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## Transformations in Cuban *Nueva trova*, 1965–95

ROBIN MOORE / Temple University

*There is no revolutionary art as yet. There are the elements of this art, there are hints and attempts at it, and, what is most important, there is the revolutionary man, who is forming the new generation in his own image and who is more and more in need of this art. How long will it take . . . to manifest itself clearly? It is difficult even to guess . . . But why should not this art, or at least its first big wave, come soon as the expression of the art of the young generation which was born in the revolution and which carries it on? (Leon Trotsky)<sup>1</sup>*

Despite its broad impact throughout the hemisphere, surprisingly little of substance has been written about *nueva trova*,<sup>2</sup> the music most closely associated with Cuban socialist revolution. Within the United States, obstacles to detailed investigation of this repertoire include a lack of funding for field research and of access to pertinent information in books and journals. Within Cuba, the primary obstacle consists of intellectual constraints. Cuban nationals have written a great deal about *nueva trova* since the mid-1970s, but few adopt what would be considered a critical perspective.<sup>3</sup> Often this is because they do not consider themselves at liberty to examine the leadership's policies, past or present. Rigorous scrutiny of *nueva trova*'s history is lacking in the work of authors throughout Latin America and in Spain (e.g., Aguila 1990), but generally for different reasons. In some cases they write books for the popular press in which detailed analysis has no place; in others their strong identification with particular artists and/or political groups tends to bias the scope and content of their work. Foreign academics encounter problems when attempting to document the movement even if they are able to travel to Cuba. Interviewees often refuse to discuss sensitive issues in detail with visitors—especially from the United States—or avoid them entirely if conversations are to be taped. Concern over the professional repercussions of their statements keeps many from speaking

against the actions of state representatives, even implicitly. All of these factors make a thorough and impartial analysis of nueva trova especially difficult.

My primary interest in this diverse repertoire concerns the changes in its official status through the years. Cubans are often slow to admit that nueva trova began as—and some might say remains—an oppositional youth music that supported some government policies and openly questioned others. During its early development it was known frequently as “*canción protesta*” (protest song)<sup>4</sup> and provided an alternative perspective on the revolutionary experience for those willing to listen. As a result of their non-conformity, young musicians suffered harassment, blacklisting, and even confinement through about 1971. After that time, however, the government’s attitude toward them began to change. Within a few years they had received dramatically increased exposure through state-controlled media, eventually becoming international symbols of the new socialist culture.

In the process of reconciliation with the government, first-generation artists have generally suppressed their overt political criticisms. While remaining influential, they no longer represent the same constituency or issues as they did in the 1960s, and in their place new generations have emerged. This essay explores a few of the concerns of nueva trova singers through the years and how their relationship to the state has fundamentally shaped the content of their work. After a brief discussion of cultural dynamics in modern Cuba, I describe nueva trova music for those unfamiliar with it and provide information on its early development. Analysis focuses on the careers of two prominent performers, Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez, as examples. I then examine the rebellious nature of early musicians and their conflicts with authorities. Finally, I consider the manner by which nueva trova was transformed from a voice of marginality into a prominent component of institutionalized music making.

Information for the essay comes from published sources, recordings, and interviews with artists living in Cuba and in the United States. Interviews in Cuba were gathered during the approximately eighteen months I spent in Havana between 1992 and 1995, and on shorter subsequent visits. Most involved relatively informal conversations with musicians, historians, staff at radio stations, and friends. Recent interviews in the United States have been conducted with Cuban exiles living in the Philadelphia area.

### **A Note About Socialism and the Arts**

As in most Marxist-Leninist states, culture and intellectual production have been highly politicized in Cuba. Fidel Castro created a National Culture Advisory in the 1960s, later transformed into the Ministry of Culture, which constantly uses the arts as a means of inspiring nationalist sentiment, unity,

and greater dedication to political goals. Government agencies promote songs with overtly political lyrics, incorporate particular composers, performers, and genres into public discourse as symbols of national heritage, and create musical festivals commemorating events of the socialist revolution, to mention only a few examples.

Such foregrounding of cultural matters reflects the importance of collective ideological appeals to the cohesion of socialist societies. Material incentives used in capitalist nations to encourage hard work and support of the status quo—bonuses, overtime pay, stock options, vacation packages—tend not to work well under state socialism for at least two reasons. First, the centralized government makes efforts to provide basic consumer goods to all citizens at affordable prices, but it cannot necessarily offer a wide selection of products or even those of high quality. As a result, money simply is not as valuable and does not serve as a strong motivator. Second, even if it were possible to utilize money as a stimulus, the resulting accumulation of capital by some individuals would place strain on basic Marxist goals of equality and the eradication of class differences.<sup>5</sup> With their options for economic incentives severely limited, socialist states make greater use of moralist or nationalist appeals in their attempts to foster cohesion. In other words, a sense of duty or obligation, the need to do “the right thing” for the good of everyone rather than for individual gain, is often the primary means employed to encourage worker productivity and support. This approach to consensus-building impels the sphere of culture and ideas to the center of any analysis of socialism (Verdery 1991:428).

In the United States, artists are allowed to say or create virtually whatever they like because the ideas they espouse have limited impact. In a society that prioritizes profitability and the pursuit of material happiness more than self-reflection about economic values or social justice, for instance, ideas expressed by musicians, poets, and the like are limited in their importance. Artistic production may be valued in some circles but is ultimately peripheral to the orientation of capitalist society as a whole. The same could be said of other intellectual pursuits (e.g., philosophy) that produce few if any marketable products.

In socialist Cuba, by contrast, material goods have been relegated (at least discursively) to secondary importance and ideas are paramount. Children are taught from their earliest years about the gains of the Revolution in the areas of health care, housing, support of the elderly, and education. They are lectured on the importance of personal sacrifice and voluntary social service. As early as age five or six, they are encouraged to take part in “Pioneer” youth activities preparing them for future political involvement and to ponder the ultimate sacrifices of martyrs to socialist ideals.<sup>6</sup> As they grow older, their exposure to political thought increases and permeates nearly every aspect

of their lives. Cuban cities are literally covered in slogans printed on walls, billboards, postage stamps, key chains, and T-shirts exhorting citizens to keep Marxist ideals in mind and to continue to struggle for a better common future.<sup>7</sup>

This, then, is the rarefied environment in which Cuban musicians have lived and worked for the past forty years. The centrality of culture and ideas to the perpetuation of socialism means that artists serve a more directly functional role than those in capitalist countries. They help focus the minds of the public on particular issues and generate sympathy for government programs. They are, more often than not, part of a vanguard that contributes actively to political affairs rather than peripheral or estranged voices in a larger (capitalist) economic process. By the same token, the importance of the arts to socialism means that authorities have a greater interest in regulating its content and that they tend to be less tolerant of views that contradict or threaten the legitimacy of their endeavors.

Nueva trova cannot be understood without considering the turbulent political conditions of much of the developing world in the mid-twentieth century. In large part, this resulted from challenges to colonialism by groups who had been under political or economic domination for as long as three and a half centuries. The conflicts also reflected a radicalization of the disenfranchised, a violent struggle for the more equitable distribution of wealth and property within states that had achieved independence. Examples are plentiful; one has only to consider the Chinese revolution or the campaigns to free Indonesia and India from the Dutch and British in the 1940s to recognize their magnitude. Similar events took place shortly thereafter in North Africa and French Indochina, as well as protests of a distinct but related nature in the United States in conjunction with the civil rights movement. Activism in all of these countries was roughly contemporary with the campaign that Fidel Castro began against Fulgencio Batista in 1953.

In Central and South America, the 1950s and 60s witnessed land reform campaigns in Guatemala, leftist guerrilla warfare in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, and Uruguay, independence movements in Jamaica and Puerto Rico, the development of *negritude* and *noirisme* in the French Caribbean, and of a strong socialist party in Chile. Even the appearance of brutal right-wing dictatorships in Brazil and elsewhere can be viewed as part of this same process, a reaction against the increasing demands of the working classes and rural poor for political change. Revolution in Cuba is thus far from an isolated occurrence, and in fact members of many constituencies cited above developed their own song repertoires similar to nueva trova. It was in this overarching context, beginning in the mid-1960s, that "the political lid came off the pot" as one commentator described it (Feliú 1997:9–10), and new forms of musical expression emerged to complement new social orders.

Nueva trova owes a conceptual debt to the efforts of folklorists and musicians in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, where protest song first achieved widespread popularity within Latin America. Authors most frequently cite Argentine Atahualpa Yupanqui (Héctor Roberto Chavero, 1908–1992) and Chilean Violeta Parra (1918–1967) as early influential composers who championed the arts of indigenous peoples and other marginal groups as well as the social issues pertinent to them. *Nueva canción* in South America developed in part out of nationalist reactions to an onslaught of consumer culture from the United States and Europe after World War II as well as heavy foreign investment in local economies. Its early songs were implicitly political in that they incorporated indigenous instruments (*charangos*, *zampoñas*, *queñas*, *bombos*) and folkloric styles (*buayno*, *milonga*, *zamba*, *chacarera*) largely ignored by the South American mass media. In this way, nueva trova was preceded by nueva canción and represents part of a host of related movements throughout the Spanish-speaking world.<sup>8</sup>

### Defining Nueva trova

Nueva trova is the best known genre of modern Cuban socially conscious song, but is far from the first. The origins of such music in Cuba stretch back in time as far as documentation exists, well over 150 years. Certainly the stage presentations of the *teatro vernáculo* were notorious for their references to contemporary politics, especially issues related to the revolution against Spain beginning in the 1860s (Moore 1997:43–45).<sup>9</sup> Later works by individual *trovador*-artists of the early twentieth century included praise of war heroes Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez, outcry over policies of U.S. military intervention, and of foreign control of Cuban farmlands (Mateo Palmer 1988:136–67). Similar works date from the Batista years. One might suggest that an unbroken legacy of socio-political song stretches back into Cuba's past, and that the prominence of nueva trova owes as much to its eventual support and promotion by the government as to any inherent "newness."

Publications from socialist Cuba often imply that the most direct predecessor of nueva trova is *vieja trova*. This is the term used today for the music of individual singer-songwriters and guitarists from the turn of the twentieth century such as Pepe Sánchez (1854–1918), Sindo Garay (1867–1983), Alberto Villalón (1882–1955), and Rosendo Ruiz Sr. (1885–1983). Robbins (1990:443) notes that both styles are intended to be listened to rather than danced, a fairly atypical characteristic of Caribbean popular music, and are performed by small groups in informal settings. Both similarly emphasize the importance of the text and convey emotional messages. More problematically, *vieja trova* is associated with the urban poor—semi-illiterate tobacco workers, tailors, and barbers—while their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s were highly edu-

cated (Benmayor 1981:20). Certainly the “*filin*” repertory of the 1950s, whose exponents include César Portillo de la Luz, José Antonio Méndez, and Angel Díaz, developed in part out of *vieja trova* and had a direct impact on *nueva trova*. *Filin* is characterized by intimate, romantic pieces employing ample use of modulation and chromaticism, a fusion of the Cuban *canción* (romantic song) tradition with influences from North American jazz. Prominent trovadores, most notably Pablo Milanés and Martín Rojas, began their careers as interpreters of *filin*. Others, including Los Cañas, made jazzy, multi-part vocals reminiscent of the Swingle Singers a prominent part of their repertoire.

Another influence on the music of *nueva trova* comes from rural and urban dance music. As a matter of fact, the first compositions embraced by government officials as “revolutionary” after 1959 bore little resemblance to the innovative *trova* of younger artists. They sounded instead almost exactly like pre-revolutionary music, differing only in lyrical content. Older, established figures such as Carlos Puebla (1917–1989) and the duo Los Compadres sang songs of admiration about the lives of Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, praised literacy campaigns, and discussed housing reform policy using the *son* and *son guajiro*.<sup>10</sup> The following excerpt is taken from the lyrics of the Los Compadres composition “Se acabarán los bohíos” (The Rustic Hovels Will Disappear). It is taken from the final improvisational *montuno* section and is sung in traditional call-and-response style. Vocals by the soloist and chorus are punctuated with flourishes on the bongo drum, claves, maracas, guitar, and *tres*.<sup>11</sup>

### “Se acabarán los bohíos” (1960s)

**Los Compadres. Italics indicate choral response.**

Una vivienda <i>mi compay</i>	A dwelling place <i>my friend</i>
Un apartamento <i>mi compay</i>	An apartment <i>my friend</i>
Para cada familia <i>mi compay</i>	For every family <i>my friend</i>
En la Sierra Maestra <i>mi compay</i>	In the Sierra Maestra mountains <i>my friend</i>
En toda Cuba <i>mi compay</i>	All across Cuba <i>my friend</i>
Se acabarán los bohíos <i>mi compay</i>	The rustic hovels will disappear <i>my friend</i>
Con mucho trabajo <i>mi compay</i>	With our hard work <i>my friend</i>
Con la microbrigada <i>mi compay</i>	With the microbrigade <i>my friend</i>
De la construcción <i>mi compay</i>	Helping in the construction <i>my friend</i>
Quedará algún bohío <i>mi compay</i>	Perhaps a hut or two will remain <i>my friend</i>
Para el museo <i>mi compay</i>	As museum pieces <i>my friend</i>
En la Sierra Maestra <i>mi compay</i> . . .	In the Sierra Maestra mountains <i>my friend</i> . . .

Instrumental string traditions and *décima* poetry<sup>12</sup> derived from Spain have also had a significant impact on *nueva trova*. Alfredo Carol, Pedro Luis Ferrer, Alberto Faya, and Lázaro García (the last two from Grupo Moncada<sup>13</sup>) are but a few of the authors known for incorporating such elements into their

songs. A tension between the creation of works based on traditional genres and others with diverse cosmopolitan influences has characterized nueva trova virtually since its inception.

Rock and folk rock from the United States and Britain may represent the most important influence on the development of nueva trova, a fact that is rarely discussed at length in Cuban literature and which contributed to the movement's mixed reception in its formative years. Indeed, a number of the first-generation of artists intended their songs to represent a conscious break with the past through the incorporation of foreign influences; only as of the 1970s did they begin to draw once again on musical styles from Cuba. Rock performance began on the island in the late 1950s with Elvis Presley imitators featured in Havana nightclubs. Singers Danny Puga, Jorge Bauer, and Luís Bravo began to write their own compositions based on tunes by U.S. artists shortly thereafter (Manduley López 1997:136–38). The popularity of rock increased steadily over the next decade, and by the early 1970s it had become more popular among Cuban youth than any other style, according to Havana-based singer David Calzado (p.c.).<sup>14</sup> Los Astros, Los Bucaneros, Los Vampiros and a host of other bands flourished despite the fact that they never received recognition or support from the government and in many cases were forced to play on homemade instruments. In the later 1970s and 1980s, Cuban rock lost some popularity. This decline was due to many factors including strong interest in nueva trova, a resurgence in traditional dance music, and the departure of prominent *rockeros* as part of the 1980–81 Mariel exodus (Manduley López 1997:136–38).

Interest in rock varied somewhat among first-generation protest singers, but in general they were avid fans who incorporated influences from British and North American songs directly into their music. Noel Nicola and Vicente Feliú, founding members of the Movimiento de la Nueva Trova, began their careers in the mid-1960s playing Elvis and Beatles covers and emulating local combos such as Los Gnomos, Los Kent, and Los Dada (Díaz Pérez 1994:143). Though Cuba's cultural establishment remained unsupportive of rock it was oddly in the homes of prominent Party members that it first flourished. As musician and writer Leonardo Acosta told me,

The children of the politicians were rock fanatics, and in the houses of the leadership the same people who were prohibiting rock on the TV and the radio in many cases paid [rock combos] to play in their kids' parties. It was the leadership who brought back LPs from abroad. . . They were the ones who traveled, and their kids asked them to bring back music of the Rolling Stones, Beatles, Bee Gees. The children in turn lent the discs to friends who copied them onto cassettes, and thus everyone could listen to the groups via a sort of musical underground. When they walked in the street with the records [in order to protect themselves from recrimination] they'd sometimes put them in the slip cover of a record by Beethoven or Beny Moré. . .



One can hear the influence of 1960s rock and folk rock in a majority of nueva trova songs from that period. Nicola's well known "Para una imaginaria María del Carmen" strikes the listener as more reminiscent of Phil Ochs than of any Cuban musical antecedent, while Silvio Rodríguez's "Oleo de mujer con sombrero" takes its picking style directly from Bob Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather."<sup>15</sup> Rodríguez, more than any other early figure, supported the fusion of foreign musical elements, primarily from the U.S. and Britain, into Cuban popular song.

Since nueva trova performers blend many distinct styles, some of the best known pieces may strike the listener as cosmopolitan and eclectic rather than overtly "Cuban-sounding." One might describe young trovadores as the "culture brokers" of international trends (Robbins 1990:435), strongly influenced by foreign pop and yet invariably changing and personalizing it for local audiences. Listeners unfamiliar with these performers who would like to experience the eclecticism of nueva trova need only contrast the following pieces: Silvio Rodríguez's "Unicornio," a slow, lyrical ballad that uses the image of a blue unicorn as a metaphor for fantasy, nostalgia, and desire (Example 1); satirical political commentary by Alejandro "Virulo" García set to recycled fragments of international repertoire such as rococo-style harpsichord, the Mexican folk song "Cielito lindo," and "The Charleston";<sup>16</sup> and pieces by Pablo Milanés whose guitar patterns frequently employ rhythms found in Cuban dance music (Example 2).<sup>17</sup> Example 1 comes from a re-release of "Unicornio" in which Rodríguez presents the melody with an accompaniment typical of light classical music. Example 2 demonstrates how Pablo Milanés' guitar playing in "Son de Cuba a Puerto Rico" imitates the anticipated bass of the *son* as well as its accompanying tres melodies.

Lyrics are a central feature of nueva trova music, but the lyrical themes with which it is associated are nearly as difficult to generalize about as its musical style. Some artists have been strongly influenced by nationally and internationally recognized poets (José Martí, Nicolás Guillén, César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda<sup>18</sup>) to the point of imitating their work or setting their poems to music (Acosta and Gómez 1981:12). Most typical, however, is the use of fairly simple and direct original verse. Writers tend to avoid machismo and the objectification of women as well as stereotypically romantic imagery, though love remains a prominent subject (Manuel 1987:174).<sup>19</sup> Many works are overtly political, contemplating the valor of insurgents at Moncada or paying homage to socialists of past decades.<sup>20</sup> Others are entirely tender and personal, while in yet others one finds a powerful linking of public and private spheres. Examples of the latter include Silvio Rodríguez's "Aurora, Clara y Felicia," a love song dedicated to three women, one fighting in the Angolan civil war; or Carlos Varela's "Foto de familia" that ponders empty spaces at the dinner table representing loved ones separated through political exile.

**Example 1. Excerpt from “Unicornio” by Silvio Rodríguez (1993). From *Nueva trova: selección de éxitos*.<sup>21</sup> This and all other musical transcriptions are by the author.**

Quarter note=60     $B\flat$     Rubato    Dmin

Vocal  
Mi u-ni-cor-nio/a-zul a-yer se me per-dió

Piano

3    Cmin     $B\flat$   
no sé si se me fue, no sé si ex-tra-vió

5    Dmin     $E\flat$     Cmin  
Y yo no ten-go más que/un un-i-cor-nio/a-zul

Perhaps due to the heterogeneity of nueva trova and the degree to which its sound varies from one artist to another, it has been defined less musically and more by the generation that created it and its meanings for them. Acosta and Gómez (1981:6) define nueva trova as “a phenomenon that arose among the youngest generation . . . a deliberate rupture with music that had come

**Example 2. Excerpt from “Son de Cuba a Puerto Rico” (1977). From Pablo Milanés, *Cantautor: No me pidas*.<sup>22</sup>**

Quarter note=160 Emin A7 D Dmin7 G7

Vocal Puer - to Ri - co a - la que ca - yó/al mar

Guitar

C F#7 B7

que no pu - do vo - lar yo te/in - vi -

Emin Emin/G A D G7

to/a mi vue - lo/y bus - ca - mos jun - tos el mis - mo cie - lo

before, a certain ‘return to the roots’ combined with the scent of renovation, and finally . . . the adoption of social and political consciousness . . .”<sup>23</sup> Others place more emphasis on oppositionality, defining the movement as a “culture of contestation” among the young and disenfranchised (Faya 1995:389). The elements of innovation and contestation were both a self-conscious part of most participants’ music. Players strove from the outset to create a different sort of art, to challenge the past musically and textually, to interpret and express the revolutionary experience in personal terms of their own choosing (Benmayor 1981:13). The entire lifestyle and persona of the nueva trova singer represented a testing of boundaries. By growing long hair, wearing torn “hippie” clothing, performing on sidewalks or other non-standard venues, and through other forms of non-conformity in addition to song writing, artists implicitly challenged social and artistic norms on multiple fronts.

## The First Artists

Members of the generation associated with the emergence of nueva trova were in grade school when the Revolution came to power. They were the first to be educated in a country attempting to radically alter the consciousness of its citizens. In addition to reading the works of Marx and Engels, these children debated questions of social justice from an early age. They were products of the drive to create an "*hombre nuevo*" or idealized "new socialist citizen." *Granma*, the official state newspaper, defined the new citizen as an individual with "a profound consciousness of his/her role in society and of his duties and social responsibilities, a [person] capable of constructing Communism and living with it" (Fagen 1969:17). Visitors to Cuba such as Ernesto Cardenal have noted the profound effects of such education on the young. My own experiences tend to confirm that, regardless of their ultimate acceptance or rejection of socialist philosophy, most Cubans today have been forced to confront a wide range of issues and have a much higher degree of political awareness than their counterparts in the United States.

In addition to domestic educational changes, protest artists were heavily affected by international social trends of the 1960s. Along with others in Europe and the United States, they questioned established patterns of sexual behavior, dress, and social relationships. They were truly products of the Revolution—most assisted in voluntary community service projects, joined the newly formed Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes as teenagers, completed military service—and yet did not hesitate to raise their voices in criticism when necessary. They considered themselves patriotic and rebellious at the same time, ready to defend Cuba despite the fact that it might not always give them reason to feel proud. Perhaps because of this independent attitude, the first individuals who began singing nueva trova in public were referred to disparagingly by Party members as "los conflictivos," "the troublemakers" (Rodríguez 1996:10).<sup>24</sup>

For many aspiring performers, the educational opportunities afforded them as part of the Movimiento de Aficionados (Amateurs Movement) proved important to the improvement of their musicianship and their contacts with peers. As with countless other initiatives, the Movimiento de Aficionados is mentioned by everyone who writes about Cuban culture but seriously examined by no one. What is documented is that it began during the earliest years of the Revolution as a means by which non-professionals could study the arts, a populist program with broad public support. It seems to have been most influential between 1961 and 1963. Exactly how many individuals took part, what they learned, and when the program ended is unclear. In any case, trovadores Tony Pinelli, Jesús del Valle, and Carlos Mas emphasize the importance of these classes as providing a venue for the performance and criti-

cal evaluation of their work (Díaz Pérez 1994:168). Amateur talent festivals hosted by the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) represented another early performance opportunity, and one of the only public spaces available before the musicians received government sponsorship. The informal nature of musical training among trova singers is significant since it is one factor that made their music difficult for the establishment to accept initially (Acosta 1995:375).

Musicians Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez deserve special attention because they had such a tremendous impact on the early years of the movement and continue to make a mark as innovative composers even today. Their musical interests are distinct and complementary, underscoring the individualistic nature of nueva trova. Similarly, their careers, which have been more thoroughly documented than most, demonstrate the changing relationship between younger artists and the government.

Pablo Milanés, a *mulato* or light-skinned Afro-Cuban performer, was born in 1943 in Bayamo on the eastern side of Cuba. His first musical experiences involved playing *son* and *vieja trova*; in general his work has been strongly grounded in Cuban folklore and he has consistently promoted the work of traditional performers.<sup>25</sup> As a teenager, Milanés was already singing on Cuban television as a result of invitations from José Antonio Méndez and Marta Valdés (Acosta and Gómez 1981:10). He later performed in Havana dance orchestras, in the Cuarteto del Rey (a group dedicated to interpreting North American spirituals) and in the jazz vocal group Los Bucaneros directed by Robertico Marín (D'Rivera 1998:119). Milanés' early solo repertoire is noteworthy for its lyrical quality, the influence of jazz harmonies, his adaptation of folkloric rhythms, and for straightforward but engaging lyrics discussing intimate relationships, love of country, as well as more political matters. More than any other figure, Milanés is credited with bridging the generational divide that separates nueva trova from popular song of the 1950s (Acosta 1995:378). As opposed to others, he was already an established artist when the revolutionaries took power. He nevertheless wrote the first piece recognized as nueva trova by historians, "Mis 22 años," in 1965.

If Pablo Milanés is an innovative traditionalist, extending and adapting folkloric genres, Silvio Rodríguez (b. 1946) might be described as an internationalist, patterning his early musical style loosely on songs by Bob Dylan and Paul McCartney, among others. Rodríguez, a Cuban of Hispanic descent, was born in San Antonio de los Baños on the outskirts of Havana. Prior to 1959 he had no performance experience. His formative teenage years were spent volunteering as a teacher in literacy campaigns, in military service, and other revolutionary activities. He too performs principally on the guitar, but more often strumming in a folk-rock style. Rodríguez combines harmonic complexity with unusual musical elements such as asymmetrical phrasing,

abrupt key changes, and vocals in a high melodic range. His voice, occasionally a little weak, nevertheless lends his recordings a sense of intimacy and honesty that are fundamental to his appeal. The lyrics of Rodríguez's songs are especially daring, incorporating surrealist imagery and powerful but extended metaphors so that the literal meaning of the text is far from transparent. Indeed, many consider him to be a poet first and a musician second. Rodríguez began to write nueva trova about 1967 and quickly developed a following. He was the first to achieve a degree of national recognition as a trovador in 1968 and remains trova's most renowned artist.

While not absolute, there are distinctions between the admirers of Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés. Silvio's fans tend more often to be white, highly educated, and cosmopolitan, preferring rock and international pop music over the works of most Cuban performers. One gets the impression that some subtly associate Cuban dance music and other traditional genres with poorly educated blacks and thus consider them less interesting (Robbins 1990:440). Pablo's fans, by contrast, are more consistently black or racially mixed, and are more sympathetic towards domestic music of all kinds. The racialized associations of each singer are perhaps clearest when one considers the performers that they have chosen to patronize. Silvio Rodríguez is best known for having given Hispanic Cuban rockers Carlos Varela and Santiago Feliú their first opportunities to perform and record, while Pablo Milanés chose to promote AfroCubans Gerardo Alfonso, Alberto Tosca, Xiomara Laugart, the duo Los Cachivache, and the folk drumming ensemble Yoruba Andabo (Alexis Esquivel, p.c.).

### Early Protest Song

Singer Noel Nicola noted in 1971 that the deeds of socialist leaders implicitly exhort Cubans to rebellious acts, but that they have tended too often to be intolerant of rebellion in others (in Cardenal 1974:51). The government has supported progressive positions in many aspects of its social agenda as regards the poor and elderly but has proven conservative in its attitudes towards long hair (worn by men), homosexuality, the right to religious expression, and other personal liberties, artistic or otherwise. Its conservative tendencies were especially pronounced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as nueva trova protagonists found to their dismay. They gathered informally whenever they could (Havana's Coppelia ice cream parlour, the Parque de los Cabezones at the University, the seaside *malecón*) and shared songs that expressed a new vision of what Cubans should think about and strive toward, not fully understanding why socialist leaders failed to take an interest in them. Ironically, their questions about the nature and substance of socialism came at a time when similar debates were occurring at the high-

est levels of government, debates that would result in the suppression of *nueva trova* for a time.

Supporters and critics of the Cuban Revolution alike recognize the late 1960s as a period of conflict. Díaz Pérez (1994:157) uses the metaphor of an enormous forge to convey a sense of how opposing goals and viewpoints were slowly being fused into a political consensus, often at the expense of those unwilling to conform. Medin (1990:16) describes the country as moving towards “a new, Soviet-oriented phase of orthodoxy,” implementing programs that extended Marxist principles more deeply into the social fabric. Whether imposed from abroad or primarily at the insistence of Fidel Castro, such policies resulted in a more intrusive government presence than had existed before. The change was most apparent in the area of economics. Banks, foreign enterprises, and large industries had been nationalized in the earliest years of the Revolution, but until 1968 many entrepreneurs were still allowed to work independently. Beginning with the new “Ofensiva Revolucionaria” of that year the government outlawed all private businesses down to the fruit carts of street vendors and manicures offered by individual women in their homes. The extent of such centralization made many uncomfortable and resulted in new waves of exiles.

Along with this drive toward economic purism came an ideological offensive, one that demonstrated less tolerance towards those unwilling to accept Party doctrine. Increasingly, space for diversity of opinion about what Cuban socialism should be was replaced by the suppression of alternate views and a demand for uncompromising adherence to a single position determined ultimately by Castro. Many policy makers at that time could not conceive of promoting youth protest music as part of its political campaigns. In a country that was striving to create a utopia for all citizens and that had the concerns of the masses constantly in mind, music that frequently included critical lyrics seemed inappropriate, even seditious. Just as leaders decided there was no need for intellectual freedom in the universities or freedom of the press if it endangered socialist goals, “so there was no need . . . for protest songs within the revolution” (Medin 1990:126).

Fortunately for the trovadores, some leaders remained with the will and the political clout to make their own decisions about how to define “revolutionary” expression. Haydée Santamaría, a survivor of the Moncada garrison attack led by Castro in 1953, had been put in charge of coordinating activities in the newly created Casa de las Américas, an institution devoted primarily to cultural exchanges with other Latin American countries. Santamaría, a music lover and admirer of South American protest song, created an early haven for *nueva trova*. She made efforts to expose younger Cubans to socially conscious repertoire from abroad and invited foreigners to Havana for events such as the Encuentro Internacional de la Canción Protesta (July, 1967) and

Festival de la Canción Popular in Varadero (December, 1967; de Juan 1982:51). For a few months in 1968 she also scheduled regular presentations of nueva trova at the Casa de las Américas. Only an individual with the impeccable revolutionary credentials of Santamaría could have challenged the biases of the leadership against nueva trova at that time.<sup>26</sup>

In the first months of 1968, planners at one of Cuba's two national television stations authorized a half-hour show on Sunday evenings called "Mientras Tanto" (In the Meantime) that featured Silvio Rodríguez and other members of the nueva trova movement. The title of the show was taken from a Rodríguez composition that also served as its theme song. Guests consisted primarily of well established figures such as vocalists Elena Burke and Omara Portuondo and poet Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera. Nevertheless, the program soon proved controversial among conservative elements of the ICRT<sup>27</sup> because of its inclusion of "hippie" performers. By mid-April, director Jorge Serguera decided to cancel "Mientras Tanto" (Correa 1997; Díaz Pérez 1994:134-37). Apparently he had never liked the idea of featuring protest singers but felt pressured to give the Cuban youth a music program that would appeal to them. This was especially urgent since broadcasts of popular U.S. and European rock groups had been condemned by the Party as a form of cultural imperialism and banned (Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, p.c.). A few radio presentations of younger alternative artists aired on Radio Habana Cuba at approximately the same time organized by Estela Bravo, and in 1968 the Casa de las Américas recorded at least one limited edition LP anthology of protest song (Díaz Pérez 1994:164-7).

### Conflicts with Authorities

Yasí tengo enemigos que me quieren descarrilar  
haciéndome la guerra porque me puse a cantar  
Pero pongo la historia por encima de su razón

y sé con qué canciones quiero hacer Revolución

aunque me quede sin voz  
aunque no me vengan a escuchar

I have enemies that want to derail me  
opposing me because I began to sing  
But I regard history as superior to  
their truths

and know I want to make Revolution  
with song

even if my voice fails me  
even if no one comes to listen

Carlos Varela, "Jalisco Park"

The reasons for the onset of the Revolution's harshest period of ideological repression—what some have referred to as "the grey period" (*el quinquenio gris*), have yet to be fully explored. Beginning in 1968 and continuing through the early 1970s, Cuban artists and intellectuals experienced serious difficulties if officials believed their works or beliefs deviated in any way from official policy. Many artists who were professionally active at that time tell horror stories involving public condemnation, loss of party mem-



bership, loss of employment, blacklisting, time served in jail or in “voluntary” labor camps (*granjas de castigo*, literally “punishment farms”),<sup>28</sup> and the like. Clearly, the so-called grey period represents the worst of the Cuban Revolution in terms of limitations on cultural expression. It was characterized by excessive authoritarianism on the part of the Party, later described by one observer as “a deformity of official thought that rendered impossible everything from the free circulation of ideas to the legitimate right to make a mistake” (Alberto 1996:34; see also Dumont 1970:81).

It is possible that economic difficulties and increasing reliance on Soviet aid contributed to these changes. Domínguez (1978:153–59) notes that the final years of the 1960s saw Cuba’s GNP plunge to its lowest levels since the Revolution had come to power. The economy hit its absolute low in 1970 during an unsuccessful all-out attempt to produce ten million tons of sugar. Soviet aid eventually arrived to make up much of the difference, but at the price of greater centralization of labor and an imposed reorganization of the government under foreign guidance. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 also had ideological repercussions within Cuba. Major tensions surfaced in the Party over whether to publicly condemn this act. Ambivalent themselves, Castro and other members of the Central Committee eventually chose to endorse the invasion in order to keep receiving economic aid. Among the many prominent figures who had spoken out against it, forty-three were arrested, nine expelled from the Party, and twenty-six imprisoned before the year ended (Domínguez 1978:162).

The government’s increasing unwillingness to tolerate internal criticism also derived from tense international relations. During the 1960s the CIA made numerous attempts to destabilize the socialist government and to assassinate Castro (U.S. Senate 1976:2–6). Beginning at that time the same agency covertly organized and/or aided as many as 300 counter-revolutionary groups (Stubbs 1989:87). And ever since the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, right-wing members of the Cuban community in Miami have carried out bombings of Cuban civilian airplanes and businesses, the assassination of diplomats, and even commando terrorist raids on the island itself (Oppenheimer 1992:325; U.S. Senate 1976:11; Smith 1987:98, 160; Stubbs 1989:xv). All of these events have led to the development of a “siege mentality” among leaders who view themselves (justifiably) as surrounded by hostile forces. They insist that the country must remain unified, and that no internal division or criticism be permitted until such aggression ends.

Though the leadership of the late 1960s remained concerned about counter-revolutionary activities, they came to view military invasion of the island a less likely option as time went on.<sup>29</sup> In place of this concern, they instead focused on culture and the media as the most central sites of future conflicts with the capitalist world. As part of a new ideological offensive they

began to condemn everything associated with the United States and Western Europe as corrupt or contaminated (Arias 1982:28); this is the period that witnessed the censorship of most rock, jazz, and other North American music from radio and television. In a speech from 1980, Castro verbalized attitudes towards foreign influences that had circulated in Party documents for over a decade. His primary point was that Cuban culture had been “deformed” as the result of external meddling:

The profound deformation . . . at which imperialists have worked for [some time], using a corrupt press, radio, and television networks that they often manage to make serve their interests, the films they introduced here, the habits, customs, prejudices, etc. with which they infected our country: all this could not but create difficulties . . . We know, for example, that years after the triumph of '59, after the victory at [the Bay of Pigs], in Cuba we still had to set ourselves the urgent goal of struggling against cultural colonialism, which survived the defeat of political colonialism and economic colonialism . . . It is a long struggle and we are still engaged in it. (Castro in Medin 1990:17)

The cultural offensive of the late 1960s affected every sphere of cultural activity, but policy makers paid special attention to rock music given its centrality to youth culture. Rock-influenced songs were viewed as implicitly subversive on many levels: because of their associations with the “decadent” ways of the United States and other capitalist countries, because of their English lyrics, and because of their association with alternative dress and lifestyles that did not conform to established norms. Officials viewed rock as transcending sound and embodying an entire way of life that often resulted in an unwillingness to integrate into the revolutionary process (Cristóbal Sosa, p.c.). At times they banned even older and relatively “tame” rockers such as Little Richard from the radio for this reason. To the Party leadership, the implicit aesthetic of all rock with its emphasis on transgression, physical gratification and/or liberation, excess, and pleasure ran contrary to the development of a disciplined and self-sacrificing socialist mentality. From their perspective, truly revolutionary artists should not adopt any of the physical trappings of a rockero or use rock music even as a vehicle in support of socialism. Any demonstrable affiliation with the movement implied “*desviaciones ideológicas*” (ideological drift), the taint of the Yankees.<sup>30</sup>

By the late 1960s, a climate of fear had permeated the intellectual community, young and old, as a result of widespread censorship and surveillance by the Interior Ministry. The extent of new limitations on the exchange of ideas first surfaced during the Congreso Cultural de La Habana in January of 1968 and was most apparent in discourses surrounding the Congreso de Educación y Cultura in 1971 (Alberto 1996:33). Artists found that in many instances they could no longer voice their true opinions; as a result they began to censor themselves, avoiding controversial issues and choosing “safer”

subjects in order to avoid scrutiny (Tomás Fernández Robaina, p.c.; Golendorf 1977:109). Many musical compositions were scrutinized and in some cases tampered with or banned by those in charge of the media. Paquito D'Rivera (1998:121–22) recounts a conversation with Pablo Milanés at this time in which the composer said “Damn it, every time that I come up with a new song, [radio and television administrator] Papito [Serguera] has to listen to it first along with the folks on the commission of revolutionary ethics, from the Party; they make me change the lyrics if they believe this or that section might be misinterpreted . . . No, no, to hell with Papito and his television station!”<sup>31</sup> Such problems, which continue to a lesser extent today, first became widespread during the *quinquenio gris*.

The internment of Cuban youth judged unsupportive of the country's socialist agenda seems to have occurred on a massive scale in the late 1960s and early 1970s. No reliable statistics exist, but one interviewee told Ernesto Cardenal that as many as 500,000 had been detained as of February, 1970: “Young men who fled from military service or school, or who have been brought there for other reasons, hippies, long-haired ones, malcontents . . . they are in rehabilitation farms or camps” (Cardenal 1974:50). This astounding figure has been supported by some of my interviews with Cuban exiles; poet and composer Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, for instance, estimates that about one third of the adult male population spent at least brief periods in detention at this time lasting from a few hours to weeks or months (p.c.). Sentences included manual labor in the countryside, simple confinement, or assignment to “reeducation” sessions. Yet another potential destination was the *minas del frío* (literally, mines of cold) area, a region in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Fernández Pavón notes that many non-conformists served time there, including Pablo Labañino Merino, the painter who designed the covers of several early *nueva trova* albums. The year 1969 marked the peak of police activity concentrating on younger Cubans, probably because of concern over the outcome of the mammoth sugar harvest (Cristóbal Sosa, p.c.).

Because of the rebelliousness of protest singers, they experienced frequent difficulties with the authorities. Pablo Milanés, one of the first to be jailed, suffered an especially harsh sentence. The circumstances leading to his arrest remain unclear, and may or many not have had to do with his song writing. In 1965 or 1966<sup>32</sup> officials apparently accused him of being a homosexual and sentenced him to an UMAP<sup>33</sup> prison in Camagüey, where he remained for over a year (Leonardo Acosta, p.c.; Radamés Giro, p.c.; Golendorf 1977:48). One punishment to which at least some prisoners in the camp were subjected during their first days of captivity is said to have involved being buried up to their necks in the ground (Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, p.c.). While this particular anecdote is unsubstantiated, the excesses of Cuban socialists as regards their treatment of suspected homosexuals (e.g., Lumsden 1996) and political

prisoners (Clark 1992) in the 1960s are well documented. Thankfully, Milanés' confinement was cut short as a result of the growing popularity of songs such as "Para vivir," "Ya ves," and "Mis 22 años." Elena Burke and Omara Portuondo recorded and promoted these pieces in the mid-1960s. Burke is said to have sung them for visiting intellectuals at the Casa de las Américas; their enthusiasm for the music and repeated demands to meet the composer eventually resulted in Milanés' release (Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, p.c.).

Other musicians experienced similar, albeit less extreme, difficulties. Documentation is scanty, and to the extent it is available tends to focus only on the best-known figures. The case of Silvio Rodríguez may be typical. He is known to have had minor clashes with the police and media officials such as Jorge Serguera beginning in 1967. According to one source he dedicated the piece "Te doy una canción" to a girlfriend who was the daughter of a prominent military leader. The girl's father did not approve of Rodríguez and eventually took it upon himself to impede the artist's career (Cristóbal Sosa, p.c.). Rodríguez exacerbated such problems with his argumentative nature, the decision to get a tattoo, to wear hippie clothing, and by making statements about the importance of foreign rock on his musical development. The police detained him on various occasions in the late 1960s, and at least once sent him to the countryside with other youths to an "encampamiento" where they were lectured on the importance of fuller integration in to the revolution (Helio Orovio, p.c.). Intervention by Haydée Santamaría invariably led to his release before long, however.

The low point in Silvio Rodríguez's career came in 1969 when he was fired by the ICRT and had no options for artistic employment, nowhere to turn. At this point the composer accepted a job working on a fishing boat named after the Playa Girón, site of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. His voyage on this 94-meter craft with 100 other young men began in September of 1969 and lasted through January of 1970 (Rodríguez 1996:9). Contemporaries viewed the trip as a form of punishment, a decision not made of Rodríguez's own free will; many thought he would never regain prominence as an artist. Rodríguez himself notes in recent publications that during the year or two prior to leaving on the boat the "thread" on which his professional existence hung "had become dangerously tense." He describes the individuals who fired him from the ICRT as "bosses who said one thing and did another, squares, those who didn't trust the young, guys with all the perks, enemies of culture, the establishment, cowards who were ruining the revolution that I carried inside of me" (Rodríguez 1996:12).<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, the months aboard the Playa Girón proved incredibly productive for Silvio from a musical standpoint. Many of his most beautiful and internationally renowned compositions, including several that openly challenge the government, were written at sea.<sup>35</sup>

Conditions began to improve dramatically for younger musicians only a few years later, and yet more subtle problems persisted that impacted their music. Radio programmers allowed them only limited access to the mass media for many years. Representatives of the National Culture Advisory and the Ministry of the Interior continued to closely monitor the ideological content of nueva trova lyrics. They regularly prohibited controversial pieces from being recorded or broadcast and sent police to concerts to ensure that they were not performed live (Oppenheimer 1992:265). Even today, those with a history of oppositional compositions often find themselves blacklisted, jailed for short periods, or professionally marginalized. "Suspect" performers may be allowed to schedule an occasional concert, but nearly all tickets will be presold to Party members so that other "impressionable" listeners cannot attend (Alexis Esquivel, p.c.). The government still determines on occasion that certain performers should not appear on the radio or television despite their popularity.<sup>36</sup>

It should be clear by now that what came eventually to be called the nueva trova movement gained popularity in the 1960s not because of government policy, but in spite of it. Performers did not initially belong to any official institution and in fact had to fight against a cultural bureaucracy in order to be heard at all. Castro himself nearly admitted as much in remarks made in the mid-1970s: "Did we, the politicians, conceive of [nueva trova]? Did we plan it? No! These things arise, like so many others, that none of us can even imagine . . ." (Castro in Díaz Pérez 1994:131). The eventual prominence of Vicente Feliú, Sara González, Noel Nicola, Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez and the nationwide promotion of younger artists was due to a conscious and abrupt shift in policy. In the space of only a few years, nueva trova moved from the margin to the mainstream of socialist music making. Its proponents were heralded as prized cultural products and spokespersons of the revolutionary experience rather than as insolent malcontents.

### **The MNT and Institutionalization**

The first government organization that offered employment to trovadores and allowed them to produce music as professionals was the ICAIC,<sup>37</sup> the primary producer of domestic films. Under the direction of classically trained composer and guitarist Leo Brouwer, the ICAIC established a working group of young musicians with the intention of training them and letting them help create film scores. The members, known collectively as the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora or Sonic Experimentation Group (GES), first assembled in 1969 and continued working, with various changes of personnel, through 1978. Musicians involved at some point during these years include Pablo Milanés, Noel Nicola, Silvio Rodríguez, Sara González, Eduardo Ramos, and

American (expatriate) Pablo Menéndez, as well as several classically trained artists (Orovio 1981:137). Under Brouwer's guidance, a number of the performers learned to read music for the first time, were exposed to the fundamentals of harmony and counterpoint, and developed the ability to work collectively as well as individually.<sup>38</sup> It is important to realize that the formation of the GES did not imply broad acceptance of nueva trova on the part of the establishment, but rather a truce or compromise with younger performers. It provided them a creative outlet, but not on their own terms. Silvio Rodríguez notes that Alfredo Guevara, the founder and president of the ICAIC for many years, pushed through the idea of the group's formation mainly as an excuse to offer a few of the many disenfranchised trovadores a job (Rodríguez 1996:11). Much of the music the ICAIC leadership asked them to produce was instrumental, quite distinct from the songs they had initially composed. Perhaps the most important result of the GES was that it legitimized the status of trovadores and supported their creative activities over a sustained period. As professional film scorers they were more respectable and still had time to compose music of their own choosing. The recordings they produced for the ICAIC<sup>39</sup> however, while hailed in certain artistic circles and sparking a degree of interest elsewhere in Latin America, never received much local diffusion or recognition.

The government's desire for closer political relations with the Allende administration in Chile and that of other Latin American countries undoubtedly contributed to the acceptance of nueva trova within Cuba. Protest music gained widespread recognition in Chile by the mid-1960s and was already an organized political force by 1969 (Morris 1986:121). Cuban singers had firsthand exposure to their counterparts in South America because the Consejo Nacional de Cultura began inviting them to international music festivals in Havana as early as 1965 (Díaz Pérez 1994:85).<sup>40</sup> In 1971 Víctor Jara himself came to perform in the Casa de las Américas; others visiting shortly thereafter included Daniel Viglietti, Isabel and Angel Parra, Tania Libertad, and the group Inti Illimani (Díaz Ayala 1981:310; Díaz Pérez 1994:229). The Cuban Grupo Manguaré received an invitation from the Chilean government to fly to Chile and study Andean folklore in 1971 (Benmayor 1981:23), becoming the first of several ensembles to do so.

The early 1970s represents a pivotal period in official reevaluation of nueva trova. With ever greater frequency, the Party invited its musicians to take part in international events throughout Latin America, Spain, and the Soviet Bloc as representatives of Cuba. Policy makers must have recognized the widespread appeal of the music and the fact that similar traditions now existed in numerous countries. They may still have found the trovador persona and the foreign musical elements in many songs unpleasant, but chose not to criticize. Acoustic trova had proven an effective tool in public rela-

tions and was certainly less controversial than the electrified rock bands many listened to clandestinely on late-night Miami broadcasts. Gradually, song writers found they had more opportunities to make recordings and received more national promotion. Initially asked to play in relatively low-profile contexts—grade schools, factories, neighborhood theaters, parks—, they were later integrated into prominent events. In a short time, artists such as Silvio Rodríguez who had been considered counterrevolutionary, or at least suspect, were becoming the unofficial artistic representatives of the country.

The peak years of nueva trova's popularity, as well as that of protest song in many other Latin American countries, extend from 1973 through approximately 1985. During that time trova became the principal form of government-sponsored music targeted at younger domestic audiences and was often featured in annual festivals (Benmayor 1981:22). It should be remembered that the term "nueva trova" itself achieved widespread recognition only in the mid-1970s (Nicola 1995:365). The very label can be viewed as a move by authorities to link what many considered a deviant form of youth expression to Cuban artists and genres of the past, and in this way to take away some of its oppositionality. Calling rockeros like Vicente and Santiago Feliú trovadores linked them discursively to Sindo Garay and Alberto Villalón, staunch supporters of the Communist Party whose compositions had never been controversial. It obscured the fact that canción protesta actually represented a form of rebellious counterculture heavily influenced from abroad.

By 1973 authorities had institutionalized a Movimiento Nacional de la Trova (MNT) and given it government oversight complete with a national registry of members, a board of directors, and centers for performance in every province. This provided additional support to artists, but it also meant that they were required to audition and receive approval before being recognized by the state.<sup>41</sup> The number of professional, salaried groups increased dramatically and new names rose to prominence: Alfredo Carol in Sancti Spiritus, Lázaro García in Villa Clara, Alejandro García ("Virulo") in Havana, Freddy Laborí ("Chispa") as well as Augusto Blanca in Oriente, the groups Canto Libre (based in Camagüey), Manguaré, Mayohuacán, Moncada, Nuestra América (in Matanzas), and others. The first widely disseminated nueva trova LP, Silvio Rodríguez's *Días y flores*, appeared in 1975. Young acoustic players reappeared on television in 1978 as part of the show "Te doy una canción," where they remained for many years.<sup>42</sup> Groups with electrified rock repertoire began to appear as guests about 1982 (Leonardo Acosta, p.c.), though it took longer for that style to be fully accepted. In general, the drive to institutionalize what had been such an eclectic and personal phenomenon proved difficult. In the first years after the National Congress on Education and Culture in 1971, MNT officials are said to have made clumsy attempts to dictate the content of nueva trova composition, with disappointing results

(Díaz Pérez 1994:22). They also continued to suppress songs deemed inappropriate or potentially subversive such as Pablo Milanés' "La vida no vale nada" (Life is Worth Nothing).<sup>43</sup>

In a musical sense, the institutionalization of nueva trova offered more resources to performers than had been available previously. The government gave them access to recording studios, producers, and facilitated the dissemination of their work as never before. One begins to find much more elaborated compositions on the market of the mid-1970s as a result; solo guitar pieces are still heard, but contrast increasingly with others incorporating synthesizer, electronic special effects, instruments such as the piano or violin, formally scored arrangements for larger groups, collaborative recordings featuring trova artists with other national and international performers and their ensembles, etc. Changes in nueva trova recordings may reflect the increased musical training and expanded aesthetic horizons of artists as they became professional entertainers. It may also represent the bias of a classically oriented musical establishment trying to make the repertoire sound more "sophisticated."

Lyricaly, nueva trova repertoire began to change in subtle ways as well. During the 1960s, trovadores freely wrote about virtually any subject they cared to with little concern for its relationship to Party doctrine. Because they had been given no formal recognition or access to the media, they performed largely among themselves; their compositions never represented a significant threat. After 1972 this began to change. Musicians suddenly found themselves in the spotlight, invited to receptions by the president of the UNEAC,<sup>44</sup> greeted personally by members of the Central Committee and even Castro himself as they returned home from tours,<sup>45</sup> and written about extensively in the media. Suddenly all of their actions, musical and otherwise, were subject to scrutiny. They could only critique domestic politics at the risk of losing the supportive relationship that now existed between themselves and the Ministry of Culture (before 1976, the National Culture Advisory).

Established trovadores thus walked an ever more delicate line between fidelity to a government that now supported them and fidelity to themselves and their own points of view. Songs about housing shortages in the city or references to censorship and restrictions on artistic freedom, for instance, become less common<sup>46</sup> and are overshadowed by other themes: adaptations of traditional trova or other folkloric texts; references to figures from Cuba's long revolutionary struggle; nationalism; commentary on international politics; or on personal relationships. Pablo Milanés wrote "Amo esta isla" in 1980 in response to the Mariel crisis, as one example. The lyrics represented a call to stay on the island and support the Revolution (González Portal 1997:7). The case of Silvio Rodríguez's later works is more difficult to evaluate since his texts are so highly metaphorical. One might suggest that it is their very



ambiguity that has enabled much of his music to escape censorship while still being read as subversive by fans.

Havana-based journalist Cristóbal Sosa suggests that the political pressures facing nueva trova performers as of the mid-1970s are similar to those facing all artists and intellectuals in Cuba. Cultural representatives are expected to belong to state organizations. These affiliations facilitate one's career in many respects, but also elicit and prohibit certain kinds of activity.

Here there's a music institute and one must be in agreement with that institute to accomplish many things. Then there's the UNEAC which also has its regulations. You belong to the UNEAC, fine, but you can't do anything you'd like such as adopting independent positions that cross [those of the association]. When there's an important cultural event that is judged to be contrary to the interests of the Revolution, a call goes out in the UNEAC so that all the intellectuals come together and sign declarations against it, as happened in the case of the Helms-Burton legislation.<sup>47</sup> (Cristóbal Sosa, interview)

Without necessarily intending to, Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez have become nueva trova superstars who generate tremendous sympathy and revenue for the Communist Party. In recognition of their contributions to the Revolution (and, undoubtedly, in order to make sure they won't defect) the government permits them to purchase large houses with pools, cars with chauffeurs, and to hire domestic help. It provides access to foreign currency, free license to travel abroad, the right to establish their own artistic foundations, and other perks—and all of this in a country in which many families still live on inadequate rations of rice and beans and can't afford to buy enough hand soap. By any standards, these singers have, ironically, become bourgeois. Both Pablo and Silvio are masterful artists and deserve special consideration, but to much of the public their new status compromises their ability to act as a "voice of protest." More cynical commentators have described their new role as one of "court musician" to the socialist power structure (Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, p.c.). Even analysts on the island admit that their lives now are completely divorced from the day-to-day realities of the average person (Clara Díaz Pérez, p.c.).

Armando Correa, a Cuban exile, has also accused Milanés, Rodríguez and other trovadores of the same generation (e.g., Eduardo Ramos, Tony Pinelli, Jorge Gómez) of involvement in acts of repudiation<sup>48</sup> against performers intending to leave the country (Correa 1997). Whether or not these accounts are true, those who came of age listening to trova of the late '60s frequently feel as if the artists who remain popular today have "sold out" to the authorities. This feeling is especially marked in conjunction with Silvio Rodríguez who established himself early on as a rebel willing to risk censure in order to speak his mind. The government "uses two methods," suggests Correa: "either they censure you or assimilate you. In the case of Silvio they assimilate

lated him. Silvio's music was prohibited, now it's obligatory." Much of Rodríguez's music does receive strong government support and promotion, and fewer of his recent compositions contain controversial lyrics. Even so, his older works continue to be performed and retain a degree of oppositionality. To the extent that pieces from the 1990s address pressing social issues (e.g. prostitution, crime) they tend to be marketed for foreign audiences, receiving little air play within Cuba.<sup>49</sup>

### Passing the Mantle of Protest

By the mid-1980s, the music of first-generation nueva trova singers had become less attractive to younger listeners for various reasons. Fewer trovadores continued playing for local audiences. Some found their talents inadequate compared with Pablo or Silvio and gradually changed careers; Rodolfo de la Fuente, for example, prefers to work behind the scenes as a producer and DJ at Radio Progreso. Others have opted to perform in foreign countries rather than at home. Amaury Pérez and Virulo now live in Mexico, Martín Rojas in Venezuela (Acosta 1995:21). Carlos Gómez and Admed Barroso Castellanos have defected outright, the former a founding member of the MNT, the latter formerly a musician in Silvio Rodríguez's backup band. The state's increasing support of commercial dance music (*timba*, salsa) beginning in the mid-'80s, as well as of rock, and the resulting proliferation of new groups have meant that more listening alternatives are available than in previous decades.

For the most part, however, the declining appeal of nueva trova stems from the changing social meanings and functions of the repertoire. In the minds of those under twenty-five, middle-aged performers represent the establishment, not the voice of an outsider with a fresh perspective. Generational differences thus play a role; younger fans prefer artists closer to their own age. Even more importantly, political change in the former Soviet Bloc has resulted in widespread disillusionment within Cuba. Earlier songs inspired by the martyrs of Moncada ring hollow in an era of uncertainty about the future of socialism. In large part, the mantle of Alberto Faya's "culture of contestation" has passed from folk protest singers to a newer generation of trovadores, rockeros, and rap artists. Most receive far less recognition and now occupy social positions similar to those once held by marginal performers of the 1970s.

A few older figures defy this tendency and continue to write controversial music. As a result they are rarely able to record or schedule large concerts; only through networks of underground home recording can their works be disseminated. Pedro Luis Ferrer (b. 1952) represents one of the most well known; he has gained a following both for his musicianship and

his penchant for insightful social critique. He also stands out for promoting acoustic renditions of the *guaracha* and *décima* at a time when many consider folkloric forms passé. According to one Spanish journalist, Ferrer's music contrasts sharply with that of the "establishment trovador" typically present at state functions ("P.P." 1994:42). Denounced as a counter-revolutionary by some, Ferrer nevertheless considers himself a critical but supportive socialist and lampoons the Miami exile community in song and interviews as ruthlessly as he does politics in Havana.

Lyrics in Ferrer's music address a diversity of subjects and underscore the imposed limits on social commentary in mainstream *trova*. Whether joking or serious, he voices concern about religious intolerance, racism, homophobia, restraints on freedom of expression and travel, and the need for political reform. Two of his best-known compositions from the late 1980s are "100% cubano" (100% Cuban) and "El abuelo Paco" (Grandfather Paco). The first draws attention to special privileges afforded tourists and foreigners since the 1990s, emphasizing that Cubans themselves have too frequently become second-class citizens in their own country. The second likens Castro to an irritable old man who builds his family a lovely house and then lords over them using implicit threats of violence.

### "El abuelo Paco" (1994)

From *Pedro Luís Ferrer: 100% Cubano*.<sup>50</sup>

Ten paciencia con abuelo	Be patient with grandpa
Recuerda bien cuanto hizo	Remember how much he's done
No contradigas su afán	Don't contradict his enthusiasm
Pónle atención en su juicio	Pay attention to his judgments
Gasta un poco de tu tiempo	Spend a little of your time
Complaciendo su egoísmo	Flattering his ego
No olvides que Abuelo tiene	Don't forget that grandpa has
Un revólver y un cuchillo	A revolver and a knife
Y mientras no se lo quiten	And as long as they're not taken away
Abuelo ofrece peligro	Grandpa poses a threat
Aunque sepas que no, díle que sí	Even if you know the answer is no, say yes
Si lo contradices, peor para tí	If you contradict him, it will go badly for you

Not surprisingly, the last time EGREM<sup>51</sup> allowed Ferrer to produce a record was over fifteen years ago;<sup>52</sup> he recorded "El abuelo Paco" independently in Miami with the help of his brother during a brief visit there. Authorities continue to censor many of his songs and will not allow his live concerts to be taped. Ferrer is aware of the price of non-conformity but has decided to speak his mind: "If you understand that no one has the right to administer liberty to you in the manner that the state bureaucracy in Cuba does, you have to resist and act like a free person to the extent that you can" (Ferrer in Niurka 1996).

Despite gradually improving economic conditions in recent years, younger Cubans still have few attractive job opportunities, few possibilities for travel or study abroad, and limited access even to clothing, food, or domestic goods. The loss of billion-dollar aid payments from the Soviet Union has created “a mass of educated youths whose expectations [clash] sharply with Cuba’s desperate conditions” (Oppenheimer 1992:263). Dissatisfaction with domestic life has led to an even stronger interest in foreign rather than national music, and in some cases a preference for songs without any political content. These attitudes reflect a rejection of many issues and music genres supported by the state, as well as of its past tendency to oversaturate the media with trova. In the early 1990s, for example, Che Guevara’s grandson Canek was known as a heavy metal rock fan whose favorite groups included Slayer, Death, and Kreator (Oppenheimer 1992:267). He and others have used rock as a symbolic tie to an international artistic community they feel separated from, and as a reaction to government policies still considered too constraining.<sup>53</sup>

Younger socially concerned composers tend to play songs with an aesthetic identity distinct from that of earlier times. They recognize their debt to past repertoire but refer to their own music as “*novísima trova*” in order to underscore its unique qualities. Some members of the newer generation (e.g., Gerardo Alfonso) play acoustic guitar, but most adopt electrified rock as their medium of choice and fuse elements of Cuban traditional repertoire with diverse influences from abroad (jazz, Brazilian pop, rap). *Novísima trova* frequently sounds even more modern and cosmopolitan than the music of earlier generations for this reason. Its artists move with ease between styles from diverse time periods, locations, and ethnic origins.

Carlos Varela stands out as one of the most articulate social commentators of recent years. Despite a history of clashes with officials, he has managed to negotiate a fairly stable position for himself as a critic who supports the government even as he finds fault with it. As in the case of other aspiring rockers (Polito Ibáñez, Frank Delgado), Varela was unable to pursue his career through the existing cultural establishment. He eventually opted to study acting, meeting like-minded instrumentalists and forming an unofficial band while enrolled at the ISA<sup>54</sup> in the mid-1980s. Involvement with the theater seems to have contributed to his musical success; Vilar (1998:17) notes that he was among the first to concern himself with lighting, stage effects, and other visual components of performance, in a clear break with the tendency of older trovadores to appear in public as informally as possible. Early venues for Varela’s band included live radio shows hosted by Ramón Fernández Larrea on Radio Ciudad de la Habana (Evora 2000). Beginning about 1986 the state gradually began accepting rockers as musical professionals (Manduley López 1997:138). In this context and with the help of Silvio

Rodríguez, Varela was eventually invited to play for larger audiences. The major turning point in his career was a concert in the Carlos Marx theater in 1990 that converted him overnight into one of the most popular musicians of the day.<sup>55</sup> Despite this acclaim he has never recorded within Cuba; the five albums produced between 1988 and 1998 have all appeared in Spain or Venezuela.<sup>56</sup>

Varela's work typifies that of *novísima trova* artists who have opted for an international pop/rock sound virtually indistinguishable from performers in the United States and Europe—in this case groups such as U2 or Sting. His pieces vary from sweet, lyrical ballads employing a lone keyboard or other instrument (“Memorias,” “Bulevar,” “Jalisco Park”) to minimalist R&B grooves and half spoken vocals reminiscent of Dire Straits (“La política no cabe en la azucarera,” Politics Don't Fit in the Sugar Bowl) to raunchy, driving rock with heavy percussion and distorted electric guitar (“Soy un gnomo”). Occasional elements of timba (modern Cuban dance music) are also used (e.g., in “Tropicollage”) as a means of alluding to issues related to tourism and commercialism. The following excerpt from “Cuchillo en la acera” demonstrates one of the many musical grooves employed by Varela's band. In this case the song is written as '80s-style alternative rock, harmonically similar to Randy Newman's “Short People.” The voice and piano eventually accelerate in tempo and are joined by bass, electric guitar, and lively set drumming.

**Example 3. Excerpt from “Cuchilla en la acera” (1993). From *Carlos Varela en vivo*.<sup>57</sup>**

Quarter note=92

Lepu-sie - ron la cu-chi-la/en el cue-llo y des-pués le qui-ta-ron la ro-pa

B<sup>b</sup>min7 Eb7 A<sup>b</sup>7sus4 B<sup>b</sup>min7

Los trans-seúñ - tes que lo vie-ron vi - ra-ron la ca - ra/yse ca - lla-ron la bo-ca

E<sup>b</sup>7 A<sup>b</sup>7sus4 B<sup>b</sup>min7 E<sup>b</sup>7 A<sup>b</sup>7sus4 B<sup>b</sup>min7

### “Cuchilla en la acera” (Razor on the Sidewalk)

Le pusieron la cuchilla en el cuello	They put the razor to his throat
Y después le quitaron la ropa	And then they took all his clothing
Los transeúntes que lo vieron viraron la cara	The passers by that saw him turned their faces
Y se callaron la boca	And kept their mouths shut
Y aunque no le encontraron dinero	And although they didn't find any money
Lo dejaron tirado en la vía	They left him sprawled on the street
Y a pesar de la sangre, los gritos, y Dios	And despite the blood, the cries, and God
Nunca llegó la policía	The police never arrived

Clearly a gifted musician, Varela has gained widest notoriety for his lyrics. They address domestic social concerns with a directness and bite often lacking in the works of earlier trovadores. Examples include the text of “Guillermo Tell” (William Tell), written from the perspective of Tell’s son who is tired of being a target and asks his father to put the apple on his own head. The allegorical quality of the story is typical of Varela’s songs; in this case he alludes to generational conflicts between youth and older members of Cuba’s power structure. “Cuchilla en la acera” (Razor on the Sidewalk), as another example, graphically describes violent street assaults typical of mid-1990s Havana, while “Monedas al aire” (Coins in the Air) represents an impassioned call for political change on the island. During the peak of Varela’s popularity his concerts became associated with anti-authoritarianism to such an extent that they frequently ended in physical violence and/or intervention by the government (Vilar 1998:22–24).

To the extent that they perform traditional music, younger trovadores alter it substantially, blending influences from Cuba’s past with those from abroad. The group Gema y Pável—named after principal members Gema Corredera and Pável Urkiza—is representative of this trend (and one of my personal favorites). Their music is nearly as irreverent as that of Varela, but in a decidedly musical sense. Rather than foregrounding socio-political critique, their compositions instead redefine Cuban culture in more inclusive, hybridized terms. The style of the performers is highly individualistic and cannot be compared to that of any other. They eventually decided to leave Cuba, preferring to sing about past experiences while residing in Spain, as have a number of their contemporaries.

Gema y Pável began performing independently of one another in the early 1980s. These were good years in Cuba, a period of relative economic prosperity and increasing aesthetic possibilities for musicians. Neither had extensive formal training,<sup>58</sup> but were nurtured by an environment generally supportive of the arts. Government subsidies for food, housing, and other necessities meant that aspiring performers could dedicate long hours to creative work rather than seek full-time employment. Gema and Pável’s first shows together took place in informal *peñas* hosted by composer Teresita Fernández (b. 1930) in Miramar (Raúl Martínez, p.c.) beginning in 1990. They

also collaborated with actors, painters, and others in multi-media “happenings” held almost nightly in the Casa del Joven Creador (House of the Young Artist), an old warehouse near the Havana docks that the UJC<sup>59</sup> had converted into a recreational space. As their reputation grew, they appeared regularly at youth events until their departure for Spain in the early 1993 (Gema Corredera, p.c.).

Songs by Pável Urkiza and others interpreted by this duo are amazingly diverse.<sup>60</sup> Rhythms may be slow and relaxed or consist of driving and syncopated figures taken from Afro-Cuban folklore (*son*, rumba, African-derived religious song). Arrangements vary from stark a cappella voices to highly elaborated studio productions with string ensemble or jazz combo backtracks. Accompaniment patterns on the guitar—the most common instrument—are highly original, employing percussive strumming, pedals, non-standard inversions and chord sequences. Vertical harmonies are extended, with unusual intervals emphasized between the voices of the singers: 5ths, flat 7ths, 9ths, etc. Vocal and instrumental improvisation is a prominent feature of most songs, as is African-American-style melisma. Repertoire includes

**Example 4. “Habana, devorando claridad” (1995). From Gema y Pável, *Trampas del tiempo*.<sup>61</sup>**

Quarter note=112 Am9 D9 D/F# F

Alto No sé ni yo lo sé ni yo -

8 Tenor Las ho-ras van na - cien-do, los por - ta-les guar-dan la hu-medad, los

6 C/E Dmin G9 E+ E7/D C+7

no sé qué su - ce - de/en la ciu-dad Per - si -

8 hom - bres - son fan - tas - mas que re - co - rren la ciu-dad

10 F6 Bbm9 D/F# F Eb7sus4 C6

güen - dos ue - ños u na vez más e

8 u na vez más je

primarily original work as well as compositions by fellow trovadores, adaptations of *vieja trova* from the 1910s, and arrangements of international Latin standards by María Grever, Augustín Lara, or Antonio Carlos Jobim. In the same piece (e.g., “El bobo”) one might hear jazz set drumming, fragments of Hammond organ solos, vocal scattling, excerpts of Beatles songs and allusions to the works of Silvio Rodríguez. The result is an almost bewilderingly intricate musical fabric. Example 4, a vocal transcription from “Habana, devorando claridad,” demonstrates the frequent independence of the two singers’ voices from one another, with the female discant creating a counter melody. Accompaniment is provided by piano, bass, drum set, and cello.

Lyrics in Gema y Pável’s repertoire can be characterized as personal, intimate, and subjective, a reaction against political slogans and mass rhetoric. Themes are varied, including love (“Longina”), adult misunderstanding of youthful innocence (“Aixa”), references to figures from Cuban history or folklore (“La caminadora”), nostalgia, bittersweet memories of life in Cuba (“Domingo A.M.,” “Habana, devorando claridad”), self-doubt, depression, loneliness (“¿Hacia dónde?”), or events as simple and poignant as the disappearance of ice cream trucks (“Helado sobre ruedas”), which by extension allude to fundamental problems associated with socialist economics. Overall, the texts of this and other *novísima trova* performers are of surprisingly high caliber, a tribute to the cultural milieu of Cuba in the 1980s and early 1990s.

## Conclusion

*Nueva trova* has been more directly tied to the Cuban revolutionary experience than any other form of music. It represents an attempt to do something fresh and artistically vital, and has created important space for musical experimentation through the years. Songs of the trovadores developed in a unique environment, one reflecting the values of the new socialist leadership and attempts to instill them in young people. The most successful examples of *nueva trova* demonstrate a high degree of creativity, poetics, stylistic synthesis, and political awareness. Drawing on diverse sources of inspiration including music from the United States, Europe, and Latin America, they nevertheless represents an implicit critique of capitalist culture. Young composers attempt to avoid clichéd, formulaic song structures and to create alternative music of high quality that documents the radical experiment of which they are (or were) a part. More than to entertain, they consistently write pieces that engage the listener intellectually as well as emotionally. Above all, they strive to be true to themselves and to freely express their views on life, politics, and personal relations.

The spirit of freedom and rebellion surrounding *nueva trova* has inevi-



tably resulted in conflicts with socialist leaders. These conflicts were most severe in the late 1960s. Trovadores initially performed far from government-controlled media, but as their public grew so too did the government's interest in regulating their work. Most have experienced periods of censure and compromise. They do not emerge unscathed from every conflict, but serve a valuable purpose by challenging the status quo. Young composers produce art that is intensely meaningful to local audiences. Humorously or seriously, *trova* contests boundaries of many kinds. It is precisely through engagement with unresolved aesthetic and/or social issues that it achieves its greatest relevance.

Given that *nueva trova* began as a fusion of foreign and national styles, it is not surprising that the voices of young critics continue to find inspiration abroad. Beginning with the emergence of the heavy metal groups (Venus, Zeus, and Metal Oscuro) in the 1980s, and with Carlos Varela and Vicente Feliú in the 1990s, electrified rock has come to play an ever more prominent role in national music making. More recently, rap too has influenced composers, especially AfroCubans. Several new bands (Anónimo Consejo, Alto y Bajo, Instinto) have signed recording contracts and are receiving widespread promotion (Sokol 2000). It is no longer primarily soloists with an acoustic guitar, but these individuals and ensembles that serve as Cuba's musical conscience.

Since the onset of economic crisis, *nueva trova* and even *novísima trova* have experienced a certain decline in popularity. The audience for socially conscious composition has always been somewhat circumscribed, achieving widespread appeal only among well educated segments of the population. These days, dance repertoire and other more commercially viable genres represent the center of Cuban music making. The collapse of the Soviet Union has thus led to a shift towards pragmatics. Most performers within Cuba are directly involved in the tourist economy and are concerned with the appeal of their music to visitors as well as its sales potential abroad. They tend to write fewer songs oriented towards local listeners and concerns as a result. In retrospect, the period prior to 1989, despite its disadvantages, was often more supportive of socially conscious art than the current one.

One unforeseen result of such changes is that the most consistent support for first-generation trovadores is now among non-Cubans abroad rather than at home. For the politically conscious youth of the 1970s and 1980s who grew up in Latin America and Spain, the Cuban Revolution became a symbol of their aspirations; it demonstrated that grassroots action could accomplish significant change. This public avidly listened to trovadores, performed their songs, and used them as a model to promote progressive musical activity within their own countries. Unfamiliar with day-to-day Cuban realities in most cases, the meanings of early *nueva trova* music remain largely the same

for them today as it did when the songs were first written. Silvio Rodríguez, for example, performed in March of 1997 to an ecstatic crowd of 30,000 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, his first appearance there since the mid-1980s (Martínez Tabares 1997:6). Commentators noted that he, as well as Puerto Ricans Roy Brown, Andrés Jiménez, and others, evoked a powerful nationalist and anti-colonialist response in listeners. Even in 1997, in a country that has consistently voted not to break ties with the United States, Silvio was able to briefly “rekindle . . . the spirit of the independence movement” (Correa 1997).<sup>62</sup>

Frederick Starr suggests in his history of jazz in the Soviet Union that whenever government officials began to support particular genres of music (swing, bebop, etc.) it was a sign that they were no longer popular with the public. He further states that attempts to use music as a tool for ideological or political change were doomed from the outset, since “the ideals of the October Revolution proved incapable of realization in popular music and culture generally unless backed by the use or threat of force” (Starr 1994:334). This commentary is provocative, but seems to be contradicted in part by the history of nueva trova in Cuba. It is true that the mass institutionalization of trova ultimately lead to greater regulation of its ideological content and its eventual declining popularity among many listeners. However, at the time it was initially endorsed by the government the music represented a very popular form of expression and continued to be so for some time. I would argue further that the ideals of socialism as perceived by Cuban youth *have* been reflected in nueva trova, and very effectively. The problem is only that policy makers within the Communist Party have not always accepted such views. Trovadores consistently support government positions they consider beneficial at the same time that they question others. Their songs reflect the attitudes of individuals who not only contemplate socialism in the abstract but have lived it as a reality their entire lives, and thus should be taken seriously. Perhaps the critiques of younger musicians will receive more immediate consideration in policy making of the future and can contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic socialist reality.

### **Appendix: “Resumen de noticias”/Review of Events Silvio Rodríguez**

This piece dates from January of 1970 and was one of dozens written while the author was worked aboard the fishing boat Playa Girón. It is intended as an example of the sort of song considered subversive at the time, and that retains associations with anti-authoritarianism. Many themes are evident in the lyrics, including feelings of marginalization and persecution, and the importance of being true to one’s conscience no matter what the cost.

He estado al alcance de todos los bolsillos  
 porque no cuesta nada mirarse para adentro  
 He estado al alcance de todas las manos  
 que han querido tocar mi mano amigamente  
 Pero, pobre de mi, no he estado con los presos  
 de su propia cabeza acomodada  
 No he estado en los que ríen con sólo media risa  
 los delimitadores de las primaveras  
 No he estado en los archivos ni en las papelerías  
 y se me archiva en copias y no en originales  
 No he estado en los mercados grandes  
 de la palabra pero he dicho lo mío  
 a tiempo y sonriente  
 No he estado enumerando las manchas en el sol  
 pues sé que en una sola mancha cabe el mundo  
 He procurado ser un gran mortificador  
 para, si mortifico, no vayan a acusarme  
 Aunque se dice que me sobran enemigos  
 todo el mundo me escucha  
 bien quedo cuando canto  
 Yo he preferido hablar de cosas imposibles  
 porque de lo posible se sabe demasiado  
 He preferido el polvo así, sencillamente  
 pues la palabra amor aún me suena a hueco  
 He preferido un golpe así, de vez en cuando  
 porque la inmunidad me carcome los huesos  
 Agradezco la participación de todos  
 los que colaboraron con esta melodía  
 Se debe subrayar la importante tarea  
 de los persiguidores de cualquier nacimiento  
 Si alguien que me escucha se viera retratado  
 sépase que se hace con ese destino  
 Cualquier reclamación, que sea sin membrete  
 Buenas noches, amigos y enemigos

I have always offered the money in my pockets  
 Because self-reflection costs nothing  
 I have always been open to any hands  
 that have wanted to shake my own cordially  
 But, poor me, I have not spent time with the  
 prisoners of their own pampered minds  
 I haven't been with those who only smile a little  
 those that control, limit the springtime  
 I have not been in archives or paper shops  
 that file me away in copies, not originals  
 I have never been in the grand markets  
 of words and writing, but I have said  
 what I had to quickly and with a smile  
 I have not been counting sunspots because  
 I know that the whole world fits inside only one  
 I've endeavored to be known as a great mortifier  
 so that, if I mortify, no one can accuse me of it  
 Though it is said that I have many enemies  
 everyone listens to me  
 quietly when I sing  
 I have preferred to sing of impossible things  
 because of the possible too much is known  
 I have preferred the dust in its simplicity  
 because the word "love" still rings hollow to me  
 I have preferred to take a blow once in a while  
 because immunity eats away at my bones  
 I am thankful for the participation of everyone  
 who collaborated in this melody  
 The role of all forms of persecutors  
 should be recognized for its importance  
 If someone hears themselves described here  
 know that the song was made with that aim  
 Any complaints, let them be direct, to the point  
 Good night, friends and enemies

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## Notes

1. Trotsky [1923] 1992:59–60.
2. "*Trova*" in Cuba, derived from "*trovador*" or "troubadour," is the term used to refer to the national repertory of traditional song. "Nueva trova" has been used since the early 1970s to refer to songs based in part on older styles but written during the socialist period. One of the most comprehensive articles written about the early history of this music in English is Rina Benmayor's "La 'Nueva Trova': New Cuban Song" (Benmayor 1981).

3. The best study to date has been written by Clara Díaz Pérez (1994).

4. Through much of the earlier section of this essay I refer to nueva trova as such even though the term was not used by performers themselves until the mid-1970s. No single label satisfactorily describes the early songs in all respects; some object to the use of "canción protesta" to describe pieces that did not necessarily protest against anything but were simply new in a musical and conceptual sense. Referring to them here as nueva trova has the advantage of employing a term that is well understood in the present and that is inclusive rather than limiting.

5. It should be noted that this description of Cuba is much more applicable to the period prior to the mid-1990s than to the current one. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union Cuba has adopted measures that are slowly converting the economy into a system influenced by capitalist market forces, much as in the case of China. The change has resulted in some salary increases and the greater utility of money, though it has also led to an increase in wealth disparities, crime, and other problems.

6. The complete name of the national children's organization is the Unión de Pioneros de Cuba (UPC). Their motto is: "¡Pioneros por el comunismo, seremos como el Che!" ("Pioneers for communism, let's all be like Che!"). "Che," of course, refers to Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine revolutionary who fought with Fidel Castro in the 1950s and later died trying to start a new revolution in Bolivia.

7. Typical slogans include "Socialism or death," "We will be victorious," or "Join in" (*Símate*). In the context of ongoing economic difficulties and widespread doubt about the substance and value of Cuban socialism today, these slogans may attest more to the desperation of socialist leaders and the difficulty of building consensus around Marxist principles rather than the actual views of the people. I am reminded of Gramsci's observation that discourses of political unity appear most often in nation states that are the weakest and most fragmented.

8. For information on *nova música popular brasileira*, see Carrasco Pirard (1982:600); Díaz Pérez (1994:113-115) provides an overview of protest song movements in Mexico, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, while Díaz Ayala (1981:302) discusses artists Raimón and Juan Manuel Serrat from northern Spain.

9. The *teatro vernáculo* or comic theater was essentially a form of vaudeville entertainment influenced by Spanish theatrical traditions as well as by U.S. minstrelsy. Short *sainetes* or one-act plays alternated on stage with song and dance routines, recitation of poetry, and the like. Numerous *sainetes* made parodical reference to contemporary political events. This tradition continued well into the 1930s; examples from the Teatro Alhambra include *El ciclón* (1906) alluding to the events of the August Revolution, and *La isla de los cotorros* (1923) about the interest of U.S. authorities in annexing the Isle of Pines.

10. Dance music genres from eastern Cuba and smaller towns in the middle of the island (e.g., Carlos Puebla y sus Tradicionales, *Hasta Siempre*, EGREM compact disc CD-0083).

11. A small guitar-like instrument. From Areíto LP #LD-3639 (EGREM).

12. A ten-line poetic form derived from Renaissance Spain that continues to be used in Cuban *música guajira* or Spanish-derived country music.

13. This name was inspired by the Cuartel Moncada in Santiago, the site of Castro's first armed engagement with Batista's forces. On the morning of 26 July 1953 Castro and his followers attempted to storm it in order to seize the weapons housed there. The attempt failed; many of the rebels died in the conflict or were tortured and killed subsequently by police. After 1959, Castro converted Moncada into a public school and museum.

14. Calzado was head of Charanga Habanera. See Manuel 1987 for further comments on rock in Cuba and its presence in nueva trova.

15. The Nicola selection can be heard on *Nueva Trova: Selección de éxitos* (Artex CD-075, EGREM), the Rodríguez selection on *Al fin de este viaje* (Ojalá cassette #MCO-0002).

16. Recorded on Alejandro "Virulo" García's *Historia del mundo* (García and the Grupo Moncada, *La historia de Cuba*. Areíto LP #LD-3741, Havana: EGREM).

17. See Benmayor (1981:16-17) for a more detailed summary of the stylistic characteris-

tics in nueva trova of the 1980s as described by musicologist Danilo Orozco. These include elaborations of past genres such as filin and/or transformations of folkloric styles like *rumba guaguancó*, the use of jazz and rock influences, electrified instruments, etc.

18. *José Martí*. Cuban patriot, revolutionary, and political activist who was killed in the final War of Independence against Spain (1895–98).

*Nicolás Guillén*. Considered Cuba's national poet, Guillén (1902–1989), an Afro-Cuban, is most famous for his work of the 1930s. In it he was one the first to incorporate serious racial themes and issues as well as black working-class slang.

*César Vallejo*. A Peruvian poet (1892–1938) of mixed Indian and European descent known for writing about human suffering and the fate of the poor.

*Pablo Neruda*. Chilean, one of the most widely celebrated Latin American poets of all time and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. His open support of socialist issues is evident in later works such as *Tercera residencia* from 1947 and *Canto general* from 1950.

19. One consistent goal of the Cuban revolution has been the greater integration of women into university programs, white-collar professions, politics, and other facets of society. The creation of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women) represents an important example of dedication to this cause. Gradual shifts in the representation of women and romantic relationships in popular song result in large part from nationwide attempts to confront sexism through related education campaigns.

20. Specific examples include “El programa del Moncada” and “Girón: la victoria” by Sara González and “A Lázaro Peña” by Martín Rojas. Lyrics to these selections can be found in Acosta and Gómez (1981).

21. Artex compact disc #CD-075 (EGREM).

22. Universal Music CD #LATD-40082.

23. Translated from Spanish by the author, as are all other quoted Spanish language sources.

24. Although this analysis focuses on music, it should be noted that younger Cubans left their mark in many artistic fields of the 1960s including film, dance, poetry, and prose. Examples include the films of Sara Gómez, dance choreographies for the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional by Rogelio Martínez Furé, and novels by Miguel Barnet.

25. In the 1980s, as one example, Milanés produced a series of albums entitled *Años* with Luis Peña and others that featured works from eastern Cuba of the 1910s and 20s. These recordings include essentially the same material that has made such a splash in conjunction with the Buena Vista Social Club documentary.

26. Tragically, Santamaría committed suicide in 1980. Apparently the Mariel crisis of that year and the realization that large percentages of the population were not in support of the Revolution caused her terrible grief (Enrique Patterson, p.c.). The Festivals of Popular Song were discontinued after a few years because officials felt that rock and other styles from capitalist countries had become too popular among participants—they considered this music ideologically decadent. The same festivals later reappeared in the 1980s (Reynaldo Fernández Pavón, p.c.).

27. Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión. Ariana Hernández-Reguant (2000) notes that through the mid-1970s this institution was known only as the ICR.

28. The *granjas* could be considered a voluntary form of punishment in that the police did not physically force anyone to go there. They “requested” individuals to go for an unspecified period with the understanding that if they served their time they could come back to their job and continue life as before. If they chose not to go, however, they would lose their job and all professional affiliations. An aside: Friends have remarked jokingly to me that Cuba is the only country in which dirt “cleans” you instead of making you dirty. The implication here is that physical labor in the countryside has the ability to wipe away the perceived stains on one's ideological record.

29. Fears of invasion were lessened in part by statements from U.S. administrations suggesting that they did not plan to attack. Additionally, the size and resources of the Cuban military had grown considerably since 1959, creating a strong deterrent.

30. While the Cuban government implemented more drastic measures than others to curb the influence of rock, we should remember that it was far from alone in its distrust of the genre. Policy makers in many countries within Latin America and elsewhere viewed rock as a form of cultural imperialism, a means by which the United States and Europe were contributing to the decline of local cultural forms. Even within the United States, controversy surrounded R&B and rock for decades among conservative groups, largely because of its associations with the working-class black community, integrated concerts, and sexually suggestive lyrics (e.g., Chapple and Garofalo 1977).

31. "Coño, cada vez que llevo una canción nueva, tiene que oírlo primero Papito, los 'seguros' de la comisión de ética revolucionaria, el Partido; me hacen cambiar pedazos de los textos, que si se puede malinterpretar esto o lo otro . . . No y no, ¡pa'l carajo con Papito y su televisión!"

32. Little has been published about the arrest. In fact, given the countless biographies of this artist it is dumbfounding to realize that not one, to my knowledge, even mentions the fact that he served prison time. However, Tony Evora, in his *El Libro del Bolero* (2001:187), does refer to the event, saying that Milanés was imprisoned in 1965 because of suspicions that some of his lyrics were counter-revolutionary and homosexual in orientation. Francisco Morín's *Por amor al arte* (1998:316–318), on the history of Cuban theater, also contains some anecdotal information on the incident. The 1966 date was provided by Clara Díaz Pérez (p.c.), who also suggested that his jailing may have involved accusations of drug use.

33. Unidades Militares para la Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units to Aid in Production). These were essentially labor camps that subjected inmates to harsh living conditions in isolated, rural areas and required them to perform hard labor for the duration of their sentences. The UMAPs existed for only a short time, from about 1965–68; inmates consisted primarily of homosexuals, religious figures, and political dissidents. Major international outcry over the existence of the UMAPs and letters of protest by renowned socialists such as Jean Paul Sartre eventually led to their disbanding (Leonardo Acosta, p.c.).

34. ". . . los dirigentes que decían una cosa y hacían otra, los cuadrados, los que desconfiaban de los jóvenes, los acomodados, los enemigos de la cultura, los asentidores y medrosos que echaban a perder la Revolución que yo llevaba dentro . . ."

35. Compositions that date from this period include "Debo partirme en dos" in which one finds open references to conflicts with authority, as well as to censorship; "Ojalá," a veiled challenge to the political leadership, said to have been directed at an officer associated with Silvio's military service or possibly to Castro himself; the more openly autobiographical "Playa Girón" exhorting members of the crew to write their own histories rather than accept those imposed upon them, and "Resumen de noticias," a declaration of principles intended for friends and enemies alike. These songs and many others have been published by the author in *Canciones del mar* (Rodríguez 1996). The lyrics are open to some interpretation, but Cubans I spoke with consider them to have been written with controversial, even "seditious" intent, inspired by problems with dogmatic officials. For one complete example, see the translation of "Resumen de noticias" in the Appendix. Cao (1992) includes discussion on this topic as well.

36. Gerardo Alfonso as one example, mentions that the government refused to allow him to appear on television singing his hit song of 1987, "Yo te quería María." This may have been because Alfonso wore (and wears) Rastafarian-style dreadlocks, considered inappropriate.

37. Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, or Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry.

38. Díaz Pérez 1994:200 provides a list of some of the documentaries and films featuring incidental music composed by this group. See Brouwer 1989:48–51 for more details about their musical objectives.

39. E.g., *Grupo de experimentación sonora/ICAIC 3*, EGREM LDA 3460.

40. Pablo Milanés wrote his first compositions with overtly politicized lyrics, such as "Yo he visto la sangre de un niño brotar" (I Saw the Blood of a Child Spilled) after the international Encuentro de la Canción Protesta in 1967 (Clara Díaz Pérez, p.c.). He seems to have been

influenced artistically by compositions from abroad as well as on the island. The piece in question takes inspiration from civilian casualties during the Viet Nam war.

41. Gerardo Alfonso refers to this "audition" process at the beginning of the CD he recorded live in the Casa de las Américas (*Recuento*, Red Casa CD, Havana).

42. The program remained on the air through 1985 (Acosta 1983:121).

43. Policy makers are said to have taken issue with the suggestion that life could ever be "worth nothing" in a progressive socialist society such as Cuba, though Milanés' lyrics do not directly imply that.

44. Unión de Artistas y Escritores Cubanos (Union of Cuban Artists and Writers).

45. According to Cao (1992:22), the first time Castro formally received Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés at the airport was after an extended tour of Latin America in 1985.

46. Examples of this sort of piece include Noel Nicola's "A Small Housing Problem" mentioned by Ernesto Cardenal (1974:154-5), Rodríguez's "Debo partirme en dos" (Rodríguez 1996:154), or Pablo Milanés' "Pobre del cantor." It is difficult to fully document the extent of the trend because most controversial songs were never recorded or widely disseminated.

47. The Helms-Burton legislation, passed in 1996 with the support of Republican Jesse Helms and other senior congressmen, represents an attempt to intensify the Cuban trade embargo. It allows punitive actions to be brought against businesses in third countries that occupy property owned prior to 1959 by U.S. businesses.

48. "Acts of repudiation" in Cuba are a form of public censure of those who have conspired against the revolution or are accused of doing so. They were especially common during the Mariel exodus in 1980—those leaving were considered traitors—but continue to occur occasionally even now. Typically, a small group of neighbors or acquaintances of the individual(s) gather and begin shouting insults at them outside their home. Sometimes the events consist only of verbal abuse together with a little pounding on the front door, or of writing slogans on it. In more extreme cases, victims have been dragged from their homes, beaten, and/or forced to humiliate themselves in various ways (e.g., to eat their own "subversive" manuscripts).

49. I base this conclusion on the fact that potentially controversial songs ("Paladar," "Reino de todavía") from his *Domínguez* release (Ojalá Records cassette #MCO-0019) are sold abroad and in dollar stores within Cuba but are largely unknown to the Cuban public. Diane Soles (p.c.) believes that the circulation of controversial works of art more widely abroad than at home is a growing trend in various fields, including film. She conceives of it as a strategy for dealing with dissent, making the Cuban government appear more tolerant than it actually is.

50. Carapacho Productions compact disc #CP-100101.

51. Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales (Agency of Recordings and Musical Editions). Initially directed by Medardo Montero, this is the state company that oversees all music recording and distribution in socialist Cuba. It was established in 1962.

52. Ferrer's early releases have been made available once again in recent years, but only in CD format for the international market (*Lo mejor de Pedro Luis Ferrer*, BIS Music CD-123, EGREM).

53. Canek now lives in Oaxaca, Mexico where he works as a freelance graphic artist.

54. Instituto Superior de Arte or Superior Art Institute. This is the premier arts school in Cuba, specializing in the training of musicians, musicologists, dancers, painters, actors, and others. It shares a space with the ENA (Escuela Nacional de Arte) on the grounds of what was once the elite Havana Country Club.

55. The prominence of Varela's group has diminished since about 1996, owing largely to the departure of musical director and pianist Elio Villafranca to the United States. Villafranca now lives in the Philadelphia area.

56. According to Vilar (1998:25), Varela's first opportunity to record came as the result of a tour in the Canary Islands organized by the Asociación Hermanos Saiz, a government agency designed to promote younger talent. Subsequent albums have either been recorded in Madrid or Caracas, also the result of foreign initiative rather than that of the Cuban government. It is

likely that Varela now prefers to record abroad since foreign contracts typically pay much better than those made with socialist labels.

57. Artex CD-074 (EGREM).

58. Gema is said to have taken some voice lessons and also to have completed a *licenciatura* in musicology under the direction of Victoria Eli.

59. Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas or Young Communists' Union, a state-sponsored recreational group intended for university students.

60. For a representative sampling of their work, listen to Pável Urkiza and Gema Corredera, *Trampas del tiempo* (Intuition CD INT 3179 2) and *Cosa de broma* (Intuition CD INT 3181 2), on the Nubenegra label.

61. Intuition CD INT 3179 2 (Nubenegra, Inc.).

62. Rodríguez's music functioned similarly in Argentina among groups opposed to military rule. See Cao (1992:20). Despite this, and the fact that Rodríguez publicly adheres to a socialist ideology, he has become heavily involved in capitalist enterprise. Correa notes that he now routinely charges \$150,000 or more for concert appearances. In the same breath he may criticize market economics and promote the sale of his own CDs, books and T-shirts!

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