary in musical and other performative traditions in Latin America.

INTRODUCTION

The New Song movement in Latin America represents an extraordinary cultural and sociopolitical phenomenon in the region. While it is true that cultural traditions provide meaningful patterns through which members of a community can understand themselves and their world in narratives, nothing brings people of all educational levels together like music. The power of music transcends literacy and social class. Its message goes directly to the masses and empowers others to come together in challenging times, defining their struggle, voicing their protestations, and, hopefully, moving toward a collective libera-

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tion from the forces that oppress them. Musical lyrics and melody possess the power to prompt societal change through consciousness-raising as well as to heal a broken spirit in the wake of repressive forces of censorship and the violation of human rights.

The architects of the *Nuevo Cancionero* or New Song Movement, “social artists” in their own right, never used their artistry to escape from reality, but rather to get to the root of and do something about vexing problems in their environment. Indeed, such folk music was used as a force to unify whether at labor union rallies or political marches. The New Song Movement’s musical heritage played a significant role in ushering in the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s paralleling a similar musical movement in the United States with Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, and the trio of Peter, Paul, and Mary, among others (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998; Hajdu, 2001). The cantautores or singer-songwriters of Latin America paid homage to the national culture of their various countries embedded in folk music while, at the same time, they gained international acclaim. The Chilean group Inti-Illimani, for example, has toured with other artists over the years, including Mikis Theodorakis, Mercedes Sosa and John Williams. In 1998, the group participated in an Amnesty International tour, which included Sting, Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen and Tracy Chapman. As a result of the tour, Inti-Illimani became the recipient of the prestigious University of California, Berkeley Human Rights Award, retrospective in nature for past musical compositions.

This gathering of voices includes many prominent artists, but the focus in this chapter will be on Chileans Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara, the torchbearers of the movement with the most long-lasting impact. It was their simple folkloric musical sounds coupled with the profound complex realities of their lyrics that re-awoke a sleeping cultural identity in the continent. Their songwriting and public performances spoke to personal experiences within the context of a national identity. As composers and folk singers using traditional regional musical instruments, Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara worked in the realm of a genuinely popular culture with an essentially modern message espousing human freedoms, defending social justice. Yet, they performed in the midst of an omnipresent threat to these freedoms in fascist dictatorships, particularly in the Southern Cone countries of Chile and Argentina, the birthplace of the New Song movement. By the force and steadfastness of their convictions and ideals, the principles of the New Song movement inspired and created a generation of songwriters, singers and musicians who would redefine the history of Latin American music. Their “message” music of social consciousness and commitment communicated a hopeful perspective, marked a significant eyewitness account of an otherwise unrecorded event, and/or carried a social or biographical message elevated to the level of the universal.

The focus of this chapter will be the recounting of a simple popular movement from humble beginnings and the relentless persistence of the *cancionero* to serve as bearing witness and protesting through the sung word — the ultimate form of democratic speech. This is the story of singer-songwriters and their music who live on in the memories of a liberated people, vindicated long after they have died, many at the hands of those who would deprive their people of the freedoms which their songs celebrate. Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara, Patricio Manns and groups such as Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún are etched in the memory of their countrymen. In Argentina the renowned Mercedes Sosa became a prominent supporter of this musical style. In Cuba Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés and Noel Nicola gained recognition as figures in the movement after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The list goes on in country after country in the Spanish-speaking world and even in Portuguese-speaking Brazil. The legacy of this musical movement with traditions rooted in folklore and indigenous instruments even persists today in new formats of Caribbean styles like cumbia, merengue, and Spanish language rock. But the distinctive flavor of the *nuevo cancionero* and its tradition of social commitment (*música comprometida*) is now an expression

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