

Review · *Carolyn Wright*

An Unfinished Song: The Life of Victor Jara,
Joan Jara. New York: Ticknor & Fields,
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On weekend evenings in late 1971 and early 1972—the uneasy middle months of Salvador Allende’s presidency—my Chilean friends and I would take one of Santiago’s big rattletrap busses down the Alameda to a neighborhood of rundown mansions and working class flats. We would get off at the Calle Carmen, and walk down to No. 340, where we paid the 20-escudo cover charge, and sat down at one of the rickety low tables in the dark, already crowded room, to wait for the spotlight to come on and the first performers to step onto the tiny stage. The place was the Peña de los Parra, the folk music club and gallery/atelier of popular art, opened in 1965 by Isabel and Angel Parra, daughter and son of the legendary Violeta Parra, the folk musician and artist who had died in early 1971. My friends and I knew that the Peña was a center of *La Nueva Canción*—the Chilean New Song movement—and part of a renaissance of folk literature, art, theatre and dance that flowered so briefly in Chile in the 1960s and 70s; but none of us could have foreseen how abruptly this movement would be cut off in September 1973, by the right-wing military coup that left Allende and thousands of his supporters and sympathizers dead, disappeared, imprisoned, exiled and silenced. All we knew then was that we admired the music—its energy and authenticity—and the artistic and social commitment of its practitioners: groups like Quilapayún and Inti-Illimani, and Isabel and Angel themselves, whose names would become synonymous with the power of song as a weapon in Latin America’s struggle against political repression and foreign domination. But the musicians just named were the lucky ones, who were out of the country during the coup or who managed to escape into exile; who would continue to compose, record, perform and tell their stories throughout the world. What of the others not so fated? What of the most renowned of them all—Victor Jara, murdered in the National Stadium in front of hundreds of witnesses in the first few days after the coup?

It was he whom many people came to hear at the Peña in 1971 and '72, at the height of his fame as a folk musician and composer of popular song,

after an equally successful career as one of Latin America's most talented and innovative young theatre directors. When he stepped onto the stage with his guitar, in an old leather jacket and work shirt, there was a hush and stir in the room as for no other performer; and when he sang his best-known songs, "Ni chicha ni limoná" ("Neither One Thing nor the Other") and "La plegaria a un labrador" ("Prayer to a Laborer"), the audience was on its feet, clapping and singing the choruses with a fervor unmatched elsewhere. Americans in the crowd were reminded of Woody Guthrie, or of early Bob Dylan, minus the standoffishness and commercialization. Everybody sensed that Victor Jara was going far, that his breadth of vision and the power of his music to inspire would carry him to world renown.

Thus the news of his death was all the more shocking. Except for Pablo Neruda, no other contemporary Chilean artist had attained such wide recognition, and won the affections of the people to whom his music was dedicated; and it was for these qualities, of course, that he was so hated by the military commanders who recognized, tortured, and shot him in the stadium. His death, ironically enough, would only enhance his renown, and put his name beside those of Federico García Lorca and Osip Mandelstam (as well as of countless others less well known) as an emblem of the artist caught in the relentless machinery of civil war and political repression, the artist destroyed for expressing ideals opposed or inconvenient to those in power.

World-wide symbol that his name has become, familiar as his songs may be to many of us, until now we have had little knowledge of the life of Victor Jara. Now, more than a decade after his death, we have his story at last, in his widow Joan Jara's *An Unfinished Song*, a forthright, powerful and loving biography of Victor and a memoir of their life together. This book is to the ongoing tragedy in Chile what Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Betrayed* are to the years of Stalinist terror and repression in the Soviet Union. Joan Jara traces her own and Victor's childhoods, the experiences that brought them to their respective careers, their meeting in Santiago and years together. The heart-rending final chapters detail the last days and hours of Allende's presidency, the confusion and brutality of the coup, the arrest and detention of thousands—including Victor—the discovery and burial of his body in the National Cemetery. In a parallel chapter, she reconstructs (from the

testimony of others detained with him) Victor's terrible last hours and tells of her flight into exile with her and Victor's two daughters, carrying only the precious photos, letters and tapes that would enable his memory to live on. By the end, the book attains a grandeur and sweep of perspective that makes it more than a biography of a now legendary folk hero, more than a love story of two artists—a Chilean singer and an English dancer—and of their commitment to their social ideals and to each other. It becomes a passionately convincing testimony of the endurance of love, and the perseverance in the human spirit of justice and compassion—embodied in the power of song which was Victor's—in spite of the forces determined to destroy all such ideals. The book is also one of the most gripping personal accounts of the Allende years and their bitter conclusion that we have in English to date; it cannot fail to make a profound impression on any reader, much less those with firsthand experience of Allende's Chile, or of any other Latin American country caught up in the processes of social change or political upheaval.

Joan Jara is particularly well-suited to the authorship of this book, in her searching identification with the Chilean people and their struggles, and in her ability to make them accessible to non-Chilean, non-Spanish-speaking readers. Born in London to a family of working-class origins, she spent a childhood dominated by the Depression and the Blitzkrieg of World War II, but the shape of her life was decided by a performance she saw in 1944 of the Ballet Jooss' famous anti-war piece, *The Green Table*. Within a few years, she was a student in the Jooss company, where she met and married her first husband, a dancer and choreographer whom she accompanied on his return to his native Chile in the mid-1950s. There she danced and toured Chile with the National Ballet, and taught dance and movement at the University of Chile. It was in May of 1960, as she lay in a hospital bed with her newborn daughter, her first marriage in collapse, that a former student came with flowers to ask how she was. He was, of course, Victor Jara.

His move from the tiny village of Lonquén, 50 miles from Santiago, was for Victor—the son of an illiterate farm laborer and a hardworking, musically talented mother—a much longer journey in some respects than that of his future wife's from London, because of the many social and economic barriers that prevented all but a few working-class young Chileans from attaining the education and training necessary to develop

their artistic gifts. From her memories and from interviews with surviving family and friends, Joan Jara lovingly and insightfully recreates the development of Victor's talent and the growth of his social vision: the family's move to the Santiago slums, the mother's struggles to feed and provide education for her children, Victor's years in seminary and military service, his eventual acceptance into the University of Chile's Theatre School as an economically disadvantaged student, his concomitant evolution as a singer and folk composer—meeting the key figures of Chile's growing indigenous musical and artistic movement, playing and touring with Cuncumén, one of the first New Song groups, and subsequently helping to form other groups, Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún, that are still together to this day.

By the time their lives intersect in 1960, the year of Victor's first extended European tour as a featured soloist with Cuncumén, both Joan and Victor are recognized in their respective fields, Victor principally as a prize-winning director in the University of Chile's Theatre Institute, invited to international drama festivals in Latin America, Britain and even the United States. From the early 1960s on, Joan's and Victor's lives become increasingly public, more involved with political events and the forces for social change in Chile, beginning with the presidency of Eduardo Frei and culminating in the vigorous nationwide effort on the part of working class people and their advocates among the middle and upper classes, to elect Salvador Allende. The second half of the book is virtually a month-by-month chronicle of the Allende years, of the participation of the Jaras and their fellow artists in the social and economic reforms of Allende's platform, in spite of the country's increasing political polarization and growing right-wing resistance. In one moving incident, the 1971 winter flooding of the Mapocho River, Joan Jara relates how the University's Ballet and Theatre Schools open their studios as emergency shelters for shantytown dwellers whose shacks have been swept away—an unheard-of, revolutionary action for such an institution and its primarily middle and upper class students and faculty!—and how the students bathe and feed the ragged, undernourished children, provide volunteer labor to construct new, sturdier dwellings for Santiago's working poor, and experience at first-hand the realities of poverty.

Warmed by the spirit of cooperation and generosity that informs these pages, readers will wonder why such actions—and programs such as

workers' health care, a daily ration of milk for all poor children, increased opportunities for education, and especially literacy for all Chileans (programs whose existence and necessity are taken for granted in this country)—inspired as much hatred among the privileged as they did, and were as threatening to the oligarchy as land reform and nationalization of major industries. Readers will fail to comprehend how the supporters of Popular Unity, Allende's coalition party, could be perceived as heavily armed, thoroughly indoctrinated fanatics bent on a Communist takeover. By Joan Jara's account, the artists, intellectuals and disenfranchised poor with whom she was in constant contact were for the most part as altruistic as (and probably less well organized than) many people who participated in the civil rights and anti-war movements in the U.S. In view of the parallels between these two countries' social movements, the annihilation of Chile's hopes for reform becomes all the more crushing. Mrs. Jara relates her and Victor's observations of covert right-wing activities in their own suburban neighborhood—of right-wing neighbors unloading sub-machine guns for storage in paramilitary caches in their houses, of gangs of neo-Fascist youths attacking Victor as he left his studio at the university, of threats by mail and telephone after successful concert appearances, new hit recordings, or music festival awards. Although she admits that her view of the oligarchy is somewhat biased, the events Joan Jara narrates are ominously similar to those in Fascist regimes that triggered world wars. Given the United States' punitive economic measures toward Chile during Allende's presidency, and the evidence for CIA collaboration in the internal resistance leading to the coup, this book should make readers question once more the callousness of much U.S. foreign policy, which has worked to deny to many Latin Americans the same political rights, social freedoms, and economic opportunities Americans expect and demand for themselves.

What shines through this narrative more than anything else, though, is Victor's personality and beauty of character—his warmth, compassion, and dedication, not only to his creative work but to an ever-broadening vision of the dignity and worth of all human beings, his commitment to enriching the lives of the poor, his growing premonitions of his own early death, and his determination to keep working for revolutionary change, no matter the cost. As Victor told one interviewer:

I am moved more and more by what I see around me . . . the poverty of my own country, of Latin America and other countries in the world; I have seen with my own eyes memorials to the Jews in Warsaw, the panic caused by the Bomb, the disintegration that war causes to human beings and all that is born of them. . . . But I have also seen what love can do, what real liberty can do, what the strength of a man who is happy can achieve. Because of all this, and because above all I desire peace, I need the wood and strings of my guitar to give vent to sadness or happiness, some verse which opens my heart like a wound, some line which helps us all to turn from inside ourselves to look out and see the world with new eyes.

Many may be capable of expressing such a vision, but few, in this country at least, have to die for it. Joan Jara's underlying implication is that as long as selfishness (such as that exhibited by so many privileged Chileans) prevails, controlling the politics of small countries such as Chile, and undermining all efforts for constructive change; as long as superpowers such as the United States follow policies dictated only by their self-interest and the self-interest of the small nations' oligarchies; then the poets, visionaries, intellectuals and all those advocating substantial but orderly reform will continue to be killed or silenced—leaving armed revolution as the only apparently viable alternative.

Victor's death is rendered especially tragic, even in his widow's down-to-earth, matter-of-fact narrative style, by our knowledge that this man—with his humor, energy and occasional moments of irritability—is not a fictional character from whom we can distance ourselves, when the plot becomes too painful, with the thought, “Oh, this is only a story.” The man whom we come to care for in Joan Jara's loving account really was brutally snatched away; the grim days in which he was a disappeared person, his widow's gruesome visit to the city morgue to claim his mutilated body, the terrible last days of his life as she reconstructs them, are very real, very recent, and replicated many thousand-fold in the individual stories of all of the other victims of the Chilean coup and military regime to this day. Her account is affecting, also, because we sense Joan Jara's natural reticence in telling it, especially in the passages about their private life: she did not start out to be a writer, but gives us this story because it must be told. Victor's and her shared mission is clear in every word of her

story. As she and her two small daughters board the jet for their long exile in Britain, she tells us:

I was filled with a sense of an unfinished struggle, the struggle of a people who were peacefully trying to change their society, obeying the rules that their enemies preached but did not keep. I felt as though I were not one person, but a thousand, a million . . . the agony was not only a personal one, it was a shared agony that linked so many of us, even though we were forced to separate, some staying in Chile, others escaping to every corner of the world. . . .

The evening before we took the plane came a last message from Victor, passed along a chain of [friends,] prisoners who had been confined with him in the basement of the stadium at some time during the last hours of his life, when he knew for certain that they were going to kill him and that he would never see us again . . . to tell me that he loved me more than anything else in the world and that I should be courageous and carry on his struggle.