

Vamos Juntos: An appreciation of Mexican singer Amparo Ochoa, 1946-1994

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September 29 marked 75 years since the birth of Mexican singer-songwriter Amparo Ochoa. At the time of her untimely death from cancer in 1994 she left behind a rich and widely varied recorded legacy. She was identified with the Latin American cultural-political musical movement variously known as *nueva canción*, *canto nuevo* or *nueva trova*, usually translated into English as New Song.

María Amparo Ochoa Castañón was born in 1946 in Culiacán, in the state of Sinaloa, where her father worked on a sugar plantation. The family moved to Costa Rica in 1950, and she grew up singing with her father and at school events. In 1965, she was back in Sinaloa. She went on to teach in rural grade schools in her home state, and songs were an essential part of her pedagogy. In 1983, she would record an album titled *Amparo Ochoa sings with the children* that harks back to those days.

In 1969, she moved to Mexico City, where she attended the National Music School at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and performed in and around the student community and beyond: in bars, cafés, public plazas and at *peñas*, informal gatherings where musicians and music lovers enjoy food, drink and plenty of song swapping.

The late 1960s through 1980s were critical years of mass protest, social turmoil and class struggle, which were subjected to violent counteroffensives in Mexico and Latin America as a whole. South America saw brutal dictatorships, while Central American workers, peasants and activists were subject to attacks by the military, death squads and police. In Guatemala, entire villages of indigenous peasants were wiped out, while El Salvador and Nicaragua suffered assaults from death squads in the former and US-supplied and trained contras in the latter.

Some practitioners of New Song were harassed and exiled, like Argentinean Mercedes Sosa and the Chilean group Inti Illimani, jailed like Brazilian Gilberto Gil or, in the case of the Chilean Victor Jara, tortured and murdered. Mexican singer/songwriter José de Molina, an outspoken opponent of the corrupt ruling PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party] and advocate of guerrilla war, suffered persecution, torture and beatings several times at the hands of the police, eventually dying from their aftereffects in 1997.

Amparo Ochoa did not suffer reprisals from the Mexican authorities for her declarations and performances. Perhaps the PRI government, which falsely claimed to be the “institutional” continuation of the Mexican Revolution, was able not only to tolerate her songs, many of which glorified the Revolution, but to burnish its image as a supposed democracy by its hands-off approach. She was also famous and popular enough that any moves to stifle her would surely have been met with protests.

An introduction to a 1981 review on the University of Texas at Austin’s *Onda Latina* program puts forward another claim. “Although Ochoa is concerned with social protest, she does not believe it is her role to raise people’s consciousness. Rather, she tries to create music that is complex enough that the social message is not necessarily obvious and must be sought out.” This writer does not consider her message so well-hidden that it would take much effort to figure out its content or thrust.

In 1971, Amparo Ochoa recorded her first album, *De la mano del viento* (*Hand in hand with the wind*). This presages the direction her oeuvre would take. It treats a theme to which she would return:

“I sing to life, I sing to love, I sing to the flower only when it’s necessary.

The sweat of the bearer of chores inspires me more,

The hands of the laborer than the roses and the laurel.

“When the planter who always sows the furrow bent over,

Can listen to the nightingale, walk without the plow,

When you, laborer, can watch the sunset, go hand in hand with the wind,

Can sing your songs, be content for a time,

When the laborer can go hand in hand with the wind.”

As her career progressed, she would sing children’s songs, humorous songs, topical songs and love songs. She would also master a range of regional styles, including indigenous music, *banda*, *mariachi*, *rancheras*, *corridos* and Yucatecan *trova*, in addition to more generalized Latin music styles such as *boleros* and *romántica*, as well as influences from the Mexican musical stage. Based on the many influences she absorbed and depending on the requirements of the given song, her voice could be tender or rough, childish or satirical, jocular or outraged, celebratory or mournful.

“La letanía de los poderosos” (The litany of the powerful), composed by Gabino Palomares, is sung by Ochoa from the point of view of an indignant rich man who blames and scolds an activist for the poor’s dissatisfaction and ingratitude:

“You want everything for everybody, and you have forgotten my interests,

And defending these poor, you haven’t noticed how much you offend me.”

After bragging of his ownership and control of the military, the police, schools, politicians, the press and the church, the *rico* concludes:

“Long live love and peace, long live the institutions,

I’ll rule with my money, in this village without pants.”

One of the most famous of her subsequent albums was *El cancionero popular* (*The popular songbook*) with accompaniment by

Los Folkloristas. (The word “popular” in Spanish-speaking countries does not refer to commercial or “pop” music as in the US but is better translated as “people’s music” or “folk music.”)

One of the album’s best-loved songs is “El Barzón” (The Yoke Ring”) in which she takes on the persona of a poor peasant farmer who plows his field with a pair of oxen held together by a yoke. The hapless *campesino* complains, “The yoke ring came apart, and the yoke team keeps on going.” In a litany of his woes, he lists his problems with the plow, the talkative seed sower and the hacienda owner who defrauds him until he has nothing left. His wife upbraids him and urges him to join other workers and resist:

*“My beloved tells me, listen well: ‘Let the bastard rot in hell!
We will starve without relief, if you maintain your belief,
In what the priest has to tell, about the torments found in hell;
Long live the revolution, ay! May the federal government die!
My yoke ring came apart, and the yoke team keeps on going!”*

With excellent acoustic accompaniment, she flawlessly covers a great deal of territory: paying tribute to Emiliano Zapata, recounting struggles against oppression, mocking fantasies of wealth and the easy life, criticizing beauty that’s only skin-deep, struggling to survive and love. One song, “La maldición de la Malinche,” about those who fawn over the foreign oppressor while disdaining the oppressed, became a standard; she later performed it live with Palomares, its composer.

There followed, in addition to two more volumes of *Canciones populares*, over 20 albums, with several released posthumously. One that continued along the lines of the *Canciones populares* was *Corridos y canciones de la revolución Mexicana* (*Corridos and songs of the Mexican Revolution*). *Corridos* are story songs often in the context of historical events. War, courage, betrayal, love, violence, tragedy, humor, all these and more are treated masterfully by Amparo Ochoa to excellent *ranchera* accompaniment.

The bulk of her repertoire consisted of interpretations of songs and poems written by past and contemporaneous Latin American artists. She was influenced by and supported the struggles in Latin America outside Mexico, past and present. In 1974, in opposition to the Pinochet coup in Chile, she recorded an album expressing solidarity with the Chilean people. Following the overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, she participated in a concert there with other New Song performers.

Amparo Ochoa was no doubt sincere in her opposition to the establishment and her encouragement of popular revolt. However, the parties and organizations that she, and many others, supported in the 1970s and 1980s, including various petty bourgeois “left” forces, betrayed the oppressed and strangled the movement of the masses in country after country. This is a particularly tragic chapter in the history of the struggles of the Latin American working class.

Her sympathies did not take into account, for example, the role that Allende’s Popular Unity government, with the support of the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile, in disarming and misleading the Chilean working class and paving the way for Pinochet, whom Allende had appointed to his cabinet. Nor did she foresee the sharply rightward trajectory that the Sandinista bourgeois-nationalist government in Nicaragua would follow in later years, including brutal attacks on workers.

The singer-songwriter is often lauded as a feminist. She was definitely an advocate of women’s rights and equality, and an opponent of outmoded attitudes about women’s “place” in the world, as well as their oppression. Ochoa recorded one album, in fact, titled *Mujer* (*Woman*), that takes up various problems and situations,

including regressive male attitudes; the tragedy that befalls a young unmarried pregnant woman; a middle-aged woman’s review of her comfortable but unfulfilling middle-class life as her daughter approaches adulthood; and the stultifying day-to-day routines of a housewife.

However, in none of these songs are all men presented as the enemy, and gender is not treated as the essential division in the world. Not only did Amparo Ochoa perform many songs, such as “El barzón” and “La letanía,” assuming male personas—refusing to “stay in her lane”—but she often sang about men and women as partners in struggle. In the title song of one of her finest albums, “Vamos juntos” (“Let us go together”), she tells her companion, “The unity that serves is the one that unites us in struggle” and “With your ‘I can’ and my ‘I love,’ let us go together, *compañero*.”

“Quiero la poesía” (I Love Poetry), on the same album, was written and first recorded by Duo Sur, two exiles then living in Mexico, Carlos Roca of Argentina and Mario Sandoval of Chile:

*“I love the poetry of a campesina flower, of a sleeping woman, of a bird flying,
I love to see it growing from the hand of my people, reaching all ears right away.
Let the whole world know that there are poets who sing,
To their wounded land, to their desolated home,
To their friends so crazy, but crazy with hope, of lifting the universe,
Through the force of a blow and a verse.
I love poetry recited in the plaza, the flag of a liberated people raised,
And not constructed one night in which the moon was shining. . .
“I love it on the bed of my compañero,
In the children who come near, in the noise of the factories,
And when it is necessary. . . I love it in battle!”*

Amparo Ochoa’s death was mourned by her fans around the world. Her peerless voice and appeals for justice and liberation will continue to resonate with and be treasured by many in Latin America and around the world.

A documentary by Modesto López about Amparo Ochoa, *Se me reventó el Barzón*, is projected to be released to coincide with her birthday.



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