

Memory in Exile: An Interview with Jorge Coulon of Inti Illimani

Written by Ramona Wadi

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Founded in May 1967, Chilean *nueva canción* group Inti Illimani quickly became popular in Chile and other neighbouring countries. Inti Illimani willingly involved itself in transmitting the message of Salvador Allende's *Unidad Popular* to Chileans, bringing the social aspect of politics to the people through music. As Jorge Coulon told *Upside Down World*, *nueva canción* artists supported Allende "completely unselfishly", perceiving in Allende an opportunity for society to flourish and regain its dignity.

Inti Illimani happened to be on tour in Europe when Pinochet overthrew Allende's government in a military coup. In a relentless drive to eliminate all traces of socialism, the *nueva canción* was banned, tapes, records and musical instruments related to the *nueva canción* were destroyed and artists were imprisoned, exiled or even murdered, as happened to Victor Jara. Inti Illimani took up residence in Italy where they remained for fifteen years until 1988, when Chile's borders were declared open. The group returned to Chile on September 18, 1988, soon becoming involved in a campaign that rejected the notion of another eight years under Pinochet's dictatorship.

Following the return from exile, some musicians left the group and were replaced by others. However the band split in the last decade, with three former members of the initial Inti Illimani retaining the same name with the addition of (Historico), in order to be distinguished from Inti Illimani, who retained the original name.

Inti Illimani has been involved in many concerts paying homage to the people who sacrificed their lives for Chile and socialism, reviving the memory of Victor Jara and Salvador Allende. Next October, Inti Illimani will be joined by two other *nueva canción* groups, Quilapayun and Illapu, in a concert which unites the singers in performance for the first time ever in Chile.

Ramona Wadi: What role did Inti Illimani play in Chilean society prior to the military coup of Augusto Pinochet? Was it a political or a social role?

Jorge Coulon: Sometimes, the role that artists have played in Latin America is difficult to explain in a European cultural, social and political context. In the Chilean society (and Latin American as well) of the 20th century, artists and intellectuals have played some political and social roles many times. This is probably due to the huge differences in the social aspect and because of the scandalous contrast between the wealth of a very few and the poverty of the vast majority of the people.

In a very vast majority, the artists were part of political movements looking for a deep social change. Inti-Illimani was a part of these movements. But above all of that, Inti-Illimani's role was the music, the searching of a deeply rooted musical language among the popular traditions in Latin America and the projection into the future of a multicultural society in the middle of an ever changing world. Inti-Illimani had the feeling of developing the musical language of the new cultural reality that was rising in South America.

RW: How did the *nueva canción* artists support Allende's *Unidad Popular*? Was it a coincidence due to the circumstances or a natural role to fulfill due to the character of the song?

JC: The support given by the artists of *nueva canción* to Allende's government was absolutely and completely unselfish. We all felt that Allende's government was in fact our government, a unique chance in history to build a society based on justice and equality. Of course, the administration of Salvador Allende was the crowning achievement of a century involving workers and intellectuals struggling to achieve a country free of outrages, exploitations, corruption, a country in which citizens were really equal in the eyes of the changes and the law.

RW: Being abroad, what is your memory of experiencing the news of the military coup, the assassination of Victor Jara? How did the distance affect your recollections of Chile?

JC: I remember I felt surprise, pain, uncertainty, anger, despair, disappointment ... there were a lot of different feelings and they all were combined in our thoughts, in our conversations. The distance and the exile distort the image of one's own country. You live in some kind of schizophrenic state, not only related to these two parallel realities but also in a third dimension which is the memory distorted by nostalgia. For the one living in exile, it's hard to accept that your reality is just the one of the country you're living in and that your relationship with your own homeland is completely virtual, illusory, unreal, at some extent imaginary, because it doesn't matter how much information you have, how much interest you have in the events happening in your country, your country is not really present in your daily life - in the smell, the flavours...For us, Chile was somehow an abstract idea and Italy was our daily reality.

RW: How did exile influence your reality and what was the impact of exile on the music of Inti Illimani?

JC: I lived in exile between the ages of 25 to 40, so my formation as an adult person was the reality of the exile, the feeling of being separated from my roots together with a permanent obsession for our far-away country. Of course, these feelings were translated into music in two different ways: first of all, we enhanced our interest and our passion for Latin American music and we assessed its qualities even more and we recognised its multiple influences better. Secondly, we added to our music the resonance that we encountered because of the exile in our daily life, the meeting of other musicians and artists and music from all around the world.

RW: Do you still view the *nueva canción* as a necessity in the present?

JC: What was known as the *nueva canción* movement was a phenomenon of the searching of a musical identity belonging to a generation that grew up in a continent that had nothing, that had lost its wealth, its freedom, its liberty, its justice. The necessity of embracing identity and dignity guided us to look for our realities and our time's sounds; first in popular roots and then in the crossbreeding.

A major part of that searching is still very important. Latin America is realizing that in the current "Globalization" it's necessary to have a strong identity through which one can relate to the rest of the world; because that's the only way you can have your own place in this "global" world. A person who doesn't have a clear and strong identity is like the air in this 'globe balloon' which a lot of people blow up but just a few are able to play with.



RW: Is there any collaboration between Inti Illimani and other *nueva canción* artists?

JC: I'm not sure if the word "collaboration" is adequate in this context, but there is some contact and some involvement and friendship with some of them. From time to time there are some encounters like the one next October 14 - 15 with Inti-Illimani, Illapu and Quilapayún at the Caupolican theatre in Santiago. The concert is called *Juntos, aquí estamos* (We are here together) and all groups will be together on stage for the first time in Chile. I think what is most important is to be in contact and collaborating with the new musicians and popular singers, so the *nueva canción* won't resemble an isolated planet doomed to disappear but given the opportunity to transform into the seeds of a movement that will renew and grow in the new generations, with the natural changes in time and history.

RW: Are there any other projects in mind for the future and do you view them as a continuation of the *nueva canción*?

JC: We have a lot of projects, which are not easy to undertake when considering we have a 44 year human and musical history. With such a long history, we work on condition that each project should be an original contribution which retains both continuity and renewal of the musical language. Of course, since this is Inti-Illimani, it's all about an ideal continuity of what it's known as *nueva canción* (New Song), a name that's a contradiction in itself, for every new thing is doomed to become old over time.

Ramona Wadi is a freelance writer living in Malta. Visit her blog at <http://walzerscent.blogspot.com>.