

# **‘The Sowing of a Singer’: Alí Primera and New Song in Contemporary Venezuela**

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## **Introduction: ‘Ubiquitous’ Alí**

In Venezuela today, the widespread popularity of the Venezuelan singer/songwriter Alí Primera (1942-85) and his songs is evident in many ways: in murals which depict a bearded man with an ‘Afro’ hair style and a guitar or a *cuatro*<sup>1</sup> in his hands; in lyrics painted on bridges and walls and quoted by Venezuelans in conversation and at meetings; in paintings, photographs and home-made figures placed in public and private spaces; in newspaper articles displayed in glass cases in the National Library; at rallies and demonstrations where the public sing collectively; at street stalls where bootleg CDs and DVDs are sold; on T-shirts and badges; at community radio stations where programmes are dedicated to him; in students’ and workers’ organisations named for him; on the soundtrack of independent and state-sponsored films; on ‘Aló Presidente’, the Sunday afternoon State TV programme<sup>2</sup> in which the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, often breaks into song. The image and popularity of Alí Primera and his songs have not been engineered by multinationals using commercial marketing techniques. Alí Primera is widely remembered and celebrated in Venezuela today because he and his songs are popularly perceived to have ‘remained faithful to *el pueblo*<sup>3</sup>...all his struggles were for people in need, for poor people<sup>4</sup>’.

Venezuela, and Latin America as a whole, is a region characterised by the concentration of economic, political and cultural power in the hands of elite minorities and the marginalisation and repression of the impoverished masses. Today, the Chávez government and the project of Bolivarianism<sup>5</sup> are popularly perceived to represent the interests of these masses and enjoy widespread support amongst impoverished and radical sectors of the population. Many of these marginalised sectors assert that Bolivarianism is based on the ideas diffused in the songs of Alí Primera, songs which provide ‘a language for all of Venezuela, [Alí] is *el padre cantor venezolano*<sup>6</sup>’. Alí Primera ‘sounds amongst those who support this process [Bolivarianism]’<sup>7</sup>, and the supporters of Bolivarianism in Venezuela today constitute the majority of the population<sup>8</sup>. This chapter seeks to illuminate how and why the songs and figure of Alí Primera have come to occupy such a central position in the political life of Venezuela.

## **The Power of Music**

Political scientists studying contemporary Venezuelan politics tend to marginalise the importance of music in the political life of the country. This essay illustrates that music can be seen as not merely derivative or reflective of politics, but that it can be political. Music can create, reinforce and contest ideology (Silverman, 1996: 231). It can be used to mobilise for official or subversive purposes (Silverman, 1996: 237). In Latin America, a region in which large sectors of the population are excluded from access to political and economic power, music is one of the most ubiquitous expressive forms that *el pueblo* have available to them. The collective musical act can create a

viable image of an alternative society organised in the interests of the masses. Songs can 'express individual experience in a collectively appropriable form'; they can have the power to partially subsume individual experience in shared images (Stewart, 1997: 200-1) and act as reference points for large and otherwise heterogeneous sectors of the population. Collective singing may create and reinforce bonds of solidarity; it can inspire collective action. Song lyrics can serve to provide marginalised and impoverished peoples with a common vocabulary with which to articulate their shared interests. The sound of folk instruments and musical forms, which have at various times been banned in Latin America because of their associations with non-Christian or 'primitive' ways of life<sup>9</sup>, offer a 'simultaneity' with the 'past' (Schutz, 1964: 159) and a means of retaining and reinforcing an identity which counters hegemonic representations of the nation.

## The Sound of Politics

According to Venezuelan intellectual and writer Luis Britto García, music and political action are inseparable in Venezuela. Since the 1970s, mass music events have been the arena where political ideas enter into mass circulation; people today, Britto García argues, can 'hardly conceive of a political act taking place in any other way' (Martín, 1998: 149). State repression in the 1960s criminalised public meetings of the left in Venezuela (Martín, 1998: 147). In this context, a 'new kind of mass meeting' centred on 'the act of celebration, the celebration of being together, like a kind of *fiesta*' (Martín, 1998: 148) emerged. These mass meetings revolved around popular artists and a 'reunion' with popular culture (Martín, 1998: 148) which was 'by its very nature an oppositional strategy with which to resist imperialist domination' (Guss, 2000: 101).

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 had led to a shift in the 'cultural repertoire' of collective action in Latin America; it 'redefined revolutionary possibilities' and produced a wave of guerrilla movements (Wickham-Crowley, 2001: 139). One of the strongest and most radical of these movements sprang up in Venezuela in the 1960s, where it coalesced around middle class university students and teachers (Wickham-Crowley, 2001: 141). The severe repression (or 'pacification') of these groups ensured that by 1969 the armed revolutionary project had resulted in failure (Martín, 1998: 147). For many young, urban middle class youths returning to Venezuelan cities at the end of the 1960s, years of guerrilla activity in the countryside and mountains had been their first experience of the diversity of rural cultural forms. These former militants 'were among the primary agitators for the interests of popular culture' (Guss, 2000: 98). At a three-day Cultural Congress against Dependency and Neo-Colonialism held in December 1970 in the western oil town of Carimas, participants argued that it was time to move from armed struggle to cultural struggle and called for 'the recolonization of Venezuela'; it was decided that 'only through an initial cultural revolution would citizens be sufficiently liberated to imagine a true economic one' (Guss, 2000: 98). Many Venezuelan leftists believed that a cultural revolution would be, as Mosonyi expressed it in 1982, the 'first step in the creation of a truly integrated revolutionary movement designed for the radical and definitive transformation of our reality' (Guss, 2000: 98). Mass music events which celebrated a 'reunion' with popular culture were in their very conception events where radical artists and intellectuals sought to communicate and diffuse leftist ideologies.

Britto García notes that in the first stages of the revolutionary period, leftists searching for songs to represent their ideals sang 'Bella Ciao'. Rock and roll and the music of the Beatles, though widely diffused in Venezuela, were rejected for mass music events; foreign music, even if it was anti-establishment in the society which produced it, could not represent Venezuelan values. Some Venezuelan traditional musical forms, such as the *zoropo* from the cattle plains, were also rejected because of their association with the *Acción Democrática* (AD)<sup>10</sup> party. Participants at the mass music events sought a new way to express what it was to be Venezuelan; they sought, as Britto García puts it, 'a song of the Venezuelan national consciousness, made by us ourselves' (Martín, 1998: 146). The *Nueva Canción* (New Song) movement which had emerged a decade before in the Southern Cone was 'grafted onto the roots of resistance'<sup>11</sup> in Venezuela.

## New Song: Origins and Theory

The origins of New Song can be traced to Chile, Argentina and Uruguay in the late 1950s. The movement was 'a reaction in national terms' to the dangers perceived to lie in the increasing influence of the recording industry, which turned songs into commercial products, and to the massive penetration of foreign (mainly Anglo-US) music which threatened to stifle local production (Carrasco, 1982: 601-2). The arrival of radio and cinema in the

region had provided a massive boost to the diffusion and popularity of a first wave of early twentieth century Latin American music styles such as the Mexican *ranchera*, the Cuban *son* and the Argentine/Uruguayan *tango*. Radio and cinema, however, were also vehicles for the diffusion of foreign music, which by the 1950s 'occupied a central place' in the region and left little space for the diffusion of national forms (Carrasco, 1982: 602).

The work of the Argentine Atahualpa Yupanqui (1908-1992) and the Chilean Violeta Parra (1917-1967) is seminal to the creation of the New Song movement. Parra and Yupanqui dedicated themselves to defending the value of indigenous cultures<sup>12</sup>. In a region where elite groups impose specific versions of the nations' histories and cultural values, versions which privilege European contributions and marginalise the contributions of indigenous African or lower class peoples, and where folkloric traditions are frequently stigmatised as 'marginal and backward ... premodern, preliterate, preindustrial, and, just as important, non-European' (Guss, 2000: 17), this defence of folklore was a radical act. Parra and Yupanqui spent the 1940s and 1950s in direct contact with the sources of popular song, 'digging out folk music' (Torres Alvarado, 2002: 43) which they then performed in urban contexts. They acted as bridges between an older generation of rural popular singers and a new generation of urban musicians growing up in the 1950s and 1960s (Fairley, 1984: 110). In their own compositions, Parra and Yupanqui 'opened a new way forward for the development of vernacular songs on the continent' (Carrasco, 1982: 605). They based their songs on traditional musical forms to which they added socially committed lyrics which celebrated the values of workers, peasants and urban migrants<sup>13</sup>, and protested against social injustices (Fairley, 2000: 363). Parra and Yupanqui were the model for a new generation of urban, educated artists who in the 1960s were becoming 'conscious of the contradictions and conflicts inherent in their national situations' and beginning to recognise them as 'features of a larger phenomenon: underdevelopment and economic and cultural dependency' (Reyes Matta, 1988: 452). Folk music provided a ubiquitous resource with which to resist what many perceived as 'cultural colonialism' in the form of the mass media imposing 'a musical taste which resulted in everything being imported from the United States' (Cabezas, 1977: 32) and acting as 'propaganda for the "American Way of Life"' (Jara, 1998: 115).

In Argentina, the populist and nationalistic Perón government sought to protect popular culture and passed a ruling in the 1950s which directed that 50 per cent of all music played on radio and in dance halls should be of Argentine origin (Fairley, 1984: 110). Although this ruling was never fully implemented, it created an increased demand for national music which in turn led to the formation of a number of folkloric groups whose music, which was 'recognisably Argentinean', became popular in neighbouring Chile, where it provided 'the only massive alternative to the imported pop sung in English' (Jara, 1998: 80) and stimulated the emergence of a number of Chilean folk groups. While many of these new groups collected and performed 'pure' and 'authentic' folklore, other groups and individuals in the early 1960s aimed to be more innovative and experimental; they created music 'firmly rooted in folklore ... in both form and expression, [but] imbued with a spirit of renewal' (Carrasco, 1982: 606).

At intermittent meetings, congresses and festivals, singer/songwriters from the latter tendency began to meet informally to listen to one another's work and to discuss and theorise their role as artists. The 'First Congress of Popular Poets and Singers of Chile', which met in 1952, stressed the need to sing of 'the ideas, struggles and achievements of the people' (Fairley, 1984: 110). In 1958, a 'manifesto' written by the Argentine poet Armando Tejada Gómez urged the artist to '[a]cquire the habit of singing about things that matter' (Carrasco, 1982: 606), and at the 'Meeting of Protest Song' which took place in Havana in 1967:

...it was resolved that song should play an important role in the liberation struggles against North American imperialism and against colonialism, as it was agreed that song possessed enormous strength to break down barriers, such as those of illiteracy, and that in consequence it should be a weapon at the service of the people, not a consumer product used by capitalism to alienate them ... [singers] should work amongst their people, confronting problems within their societies (Fairley, 1984: 107).

By the mid to late 1960s, a new movement of artists who saw themselves as articulating not just a national but a continental political struggle (Fairley, 1984: 112) had taken shape<sup>14</sup>. They interwove instrumentation from across the region, thereby 'fulfilling the dream of Latin American integration that neither political nor economic decisions achieve' (Reyes Matta, 1988: 451)<sup>15</sup>. Diffusion was by live performance and increasingly, with the establishment of the independent recording company DICAP (*Discoteca del Cantar Popular*) by the Communist Youth in Chile in 1968, via record sales. The Marxist Popular Unity (UP) government of Salvador Allende (1970-73) provided the movement with a tremendous boost; the import of foreign records was banned (the result of the need to restrict the use of foreign currency as well as clear cultural policy) and Chilean records were sold at a fixed price (Fairley, 1984: 113). By the time of the 1973 coup, which brought a violent end to Chile's socialist experiment,

New Song, which had sprung up as a cultural articulation of the continent's struggle for economic and social emancipation, had become 'part of the innate consciousness of the people' (Carrasco, 1982: 612). The artists associated with it subsequently 'topped the first death lists' during the 'cultural blackout' which the Pinochet regime imposed (Brister, 1980: 55). The military identified New Song with the UP government, and 'everything connected with the UP had to be wiped off the face of the earth' (Márquez, 1983: 8). The instruments which had become associated with New Song were unofficially banned, records were burned, and artists were blacklisted, imprisoned, forced into exile or murdered<sup>16</sup> (Morris, 1986: 123).

A 'living reflection' of the world it comes from (Carrasco, 1982: 612), New Song continued to articulate the interests of *el pueblo* even as a wave of military dictatorships swept the Southern Cone. By the mid 1970s, conservatory musicians in Chile had formed a group, *Barroco Andino* ('Andean Baroque'), which performed classical music on folk instruments at universities and churches. The military took no action against such performances, and gradually a new form of New Song ('*canto nuevo*') took shape. Though New Song in the Southern Cone after the mid 1970s became much more metaphorical lyrically in order to circumvent censorship, the use of folk instruments added political overtones (Morris, 1986: 124). In exile, New Song became 'the voice of an uprooted people', an expression of a culture 'that identifies us' and an 'important factor in the struggle against Imperialism, which oppresses people both inside and outside our land, making us more dependent on these repressive forces'<sup>17</sup>.

## Venezuelan New Song

New Song did not begin to take shape as a movement in Venezuela until 1970, when the first mass music events were organised by artists Lilia Vera, Gloria Martín and Soledad Bravo<sup>18</sup> (Martín, 1998: 45)<sup>19</sup>. 1970 was 'the [first] possible moment for a public song of radical criticism' in Venezuela (Martín, 1998: 69). Throughout much of the 1960s, State repression of the left was severe; a 'pacification' plan was implemented by the government, left wing parties were declared illegal, and those who refused to be 'pacified' were imprisoned, exiled or 'disappeared'<sup>20</sup> (Martín, 1998: 26). The Central University of Venezuela (UCV), a centre of radical student activism, was frequently ransacked and even, at the end of the decade, closed down by the political police for two years (Martín, 1998: 26). In 1970, Venezuela 'was a country of approximately ten million inhabitants'<sup>21</sup>, still a monoproducer of oil ... with a failed agrarian reform, high levels of unemployment and illiteracy, and an increasingly scandalous growth in levels of poverty and marginality' (Martín, 1998: 25). Forced underground in the 1960s, the left was weakened and divided (Martín, 1998: 25). The armed struggle had failed to effect socio-political change. Popular culture, it was decided at the 1970 Carimas Congress, and reiterated at 'A Meeting for the National Defence of the Culture' held in Barquisimeto in 1977 (Guss, 2000: 99), offered leftists an alternative and more effective means of uniting the masses to militate for social transformation. Immigration from overseas during and prior to the 1970s created 'intercultural bridges', bringing new ideas and musical forms to Venezuela which were also available for leftist artists to draw on (Martín, 1998: 22). In the 1950s, the military government of Pérez Jiménez had encouraged European immigration to Venezuela via a policy designed to 'whiten the race' in cultural and racial terms (Wright, 1990: 123). This led to a massive influx of Italian and Spanish immigrants, who brought partisan and anti-Franco songs which took root in the new environment (Martín, 1998: 24). In 1970, the newly elected Venezuelan president Caldera allowed a number of Venezuelan exiles to return to the country. These leftists brought 'revolutionary' ideas they had absorbed from Cuba and France (Martín, 1998: 26), while later in the 1970s, Venezuela became the 'asylum of choice' for many Chilean, Peruvian and Argentinean New Song artists forced into exile (Guss, 2000: 100).

Following the apparent successful 'pacification' of the political left and the subsequent relaxing of State repression in 1970, individual artists such as Lilia Vera, Gloria Martín and Soledad Bravo, who until that moment had not been aware of one another's work<sup>22</sup>, began to meet, exchange ideas, organise and perform at *Festivales por la Libertad* (Festivals for Freedom) to harness support for human rights committees and other local and international causes (Martín, 1998: 73). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, these artists, together with groups like *Los Guaraguao* and *Grupo Ahora*, and after 1973 Alí Primera, met and performed regularly with other Latin American New Song artists at mass music events and festivals in Venezuela and throughout the continent (Martín, 1998: 45-59). Marginalised by the mass media at home, Venezuelan New Song artists recorded on the independent *Cigarrón* record label, established by Gloria Martín and Alí Primera in 1973 (Martín, 1998: 30). These records, sold at live performances and by the artists' friends and relatives<sup>23</sup>, were widely diffused in Venezuela<sup>24</sup>.

By the early 1980s in Venezuela, New Song mass music events and festivals, organised by artists and the communities in which they worked at a grassroots level (i.e. without official support or funding) around 'base,



community, religious, student, environmental [causes], committees created ... for the defence of human rights or in solidarity with other Central or South American countries', regularly attracted audiences of thirty thousand people or more and, for lack of alternative available venues, were usually held in sports stadiums (Martín, 1998: 73). At a time when political parties appeared to be losing touch with *el pueblo*<sup>25</sup>, New Song offered a channel for the expression of the hopes and discontents of the impoverished and politically powerless. It was a movement that was rooted in the popular culture of the masses, not only at the levels of generation and distribution, but also consumption; marginalised and oppressed sectors 'identified' with New Song and granted its artists the role of spokespeople for their interests (Martín, 1998: 13). Without official or commercial support or mediation, the links between artists and audiences created a space for the construction and circulation of an oppositional cultural movement of and for *el pueblo*. New Song acted as an intermediary between the State and the demands of civil society (Martín, 1998: 71) and became a ubiquitous 'cultural referent' formulated and received as being 'committed to the possibility of a better future' (Martín, 1998: 9-11). It was 'an extraordinary experiment, because it demonstrated that unity was possible'<sup>26</sup>.

Following the death of Alí Primera in a car accident in 1985, Venezuelan New Song went into apparent decline (Martín, 1998: 63). Martín (1998: 75) attributes the fragmentation of the movement in the late 1980s to a 'social loss of will and vehemence' in confronting and contesting official inaction within the context of the maturation of a new generation in an increasingly consumerist society. New Song artists withdrew from public life (Martín, 1998: 75). By 1995 the movement revolved around the work of a few individual artists and a 'resonance around the figure and work of Alí Primera' (Martín, 1998: 63) who was popularly remembered after his untimely death because of the perceived correspondence between the discourse of his songs and the way he lived, his moral and artistic integrity in the face of State repression and persecution, and his identification with the impoverished masses<sup>27</sup>.

## Alí Primera: Life and Work

'Humanity' has been referred to as the first example of Venezuelan New Song (Martín, 1998: 27). Alí Primera wrote the song while he was being detained by the political police in Caracas in 1967, following a police raid on the UCV where he was studying chemistry. It is a song which Primera arranged for a rhythmical *cuatro* and bass accompaniment, with a recurrent chorus sung by female voices:

'Humanity, humanity.  
There are reasons for joy,  
But for sadness many more'.

A song which uses direct language, simple musical accompaniment and a 'catchy', repetitive chorus to denounce urban and rural poverty, the Vietnam War and the subordinate position of African-Americans, and which unequivocally attributes poverty, inequality and racism to imperialism, 'Humanity' was to mark a new direction for Primera. 'From that moment in 1967', the artist said in 1982, 'I have walked a single path, accompanied by song' (Marroquí and Castillo, 2005: 11).

That path began, as Primera emphasised in his adult life, in rural poverty in the harsh and arid region of Paraguaná where Primera was raised<sup>28</sup>. Following the death of his father in 1945, the young Alí worked as a bootblack and a boxer to help support his mother and siblings. Throughout his adult life, Primera was to refer to these reported childhood experiences of hardship and poverty and to proclaim, as he did in 1982, that he identified with 'the child bootblack, the peasant, the orphan, the worker, the militant revolutionary' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 156). The town where the young Alí lived for much of his childhood, Punto Fijo, was constructed around the foreign-owned oil refinery, Amuay. The employees of this refinery had access to private air-conditioned schools, clinics and luxurious housing. Local peasants and workers, however, including Alí and his family, lived in poverty in virtual segregation in the *barrios*. In 1982, Primera attributed his political activism to these early experiences:

In the oil zone I had contact with the gringo and the worker. And there, in that refinery belonging to a transnational company, through seeing the realities of exploitation, the desire to fight for change began to grow in me (Hernández Medina, 1991: 143).

In 1958, Primera moved to Caracas to attend high school and later, in 1964, UCV where he became involved in student activism. In 1968, Primera began to campaign for the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) in the run

up to presidential elections, singing in poor areas, or *barrios*, at cultural events organised to harness support for the party. He came to believe that a song such as 'Humanity' could have an impact more powerful than speech alone, as he explained in 1982:

People were hearing something new and something very important was sown in me ... the emancipating role that song and the singer can have when what they propose is respect for man (Marroquí and Castillo, 2005: 13).

In 1968 Primera obtained a grant from the PCV to study oil technology in Romania. After two years, with his thesis almost complete, Primera abandoned his studies, explaining in a letter to his mother that he did not want to be a part of the oil companies' 'exploitation' of his country (Hernández Medina, 1991: 43).

In Europe, Primera met other Latin American leftists who had been forced to leave their countries for political reasons. This contact led Primera to 'understand that the culture of our people is very similar' and instilled a sense of continental solidarity in the artist<sup>29</sup>. Primera performed and organised 'Peace for Vietnam' tours in Europe and the USSR, supporting himself by washing dishes in order not to 'sell' his song. He returned to Venezuela in 1973 to perform at cultural events organised to harness support for the presidential campaign of José Vicente Rangel, candidate for the newly formed Movement towards Socialism (MAS)<sup>30</sup>. His first LP, *People of my Land*, which he had recorded in 1969 in Europe, was prohibited by many Venezuelan TV and radio owners<sup>31</sup>. In order to distribute his music and that of other New Song artists whose work was vetoed by the State, Primera, together with Gloria Martín, established the cooperative record label, *Cigarrón*. On the *Cigarrón* label, Primera was to record thirteen of his own LPs, which were distributed primarily at live performances and via informal networks of friends and relatives. The music on these albums is varied and based on local Afro-Venezuelan, indigenous and popular *mestizo*<sup>32</sup> forms such as the *tamunangue* from Lara State, the *gaita* from Zulia State, the *joropo* from the plains and rhythmic forms associated with the *tambor* drum ensembles of Barlovento. Instrumentation includes stringed instruments (harp, guitar, mandolin, *cuatro*) and African and indigenous percussion instruments and drums (maracas, *charrasca* scrapers, *quitiplás*, *mina* and *furruco* drums of African descent)<sup>33</sup>. Primera in 1985 described his music as being connected with the land and its workers, as:

The music of the birds, the wind, the trees, the songs of the peasants as they sowed the land, *salves*, *merengues*, *vales*, old clarinets and violins, the *cuatro* with goat-hair strings; that's where my song comes from (Hernández Medina, 1991: 247).

His lyrics celebrated and defended indigenous groups, Afro-Americans, children, the victims of war throughout the world, the environment, and common people. Many of the songs have verses which are recited to a melodic or rhythmic accompaniment in order to heighten the message contained in the lyrics<sup>34</sup>. Primera's songs are direct and unambiguous; musically, they do not require exceptional skill to perform in the manner that Primera arranged them, and lyrically, the language is frequently vernacular and conversational in tone. These qualities led some to criticise Primera's songs for their lack of aesthetic concern and to refer to them as 'pamphlets' (Obregón Muñoz, 1996: 12). Primera made no apologies for privileging the socio-political message over aesthetic form<sup>35</sup>:

'I don't like using pretty words  
To perfume shit'

('Single Note Pamphlet', from the album *Cuando nombro la poesía*, 1979).

Primera sought, as he explained in 1974, to 'articulate a class ideology in a language which ordinary people will relate to' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 64). In his songs, he aimed to provide a vocabulary with which ordinary people could recognise and articulate their condition, and in recognising and articulating it be spurred, as he said in 1985, to 'transform [society], because a people that is unconscious of its own reality, even its own strength, is incapable of mobilising and transforming anything' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 248). Primera noted in 1985 that his songs even reached the 'forgotten' peoples of rural Venezuela in spite of high levels of illiteracy in these regions, because illiteracy 'isn't an obstacle to understanding my songs, ... my songs are simple, the language of the people' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 250).

Primera toured constantly, both in Venezuela and abroad where he participated in New Song festivals and events organised in solidarity with the peoples of Central and South America. In spite of the media ban, his fame and influence became widespread through direct and unmediated contact with his audiences<sup>36</sup>. When private TV owners became aware of his mass appeal, some offered him large sums of money to appear on their programmes. Primera rejected these financial incentives, claiming in 1975 that his message was 'not compatible' with TV. He denounced media managers who want to 'own our thoughts', accusing such figures of not representing 'the people' but 'the dominant classes, who see their interests endangered when ordinary people achieve a higher level

of awareness' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 68). Primera refused to compromise his message by fitting it in between commercial breaks and submitting to the dictates of TV censors as to what he could say and sing, maintaining that:

It is essential that I refuse offers to sing on TV ... [what is important] is my presence in front of the people so that they have the chance to boo or applaud or say "I'm with you, Alí", and I to them, because I believe that song is constructed in the presence of the people (Hernández Medina, 1991: 184).

Though he continued to have strong links with PCV and MAS, Primera believed, as he said in 1984, that if his song was written to express a party line, then it would not reach 'where it should reach. I have come to the conclusion that song comes essentially from the people, but the voice of ordinary people everywhere, every day' (Martín, 1998: 100). In 1978, Primera founded and took on the role of national co-ordinator of the Committee for the Unity of the People (CUP), an organisation which worked to overcome sectarianism and to create links of solidarity between all left wing parties through the uniting of people around cultural events<sup>37</sup>. The aim, as Primera expressed it in the CUP manifesto of 1978, was to 'consolidate a deep revolutionary process of a new kind that will lead the working masses toward the taking of power' (Hernández Medina, 1991: 83-97). Primera's songs were the primary vehicle for the diffusion of CUP ideology:

'Why not unite?  
And fight as brothers  
For our suffering homeland,  
The homeland that we love'  
(Dispersed', from the album *Lo primero de Alí Primera*, 1974)

At the beginning of the 1980s, Alí Primera was the ideologue behind a philosophy he called '*La Patria Buena*'<sup>38</sup> (Marroquí and Castillo, 2005: 70-71). This philosophy combined elements of Marxism, Liberation Theology and the philosophy of Bolívar (the Independence hero who struggled for a united Latin America) with popular wisdom to create a revolutionary, humane and anti-imperialist ideology which he and other New Song artists expressed directly to the Venezuelan public at mass music events. *La Patria Buena* did much to revive popular interest in the actions and philosophy of Bolívar and other Independence heroes and revolutionary figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Primera faced increasing persecution from State authorities who, he claimed, viewed him as a dangerous subversive who encouraged 'non-conformity'. He and other artists and intellectuals denounced the persecution to which he was reportedly subjected<sup>39</sup>. He reported that his flat was broken into and searched and that his wife and mother received threatening telephone calls advising them to buy mourning clothes. On more than one occasion, Primera reported attempts to assassinate him<sup>40</sup>. The artist, however, remained defiant and proclaimed in 1985 that, though he loved life, he was not afraid to die:

I want to say something to those who have been threatening me and trying to kill me for so long. Breaking into and searching my house, shooting at my car windows, persecuting me on the roads, etc.: none of that will silence me. My weapon is song... my weapon is the desire to always be useful to my country. I don't have the makings of a hero, but since I don't have the makings of a deserter either, I prefer to take the risk of using my 'weapons' to confront yours (Hernández Medina, 1991: 212).

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1985, Primera was returning home after working on his latest album when an oncoming vehicle collided with his. He was killed instantly.

## The Songs of Alí: A Ubiquitous System of Public Communication

More than 30,000 people followed Primera's body to its final resting place in Punto Fijo. Many of these people suspected that Primera had been murdered by State authorities who wanted to silence a 'troublesome' voice (Núñez: 1985, quoted in Hernández Medina, 1991: 251). Primera was popularly seen as a martyr:

Alí Primera has not died; he has disappeared physically, but his message, his songs and the principles which he courageously defended until the last moment of his life ... are firmly rooted in the hearts of the people...[he fought] in a selfless way and with great abnegation... without fear of the threats and dangers [he faced] from the powerful and eternal enemies of liberty and the violators of human rights (Gauna Morena: 1985, quoted in Marroquí and Castillo, 2005: 180).

When a committed artist dies, he or she may be ‘set apart’ from other living artists and also above them, ‘partly because the dead are no longer fallible... and partly because their characters and their careers begin to be both simplified and ennobled as they undergo a two-stage process of transformation’ (Pring-Mill, 1990: 63). The first phase takes the artist out of life and into history. The second phase takes the artist into the realm of legend so that such individuals ‘come to stand for things which are of greater importance for those who have survived than the individuals themselves may have been ... in life’ (Pring-Mill, 1990: 64).

In Venezuela today, Primera and his songs are popularly perceived to stand for the interests of the impoverished masses to whom President Chávez addresses his discourse (Hellinger, 2001: 5). During the 1980s, poverty increased in Venezuela, reaching estimated levels of 80 per cent (Ferguson, 1994: 48). The songs of Alí Primera accompanied large sectors of the population as they spontaneously rose up in widespread expressions of popular discontent in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

In universities, factories and secondary schools, people are joining the struggle for social change, stimulated by the New Song that Alí Primera created. Protests are preceded by the presence of Alí Primera, otherwise they are not protests. His message echoes... his songs are still relevant. The arsenal that he carried in his throat has not been diluted by the passage of time but it is a living presence at each and every act that people undertake to demand their liberation and their well-being (Hernández Medina, 1991: 6).

In 1994, the first message Colonel Hugo Chávez communicated to the Venezuelan people after his release from prison following an unsuccessful but popularly supported coup attempt was ‘Let [the people of Venezuela] listen to the songs of Alí Primera!’<sup>41</sup>. A political unknown at that time, Chávez was able to communicate an ideology and a vision of *La Patria Buena* to the Venezuelan public through a ubiquitous cultural reference point; the songs of Alí Primera.

## Conclusion: Alí, ‘the People’s Heritage’

Twenty years after the artist’s death, the Chávez government declared the work of Primera part of the national cultural heritage and agreed to create a commission to collect and diffuse the recordings and writings of the singer/songwriter<sup>42</sup>. The masses who always identified with Alí Primera and who proclaim that they have ‘internalised’ his songs now have an official space to express their cultural and political identity, a space which they were denied during the *Punto Fijo* period. The songs and figure of Alí Primera have in recent years become more noticeable to the visitor to Venezuela because of the Chávez government’s cultural policies<sup>43</sup>, but these songs had already been circulating at a grassroots level for thirty years before the election of Chávez.

Alí Primera is popularly seen to have ‘sown’ ideas in the mass consciousness, ideas on which many believe Chávez now bases government policy. Many Venezuelans believe that Primera’s songs are a root out of which present-day Bolivarianism has grown<sup>44</sup>, that ‘Alí blazes the trail of this process and gives us confidence that it is ours’<sup>45</sup>. For the impoverished masses who form the majority of the Venezuelan population, Alí Primera never died; 1985 is the year of the ‘sowing’<sup>46</sup> of their *padre cantor* and today, more than two decades after the artist’s death, his songs continue to accompany their everyday lives and struggles.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Four-stringed Venezuelan guitar.

<sup>2</sup> The mass media in Venezuela is concentrated into ‘extremely powerful private companies’ such as the Cisneros group which depend on US corporations for programmes, technology and investment. (Ferguson, 1994: 62). Private channels generally ignore Alí Primera.

<sup>3</sup> *El pueblo* translates into English as ‘the people’. The Spanish term is ideologically loaded, however, in that it refers to the common people as opposed to wealthy and powerful elites, and has great resonance in Latin America.

<sup>4</sup> Cultural activist, interviewed 15/7/05, Caracas.

<sup>5</sup> Bolivarianism, named for the Independence hero Simón Bolívar, is essentially anti-imperialist and committed to Latin American integration. See Gott: 2005 and Buxton: 2005.

<sup>6</sup> ‘The father of Venezuelan song’. Member of the Venezuelan Grupo Musical Iven, interviewed 7/7/05, Santiago, Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Martín, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas.

<sup>8</sup> Popularity ratings vary according to source and from day to day, but generally indicate 50-70 per cent support.

<sup>9</sup> See Tandt and Young (2004) for a discussion of tradition in Latin American music.

<sup>10</sup> Under the *Punto Fijo* pact of 1958, a two-party system ‘with minimum ideological differentiation’ (Ellner, 2005: 8) was installed in Venezuela. Political power alternated between AD and the *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI). This system prevailed until the election of Chávez in 1998.

<sup>11</sup> I borrow this phrase from Whisnant, 1995: 175, where it is used in the context of Nicaragua.

<sup>12</sup> Yupanqui, whose real name was Hector Roberto Chavero, adopted an indigenous name (Atahualpa was the last Inca king, betrayed and murdered by Pizarro) as a political statement (Fairley, 2000: 363).



- <sup>13</sup> See Gilbert: 1998 and Green: 1997 on Latin American urbanisation. Rowe and Schelling write that industrialisation in Latin America has been 'insufficient to absorb the mass of poor peasants and rural labourers, leading to the "explosion" of cities and the co-existence of a wealthy minority... and a large mass of under- and unemployed "traditional" migrants, living in shantytowns on the peripheries of the city' (1991: 50).
- <sup>14</sup> See Martín, 1998: 22-3 and Carrasco: 1982 for names and details of main artists.
- <sup>15</sup> New Song artists combined instruments such as the *charango*, a small ten-stringed guitar from the Andes, the Venezuelan *cuatro*, the Cuban *güiro* (gourd scraper), drums introduced by African slaves, the Andean *quena* (flute) and *zampoña* (pan pipes), amongst others. They also used popular musical genres from across the region in their compositions.
- <sup>16</sup> See Jara: 1983/1998 for a vivid account of her personal experience of the UP years, the military coup and the subsequent murder of her husband, New Song artist Víctor Jara at the hands of the military.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted from the notes accompanying a cassette recorded in 1987 in Stockport, UK, by Chilean exiles, 'Duo Amanecer', *De tierras lejanas* (From Distant Lands).
- <sup>18</sup> Soledad Bravo has publicly distanced herself from New Song since the election of Chávez, of whom she is an outspoken critic. See <http://www.petitiononline.com/mandato/petition.html> (accessed 18/9/06).
- <sup>19</sup> Alí Primera was in Europe 1968-1973 (Peraza et al, 2005: 37).
- <sup>20</sup> See Arzola Castellanos: 2005 for an investigation into political disappearances of Venezuelan leftists 1960-69.
- <sup>21</sup> The population had reached 20.7 million by 1994 (Ferguson, 1994: 73).
- <sup>22</sup> Lilia Vera, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas.
- <sup>23</sup> Lilia Vera remembers that only one record shop, owned by a personal friend of Alí Primera's, would stock the *Cigarrón* label. New Song artists sold their own LPs via informal channels and networks. (Lilia Vera, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas).
- <sup>24</sup> Given the informal manner of record distribution, it is difficult to obtain exact sales figures from this period. Alí Primera (1984, quoted in Martín, 1998: 103) refers to a 'census' which 'locates our songs in approximately 600 thousand Venezuelan homes'. Primera's nephew, Alí Alejandro Primera, estimates that in Caracas more than 70 per cent of the population owns at least one of Alí Primera's records (Alí Alejandro Primera, interviewed 25/7/05, Hilton Hotel, Caracas).
- <sup>25</sup> Official abstention rates in the 1984 general elections were 42 per cent (Martín, 1998: 73).
- <sup>26</sup> Gloria Martín, interviewed 27.7.05, UCV, Caracas.
- <sup>27</sup> Gloria Martín, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas.
- <sup>28</sup> Biographical information is taken from Martín, 1998: 29-31, Castillo: 1999, Hernández Medina: 1991, Obregón Muñoz: 1996, Peraza et al, 2005, Hidalgo Quero: 1998 and interviews with family and friends conducted in Venezuela, July 2005.
- <sup>29</sup> Alí Alejandro Primera, interviewed 25/7/05, Hilton Hotel, Caracas.
- <sup>30</sup> The 1973 elections were won by Carlos Andrés Pérez of AD. For more on MAS see Ellner: 1988.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Alí Primera is vetoed. Not a single TV channel or radio station would dare, not so much to have him appear on their programmes, but to transmit his clear and courageous denunciations against the current economic structures which maintain the rich in power' (Ramón Rivasaez: 1973, quoted in Hernández Medina, 1991: 56). In a poem published in *Punto* in 1973, 'The Government doesn't Like the Songs of Alí Primera', Alejo Torres describes an incident of state censorship of Primera's music thus: 'With guns in hand/...the police arrived/...[an] official announced/... "I've been sent to collect the songs/that contain obscene phrases/because they offend the system/and incite to protest"' (quoted in Hernández Medina, 1991: 55-56).
- <sup>32</sup> *Mestizo* is the term used in Spanish to refer to Euro-Hispanic/indigenous hybrid forms.
- <sup>33</sup> For more on Venezuelan music styles and instruments see Brandt: 1994 and 2000, Olsen: 1996, Sweeney and Rosenberg: 2000 and Aretz: 1991.
- <sup>34</sup> During live performances, Primera 'sang for a minute, then just strummed his *cuatro* while he held a political meeting for 25 minutes, then carried on with the song'. (Lilia Vera, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas). Amateur recordings of Primera's live performances show that Primera indeed interrupted his songs to make political speeches. An anonymous reviewer wrote of Primera's appearance at a New Song festival in the early 1980s 'the bridges that he establishes between one song and the next, results in a notable political effect. One could say that he resembles a political orator. His speeches possess a certain mystical intonation; poverty and exploitation, the people's struggle, are treated like sacred themes which flow into songs of resounding momentum, as if each song could be a popular battle hymn'. (Review, undated, given to me by a friend who photocopied it from a page of a Latin American journal at some time in the early 1980s).
- <sup>35</sup> Towards the mid-1980s, Primera did begin to exhibit a greater concern with the aesthetic value of his songs. (Gloria Martín, interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas). Personal friends of Primera's, and artists who worked with him, emphasise the care Primera took when composing in the musical styles of various regions of Venezuela, often travelling to those areas in order to steep himself in local musical traditions before writing a song.
- <sup>36</sup> Many Venezuelans I spoke to in July 2005 emphasised that Primera came to them and that he lived and worked in their spaces alongside them.
- <sup>37</sup> Martín stresses that at that time the left was extremely and bitterly divided in Venezuela, arguing over strategies, theories and tactics. (Interviewed 27/7/05, UCV, Caracas).
- <sup>38</sup> '*La patria*' is a word which, like '*el pueblo*', has much greater resonance for Latin American peoples than the literal translation, 'The Good Homeland', would suggest. See Pring-Mill, 1990: 4 for a discussion of the rhetoric of Spanish-American poetry.
- <sup>39</sup> Hernández Medina: 1991 devotes twenty pages (117-137) of his book to declarations and letters written by journalists and intellectuals in defence of Alí Primera. For example: 'We emphatically declare that we are not prepared to tolerate the *Copeyano* government making Alí Primera into a hostage. He ... belongs to the people; he is one of the clear reference points for the people's organisation. We therefore assume his defence and express our solidarity with [the artist] who does not represent art for art's sake but culture at the service of our people's struggles'. (From *El Nacional*, 26/4/82, quoted in Hernández Medina, 1991: 120).
- <sup>40</sup> 'They have tried to cause an accident', Primera: 1982, quoted in Hernández Medina, 1991: 135. 'They are trying to destroy me ... They are still after me and trying to cause an accident', Primera: 1983, quoted in Hidalgo Quero, 1998: 84-85.
- <sup>41</sup> See [www.el23.net/sucreencomunidad/sucred.htm](http://www.el23.net/sucreencomunidad/sucred.htm) (accessed 25/4/05).
- <sup>42</sup> See [www.sacven.org/english/ver\\_noticia.asp?id](http://www.sacven.org/english/ver_noticia.asp?id) (accessed 18/4/05) and [www.trovacub.com/nuke/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=702](http://www.trovacub.com/nuke/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=702) (accessed 3/3/05).
- <sup>43</sup> In December 2004, the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, which requires Venezuelan radio stations to broadcast at least 50 per cent Venezuelan music between 7am and 11pm, came into effect. [www.cirpa.ca/Page.asp?PagelD=122&ContentID=712](http://www.cirpa.ca/Page.asp?PagelD=122&ContentID=712) (accessed 20/2/06)
- <sup>44</sup> Bolivarianism is frequently likened to a 'tree' with its roots in the ideologies of Independence and revolutionary heroes (See Gott: 2005).
- <sup>45</sup> Director of a community radio station, interviewed 22/7/05, Barquisimeto, Venezuela.
- <sup>46</sup> In Spanish, *la siembra*. When Venezuelans talk of *la siembra de Alí*, 'the sowing of Alí', they sometimes rub their fingers together, palm downwards, in a gesture reminiscent of the act of scattering seeds onto a ploughed field.

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