

Reflections On The New Song Movement

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In order to speak of *Nueva Cancion* in Chile it is important to speak of a bygone era in Canada, namely, the mid-70s until the late 80s, when political and social activists were made aware of violence and oppression not just of the military in Chile, but of regimes around the globe: South America, Guatemala, East Timor, Palestine. Most activists were working in solidarity with at least one other country in the world. But I think everyone was touched by the experience of those from Chile.

After the military coup in 1973 Chilean exiles fluttered down like falling leaves and wherever they landed in the world they had a dramatic impact. It was impossible not to be affected by their stories of violence, disappearances, repression and horror, and their enormous love of their country. They politicized many of us. They also enchanted us with the sounds of their beloved Andean music played on instruments such as the *quena* and *charango* (pan pipes and a small guitar-like instrument made from an armadillo shell). As they strove to endure the difficulties of resettlement in their new-found home, music became a way to preserve some of their culture, making the transition easier.

Looking back on the years leading up to the military coup, it is easy to see why music plays such an important part in the lives of Canada's Chilean population. During the 1960s there was a massive movement of organized labour, peasants and students who came together not only to protest decades of corrupt and repressive (albeit elected) governments but to work for political and social change. From this grassroots movement came a natural desire for cultural expression—not the North American glittery, show business type of music, but the true voice of the people. Musicians such as Victor Jara, Violeta Parra, Inti Illimani, and Quilapayún, were just a few of thousands of artists who created music and lyrics from their own experience and struggle. Also, in 1972, Pablo Neruda became Chile's second celebrated Nobel Laureate. All these artists were motivated by left-wing political convictions. "Nueva Cancion" was born from a mass political movement and was a fusion of grassroots music, academia, and indigenous Andean culture. It was a rejection of cultural imperialism and advocated social justice, human rights and solidarity.

This mass movement was so successful that in September 1970 the Chilean people went to the ballot box and elected the Socialist president, Salvador Allende. Social programs like health care and education were improved; children were given milk at school to augment their diet, and ordinary working people started to enjoy participation in democratic community development. The "New Song" movement blossomed as it

reflected the victories of the people. But the interests of US-based multinational corporations linked to the greed and disloyalty of Chilean military officers and others in the ruling elite of the country smashed the dream in a vicious military coup on September 11, 1973. President Salvador Allende died defending the rights of his people. Also tortured and murdered three days later was Victor Jara, the peasant boy who rose to

international fame for his wonderful music and lyrics championing the cause of ordinary people. If a young man working in the mortuary had not risked his life to notify Victor's wife, his body might have simply disappeared like so many others.*

As she left Chile to return to her native England, Joan Jara said "I would do everything in my power to allow Victor, through his music and recordings, to continue to work for the cause he had made his own. His murderers had misjudged the power of song." She traces Victor's life and music and said that "New Song" did not have a set of goals and objectives, and was not a means to an end. It was the music of the people—it was about love and life and celebrated the work of the people and the beauty of the land. It expressed a belief in

and love of ordinary people, whilst condemning fascism, greed, militarism and the right-wing agenda.

I have been very fortunate to visit Chile twice—in 1988 and again in 1989 when I was an observer for the first elections in 16 years. In addition to sharing in the joy of a people so long deprived of the most basic democratic rights, I met Joan Jara and one of the Victor's daughters as they put the roof on a new dance studio. I was also able to visit a *peña*, a venue for performing and visual artists to come together to promote Chilean culture. *Peñas* were very popular during the Allende years, having been started by Violeta Parra.

With Victor's, Violeta's and others' lyrics still in my ears and heart, I realize that in 1990s Alberta we seem to be a million miles away from experiencing such a mass movement of the people. We sing old familiar sing-a-long tunes to which politically relevant words have been added, which lift our spirits, keep us amused and relieve our frustration because there is so little outrage over government cuts and privatization of social programs. But we can look back in hope that the dream which was born in Chile of a grassroots movement electing a government which defends the rights of the people first will live on in music and poetry and will be the beacon for all of us struggling for social justice.

*Joan Jara. *Victor: An Unfinished Song*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1983.

