

"Vamos a la carga:"
the musical negotiation of the local and the global in Sandinista Nicaragua.

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Latin American Studies Association meetings,
Guadalajara, Mexico, April 1997

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The term "música popular" has always had a broader connotation in Latin America than the phrase "popular music" in non-Hispanic North America. In particular, the expression "música popular" can encompass more traditional forms that would clearly be considered under the rubric "folk music" in Anglo America. The label's flexibility highlights the challenge faced by politically committed musicians to define the nature of música popular in the Nicaraguan Sandinista Popular Revolution. Beginning with the upsurge in cultural activity that challenged the Somoza dictatorship in the mid 1970s, revolutionary sympathetic artists, including musicians, had to negotiate the twin goals of promulgating a local identity rooted in local tradition and participating in contemporary global artistic production. In this paper I want to begin to explore the nature of these sometimes competing objectives and look at some of the various responses of Nicaraguan musicians and others involved in the nation's music industry during the later half of the revolutionary decade of the 1980s. This is the period that followed what is now, somewhat nostalgically labelled, "la euforia" ("the Euphoria"), the heady first years of the revolutionary period. By the second half of the 1980s, an early efflorescence of interest in folk culture had mostly subsided and the many initiatives of direct and indirect state support for national music were forced to be substantially curtailed. Examining the latter part of the Sandinista government's tenure provides an opportunity to view the results of something of a distillation process, one that sorted out some of the chaotic currents of the early years and can reveal which musical directions received an emphasis sufficient to insure their survival into the relatively lean years of the late 1980s.

Outside of the metropole - meaning the First World, or major industrialized centers of global power - when acts of resistance and social struggles for a more humane redistribution of power have grown into large scale movements, historically they often become channelled into a national frame. This has certainly been true in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially vis a vis the power of the United States. Central American reality, and perhaps Nicaragua's in particular, dictates a nationalist engagement with an overwhelmingly superior power - the United States. For over a century this power has loomed over and occupied the national consciousness and sense of sovereignty, a power that literally occupied the country with soldiers in the 19teens, 1920s and early 30s and only withdrew them after establishing a praetorian military apparatus to guard its interests. (A task the Somoza family performed admirably for generations.) The overthrow of the Somozas in 1979 began a process that defined itself as a recasting of Nicaragua's national identity. Within this redefinition, a set of key issues for politically engaged artists was determining the relationship between what was perceived as the national, and the extra-national.

On the one hand, a central part of the Sandinista cultural project was to "rescatar lo nuestro" - "rescue, or recuperate, that which is ours," to salvage "authentic" Nicaraguan culture that had been repressed and denigrated during the over four decades of rule by the Somoza dynasty. Just as the majority lower and working class - the clase popular - had been denied and oppressed, so had its culture, including musical expression. Economic and social liberation, then, should release, and be spurred forward with the flowering of repressed cultura popular (popular, or peoples culture). The Nicaraguan artistic community as a whole saw the necessity to have a firm grounding in local artistic expression. One example of this within the field of music was the goal in the early revolutionary period to acquaint urban youth with traditional rural based music as one of many parts of the huge literacy campaign of 1980. When young

volunteers from the cities fanned out across the nation, they were charged with the additional task of documenting folk music in the sometimes remote areas to which they were assigned. The impetus to validate definably Nicaraguan musical forms and styles through "rescuing" them, and then in some manner utilizing them in new musical forms became one of the two poles that informed the process of creating a new popular music within the revolutionary process.

On the other hand, politically involved artists and others hungered for an engagement with the international community and the most contemporary global trends and ideas. With the triumph of the revolution Nicaragua experienced a feeling of joining a world community from which it had been excluded by the paternalistic policies of the previous dictatorship. Musicians and other artists especially resented what they considered the wholesale importation of United States cultural products, and the more inferior parts of North American culture, including music, at that. Nicaraguans hoped to emerge from being typified as a backwater, a protectorate of the United States and the private plantation of the Somoza family.

This dilemma of negotiating the local and the global revolves around essentially the same dichotomy that Clifford Geertz, referring to newly independent nations in the early 1960s, labelled "essentialism" - that is, localized values - versus "epochism" - the desire to participate in the most advanced economic and technological developments of the age, with corresponding pressures to adopt the cultural mores of the metropole cultures where these developments are centered. In the periphery, or Third World, for lack of a better label, creative artists are faced with the high profile of metropole cultural forms whose presence and massive circulation stems from the sheer weight of the metropole's economic dominance, insured by political and military power superiority. In the sphere of music, this is almost a worldwide "given": metropole musical culture is an increasingly unavoidable part of the globalized landscape. International musicians find themselves in what Gage Averill perceptively nicknamed "the Paul Simon cargo cult": Third world artists bring their cultural capital to the world marketplace in the hopes of an exchange for the material benefits a multinational can bestow if their music can be successfully marketed in the lucrative metropole. Many popular musicians find themselves engaged in a search for the best strategies to retool their local cultural capital so that it can enter and satisfy an external market. The aesthetic results of these economic constraints and their effects on local music production is a fundamental feature of popular music in the world, an area worthy of more careful consideration by the still young field of popular music studies, and one where ethnomusicologists are making a crucial contribution. For Nicaraguans, the presentation of their music outside of the country was an important aspect of the balancing of localized and cosmopolitan style, however one that should be understood within foremost concern voiced by most Nicaraguan musicians in the 1980s, which was the construction of a new musical culture within the nation.

For politically committed Nicaraguan musicians, the goal of effecting a new conception of Nicaraguan *música popular* meant that the primary target was to be local: to reflect, to participate in, and to contribute to a dynamic national social process. As part of that process, Nicaraguan and other Central American musicians felt the need for a nomenclature to distinguish socially committed Central American song from Nueva Trova, which developed in Cuba in the 1960s, and from Nueva Canción (both mean New Song), a name originally describing Chilean music also in the 1960s, but later often used to describe all Latin American political music. The volcanic chain along the Central American isthmus inspired the new name Volcanto, created from combining the words *volcán* (volcano) and *canto* (song). (Nicaragua is known as "the land of lakes and volcanos.") I should note that in Nicaragua - as in the rest of Central America - this music was located entirely within the majority Spanish-speaking population of mestizos (mixed Spanish and AmerIndian race and culture).

The international market was, however, a major consideration for productive, young musicians in Nicaragua in the 1980s. Despite the United States government's economic embargo and the difficulties of marketing in - much less touring - the U.S., there were many opportunities in both Western and Eastern Europe. Of course, it was a different audience that would be attracted to their music; a different set of strategies came into play when factoring in potential metropole audiences. There was little possibility of a mass media commercial turnover that could generate revenue, but there was an interested audience created by events in Central America. This was a pre-selected audience to a great extent, a group that could be characterized as generally open to different sounds and musical styles, interested in the translated content of lyrics that would reflect the region's changing reality, and - I would argue -

for the most part a group that wanted to hear something that could be identifiably Central American, which at that time actually meant Salvadoran or Nicaraguan, or possibly Guatemalan.

Studies of music with some political message have tended to rely heavily on an analysis of lyrics. For Volcanto, like much other expressly political music, part of its fundamental definition revolves around its semantic content. However, to help offset the usual privileging of lyrics over music I want to look fairly exclusively at the musical content, stylistic features that characterize the music. To effectively discuss how various Nicaraguan folk and popular musical styles were integrated and synthesized with outside styles would require traversing the broad musical landscape of the country. This is clearly outside the scope of this paper, but I want to delineate some of the factors at play, and present a small - but representative - sampling of the music created at the end of the 1980s. I should point out that the Sandinista period also presented a fascinating chapter in the history of attempts at creating more participatory media. This included the opening of new performance venues, new media laws, and a new prolific state record label and a chaotic and often times very contradictory radio programming policy for government stations. All of these had an indirect impact on volcanto by helping to broaden the music's audience and break down some of the alienation between music producers and consumers.

There were three principal sources for musical creation: 1) Anglo rock and popular music, 2) popular music from the rest of the Latin American continent, and 3) local, Nicaraguan forms which, of course, have been impacted by the first two to various degrees.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several rock and roll bands had essentially copied Anglo American rock mixed with Latin American pop styles, as well as Mexican rock and pop, itself already a mirroring of U.S. and English styles. (This music was a clear example of a congruence between the English and Spanish meaning of *música popular*, popular music.) This derivative rock had already run its course by mid-1970s, several years before the overthrow of Somoza. Sandinista Nicaragua was not hostile to North American culture: on the contrary, it has always enjoyed great acceptance and this interest has continued to the present day. However, there was some rejection of Anglo American culture, including rock, in the first years of the revolutionary period. This attitude is easily explained, and understandable given the intensity of feeling immediately after *el triunfo*, the taking of power in July, 1979. Only later did this hostility break down, due in great part from patient education by the FSLN (the Sandinista front) and the good examples shown by the many U.S. volunteers that came to work in the country. (Actually a reverse attitude developed: Nicaraguan right wingers resented pro-Sandinista foreigners coming to the aid of the new government!) In post-1979 Nicaragua, Anglo American music did not arrive so much via Nicaraguan musicians, i.e., through the impact of North American styles on music created in Nicaragua by Nicaraguans, but more from the entry of Anglo American music proper. Economic imperatives and the trade embargo enforced by the United States government, not Nicaragua, restricted the flow of North American music into the country. However, resourceful Nicaraguans found ways of obtaining the latest music: video clips pirated from then-super station WTBS, complete with the logo clearly visible in the lower corner, were regularly broadcast on SSTV, the Sandinista Television System. I'll play an example of Nicaraguan music from 1990 that is generally cast within North American popular music style later on.

There exists a long politico-cultural history of continental identification throughout Latin America. For radical politics, the figures of Ché Guevara and Nicaragua's own Augusto César Sandino have been invoked as emblems of a united Hispano-America struggling for sovereignty. While sometimes this unity remains at the level of manifesto, rather than actual contact, the commonality of a mutual language has engendered the identification of a continental literature, and the potential for musical unity is present through elements of a common Iberian musical foundation.

What has been the impact of music from the rest of Hispano-America in Nicaragua? Within the area of popular music generally, Latin American popular styles have always enjoyed substantial acceptance, especially the Mexican *canción ranchera*, and dance music from the greater Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

For music with a social message, there are two recent examples:

- first, a brief period of popularity of Andean music in the early 1970s, driven by the message contained in Chilean *Nueva Canción*;

- and second, the admiration of Cuba and, therefore, music from Cuba and of Cuban derivation. Nueva Trova enjoyed some popularity, especially when one could listen to it without persecution after 1979. It should be kept in mind that a substantial amount of Cuban Nueva Trova uses a generalized, ballad style that musically is not particularly Cuban. Two musical examples of Nicaraguans that fall within this style would be Duo Guardabarranco, which continues to tour the United States, and Salvador Bustos, whose early compositional and performance style was almost a clone of that of ___awkward here Cuban Silvio Rodriguez.

Even more widespread was the use of music now called salsa. Much as salsa has served as a common denominator to some extent within Latino communities in the United States, this transnational music is popular with regional variations throughout much of Latin America. In addition, the triunfo - the triumph of the Revolution - came in 1979, when the salsa "boom" was still strong in the U.S. Most of what is now called salsa is recognized as being Cuban in origin much more so in Latin America than in the United States. This identification with Cuba had obvious political significance for Nicaraguans in the 1980s.

The following is an example of an early Volcanto salsa based song from 1983. Influence of the Nicaraguan son nica style is evident in the dual harmonized guitars and the light rhythmic approach, which could almost be followed in a triple meter. One should remember that the term "yanqui" was used as a personification of politico-economic domination and, at that time, a military threat - not a disparagement of North Americans generally.

• [musical example] Pancansán: "El yanqui se va joder" ([If he invades us,] The Yankee Is Going To Get Fucked).

It is interesting to note that there was a continental, yet not a regional musical identification: each Central American nationality has little communication with, nor knowledge of the rest of Central America. For example, although there was a high level of consciousness about the political situation in El Salvador, an expression of this awareness was confined to references in lyrics, never musically.

Moving to the local level, musical style within the borders of the nation-state Nicaragua is a somewhat complex palette of different regional styles. However, as a grand generalization, there exists a broad similarity among the various mestizo Nicaraguan music forms. which, as a point of reference, are not dissimilar from much of the folk and popular music of central and northern Mexico. In addition, northern Mexican music has become strongly rooted in Nicaragua's primarily rural northern zone, and Hispano-Caribbean based dance styles have been extremely popular, especially in urban areas.

At this national level, social movements can inherit various kinds of problematic legacies vis a vis/___/ expressive forms charged with notions of tradition. Versions of localized cultural expression can be used for all types of political ends, and progressive social movements often face folk rooted forms encumbered with an unwanted political significance promoted by the ruling structure. However, in Nicaragua, no music was particularly identified with Somoza, who was far too infatuated with United States culture to promote much of anything Nicaraguan.

To help provide a focus on the articulation of local, continental and international style within Nicaraguan Volcanto in the later half of the 1980s, I want to look at the music generated for the nation's second national elections in 1990, the denouement that effectively brought to a close the battered revolutionary experiment. This important historical moment provides an occasion to judge the state of Nicaraguan Volcanto after a decade of open existence and uneven state supported development. Almost all musicians of some national or even regional stature did support the FSLN at this time. The call to create music to boost the Front's electoral campaign brought forth contributions that ranged across much of the country's stylistic gamut. The state label produced a cassette with the songs judged as most effective. As songs deliberately crafted for an electoral campaign some of the lyrics and music were not the composers' best efforts, but stylistically this music provides a good overview of Volcanto's output and shows some of the tensions inherent in the socially committed song movement in Nicaragua.

The first example is a the style known as a son nica, the song form most identified as being traditionally Nicaraguan although, in fact, it was created in the 1930s. Here it is taken at a fairly fast tempo that is sometimes criticized for "Mexican-izing" the son nica, sung by a venerable patriarch of rural song, El Guadalupano (Pablo Martínez Téllez).

--> The singer, El Guadalupano, is famous for the campesino "cracking" in his voice (not that typical of most singers, even in a rural style)

- [musical example] El Guadalupano (Pablo Martínez Téllez): "Todos con Daniel"

The next song is by one of the best known Volcanto singer-songwriters, Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy. This example shows some Cuban influence, though not with Nueva Trova, but a post-salsa popular dance style called "songo" This is a modified version of songo.

--> selection begins w/ instrumental break: accordion = northern area, also trademark of Carlos Mejía Godoy

- [musical example] Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy: "El 25 en la casilla 5"

There were very few, and not so successful efforts, to copy North American styles, and the next selection is from the only song in this vein on the campaign cassette. It is a good example of what Volcanto essentially was not: an imitation of North American style.

- [musical example] Engel Ortega: "Ganamos y adelante"

However, there were two songs written for the 1990 elections that overwhelmingly resonated with the people, and they are revealing in their styles.

The first is a style I think you will all recognize.

- [musical example] "El Gallo Enavajado" (a fighting rooster, armed with small knives in the talons)

This is a Mexican canción ranchera with accompaniment by a thoroughly Nicaraguan mariachi, complete with piano accordion. The song was written by a songwriter who was only marginally identified with the Volcanto movement particularly, one who up to that time had exclusively recorded songs for children. In fact, hardly any Volcanto musician could write in this style that is so popular in the northern half of the country. The popularity of this song, ascertained from public reaction to previous media exposure and live performance, was recognized by music producers when "El Gallo Enavajado" was placed in the favored position as the first song on the compilation cassette the state recording label launched for the campaign.

Here is the second song that was immensely popular in early 1990. There are three versions of the same song on the campaign tape. This one is a mix that utilizes some chanting of "Daniel, Daniel" from an outdoor rally.

- [musical example] "Vamos a la carga" ("Let's Get Going")

Foreigners had to be brought in to compose and perform this number. It is a cumbia by the widely popular Colombian group, La Sonora Dinamita.

Why is this cumbia significant? Various types of cumbia were the dance style of choice with the popular classes in Latin America at this time. I attended the first semi-official beginning of the 1990 campaign in early 1989, held in the city of Masaya. Before the speeches they played music over the loudspeakers. There was some Volcanto, but most music was non-political, and mostly non-Nicaraguan. At one point, a Mexican style "cumbia" came on, the "Part 2" response to an earlier big hit. This song evoked the strongest response, and I began to notice that almost everyone, especially the women, began to sing or mouth along with the all the lyrics.

The reduced circle of musicians based in Managua that increasingly came to become synonymous with Volcanto in Nicaragua either neglected, to some extent, to gauge the musical styles that were most relevant to the majority of the population, or the musicians decided to just ignore them and pursue their own artistic impulses. The response to the music generated for the 1990 elections indicates that the Volcanto movement - in which I include the recording company, broadcast media (meaning television and especially radio), and the rest of the small music industry that could be mobilized - apparently would have benefitted from the adoption of a different strategy of inclusion that could have embraced more popular, or mass rooted styles.

This could have included encouraging and giving more attention to musicians from outside the capital city, as well as the Managua based musicians themselves consciously producing music that adhered to the stylistic parameters with which a great deal of the national population identified.

The later stage of Volcanto displayed outside of Nicaragua suffered from a similar disjuncture. The stylistic orientation of the Nicaraguan groups that enjoyed most of the opportunities to tour Western and Eastern Europe, and Canada and the United States, probably misjudged their natural audience by neglecting the desire by a "solidarity" based audience for exposure to music distinctly Nicaraguan in style. The concert of Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy in Austin, Texas, on his 1989 USA tour, I fear, is an example of such a disjuncture between cosmopolitan-oriented musicians and an audience hungering for some local-based material. To begin with, Luis Enrique's own persona on stage, that suffered from too many affectations of a superstar, super-star wanna-be alienated the type of audience that supports the Central American solidarity movement. A Texas-Mexican friend commented that his performance made him come across as "the Neil Diamond of Nicaragua" (maybe it would be more appropriate to say, "the Julio Iglesias of Nicaragua.") On a musical level, Luis Enrique was accompanied by members of "Praxis," the country's one jazz fusion band. But, frankly, ¿where is the interest for the North American audience in another jazz fusion band when there are probably several of equal or even better quality in every North American city on Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy's tour? The only uniquely Nicaraguan elements in the music were the lyrics and - for those who could recognize it - Luis Enrique's accent: outside of the advance publicity, these alone identified the group as Nicaraguan.

Anthony Smith, one of the main contributors to what seems to be the growth industry of scholarship on nationalism, referred to what he termed the "isolation of westernized intellectuals, professionals and technicians, torn between an alien world of modernization, repellant but fascinating, and the warm but stagnant traditions of their native communities." While not disputing the accuracy of this observation in many instances, including for important sectors in Nicaragua, it appears to me that the situation for some Managua youth, including many, if not most Volcanto musicians, was almost reversed: they were torn between the alien world of the peasant and the "salt of the earth" in small towns - however interesting their cultural manifestations were in terms of national symbolism -, and the warm, fascinating world of global cultural currents. One effect of increased globalization of metropole culture is that many in the periphery are more comfortable in a world cultural milieu than the localized aesthetic of the majority population within their shared nation-state.

One can empathize, then, with young, urban Volcanto musicians who did not want to play, much less compose, what I often heard described as "cheap cumbias." However, these musicians were perched between current stylistic trends of the world market and the aesthetic preferences of the bulk of their own population. This tension was increased and further complicated by the particularity of these musicians' society undergoing a significant social transformation that was attempting to empower the lower classes, and the musicians' own commitment to help advance this process. These social actors defined themselves as morally committed activists as well as creative artists. Though Volcanto musicians dismissed "cheap cumbias" and other styles on aesthetic grounds, the fact remained that these musical forms enjoyed a mass appeal that presented an avenue of potential popular communication - one that for the most part remained unrealized.

In the attempts to create a new Nicaraguan musical culture, no one style emerged as a central paradigm, and there were certainly no constraints that dictated any monolithic style to which musicians were forced to adhere (as was the case in the Soviet bloc). Volcanto musicians and the many others involved in the production of a socially committed música popular experimented with a variety of stylistic mixtures and syntheses of locally and globally derived music. The 1990s has seen further fragmentation and a reduced level of national musical activity of all types. The official campaign music of the FSLN in the 1996 elections, in keeping with the Front's inclusive image, was the "Ode to Joy" of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Even so, within the Volcanto movement there was always a feeling that a certain solution, a correct mixture, could be found to balance national and international styles within this politically charged context. Commenting on this elusive goal, one musician, a member of Luis Enrique's original group, summed up, "It seems that no one has yet found the right recipe."

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