

## CHAPTER 35

# 'Los Novísimos' and Cultural Institutions

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*Abstract: The nueva trova, which began in the 1960s, owes much of its recognition nationally and throughout Latin America to cultural institutions of Cuba from the past. The youngest (and third) generation is currently supported by cultural institutions such as La Asociación Hermanos Saíz, Casa del Joven Creador and El Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau. This paper, however, focuses on the level of involvement of cultural institutions with the second generation referred to as los novísimos, and highlights the career of Gerardo Alfonso as compared to his contemporaries. Official support or lack thereof affects the dissemination of these artists' work on and off the island. Even within the novísimos, some artists have had more support than others. I argue that whatever support has come from cultural institutions, the novísimos have had substantial success at finding ways to subvert institutional control while taking advantage of the support that is offered.*

*Los novísimos*, Cuban singer-songwriters, or troubadours, from the second generation of the *nueva trova*, offer a unique perspective on the theme of this panel on history, institutions and legacy. Concurrent with the protest song movement developing in many parts of the Americas and Europe, *nueva trova* is an artistic expression that emerged at the end of the sixties in Cuba. A movement or perhaps simply an attitude, *nueva trova* has always taken an intellectual stance against the socio-political injustices of the day. Its founders were Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Vicente Feliú and Noel Nicola, all of whom continue to sing *nueva trova* with the exception of Noel, who died in 2005. Two more generations follow *los novísimos*: the third generation, most of whom now live in Madrid and the youngest generation receiving substantial support from Cuban cultural institutions such as Hermanos Saiz, *La Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*, and *El Centro Pablo de la Torriente Brau*, for example.

Linked to the Chilean protest song during the period before and after Allende's brief presidency and continuing as an underground movement

during the Pinochet regime, the *nueva trova* was born of a political context that ostensibly ministered to the social needs of its people. Cuban troubadours have never been tortured and killed for their songs, as was Victor Jara, for example. In fact, though the early *nueva trova* did find issues to protest in Cuba and other parts of the world, it also praised the new programs of its society such as voluntary work, the Committees for Revolutionary Defense, and the New School.<sup>1</sup>

The *nueva trova* emerged from the Cuban revolution in combination with the international scene of the second half of the twentieth century. It also linked itself to another key moment in Cuban history, the struggle for independence during the preceding century, in claiming a musical and ethical affiliation with traditional troubadours such as Pepe Sánchez and his protegé Sindo Garay. In addition, the *nueva trova* participated in the struggles for social justice throughout Latin America, thereby contributing to the formation of Latin America's history. The two *trovas*, new and traditional, found a thematic and artistic nexus in the figure of the troubadour, the poet who plays the guitar and sings his own compositions.

With this basic background about the *nueva trova*, we can consider the following questions:

1. How can the *trova*, which was born out of a specific historical moment, continue to exist in a time where the social and political realities are so different from the context of its inception?
2. What institutional support has been granted these troubadours? What are the limits that accompany institutional support and what impact does support have on contemporary troubadours?
3. Does the troubadour possess, from the legacy of his precursors, some device in order to deal with the widening gap between revolutionary rhetoric and current reality?
4. What possibilities for cultural agency does the contemporary troubadour have in facing current global and domestic forces?

My work focuses on *los novísimos*, the singer-songwriters who entered the movement in the late seventies and early eighties. Twenty years after the triumph of the revolution, this group emerged as the fruit of

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1. Lauren Shaw, "La nueva trova cubana: una poética y política menor," diss., City University of New York, 2002. 378.

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those who fought for it. *Los novísimos* comment on the conditions in which Cubans are living, without, however, directly making reference to Cuban politics. And with the advent of the Special Period where the distance between rhetoric and reality grows further, they sing of the social misfortunes created by the economic crisis, such as, for example, the resurgence of prostitution on the island. These troubadours also point out injustices that the revolution has preferred to ignore: racial discrimination and homophobia. Therefore, these musicians, now in their forties, maintain the original attitude of protest from the early stages of the *nueva trova* and direct their attention to social inequality without, however, blaming the revolution.

What does this group of troubadours do in the first decade of the twenty first century? What do they confront politically, socially and economically? And how do they respond as artists faced with the forces of the global market? As an example of *los novísimos*, I will examine the work of Gerardo Alfonso and compare him to various other troubadours of his generation in order to illustrate the multiple possibilities in Cuba today with respect to artistic creativity. We can see that the level of institutional support influences the artistic orientation of these troubadours. Or is it the reverse, that the orientation of the troubadour influences the level of institutional support? Perhaps the relationship is symbiotic.

In the first interview that I conducted with Gerardo Alfonso, he speaks of his origins as a troubadour:

Fui con una guitarra a una evaluación para la inscripción a la nueva trova. Canté canciones que yo había hecho .... Entonces -- ¿qué hubo?-- que todavía no estaba preparado, que quedaba como candidato hasta el año que viene. E ingresé de nuevo. Ese día me creí que era un trovador. Porque era un chiquito que tenía una guitarra y cantaba canciones con cierta poesía y con ciertos patrones de la nueva trova. Desde ese día yo creía que era trovador.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the 80s Gerardo was criticized by Sara González y Alexis Triana (*nueva trova* members of the first generation who directed evaluations and determined the fate of younger troubadours). Gerardo

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2. Lauren Shaw, "La nueva trova cubana: una poética y política menor," Diss., City University of New York, 2002. 388.

was experimenting with musical forms (specifically the genre of the *ochanga*) that privileged rhythm over “serious” lyrics. About his 1984 song featuring rhyme such as *ochanga* with *malanga y pachanga*, Gerardo says:

...esas cosas fueron fatales para la época mía. Después me plegué a la incidencia de la canción de autor. Teniendo como referente a Serrat, a Eduardo Aute, a Silvio. Era muy fuerte que un tipo como yo así como cualquiera apareciera en el medio con otra onda completamente. [Pero] los temas que yo hice dentro de los patrones de la trova tampoco obedecen a la medida...Hice cosas distintas dentro de lo mismo pero más dóciles. Ahora, sí soy cimarrón y hago lo que me dé las ganas...porque ya no me importa. Además nadie me dice nada ahora.<sup>3</sup>

Another moment in the first interview, Gerardo continues to speak about the *ochanga*:

...es muy asimétrica. Que nada más hice dos canciones y fueron bastante criticadas porque eran ligeras del punto de vista de contenido, y como era tan complicado seguirla de punta de vista rítmica, no tuve éxito... Yo fui de los que asumía algunas cosas de las corrientes que pasaban. Estoy hablando de esto musicalmente. En la poesía, fue lo que te dije al principio, hubo una época de total acuerdo, un entendimiento entre las instituciones.<sup>4</sup>

What is of interest here is not just Gerardo's emphasis on new forms, but also the resistance with which the cultural institution of the *nueva trova* movement met his innovative efforts. Of the other genre that Gerardo has created, the *guayasón*, he states:

...uno de los ritmos que yo hice en el '83. Guayasón es una mezcla de la música campesina con la música afrocubana. El compás, seis por dos, seis por cuatro. El género pegó mucho en la gente. Cuando hice “Son los sueños todavía,” un himno esa canción, ...nadie sabe cómo se toca la guitarra. El rayado en la mano es una cosa propia como es difícil tocar el son, para quien no sabe.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, May 2005.

4. Shaw 382-3.

5. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, May 2005.

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Ironically, this well-known composition within Cuba, praises the figure of *el Che* while simultaneously criticizing the slow progress of the revolution at converting ideas into action. The security with which Gerardo declares his freedom of artistic expression now is owed as much to the level of fame this troubadour has achieved in Cuba as it does with the institutional support that he has found; a natural result of Gerardo's integration into the official cultural system.

2005 marks the 25th anniversary of Gerardo as a troubadour. He celebrated his anniversary not only with a series of concerts in Havana but also with a national tour funded by the *Instituto Cubano de la Música, la Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC)* y *La Organización de Pioneros José Martí (OPJM)*. In Havana Gerardo began to celebrate in April 2005 at *el Teatro del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* and later he appeared at *El Centro Pablo* and *Casa de las Américas* with two concerts featuring his compositions accompanied by the acoustic guitar. That summer he gave two concerts with different bands in *la Plaza de San Francisco de Asís* in *la Habana Vieja* featuring jazz, pop, and Afro-Cuban music.<sup>6</sup> An October concert with guest musicians performing at *la Sala Avellaneda del Teatro Nacional* concluded the series of events in Havana.

The national tour was organized under a completely different concept and it lasted the entire year. Gerardo visited the different provinces of Cuba with two suites by the Italian composer Walter Sivilotti based on songs written by the troubadour. "Sábanas blancas," which had its world debut in 2003 is based on seven songs by Gerardo, the most famous bearing the title of the suite. Sivilotti has also made suites with songs of other troubadours such as Teresita Fernández, Sara González, and Silvio Rodríguez. However, Gerardo sings his own songs in "Sábanas blancas." "Las leyendas camgüeyanas" is a collection of eight songs written by Gerardo in his new genre, *el guayasón*, based on the legends that originate in the city of Camagüey, some of which belong to Cuba's literary canon for being collected and written down by the poet/novelist Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. In the provinces that have symphonies, such as Holguín, Matanzas y Santiago de Cuba, symphonic concerts were presented, and in the provinces that lack symphonies, their local bands per-

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6. María Fernández Ferrer. "Gerardo Alfonso: trayectos y esencias." *La Jiribilla*. 16-22 Apr. 2005 <[http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2005/n206\\_04.html](http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2005/n206_04.html)>.

formed the works. All told the year-long celebration shows the multiplicity of creative talent of this troubadour not only as a musician but also as an artist with the awareness and means to promote himself utilizing the cultural structures of his country.

Gerardo proposed the idea of celebrating his anniversary to the various centers in which he presented his concerts, with the arrangement that the institutions would earn the profits of the productions and that they would help him with promotion. Gerardo states with respect to the economics of concert making: *no son nada lucrativos*.<sup>7</sup> He explains that he is able to live with such economic restrictions because he has the privilege of playing in other, more commercial, venues inside and outside of Cuba. He supports himself with this income as well as from copyright royalties and the salary he earns from the *empresa* (cultural agency of the state) to which he belongs. All musicians in Cuba belong to one of the various *empresas*, depending on the type of music and the musicians' professional level. They collect a fixed salary for having completed a set of requirements, which in Gerardo's case constitute six concerts per month throughout the whole country. He says: *Hago actividades políticas, recitales, etc y de esa manera se justifica el salario mío. Es el concepto del artista subvencionado. Pero ese salario no es suficiente, de eso [solo] no vivo*. He adds that he tours abroad and performs in certain venues in Cuba such as in hotels, nightclubs, and bars where he is paid in dollars, all of this having been made possible by the tourist industry.<sup>8</sup>

There are other examples of institutional support that Gerardo receives. He is included in recordings for the series called *A guitarra limpia* produced by *el Centro Pablo*: the *Antología de la nueva trova* recorded in 2002 and his solo concerts taking place in the patio of *el Centro Pablo* are two examples. In 2002 he was invited to be featured at the closing event for *Longina*, the annual festival of *trova* named in honor of the traditional troubadour, Manuel Corona, and his composition of the same name. In a more administrative capacity, Gerardo directs *Almendares Vivo*, a cultural-ecological project that promotes public awareness about the environment, situated next to the Almendares River in Havana's

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7. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, 2005.

8. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, 2005.

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*Parque Metropolitano.* On Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays activities take place there with the idea of creating bridges between Havana and Cuba's provinces, between Cuba and other countries, and between culture and ecological issues. It is interesting that the project also includes the promotion of Cuban rap. Gerardo, an Afro-Cuban troubadour speaks about the importance of rap music in forcing the debate in Cuba about the issue of racism. While his own music may not have forced any debates about racism, he has taken part indirectly in this debate by using his cultural agency to support a musical form different from his own but that highlights a topic that he considers fundamental to the progress of his country. *Hubo una explosión de Hip Hop y los muchachos hablan sin piedad del tema [del racismo]. Y eso consiguió polémica, debate. Y se ha asumido institucionalmente el tema, se discute. Hay una dinámica.*<sup>9</sup>

It is important to comment here that the mere creation of "Las leyendas Camagüeyanas" and the subsequent concerts in coordination with Cuban orchestras throughout the island exemplify the access that Gerardo has to the cultural structures of his country. Also his song, "Sábanas blancas," plays as the theme song to the television program "Andar La Habana," showing the level of cultural authorization and popularity that he possesses.

In addition we must consider the list of prizes that Gerardo has received, which indicate not only his talent but also the support he receives to realize his ideas.<sup>10</sup> The careers of the other *novísimos* have forged very different paths. His contemporary Frank Delgado remains more on the margins of institutions, through he does belong to a musical *empresa*, from which he cannot survive economically either. He promotes himself by his own means on and off the island and produces his CDs without the support of a Cuban record label. In the last few years he has become involved with the writer and filmmaker Eduardo del Llano in the

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9. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, 2005.

10. He has received the Medalla 23 de agosto granted by the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, the Distinción por la Cultura Nacional, La Giraldirilla de la Habana given by the Gobierno de la Ciudad de la Habana, the Réplica del Machete de Antonio Maceo from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Cuba, the Orden Alejo Carpentier from the Consejo de Estado de Cuba, the Premio Abril from the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, and the Reconocimiento al Mérito Artístico from the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba. <[http://trovacub.com/piermail/boletin\\_trovacub.com/2007-January/0002510html](http://trovacub.com/piermail/boletin_trovacub.com/2007-January/0002510html)>.

production of a series of short very satirical films. The songs of Frank appear in these films and their lyrics underscore their critical messages with his usual brand of humor.

Carlos Varela, another *novísimo*, seems to represent the youths' critical voice sanctioned by the state. His music is produced on Cuban labels such as BisMusic. He plays to sold-out audiences in huge theaters in Havana. He also has managed to work successfully in the global market. His song "Una palabra" plays at the close of the 2004 Hollywood film *Man on Fire*, starring Denzel Washington. The same song appears in the more socio-politically conscious film by the Mexican filmmaker, Alejandro González Iñárritu, *Powder Keg*, 2001. It was first recorded for his CD *Nubes* produced by BisMusic in 2000.

Another *novísimo*, Polito Ibáñez, has more or less left *trova* for pop music with a more *pan-latino* sound. He now performs in commercial venues where young professionals in possession of dollars attend, listening to his music as they sip rum at prices beyond the revolutionary reach. An example of Polito's more current style can be heard on the CD *Axilas*, from 2003 produced on the label *Unicornio* (a branch of *Abdala*, the record company owned by Silvio Rodríguez).

In my 2005 interview with Gerardo, he comments:

Yo renuncié a esperar a que me vengan a buscar una disquera multinacional. Estuve años esperando por ellos y ya no creo más nada en eso. Creo en la obra y lo mejor posible para ella. Pero no por ninguna regla del mercado, de la industria. Logré llevar a cabo una idea que tenía cuando renuncié a la industria multinacional de las discográficas. Me liberé del espíritu cuando yo me negué todo eso. La industria musical norteamericana tiene su lógica, su propósito es vender. Pero que te obliguen ciertas cosas para vender, me niego contra eso.

Fruit of this liberation is "Las leyendas camagüeyanas" produced in collaboration with Walter Sivilotti. Gerardo concludes his description of the piece saying that even though he has maintained copyrights for the suite, he has given up publishing rights as his donation to the city of Camaguëy, thus making the piece more accessible to more orchestras.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Gerardo Alfonso, personal interview, 2005.

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Gerardo has persisted with the *guayasón* though he was once criticized for composing genres that privileged form over serious lyrics, which forced him at one point in time to conform more to the accepted sound of the *nueva trova*. His CD *Raza*, recorded in 2003, is an eclectic selection containing three *guayasones* and two *ochangas*, among other genres. “Las leyendas camagüeyanas” is pure *guayasón*. Gerardo has covered great spans of musical territory in developing this genre of his. With “Las leyendas,” we see him combine Cuban local culture with his concerns about Cuban musical form thus eclipsing contemporary socio-political concerns as he highlights the cultural in place of the revolutionary.

I conclude that one of the most important legacies of Gerardo Alfonso could well be the genres that he has developed throughout the past 25 some years of his career. Despite the difficulties the creation of these genres caused him at the beginning of his profession, once other musicians began to adopt the *guayasón* for example, we see that his genre has established itself. Since it takes the participation of the musical community for a new genre to take hold, with “Las leyendas” he leaves a very Cuban legacy to a more global musical community.

Perhaps the artistic life of Gerardo Alfonso has followed and will follow the same trajectory of his government confronted with the forces of globalization, which Cuba has felt more profoundly since the Special Period caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The shift from identifying the nation through politics (the socialist cause) to culture (*cubanía*) certainly describes the focus of Gerardo’s latest developments. Ironically, Gerardo has managed to impose his creativity on the multinational music scene despite having renounced the terms of recording companies that represent the global market.

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