

21H.171 Final Paper

***Nueva canción* as a Revolutionary Tool in Puerto Rican Protests**

Introduction

The ubiquitous political instability and socioeconomic inequities in Latin America during the post-World War II period gave rise to different manifestations of discontent and resentment among citizens. One such manifestation was a socio-musical movement known as *nueva canción*, which promoted a broad range of social justice themes in the lyrics of folk-style songs (Shaw, 2015). The movement spread from Chile and Cuba across Latin America and eventually emerged in Puerto Rico, which was undergoing rapid change because of its new political relationship with the United States (Denis, 2015). *Nueva canción* was a critical tool that motivated and directed revolutionary movements in Puerto Rico during the Vietnam War period, and its influences in contemporary protests remain. To support this thesis, this paper will focus on a case study: the music of Roy Brown and its role in the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) protests of the 1960's and 70's. In this context, *nueva canción* was used as a tool to record history, to reject American capitalism and militarism, and to relate the political struggles of Puerto Rico to those occurring in other Latin American countries.

Background: The UPR Protests of the 1970's

To study the role of Roy Brown's *nueva canción* songs in revolutionary movements, it is necessary to examine the historical context upon which these protests took place. During the first half of the 20th century, increasing global pressure to

decolonize forced the United States to restructure its relationship with Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was made into a *Freely Associated State* in 1952 in a joint negotiation between the governing party in Puerto Rico and the United States Government. One of the measures taken to normalize this new status was the institution of a *gag law*, which made it illegal to discuss independence, display a Puerto Rican flag, among other things (Denis, 2015).

Shortly thereafter, the President of the UPR, Jaime Benítez, made a similar ruling that prohibited manifestations of independence and socialism, both popular among university students at the time. In addition, the US Department of Defense made it a requirement to graduate that male students participate in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), an officer training program for the United States Armed Forces. Finally, the possibility that male students could get drafted for the Vietnam War (and that Puerto Ricans were put on the front lines) incited a number of major protests in 1971, 1973 and 1976. In these protests, two police officers, one ROTC cadet and one student were killed. After nearly a decade of conflict, these protests resulted in the resignation of Jaime Benítez and the expulsion of the ROTC from campus (Medina Fuentes, 2013).

The music of Roy Brown

In the midst of this, Roy Brown had enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico in the late 60's. "I was part of a time when young people wanted to create a new political movement in Puerto Rico," he said of his time in the university, "And we were the cultural part of that world: the *nueva canción*, protest song." The Florida-born artist quickly made a name for himself by releasing two albums that dealt with the protests: *Yo protesto* in 1970 and *Basta ya... Revolución* in 1971. Although Brown himself is

skeptical of his music's success in provoking social change, careful look at his work would suggest that it had an important cultural role in these protests (Shaw, 2015).

The first of these roles was as a tool to record history and to provide continuity to the decades-long conflict. Recall that the previously mentioned prohibition of activities whose purpose was to promote independence (coupled with news agencies that were decidedly anti-independence, and were owned by the pro-statehood governor at the time) meant that any opposition to the Puerto Rican government was heavily censored. Activists such as Brown were also frequently harassed by the FBI. "My mother committed suicide because they convinced her that I was a terrorist," Brown revealed once in an interview (Shaw, 2015). This made it extremely important for there to be some artifact of these struggles. A simple example is *Míster con macana*, from the album *Yo protesto* (Brown, 1969). The song tells the story of university students being chased down by state and local policemen during protests, and the violence that was sure to follow. Although this song was popular at the time among protesters, its importance as a historical artifact would only be known decades later: this song was actively used in the UPR protests of 1981 and in the much more recent protests of 2010 (Shaw, 2015). The last verse goes:

[...]

gritan asesino

y un míster con baqueta

saca una pistola

y todo por la Coca-Cola.

[...]

They scream killer

and a mister with a drumstick

takes out a gun

all for a Coca-Cola.

The simultaneous criticism of police brutality and American capitalism in this verse brings us to the second role that *nueva canción* had in these protests: the movement was used to promote anti-capitalist and anti-militarist perspectives. As previously mentioned, students vehemently opposed the installation of the ROTC on campus, and the use of a draft for a war they had no vested interest in. At the same time, inspiration from socialist movements in other Latin American countries, particularly in Cuba, had prompted the creation of student groups devoted to socialism within the university (Grupo Editorial EPRL; Medina Fuentes, 2013). Naturally, a lot of Roy Brown's music revolved around these themes. The most famous and powerful song in this regard is *Monón* (Brown, 1969). The song revolves around a man (Monón) born into poverty, who attempts to escape it by enlisting in the military. The man then returns from Vietnam, and decries the state of the world with his newfound perspective. The song emphasizes the predatory nature of the American elites as they pick from the poor to fight their battles. In one of the most poignant passages of this song, a desperate Monón cries:

¡Fuego, fuego, fuego,

“Fire, fire, fire

el mundo está en llamas!

the world is in flames!

¡Fuego, fuego,

Fire, fire, fire,

los yanquis quieren fuego!”

the Yankees want fire!”

This song was extensively censored at the time because of how effective it has been at inciting resentment. In a famous incident, students burned down an American flag and danced around it live in one of Brown's concerts (Shaw, 2015). Of course, this

is but one example of a socially conscious song. *Señor inversionista* criticized powerful politicians for “stealing the votes of the poor”, and warned that they will be hanged “with hat and everything.” *Negríto bonito* lamented the terrible living conditions and wages for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, and admonished that moving to New York (as many were doing at the time) did not guarantee prosperity (Brown, 1969; Brown, 1971).

It is important to note that promotion of these values is a core characteristic of *nueva canción* not just in Puerto Rico, but throughout Latin America. Silvio Rodríguez criticized United States interventionism in the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba in his song *Playa Girón* (Rodríguez, 2016). Likewise, Víctor Jara used *Preguntas por Puerto Montt* to criticize the killing of civilians in Puerto Montt in Chile (Jara, 2001). In a more spiritual view, Facundo Cabral lamented the vanity of landowners that thought that just having money would grant them happiness in *Pobrecito mi patron* (Cabral, 1971). It is imperative to realize that these are all struggles that are universal across the region. Panamanian singer Rubén Blades emphasized this in an interview: he stretched that *Juan González* (a song about a guerrilla fighter killed by the army) was not set in any particular country. “[...] when I write a song [...] it is obviously a consequence of my observations of Panamá, but I write it in a way where I want it to be everybody’s song,” Blades explained (Shaw, 2015).

This universality is crucial, and intimately related to the final main function of Brown’s songs in these protests: they were used to establish a common ground with other Latin American countries’ political issues. This is a decade and a half after the establishment of the *Freely Associated State*, meaning that Puerto Rico was stuck in between two worlds. Faced with embracing either one of these two worlds, pro-

independence poets such as José Antonio Corretjer repeatedly made allusions to similarity in struggles between Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries (Cabrera, 2017). In this aspect, Roy Brown was no exception. A clear-cut example of this is *Antonia murió de un balazo* (Brown, 1971). This song tells the story of Antonia Martínez, the UPR student that was shot while on a balcony by an unidentified police officer on March 4th, 1970 (Grupo Editorial EPRL). In two distinct verses, Brown connects the incident with similar killings in countries such as Bolivia, Venezuela, and Uruguay. One of the two verses reads:

<i>Estás aquí, en Bolivia,</i>	<i>You are here, in Bolivia,</i>
<i>Argentina, Venezuela;</i>	<i>Argentina, Venezuela;</i>
<i>a la guerra,</i>	<i>to war,</i>
<i>joven luchador.</i>	<i>young fighter.</i>

Moving forward: how *nueva canción* has impacted music today

Curiously, when asked if there are any socially conscious rappers on the island, Brown argued that the “well-known ones have no social conscience” because they are denied a market if they choose to do so (Shaw, 2015). Brown was wrong: some of the most prolific Latin American artists of all time are rappers with socially conscious songs. Moreover, it is crucial to accept and appreciate this work to study how *nueva canción* evolved in the decades since the UPR protests of the 1970’s. Interestingly enough, the perfect case study to see this is a much more recent protest in the UPR, this one in 2010. Students protested an increase in tuition that would drastically burden them in an

already struggling economy. Amazingly, within a year of the protests, the demands of the students were met (Laguarta Ramirez, 2016).

That same year, *Calle 13* (the artist with the most Latin Grammy wins and nominations; Statista) released an album that follows to a point the three key aspects detailed above. Firstly, *Calma pueblo* is an account of the recent massive layoffs in the Puerto Rican government, and the resentment felt by the students when their tuition was increasing. Further, *El hormiguero* alludes to the colonial status of the island and to interventionism in other Latin American countries, and calls for unity in defeating “the cowboys.” Finally, *Latinoamérica* is a vivid, poetic vision of an idyllic Latin America and of the resilience of its people in standing to adversity. The album, *Entren los que quieran*, was a critical and commercial success that was, much like Brown’s music, censored on the island radio for years (Pérez, 2010).

To properly analyze social movements through music, one must look at all genres of music, not just genres that used to be socially conscious. Right now, *Residente* is core Spanish protest artist. On other fronts, for example, Tego Calderón found great success in using his music to criticize injustices towards dark-skinned Latin Americans in his music (Calderón, 2003). Rap is what a lot of what used to be *nueva canción* has evolved into. It would be unwise to indiscriminately dismiss it as “Go and kill so and so, fuck that woman...” as Brown did in his interview.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has asserted that *nueva canción* was effectively used to incite and focus revolutionary movements in Puerto Rico during the period of the

Vietnam War. Furthermore, the influence of *nueva canción* continues to reverberate in today's music. *Nueva canción* was used as a tool to keep an account of history, to provoke feelings of resentment towards the governmental status quo, and to create a common thread between political conflicts in Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America. The importance of these conclusions lies in their relevance today. As argued, our current social movements have a musical component: for example, the movement towards reconstruction in Puerto Rico has been accompanied by numerous songs. In analyzing the current situation on the island, or other situations of unrest such as in Venezuela, we need to examine the music being used in order to obtain the full picture of the sentiments of the people.

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