



VÍCTOR JARA

Even 40 years after his death, Víctor Jara's songs continue to inspire idealism across Latin America. Chris Moss recalls Chile's pre-eminent protest singer

On appearances alone, it's difficult to connect the Chile of today with the country that witnessed the flowering of the committed folk song of Víctor Jara.

Santiago is slick and stridently capitalist. Chile is the most stable, arguably most democratic country of its still troubled continent. Pinochet is dead but missed by many. A key member of the musically gifted generation that rebooted indigenous and Creole popular music to create so-called *nueva canción*, Jara would have felt ill at ease in this modern version of his beloved *patria*.

He sang for, and often with, slum-dwellers and factory workers, the landless and the

dispossessed, women and children. His mild-mannered delivery belied his deep and abiding belief in social justice. His poncho and his love of *mestizo* culture would be an affront to all those Chileans who pride themselves on their Starbucks outlets and their European lifestyles. Chile today is, in many ways, a country bereft. Those who miss Jara also miss an age of hope and promise that died with him 40 years ago.

Víctor Lidio Jara Martínez was born on September 28 1932 on a plantation near Lonquén, inside the metropolis of Santiago. His parents, Manuel and Amanda, were farm workers and Jara and his siblings helped

out, collecting firewood and feeding the pigs. Amanda, a *mestiza* with Mapuche ancestry, sold herbal remedies, played guitar and sang folk songs. Manuel was illiterate, a drinker and prone to violence.

After Manuel died, the family moved to Santiago. The young Jara started guitar lessons with a neighbour, who noticed that the boy was an unusually talented songwriter.

Jara's mother died when he was just 15 years old. He sought help from a priest, who encouraged him to enter a seminary in the town of San Bernardo, near Santiago. He enjoyed the sacred music and singing, but was not cut out for the priesthood. In 1952 he left and ten days later was drafted into the Chilean army, where he rose to the rank of sergeant first class and was regarded as potential officer material.

But Jara returned to Santiago after his discharge, working as a hospital porter, and experienced a series of events that steered him towards an artistic vocation. First, he successfully auditioned for the choir at the University of Chile and appeared on stage

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in Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. He joined a mime group and acted in several plays, one of which was Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, a masterpiece of socialist realism that portrays the suffering of a group of poor, homeless Russians living in a shelter.

In the late 50s Jara met two women who came to play significant roles in his life. One was Joan Turner, a British-born dancer and dance teacher married to a Chilean ballet star. After her marriage broke up, Turner and Jara became close. They married in 1965 and raised a daughter, Amanda, along with Turner's daughter from her previous marriage, Manuela. The other was Chilean folksinger Violeta Parra, who Jara met at Santiago's Café São Paulo in 1957. More than any other Chilean artist, Parra led the way in forging a modern version of Chilean folk music that became known as *nueva canción*.

Parra believed roots music should be integral to everyday life and established music-oriented community centres called *peñas*. While keeping up his theatrical pursuits, Jara joined a group called Cuncumén and began exploring Chile's folk songbook.

Music began to occupy more and more of his time. He left Cuncumén in 1962 and began writing his own songs. At first these were autobiographical, but as he began to perform in the *peñas* his subject matter became more wide-ranging. Jara released his first album, *Víctor Jara* (Geografía) in 1966. Songs about rural workers such as 'El Arado' (The Plough) and 'El Carretero' (The Cart Driver) became part of his core repertoire. Another early song, the jovial 'La Beata', about a pious woman who has the hots for her priest and confessor, was banned from the radio and record shops. The controversy made Jara very cool indeed.

After visits to Cuba and the Soviet Union, Jara joined the Communist Party and allied himself with the leader of the socialist Unidad Popular party, Salvador Allende. Using *nueva canción* as his main mode of expression, Jara began to call for a fair deal for the poor and justice for the masses. With the 1969 release 'Preguntas por Puerto Montt' (Questions about Puerto Montt), Jara attacked Edmundo Pérez Zujovic, a government official who had ordered police

to massacre squatters in the town of Puerto Montt. He composed 'Venceremos' (We Shall Triumph) for the Unidad Popular, and joined in the celebrations when Allende was elected president in November 1970. Jara and Joan led a grass-roots cultural renaissance, organising events in support of the new government. He set verses by Pablo Neruda to music and performed at a ceremony honouring the poet after he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972. Throughout, he continued with his teaching job at Chile's Technical University.

On September 11 1973, Chilean troops under the command of General Augusto Pinochet staged a coup. Jara was seized and taken to the Estadio Chile, a large sports stadium. He was detained for four days and denied food and sleep. He was tortured: his hands were broken by soldiers who mocked the guitarist, saying he could keep on strumming with his broken bones. On September 15 Jara was taken to a deserted area and shot. His body was transferred to the city morgue in Santiago, where Joan was allowed to retrieve it and bury it on the condition that she didn't publicise the event.

Jara's legacy is deep, enduring and diverse. American folk singers such as Simon & Garfunkel and Phil Ochs and Latin American singers like Cuba's Silvio Rodríguez and Argentinian folk-rock star León Gieco owe an obvious debt to him. In 1973, the Soviet scientist Nikolai Stepanovich Chernykh named a newly found asteroid Víctor Jara and in 2003 the stadium where Jara spent his last days was renamed the Estadio Víctor Jara.

Jara's murder was truly evil and yet typical of Latin America's right-wing governments, but not only Chile feels his loss. A song, 'Víctor Jara', co-written with poet Adrian Mitchell, was included on Arlo Guthrie's 1976 album *Amigo*. The last verse reminds us: '*Now the generals rule Chile and the British have their thanks for they rule with Hawker Hunters and they rule with Chieftain tanks; but his hands were gentle; his hands were strong.*' ♦

+ **VIDEO** Watch Bruce Springsteen's recent tribute to Víctor Jara on the 40th anniversary of Jara's death on our YouTube channel

BEST ALBUMS



Víctor Jara (Geografía/RCA, 1966)
Jara's debut is a collection of simple but powerful folk songs, featuring performances by Quilapayún and Ángel Parra, son of Violeta, on *charango*.



La Población (Odeon, 1972)
This is a gritty collection of field recordings and protest songs that pays homage to the slum-dwellers. Isabel Parra, daughter of Violeta, shares the vocals on the opening track, 'Lo Único que Tengo'. *La Población* was re-released in 2003 with five extra tracks, including the sublime 'Te Recuerdo Amanda'.

BEST LIVE ALBUM



En Vivo en el Aula Magna de la Universidad de Valparaíso (WEA International, 2003)

Recorded in 1970, this album features Jara performing to an audience of engaged, hopeful students at the peak of his talents.

BEST COMPILATION



Antología Musical (WEA International, 2003)

This excellent double album comprises 45 tracks that provide a good sampling of Jara's career and his many moods, including humour. It includes 'Preguntas por Puerto Montt' and victory anthems from the time of the Allende election.

BEST AVOIDED

Just about all the Víctor Jara tribute albums – stick to his own work before venturing into all the countless homages.

IF YOU LIKE VÍCTOR JARA, THEN TRY...

Violeta Parra



Antología (Warner, 1999)

Parra is the seminal musician and ethnomusicologist usually heard via others' versions of 'Gracias a la Vida'. This collection is rough and ready (the songs here were recorded between 1955 and 1966) and doesn't contain all her standards, but still provides a superb introduction to Parra's work.