

Mercedes Sosa, 1935-2009

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Latin American music lost one of its greatest exponents with the death of Argentinean singer Mercedes Sosa last Sunday. The singer's career, which spanned over five decades, came to fruition during one of the most critical periods in the continent's history.

Born on July 9, 1935 in the town of San Miguel de Tucumán of French and Quechuan parents, Haydée Mercedes Sosa sang from an early age, winning first place at a contest sponsored by a local radio station at the age of 15. The prize was a two-month contract with the station, and was to mark the beginning of her professional career.

Though Sosa began as a singer of popular material, by the early 1960s, she and her first husband Manuel Oscar Matus became attracted to the *nueva canción* movement. The rich and varied field of Latin American folk music had earlier been explored by such pivotal artists as fellow Argentinean Atahualpa Yupanqui and the Chilean Violeta Parra. (One of Sosa's best-loved interpretations, "Gracias a la Vida," was written by Parra.) *Nueva canción*—also variously known as *nuevo canto* and *nueva trova*—extended these explorations.

One characteristic of the Latin American folk music movement of the 1960s that distinguished it from its equivalent in the US was its greater use of Amerindian—especially Andean—styles and musical instruments like the *charango* (a double-coursed five-string instrument traditionally made from an armadillo shell), the pan pipe *zampoña*, the notched flute *queña* and percussion instruments like the *palo de lluvia* (rain stick), *uñas* (goat toes sewed onto a cloth or leather loop) and *bombó* (a bass drum that could either be carried or played while seated). The European nylon stringed guitar, however, has always been a prominent component.

Over time, *nueva canción* would embrace influences from other sources, like urban black Peruvian music,

North American folk, rock, jazz, Caribbean, African and even classical influences.

Young musicians absorbed and transformed these influences, eventually adding their own original melodies and lyrics. Sosa's robust and expressive voice was well-suited to the instrumentation and styles, and she quickly became known as a prime interpreter of *nueva canción*.

Nueva canción's influence has been incalculable, and it can still be heard, not only in Latin America, but in the US and Europe as well.

Another important characteristic of *nueva canción* is its political content. Many of the most talented songwriters and poets from the length and breadth of Latin America—writers like Cuba's Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, Brazil's Gilberto Gil and Chile's Victor Jara—wrote fervent denunciations of oppression of the rural and urban masses and expressed hope for a better future. Sosa's forceful renditions of such anthemic material as "La Maza," "Solo le Pido a Dios," "Hermano Dame la Mano," "Cuando Tenga la Tierra" and numerous others left no doubt as to where her sympathies lay.

On the other hand, her passionate renditions of love songs like "Todo Cambia" and "Canción y Huayno" (aka "Poco a Poco") always added depth to the lyrics. Her love songs, however, were not limited to romantic material. For example, she treated maternal love quite differently—and effectively—in two of her best-known recordings. In the tender, regretful "Duerme Negrito" she sings a lullaby, with aching sorrow, to a child whose mother must go far away to work. In the joyful tribute to a mother, "Las Manos de mi Madre," she celebrates a mother's ability to "make everyday things magical" for her children despite hardships. Whether a political rallying cry, a love song or a lament, Sosa's voice lifted the material to a higher level with its depth, strength, flexibility and flawless delivery.

Many of the *nueva canción* performers influenced by the same political movements as others of their generation, and often sang uncritical praise for figures like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the Argentinean leftist whose strategy of peasant guerrillaism was to prove so disastrous for the Latin American working masses.

When the US-supported right-wing counteroffensive took place in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the *nueva canción* performers were to suffer the consequences. Victor Jara, who had been a supporter of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, was tortured and murdered in 1973 during the bloodbath following Allende's overthrow and assassination carried out by the military under Pinochet and with the support of the US and Chilean bourgeoisie. Gil—part of the *tropicália* movement in Brazil, which produced songs sharply critical of the country's military dictatorship—was jailed without charges for nine months in 1969 and then forced into exile. The Chilean group Inti-Illimani, which was touring Europe at the time of the Pinochet coup, spent years in exile.

After the 1976 military coup in Argentina, Mercedes Sosa suffered harassment and censorship, though her international fame prevented the military dictatorship from treating her as brutally as they were treating other Argentineans. However, in 1979 she was searched and arrested—along with 200 audience members—while performing at a performance in La Plata. International pressure secured her release but, fearing for her life, she fled to Europe, where she would remain until 1982, a year before the junta's fall.

By the end of the 1980s, most of the proponents of the *nueva canción* movement had made their peace with the civilian governments that replaced the military regimes in Latin America. (Gil, in fact, returned and became minister of culture in Lula's Brazilian Workers Party government.) Mercedes Sosa was no exception. Though she opposed the right-wing government of Carlos Menem, she enthusiastically supported the elections of Néstor Kirchner and later his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina's first female president. The Kirchner administrations' policies have impacted drastically on the very working class whose exploitation Sosa so fervently denounced in her songs.

Sosa summed up the political evolution of this

generation herself in a recent interview, declaring: "Before, the dreams were more radical, perfect. Now, you do what you can."

Ill health intermittently forced Mercedes Sosa off the stage during the succeeding years, but she continued to perform worldwide when she could, garnering international acclaim and awards, often collaborating with artists including Milton Nascimento, Holly Near, Sting, Shakira and even Luciano Pavarotti. She recorded prolifically, releasing over 70 albums during her lifetime.

Sosa's condition worsened in September and she was hospitalized for two weeks with liver problems. She died of kidney failure and cardiac arrest on October 4. Her death was greeted with tributes and expressions of grief from around the globe.

Mercedes Sosa's inimitable interpretations of songs of struggle, love, celebration and hope will be enjoyed and appreciated long after her death. Recommended recordings are too numerous to list. A performance of her signature song "Gracias a la Vida"—with tastefully spare guitar accompaniment that highlights the power and sheer beauty of her singing—can be accessed here.



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