

The Nueva Trova: Frank Delgado and Survival of a Critical Voice

Lauren E. Shaw

The *nueva trova* is not a genre or an artistic school. Rather, it is a musical movement that is not characterized by a particular style. As a movement, it belongs more to a certain ideology and way of life than to a certain time period. The musical forms it encompasses are many: *bolero*, *guaguancó*, *guajira*, *guaracha*, *danzón*, *son* and ballad. Some troubadours even include reggae and rap into their repertory. It is the ballad, however, that is used most frequently due to its flexibility of form that can accommodate more adeptly to lyrics.

The *nueva trova* emerged in Cuba at the end of the sixties with singer-songwriters Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés as its two-main founders. It has come to be associated with the ideological, historical and social-political context of the Cuban Revolution. In fact, in the last few decades, its songs have conveyed the impact of socialism on the island. Although it is part of the world-wide movement of protest songs in the sixties, the *nueva trova* is unique, due to the political situation in Cuba.

Some of the foremost artists taking part in this international song form are: Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez in the United States; Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara in Chile; Mercedes Sosa in Argentina; Oscar Chávez and Amparo Ochoa in México; Roy Brown in Puerto Rico and Joan Manuel Serrat, Paco Ibáñez, Luis Llac and Raimón in Spain. Insisting on social justice, these artists strove to raise consciousness and to speak out against oppressive social and political systems. They represented the antithesis of music as a business.

In Latin America, this song form came to be known as the *nueva canción*: *nueva*, new, because of its aesthetic and thematic innovations. The *nueva*

trova shares what was new in the *nueva canción* but differs from it because of the very specific reality from which it emerged: communist Cuba. It was created in a particular time and country where it was assumed that the people's needs were addressed and oppression from social inequity and political tyranny was a thing of the past. The selection of the word *trova* instead of *canción* speaks to the conscious desire of the Cuban singer-songwriters to claim their thematic and textual connection to Cuba's traditional troubadours of the nineteenth century. What separates the *nueva trova* from the nineteenth century *trova tradicional* is the Cuban Revolution and the possibilities it promised for those who participated in its ideology and formation.

In 1972 el Primer Encuentro de Jóvenes Trovadores (The First Gathering of Young Troubadours) was celebrated in Manzanillo, where young troubadours of various provinces could join together to exchange ideas amongst themselves and also to establish a dialogue with laborers and educators. This event marks the inception of what is known as the "organizational movement" of the *nueva trova*, which eventually dissolved in the mid eighties. The musical movement has never ceased to exist. In addition to Rodríguez and Milanés, its other principle-founding members are Noel Nicola, Vicente Feliú and Augusto Blanco. Later, other troubadours joined the movement, such as Amaury Pérez, Alejandro García, known as Virulo, Pedro Luis Ferrer, Mike Porcel, Angel Quintero and Sara González. In the eighties, a second "generation" of new troubadours developed with artists such as Frank Delgado, Santiago Feliú, Donato Poveda, Alberto Tosca, José Antonio Quesada, Anabel López, Xiomara Laugart, Carlos Varela, Gerardo Alfonso and Polito Ibáñez. This "generation" is referred to as *generación de los topos* because of their underground origins. Delgado maintains the line established by Ferrer, working predominantly with Cuban rhythms set to aggressively critical lyrics. Of this group, Varela has become the most famous in Cuba, fusing rock and roll with *trova*. Ibáñez began as a solo troubadour but now plays primarily with his band, assuming a more popular-commercial style than that of solo acoustic guitarist. The Afro-Cuban Gerardo Alfonso incorporates reggae and rap in his repertory. Feliú stands out for his unique style on the guitar. With the exception of Laugart, who resides in New York City and Poveda who lives in Miami, all members of this group have remained in Cuba.

At the end of the eighties, a third "generation" of new troubadours appeared at the time the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cuban people entered the período especial due to the sudden loss of Soviet economic support in the form of trade and subsidies. The irreverence and critical tone of their lyrics reflect these difficult times. The third "generation" came to be known as *la generación del 13 y 8*, which refers to the address of the *peña* where they would gather to play in el Vedado, a neighborhood in Havana.

Gema y Pável, the trio Superávit and the group that calls itself Habana Abierta represent some of this generation of troubadours. By as early as 1993 many of this generation had begun to establish themselves in Madrid where they all continue to survive on their musical talents giving concerts and producing CDs for Spanish record companies. The fact that they have chosen to leave Cuba reflects the lack of opportunities for them on the island.

The most recent expression of the *nueva trova* is manifest in various regions of Cuba: Havana, Santa Clara y Santiago de Cuba. These young troubadours, born in the mid seventies in Havana are known as the Cantores de la Rosa y la Espina: Samuel Águila, Ariel Díaz, Carlos Lage, Karel García, Yhosvany Palma, Sergio Gómez (poet who collaborates with Samuel), Silvio Alejandro, Fernando Bécquer, Axel Milanés, Diego Cano and Eduardo Frías. As of my last visit to Cuba in 2000, they had little experience performing off the island, with the exception of a few government-sponsored concerts in Guatemala. They usually share concert programs since none possesses the sufficient repertory or artistic level to sustain a solo concert. Heidi Igualada and Rita del Prado belong to this generation also. Yamira Díaz, from Pinar del Río, could be included in this generation although chronologically she belongs to the *generación del 13 y 8*. Among the villaclareños are Diego Gutiérrez, Aláin Garrido, Raul Marchena, Leonardo García, and el Trío Enserie (Raul Cabrera, Rolando Berrío and Levis Aliaga). Enserie stand out from their peers perhaps because they are a trio which enables them to produce a greater number and variety of songs. In 1999 they also released a CD produced by Silvio Rodríguez's recording studio and record label, Abdala. They have traveled extensively, but have since disbanded, with two members residing in different areas of Spain and one in Cuba. From Santiago de Cuba William Vivanco, stands out as a significant singer-songwriter of this generation.

Having delineated the key artists participating in the *nueva trova*, I would like to turn to the lyrics of Frank Delgado from the generation of *los topos*. When I first interviewed him, he hesitated to admit being part of the *nueva trova*.¹ He went on to say that for him the *nueva trova* is Pablo and Silvio, and perhaps the next group of musicians that immediately followed the founders. However, he clearly admitted his connection to the *nueva trova* by saying that he shares aesthetic similarities with *nueva trova* musicians, but that there are differences. When pressed about the differences he described his own lyrics as more prosaic than those of the *nueva trova*. To Delgado, the *nueva trova* texts came out of the vanguard style emphasizing the cryptic and polysemous

1. All comments from Frank Delgado are translated from the 1999 interview in Havana, transcript of which can be found in the original form in: Lauren Shaw, "La nueva trova cubana: una poética y política menor," *diss.*, City U of New York, 2002, 341-376.

vein of poetry. He sees his own texts (and those of his generation) as narrative rather than as poetic, as descriptive but also more direct and more critical. He gives the example of one of Silvio's verses to show the difference in style, calling it opaque, difficult and *vallejiano*: un reloj se transforma en canchero y la capa de un viejo da con una tempestad de comején.² He also mentions that in the late seventies and early eighties, the *nueva trova* was becoming a caricature of itself, so much so that anyone who carried a guitar, wore dirty boots and combined the banal with unrelated imagery in his songs could be considered a troubadour. Delgado's generation broke from this trend with its clear, direct texts that spoke to tangible issues in contemporary Cuba. His songs continue in this vein, while the most current generation receiving state support under the auspices of the UJC (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas) tends to avoid critical commentary in its texts. Hence, one reason for the misconception that the *nueva trova* is dead and out of touch with contemporary Cuba.

Delgado has managed to keep his critical voice heard, humorously commenting on the shortages and restrictions imposed on the Cuban people. The CD *Trov-Tur*, which was recorded in 1995, represents Delgado's response to the período especial. The song "Cuando se vaya la luz, mi negra" is one example:

Cuando se vaya la luz, mi negra, nos vamos a desnudar,
 Temprano tiene su encanto, como la gente en el campo.
 Lo malo es que sin agua y sin ventilador,
 Acabaremos pegajosos y sudados como en un maratón.³

Introducing this song at a solo concert at Bard College in 2000, Delgado explained its context in the período especial, the frequent electrical blackouts emptying Cuba's decaying infrastructure without economic support from the Soviet Union. The song served to give comic relief at a time when Cubans were particularly burdened with sacrifice and hardship. Humor has been one of Delgado's best devices.

As a musician of certain category, Delgado has special privileges not granted to the common Cuban. He is able to spend long periods of time away from Cuba on tours that he arranges himself. He always returns to his native land and has written songs about those who have made the other choice.⁴ In Cuba he appears on recordings and concert programs that feature *nueva trova* artists and he performs solo concerts in venues such as the Casa de las

2. Silvio Rodríguez, "Como esperando abril," *Te doy una canción*, fonomusic, 1975.

3. Frank Delgado, "Cuando se vaya la luz, mi negra," *Trova-Tur*, Mutis, 1996.

4. See Frank Delgado, "La otra orilla", *La Habana está de bala*, Nuestra América, 1997.

Américas. His CDs, however, though recorded in Cuba, are usually produced off the island. His latest, *El Adivino*, was produced in Miami in 2002.

Because of his more international exposure and experience, he has a broader base than that of the younger troubadours. He now has a web page containing most of his lyrics, which can be accessed by anyone: a recent example of the Internet's effect on communication between Cuba and the United States. However, during the late nineties and the beginning of the new millenium, while I was researching my dissertation, no such information was available to me over the Internet. Even while in Cuba, I found it difficult to extract written lyrics from troubadours who seem to relate more to the aural nature of their profession. Delgado, on the other hand, always has had his songs typed and collected in his own unpublished songbook. Perhaps a sign of professionalism or maturity, he has always been conscious of the value of his lyrics. He has always been an independent musician not relying on the state funded and controlled recording labels, which explains his living arrangements. At the time of our interview in 1999, he was living with his parents in a room that he had converted into a make-shift music studio.

The songs I would like to discuss concern issues relating to Cuba's struggles since 1990, as well as the troubadours' struggles at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In the liner notes of the CD, *Trova-Tur*, Delgado states that "being a troubadour in Cuba is synonymous with possessing a certain attitude about life which constitutes a type of musical and poetic militancy. It is the historical antithesis of the singer and is to the left of the song, circumscribed in a particular historic reality and a product of a tradition."⁵ He concludes by defining himself as a troubadour. His song titled "El proceso" from this CD refers directly to the troubadours' trade and he defines himself as un simple trovador, which refers to this notion of poetic militancy. He mixes humor with a certain aggressiveness while openly pointing to the controversial role the troubadour has taken on in Cuba.

Que soy maldito y objetor dice la fiscalía.
Me acusan de manipular datos de economía,
de ser un típico provocador irresponsable
en un país inestable.

...

Que soy un simple trovador que dice lo que piensa,
que soy poeta e intocable, dirá la defensa.
Que quien ha visto a un trovador objetivo y valiente
hablar bien de un presidente.

...⁶

5. Delgado, *Trova-Tur*, 1996.

6. Delgado, *Trova-Tur*, 1996.

Delgado sets up a dialogue between the troubadour's audience and his judges, against whom he defends himself. He describes the polemic involved in speaking out and living within the restrictions of a duplicitous society. He contrasts "the simple troubadour who says what he thinks with an environment that accuses him of performing demagoguery out of very few elements and of looking for a salve in the applause of an audience that supports his opinions." Throughout this dialogue, Delgado criticizes Cuba of the nineties from his marginalized position of poet/critic. "El proceso" represents the delicate position of the troubadour with a critical voice who is judged by hypocrites and defended by people.

The question of censorship is one that frequently concerns North Americans about Cuban artistic expression in relationship to the state. Cubans, by the way, seem to be quite aware of what songs make the radio, what songs do not (as well as why) and which troubadours have become silent in the public arena. During our interview, Delgado commented that if the government doesn't like a song, it doesn't get aired on the radio. Other interviews I conducted with Cuban troubadours, who wish to stay off the record, not only convey that certain songs are denied access to the airwaves but that certain performers are also denied access to concert venues. Of course, the radio and concert halls are not the only ways of disseminating the *nueva trova*. Small and informal gatherings called *descargas*, along with clandestine and not-so-clandestine cassette recordings, serve as powerful avenues of expression.

The problematic song (for its chauvinistic perspective on prostitution) titled "Embajadora del sexo" uses humor to criticize the fact that prostitution has arisen since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cuban economy, specifically the type of prostitution that is now widespread: between la *jinetera* and the foreign tourist. The mere fact that this song directly addresses the issue of prostitution, however, speaks to the failure of the Cuban government to deliver on its initial promises. The reappearance of prostitution in Cuba represents a huge blow to the Revolution since one of the first social programs that Castro implemented in his early days sought to wipe out this age-old response to social inequity. The Revolution was successful in educating all sex workers and ensuring that they were gainfully employed in jobs that the Revolution condoned. The absence of prostitution in revolutionary Cuba has always been one of its prize achievements as well as a certain proof that the government's policies were genuinely helping its people. It was another useful statistic, along with those regarding the successes of the literacy campaign and socialized medicine, pointing to the ills of capitalism and the benefits of socialism.

Embajadora del sexo, funcionaria del deseo,
de día estudias inglés y por las noches te veo.

Escarnecida en historias como burdas mesalinas,
 pero envidian tu aventura de ser puta clandestina.
 Que no paga al sindicato ni a chulos ni pretendientes,
 por esa parte te digo, son putas independientes,
 que utilizan la avenida sin tener que pagar nada,
 por esa parte te digo, son putas privilegiadas.

...⁷

Through humor derived from a lexicon of professional terms, Delgado specifically criticizes a society that can't offer the legitimate positions of: *embajadora, funcionaria, canceller, cónsules, jurisprudentes* etc. Also, the efficiency and freedom from bureaucracy in their line of work stand in sharp contrast to the legitimate labor structure of Cuba.

Turning to the song "Río Quibú," Delgado offers more than a simple trip down the river that traverses the city of Havana. The trajectory of the river reveals the contradictions that, theoretically, do not exist in a socialist country.

Nació en la espuma sideral de una laguna podrida,
 de los residuos de un central y alguna lluvia caída;
 él nunca tuvo en su abolengo
 un manantial por nacimiento.
 Se fue acercando a la ciudad entre barrios marginales,
 de casas hechas de cartón y mágicos materiales;
 si no lo crees, vete y pasa por "Zamora" y "La Corbata".

...

El río va caminando con su causa y sus desgracias...
 y la mierda de su antigua aristocracia.
 Su curso es un muestrario de grandes contradicciones:
 Ciudadelas y centros de convenciones...
 Río Quibú, río Quibú...
 El río sucio llega al mar después de una gran batalla,
 depositando su carga, contaminando la playa.
 Claro, estás sobre la pista; esta canción la hizo un bañista.
 Río Quibú, río Quibú

...⁸

Alluding to the embargo and the scarcity of goods in Cuba, in the final lines, Delgado jokingly blames these deficiencies on Cuba's rejection of capitalism: how great it would be to defy the whole world and on its shores build a little restaurant. This song makes reference to specific places and events in contemporary Cuban life, particularly in Havana: names of marginalized

7. Delgado, *Trova-Tur*, 1996.

8. Frank Delgado, "Río Quibú," *Nueva trova: selección de éxitos*, ARTEX, 1993.

neighborhoods; the state corporation, Cubanacán; and a privileged neighborhood endowed with a golf course, swimming pools, and streets where only foreigners and a few select Cubans such as Silvio Rodríguez live. Delgado disparages the environmental contamination that this river suffers but he also exposes the unequal social terrain through which it flows. He achieves a comical tone with the ironic commentary about himself as a river bather and the absurd suggestion for how to avoid the pollution of the Quibú: take off for Varadero, the tourist beach, which has become off limits to the common Cuban.

On his latest CD, the song “Viaje a Varadero” describes an attempted trip to Varadero that relays his disapproval of the new form of colonization taking place on the island. He begins with:

Cuando a Varadero llegué, había una frontera
con gendarmería, garita y pasaporte.
Y la última vez que anduve por estas tierras
Esto todavía era Cuba, mi consorte.

He closes describing a depressing sense of dislocation from his own soil where everything is now written in English:

Pero aquí todo está en inglés y no hay nadie conocido;
Me siento como Santa Bárbara en casa de un militante del Partido.
...
Allá amigo Maximiliano, después de una hora me fui con tristeza,
...
No sé cuando. la península se nos fue de las manos,
No sé cuando lo decidieron y yo no me acuerdo si me preguntaron.⁹

Other themes Delgado explores are: exile, the lack of necessities on the island, the decay of Havana, and the changing landscape that tourism brings with it in songs such as “La Habana está de bala,” “La otra orilla” and “Mata-moros no vira pa’ tras.” A song from 1998, “Vivir en la casa de los padres,” humorously proposes a wild scheme for income in a family that lacks basic needs much less the luxuries taken for granted in the United States:

Ahora tengo un nuevo invento
Para que mi familia sobreviva
Les alquilo un cuarto a esos primos lejanos
Que gustan de nuestro estilo de vida.
Y aunque la casa está algo apuntalada
Conserva todavía su majestad.
Nosotros nos quitamos la comida
Porque andamos calculando un negocio a largo plazo

9. Frank Delgado, “Viaje a Varadero,” *El adivino*, Pimienta Records, 2002.

Y les tocamos música divina
 Pa' que vayan con el tiempo asimilando los garbanzos.
 Yo sé que en tu casa no hay apagones
 Y siempre está repleta la alacena,
 Que puedes expresar tus opiniones
 Y hay muchos más canales en tu antena.
 Pero en casa yo me siento como en casa,
 ...¹⁰

Delgado's unpublished, unrecorded song written at the turn of the new millennium and titled "En Cuba los trovadores" unabashedly reveals the danger in which the Cuban troubadour finds himself today as spokesperson for the ills of society that rarely enter public discourse. He describes the role of the troubadour in various ways: "saytrs, defamers, vandal professors, singing newscasters, cave-dwelling senators," all of whom possess an irreverent attitude toward power.

En Cuba los trovadores son como pátinas de colores
 sobre el oro macilento que hay en la cámara de los lores.
 En Cuba los trovadores son como sátiros detractores
 que bailan una mazurca sobre la cama de los rectores.
 En Cuba los trovadores a veces pares, a veces nones
 Se paran sobre el abismo de sus canciones.
 Por eso yo te aconsejo que no te pares donde se paran los trovadores.
 ...
 En Cuba los trovadores a la mitad de algún estribillo
 tienen que cantar un silencio con puntillo.
 Por eso yo te aconsejo que no te calles si un día se callan los trovadores.¹¹

Delgado juxtaposes the figures of the political authoritarian world (cámara de los lores, rectores, profesores, directores, senadores, mayores) with the lexicon of the musical world (*becuadros*, *bemoles*, *estribillo*, *puntillo*). In spite of the fact that authority has the power to silence the troubadour, it does not have absolute power if the people continue to listen and if the troubadour maintains his critical attitude toward society. With irony, repetition and variation, Delgado warns about "the danger" of the troubadour advising his audience to avoid his company. However, the tone of his final piece of advice in the last verse of the song switches from ironic to sincere. Here, he directly states the need for the function of the troubadour in Cuban society. The closing lines associate the voice of the troubadour with that of the people: this is why I advise you not to shut up if one day the troubadour does.

10. Delgado, "Vivir en casa de los padres," *El adivino*.

11. Delgado, "En Cuba los trovadores," unpublished song.

In conclusion, Delgado came out of a period in the *nueva trova* during which direct critical discourse was preferred and the organizational dogmatic movement of the *nueva trova* was dissolving. He has maintained this orientation of undogmatic directness throughout the nineties and into the twenty-first century, while many of his contemporaries have changed course or become silent. A combination of poetic talent (albeit in the more narrative style), profound knowledge of Cuban music, a resounding voice, musical dexterity and biting humor, Frank Delgado is a consummate troubadour: undaunted, so far, by the perils of his trade.

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