

An Unwelcome Import: Rock and Nation in Post-Peronist Argentina

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I want to thank Ximena López Carillo and Matías Hermsillo for the invitation to participate in this exciting conference. I'm particularly excited to be here because the topic of the conference – “Globalizing Latin America: New Approaches to the Nation State & Identity” – lies so close to my own central research interest. Over the last decade or so, I have been exploring the ways that Argentine political history was shaped by globalization, or more precisely by Argentina's position in the evolving transnational cultural circuits constructed by globalization. Today I want to offer an example of this sort of analysis, by placing the intellectual and political history of the late 1950s and early 1960s in a specific, perhaps counterintuitive, transnational context. It is, of course, quite common to set this history in the context of the Cold War, but what I want to demonstrate is that it was also shaped in important and surprising ways by rock and roll.

The period I will be examining is delimited by two military coups: the *Revolución Libertadora*, which overthrew the Perón regime in September 1955, and the *Revolución Argentina*, which inaugurated the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía in June 1966. These years were marked by the rise and fall of a middle-class political project aimed at restoring democracy on non-Peronist terms. During its decade in power, Peronism had politicized the sociocultural cleavage between “high” and “low”: while Juan and Eva Perón spoke for the supposedly

uncultured and uneducated *descamisados*, anti-Peronists from both left and right attacked what they saw as barbaric anti-intellectualism and called for a restoration of the nation's civilized values. For anti-Peronist intellectuals, the fall of Perón represented an exciting opportunity to reimagine the nation and its relationship to the rest of the world. Intellectuals who had been frustrated by the Perón regime's nativism now pursued a modernizing cosmopolitanism. In their view, Peronism's nationalist hostility to foreign culture was symptomatic of the regime's lowbrow anti-intellectualism. They hoped to open the country to the latest intellectual and artistic currents from Europe and the United States and to position Argentina alongside the most progressive, modern nations of the world.¹

However, if these intellectuals were to lead the nation, they needed to avoid alienating the masses who had embraced Peronism. Many anti-Peronists, appalled by the violent authoritarianism of the *Revolución Libertadora*, began to re-evaluate the nature of the Perón regime's appeal and to insist that its followers needed to be included in any future political project. In 1957 and 1958, these intellectuals joined forces with young leftists to support the successful presidential campaign of Arturo Frondizi, who championed modernization, anti-imperialism and an inclusive, anti-oligarchic democracy. At their most optimistic, they hoped to restore Argentine democracy by incorporating the Peronist masses into the project of cosmopolitan modernization. But their optimism did not last. The disintegration of Frondizi's coalition, combined with the impact of the Cuban Revolution and the deepening polarization of the Cold War, undermined middle-class support for democracy and helped put Argentina on the path toward military dictatorship.²

¹ On the alignment of "high culture" with "cosmopolitanism" in Argentine politics after Perón, see Ostiguy, 4-7.

² Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas: la formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la Argentina, 1956-1966* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1991); Carlos Altamirano, "Estudio preliminar," in *Bajo el signo de*

While this story is familiar, historians have for the most part failed to notice a striking synchronicity: the unraveling of this democratic project occurred at the same time as a major shift in popular culture. The Revolución Libertadora coincided almost exactly with the arrival of rock and roll in Argentina. At the very moment that non-Peronist intellectuals were seeking to refashion Argentina as a modern, cosmopolitan nation, rock and roll was transforming what it meant to be modern and cosmopolitan.

Although first recorded in the United States by small, independent labels, rock and roll was disseminated globally by a handful of massive, multinational record companies that aimed to capitalize on its powerful appeal for young consumers. Within Latin America, these companies moved quickly to develop young stars from the region who could sell Spanish-language rock and roll to a transnational market. This strategy inundated Argentina with what many commentators viewed as a torrent of lowbrow, commercial pop music. Anti-Peronist intellectuals had hoped to engage with foreign trends, but the most up-to-date, foreign music was now dangerously aligned with the low side of the high/low divide. Moreover, the marketing of the Nueva Ola, as the young pop stars were known, associated rock and roll with a range of dance musics from the Caribbean, making it even more problematic for those who sought to reconcile Argentine national identity with the most sophisticated versions of European or North American modernity.

I will make three main interventions today. First, I will examine how the effort to reconcile Argentine popular culture with cosmopolitan modernity was visible and audible in the field of music. Second, I will show how the advent of rock and roll threatened this project. Third,

las masas (1943-1973) (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2001), 50-96; Flavia Fiorucci, *Intelectuales y peronismo, 1945-1955* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2011), 175-210; Celia Szusterman, *Frondizi and the Politics of Developmentalism in Argentina, 1955-62* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); María Estela Spinelli, *Los vencedores vencidos: El anti-Peronismo y la "revolución libertadora"* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2005); César Teach, "Golpes, proscripciones y partidos políticos", en Daniel James ed., *Violencia, proscripción y autoritarismo (1955-1976)* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2003), 17-62.

I will argue that the challenge posed by rock and roll inspired a turn toward musical elitism that reinforced a growing hostility to democracy. In a broader sense, I hope that bringing rock and roll into the political history of this period can help reveal the way in which Argentine ideological battles were fought on terrain that was shaped by global capitalism.

Refashioning National Identity through Music

The project of democratic, cosmopolitan modernization had its clearest expression in the Frondizi presidential campaign. The candidate of the Intransigent Radicals, Frondizi promised to correct the authoritarian conservatism of the *Revolución Libertadora* and to reincorporate Peronist workers into national politics. His project entailed the construction of an alliance between the working and middle classes and, as such, required a cultural politics. In 1956, the young folk musician Ariel Ramírez began to provide entertainment at meetings of pro-Frondizi committees. At one of these, he met the journalist and historian Félix Luna, and the two forged a musical partnership: working with Ramírez, Luna wrote what he called “obscenely partisan” lyrics to several well-known folk melodies, which Frondizi then used on the campaign trail. Folk music was particularly well-suited to this political project. The popular appeal of the genre crossed both partisan and class lines, uniting Peronist workers and middle-class anti-Peronists just as Frondizi now hoped to do in the political sphere.³

Yet popular music was more than simply a means to attract votes; it was a key site for the delicate ideological project of reconciling Argentine popular culture with cosmopolitan

³ On the Perón government’s support for folk and on its non-partisan appeal, see Oscar Chamosa, *The Argentine Folklore Movement: Sugar Elites, Criollo Workers, and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism, 1900-1955* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 157-82; Oscar Chamosa, *Breve historia del folclore argentino (1920–1970): Identidad, política y nación* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2012), esp. 145–46.

modernity. Ariel Ramírez's style of folk music reflected this project. Ramírez was part of a new generation of highly trained musicians who had begun to compose and perform more sophisticated versions of traditional music. Whereas earlier folk artists cultivated an image of simplicity and authenticity, these new musicians aimed to put Argentine folk music into dialogue with advanced genres of ostensibly universal value.⁴ Ramírez had studied the piano at the National Conservatory and become an accomplished performer of classical music before developing a passion for folklore. A formative meeting with Atahualpa Yupanqui led to extensive travels in Tucumán and Jujuy, considered the symbolic center of the nation's folk culture. Ramírez's combination of prestigious erudition and close contact with the authentic enabled him to deliver a sophisticated musical nationalism – “jerarquía en música nativa” in the words of *Folklore* magazine – that was precisely what the Frondizi movement needed.⁵

Ernesto Sábato was another anti-Peronist intellectual drawn both to Frondizi and to popular music as an expression of national identity. In 1956, Sábato argued that to make national reconciliation possible, anti-Peronists needed to understand what motivated the Peronist masses, namely “a legitimate yearning for justice and recognition, in the face of a cold and selfish society that has always forgotten them.”⁶ Sábato's willingness to acknowledge the legitimate demands of Peronists was harshly criticized by some of his friends within the anti-Peronist intelligentsia, including most famously Jorge Luis Borges, but it put him in tune with the inclusive spirit of Frondizismo. And like Luna and Ramírez, Sábato turned to popular music as the basis for elaborating a unifying national identity. In 1963, he published an anthology of commentaries about tango. In his introductory essay, he located the origins of the genre in Buenos Aires but

⁴ On Buenaventura Luna's image, see Karush, *Cultura de clase*, 210-11.

⁵ *Folklore* 29 (October 1962), 3-7.

⁶ Cited in Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda*, 229.

insisted on its national representativeness. Sábato argued that the tango's hybrid roots, its origins in the massive waves of immigration that reshaped Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, made it more Argentine, not less. Sábato described the tango as an authentic Argentine response to modernity. Unsurprisingly, given his interest in forging national unity across class and political divisions, Sábato ignored the counterhegemonic elements in tango. He emphasizes the genre's profundity, its expression of machismo, nostalgia, and sadness, rather than its depiction of class-based resentment. And he stressed the evolution of the tango away from its primitive roots. Alluding to the genre's origins among the population of African descent, he claimed that the inclusion of the bandoneón allowed tango bands to distance themselves from "the candombe inheritance."⁷ Just as Ramírez offered intellectuals a sophisticated version of Argentine folk music, Sábato championed the tango as an authentic yet modernized symbol of the nation.

Nowhere was the effort to construct a modern, cosmopolitan version of Argentine nationalism more visible than in *Qué*, the weekly news magazine founded by the economist Rogelio Frigerio in the wake of the Revolución Libertadora. Frigerio used the magazine to advocate for "developmentalism," an ideology that combined nationalist calls for state planning and industrial protectionism with an insistence on the need to encourage foreign investment and to adopt the latest technology. Developmentalism was tailor-made for an anti-Peronist middle class that was seeking a way to assert its political leadership, and Frondizi made it the centerpiece of his successful campaign for the presidency in 1958.⁸ *Qué's* editorial stance in the cultural arena mirrored its position on economics: the magazine closely followed the latest

⁷ Sábato, 19.

⁸ On Frigerio, developmentalism and *Qué*, see Szusterman, *Frondizi and the Politics of Developmentalism*; Spinelli, *Los vencedores vencidos*, 249–60.

international developments even as it sought to promote local artists. It attempted in this way to craft an image of the Argentine nation that could be reconciled with cosmopolitan modernity. *Qué* argued that established national genres needed to be updated and improved. Celebrating the young folk musician Waldo de los Ríos, the magazine's reporter applied developmentalist logic to national culture: "cultural wealth, just like economic wealth, must be developed without hesitation through resources that correspond to up-to-date technology and thought."⁹ Similarly, the magazine complimented folk guitarist Eduardo Falú for achieving "manifest improvement" by way of "a clear, polished and brilliant technique, of the kind that matures in everyday study."¹⁰ Long study, up-to-date technique and ideas: these were the keys to improving native, Argentine music so that it could take its place alongside the sophisticated musical genres of the modern world.

Problematic Music: Rock and Roll and the Nueva Ola

The arrival of rock and roll in Argentina undermined the efforts of those engaged in the project of crafting a cosmopolitan nationalism. As in other parts of the world, rock and roll immediately resonated with young people but struck many older observers as dangerously improper. One magazine bemoaned the "licentiousness" and "frenzy" of kids dancing to rock and wondered whether the new fad was "dangerous."¹¹ Nevertheless, these fears tended to subside as multinational corporations and local firms promoted rock and roll as a safe music that young people could enjoy with their families.¹²

⁹ *Qué*, 1/29/57, 24.

¹⁰ *Qué*, 3/25/58, 22.

¹¹ *Qué* (February 12, 1957), 24.

¹² Manzano, 75.

In Argentina, it was not so much the immorality of rock and roll that concerned observers as its cheap commercialism and poor quality. Interviewed by the magazine *Mundo Argentino*, jazz pianist Lalo Schifrin reassured readers that the fad did not prove the existence of a “generation of decadent youth.” But he described rock and roll as nothing more than rhythm and blues with a new name and dismissed Bill Haley as a “bad jazz musician.” Schifrin argued that the genre’s popularity was due to the same sort of “large publicity campaigns” that had disseminated such rhythms as the mambo and the chachachá.¹³ For Schifrin, rock and roll was lowbrow, commercial entertainment not to be taken seriously. In the pages of the developmentalist magazine *Qué*, music writers denounced the genre in precisely these terms. These journalists were committed to opening Argentina up to the latest trends in global culture, but they were also keen to resist both economic and cultural colonialism. Their vision of cosmopolitanism entailed an engagement with the most sophisticated cultural elements from Europe and the United States, not the uncritical adoption of a tacky foreign genre manufactured by powerful corporations. *Qué’s* reporters criticized rock and roll for its poor quality and its escapism, while insisting hopefully on the genre’s limited popularity: rock and roll was “a poor relation of jazz . . . it is the escape valve through which the youth avoid their problems. . . For now, it has been limited to the least rooted sectors in big cities. The youth of the pueblo remains faithful to national music.”¹⁴

Qué’s writers specified the form that cosmopolitanism ought to take by drawing a contrast between jazz and rock and roll. Since the 1930s, jazz had acquired substantial prestige in Argentina. In the 1950s, the advent of bebop, a difficult style popular among small groups of

¹³ *Mundo Argentino* (February 6, 1957), 20–21.

¹⁴ *Qué*, 2/12/57, 24.

connoisseurs, solidified the genre's reputation as an exemplar of avant-garde modernism.¹⁵ Whereas jazz was a sophisticated, challenging cultural form, rock and roll was easy, commercial music at its worst. In a description of an event that featured both genres, the magazine reported happily that the audience of university students was sophisticated enough to prefer the jazz.¹⁶ For *Qué's* reporters, the African American origins of jazz functioned as a guarantor of the music's authenticity, while the artistic ambitions of jazz musician, their vanguardism, made the music an acceptable form of musical modernity. The magazine described the music of Duke Ellington as a combination of white and black musical cultures, "supercivilized and at the same time voluntarily primitive," and argued that jazz "has contributed to a great extent to unleash the contemporary musical revolution."¹⁷ Here, implicitly, was the logic of musical uplift. Just as Waldo de los Ríos and Eduardo Falú produced sophisticated versions of folk music rooted in simple, Argentine traditions, Ellington and other jazz masters had embraced the primitive essence of African American music while civilizing it. In this way, jazz aptly symbolized the modern, cosmopolitan culture that non-Peronist intellectuals sought to embrace. Rock and roll, by contrast, appeared to unleash the primitive while discarding the civilized; as such it had little appeal for these intellectuals.

In the face of the onslaught of rock and roll, *Qué* was particularly concerned with the state of the tango, which had begun to lose favor among Argentine youth. In multiple articles focusing on the tango as an object of nostalgia, the magazine lamented that the music's glory days had passed: "the tango feels that the city's rhythm, its mode of expression and themes are other. . . The chimneys with their intrepid fumes advance over the renewed geography of the city

¹⁵ Karush, *Musicians in Transit*, 28-36; Sergio Pujol, *Jazz al Sur: Historia de la música negra en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2004), 120-32.

¹⁶ *Qué*, 2/19/57, 24.

¹⁷ *Qué*, 10/2/56, 30.

. . . And the native of the city, of sweet and loving soul, feels that there's no room for the tango."¹⁸ Also troubling were reports that the tango, Argentina's greatest cultural export, no longer appealed to audiences in Europe and the United States.¹⁹ The tango, which until just a few years before had been the most popular music and dance form in the country, now seemed hopelessly out of step with contemporary tastes.

The great hope of those who hoped to modernize the tango was Astor Piazzolla, whose wildly innovative Octeto Buenos Aires debuted at the same time as the *Revolución Libertadora*.²⁰ *Qué* was both a champion and a critic of Piazzolla, an ambivalence that reflected the larger predicament faced by intellectuals in this period. The magazine's reporters referred to him as "el modernísimo Astor Piazzolla,"²¹ but they also worried that his avant-garde version of tango might not appeal to the masses. When the Octeto Buenos Aires performed at the University of Buenos Aires Law School, *Qué* praised the composer for having taken the tango to such a prestigious space. Nevertheless, the reviewer hoped that Piazzolla would perform the same show in the plazas, barrios, and working-class suburbs of the city in order to assess whether this "artistic creation of popular roots" would actually appeal to the people.²² While the magazine often praised Piazzolla's music, one review argued that his avant-garde experiments had gone too far, making his music sound like "dull reports."²³ By contrast, *Qué* unreservedly celebrated the bandleader Aníbal Troilo, Piazzolla's former employer, for his "clear popular affiliation" and for striking the perfect balance between modernization and tradition. Regarding Troilo's adoption

¹⁸ *Qué*, 7/23/57, 26-7.

¹⁹ *Qué*, 10/9/56, 36.

²⁰ Diego Fischerman and Abel Gilbert, *Piazzolla el mal entendido* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2009), 137-38.

²¹ *Qué*, 8/13/57, 23.

²² *Qué*, 12/17/57, 22.

²³ *Qué*, 10/16/56, 31. For a much more positive take on Piazzolla's music, see *Qué*, 4/23/57.

of the latest, vanguardist elements, the magazine complimented him for not overdoing it: “Troilo has known how to remain just right, filtering out excessive audacities, pouring them into the genre’s classic molds to just the right extent.”²⁴ The *Qué* writers’ enthusiasm for Troilo and ambivalence about Piazzolla reflected their hope that Argentine music, and by extension Argentine national identity, could be modernized and improved without losing its popular appeal. Yet the arrival of rock and roll complicated this vision because it suggested that sophistication, mass popularity and cosmopolitan modernity might be incompatible. Piazzolla’s tango, like Ellington’s jazz, was sophisticated, cosmopolitan and modern, but it lacked the mass appeal of Bill Haley and the Comets.

This problem only worsened over the next few years as the multinational record companies CBS and RCA Victor launched a new international strategy aimed at capturing the rapidly growing youth market made visible by the rock and roll boom. These companies searched for performers from throughout Latin America who could attract young consumers by delivering credible rock and roll sung in Spanish. Marketed collectively as the Nueva Ola, these stars represented an effort to unify the Latin American market. Calculating that young people in Argentina and Mexico shared the same taste in rock and roll, the multinationals hoped to find performers with broadly regional appeal. In implementing this strategy, the companies relied on Latin American intermediaries. In Argentina, CBS turned to Ben Molar, who had begun his career writing Spanish lyrics to boleros by French composer Paul Misraki. The commercial success of these boleros throughout Latin America meant that Molar had experience in appealing to Latin American consumers across national borders. In 1957, one of the company’s newest discoveries, Los Cinco Latinos, recorded a cover of the Platters’ “Only You” with Spanish lyrics

²⁴ *Qué*, 8/13/57, 22-23.

by Molar. The record was a hit throughout Latin America, proving the viability of the new strategy.²⁵ RCA Victor took a similar approach, hiring Ricardo Mejía, an Ecuadoran who had worked for Sears Roebuck in the United States and in Colombia, to run its Argentine branch. Although Mejía lacked any firsthand knowledge of the Argentine music market, his combination of North American sales expertise and Latin American ethnicity made him well-suited to enact the company's new strategy. In 1959, Mejía began assembling a full lineup of young artists. By the early 1960s, several of his Nueva Ola artists, including especially Palito Ortega, had become stars throughout Latin America.²⁶

As a fundamentally transnational phenomenon, this new pop music was at odds with the musical nationalism of Argentine intellectuals. In fact, the Nueva Ola was transnational in two ways. First, singers from throughout Latin America were popular throughout the region. In addition to homegrown artists like Palito Ortega, Argentine fans embraced foreign singers like the Mexican Enrique Guzmán.²⁷ Thus, fans experienced Spanish-language rock and roll as a Latin American genre (or, more precisely, a Latin American version of a North American genre) rather than an explicitly Argentine one. Second, even though the Nueva Ola entailed an effort to market rock and roll, it was never exclusively dedicated to that single genre. Instead, Spanish-language rock and roll was promoted alongside a range of genres from throughout Latin America. RCA Victor included its Nueva Ola rock-and-roll recordings on compilation albums that also featured Cuban mambo, Brazilian samba, Mexican bolero, and Argentine tango.²⁸ When Mejía launched

²⁵ CBS, *Annual Statement* (1959).

²⁶ Karush, *Musicians in Transit*, 112-117.

²⁷ The Argentine top ten list for the week of June 8, 1963 was typical. It featured four records by North American singers, one tango and one Argentine folk song, alongside four records by rock-influenced artists from other countries: two by Guzmán, one by Chilean Antonio Prieto, and one by Italian Adriano Celentano.

²⁸ Andrés Jiménez, "La nueva ola y la explosión del mercado musical discográfico," *Todo es Historia* 421 (2002), 9.

El Club del Clan, a television program meant to promote his young artists, he continued the strategy. Each cast member on the program tended to specialize in a specific genre, with the result that rock and roll appeared as one of several contemporary forms of popular music. Raúl Cobián sang tangos, while Chico Novarro and Perico Gómez sang cumbias, boleros, and other “tropical” rhythms. Thanks to the commercial logic of the Nueva Ola, rock and roll was consumed in Argentina as part of a menu that featured dance rhythms from elsewhere in Latin America, especially the Caribbean.

The artists of the Nueva Ola were promoted as non-threatening, escapist fun, offering consumers a safe, Spanish-language version of contemporary, North American pop culture.²⁹ Yet even though the Nueva Ola may have satisfied the desire for cosmopolitan engagement, middle-class intellectuals worried that it would debase Argentine popular culture as much as Peronism had. This anxiety partly reflected the reputation of rock and roll as a low-quality music foisted on the public by powerful, foreign corporations. The magazine *Primera Plana* described the multinationals and the local broadcasters who partnered with them as a “factory of idols” that manufactured successful artists by emulating the formula created for Elvis Presley.³⁰ But misgivings about the Nueva Ola also resulted from the association that it forged between rock and roll and Latin American dance genres. To many middle-class Argentines, “tropical” genres like cumbia were tacky, tainted by their popularity among the working class as well as by their origins in the circum-Caribbean.³¹ For some, the massive success of Chico Novarro’s cumbia, “El orangután” symbolized a cultural nadir:

²⁹ Manzano, 80-83. See also Sergio Pujol, *La década rebelde: Los sesenta en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2002), 251–53.

³⁰ *Primera Plana* (7/30/63), 24.

³¹ On the “tackiness” of cumbia in Argentina in the 1960s, see Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila, eds., *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5-6.

Cuando lanzó en un ciclo del Canal 13 su estribillo sobre *el orangután y la orangutana* – un obsesivo repiqueteo que retumbó en la Argentina y en el Uruguay durante todo el verano – mucha gente creyó sentir que ese tema era tanto una síntesis como una premonición de lo que estaba ocurriendo: desembarazados ya de su vieja pasión por el tango y las milongas, fatigados de su pasión por el folklore, los adolescentes rioplatenses empezaban a coronar ahora a los *orangutanes*, a pasarlos en triunfo.³²

The reference to drums and, hence, to blackness – “repiqueteo que retumbó” – underlined the danger of replacing a vibrant, national culture with this particular import. For intellectuals interested in aligning Argentina with civilized, cosmopolitan modernity, the rise of the cumbia was a step in the wrong direction.

The Nueva Ola provoked a defensive, nationalist reaction from some middle-class proponents of Argentine folk music, even though the “folk boom” of the late 1950s and early 1960s gave them grounds for optimism about the genre’s commercial prospects. By 1962, in fact, porteños heard an average of sixteen radio programs per day dedicated to the genre, and every television station featured folk music programs as well.³³ That same year, the magazine *Folklore* declared victory over foreign forms of commercial music: “The cycle of the pachanga, the cha-cha-chá, and rock—of blue jeans, sideburns and violence—is over. We believe that our people have made contact, for the first time, with something they carry within: the love of their fatherland.”³⁴ Identifying the foreign enemy as both rock and roll and dance genres from the Caribbean, the magazine celebrated the healthy nationalism that allegedly led Argentines to prefer folk music.

³² *Primera Plana* (3/17/64), 20-1.

³³ Ariel Gravano, *El silencio y la porfía* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1985), 120–22. On the folk boom, see Pablo Vila, “Música popular y auge del folklore,” *Crear en la cultura nacional* 2.10 (1982), 24–27; Claudio F. Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el “ser nacional”: una aproximación sociodiscursiva al “folklore” argentino* (Córdoba: Recovecos, 2009), 145–90

³⁴ *Folklore* 9 (January 1962), 26.

But as we have seen, most intellectuals rejected this sort of defensive nationalism. On the contrary, given their frustration with Peronist nativism, they hoped to craft a nationalism that would insert Argentina into the most up-to-date, cosmopolitan and sophisticated cultural currents. And this impulse was present within folk music. While groups like Los Chalchaleros used an established formula to appeal to a popular audience, other artists developed more sophisticated styles. Alongside musicians such as Ariel Ramírez and Eduardo Falú, new groups like Los Cantores de Quilla Huasi and Los Huanca Hua did not hesitate to incorporate elements from foreign styles, adopting more sophisticated arrangements and urban performance attire.³⁵ Similarly, the folk innovators of the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero (MNC) rejected the Nueva Ola, denouncing “the invasion of decadent and distorted forms of foreign hybrids.”³⁶ For Mercedes Sosa, the movement’s most prominent member, the MNC distinguished itself by the foreign musical models it emulated: “we based ourselves on jazz so that our music would be new.”³⁷

Despite these efforts to modernize and uplift folk music, the enormous commercial success of the Nueva Ola made the goal of a sophisticated, yet popular musical cosmopolitanism increasingly elusive. To folk modernizers, the Nueva Ola represented the very opposite of the sort of high-brow culture they wished to associate themselves with. For example, Los Huanca Hua rejected the label, “nueva ola del folklore.” Though it was meant to highlight its youthfulness and popularity, the term also evoked a cheap commercialism and faddishness that did not fit the group’s self-image. In any case, by the mid-1960s, the emergence of mega-stars

³⁵ Chamosa, *Breve historia*, 160-65.

³⁶ The MNC manifesto, originally published in 1963 in the newspaper *Los Andes*, is available online at <http://www.tejadagomez.com.ar/adhesiones/manifiesto.html>. For an analysis, see Díaz, 191–98.

³⁷ Quoted in Molinero, *Militancia de la canción Política en el canto folklórico de la Argentina (1944/1975)* (Buenos Aires: De Aquí a la Vuelta, 2011), 186.

like Palito Ortega had far outstripped the commercial success of folk music. As one magazine put it in 1966, “El twist has defeated musical nationalization.”³⁸

Musical Polarization

As historians have demonstrated, the coalition assembled by Frondizi began to fall apart almost as soon as he took office. In late 1958, Communist oil workers launched a strike in Mendoza, and Frondizi’s pact with the Peronists disintegrated. To Argentine leftists inspired by the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, the new president’s pragmatic policies amounted to a betrayal.³⁹ The next few years witnessed a deepening process of polarization, increasing violence between Peronists and the state, and growing frustration on the part of the military. Although this polarization was provoked by specific policy disputes, it also reflected the failure of efforts to forge a cosmopolitan, modernizing nationalism, capable of unifying Argentines across class lines. Within the sphere of popular music, the massive commercial success of rock and roll and the Nueva Ola overwhelmed efforts to forge more sophisticated versions of tango and folk. As a result, the same polarization that characterized politics also structured popular music.

Intellectual frustration with the failure of the cosmopolitan nationalist project was most clearly visible in *Primera Plana*. Founded in 1962 by journalist Jacobo Timerman, this influential magazine was a proponent, in Oscar Terán’s phrase, of an “authoritarian modernizing project,”⁴⁰ an orientation that shaped its musical criticism as much as its news coverage. The masses, it seemed, were no more likely to embrace vanguardist musical forms than they were to

³⁸ *Gente*, 1/6/66, 26

³⁹ Terán, 130-53.

⁴⁰ Terán, 163.

give up their loyalty to Perón. In response, *Primera Plana* retained the commitment to modernization that had characterized *Qué* and the developmentalist project more generally, while jettisoning Frondizi's commitment to democracy. In May 1965, *Primera Plana* dedicated an issue to celebrating exciting developments in the musical scene of Buenos Aires. Not surprisingly, the magazine put Astor Piazzolla on the cover. After describing the work of the most advanced local musicians in tango, folk, and jazz, the magazine's reporter lamented that these artists could not compete with the stars of the day: "records, radio and television have their own idols: Nueva Ola singers who pivot on the collective psychosis and belong less to the field of music than to that of publicity."⁴¹ In contrast to *Qué*, which seven years earlier had hoped that Piazzolla might attract a popular audience for his sophisticated and cosmopolitan version of tango, *Primera Plana* now saw that project as entirely futile in the face of the Nueva Ola. Whereas *Qué* celebrated Troilo for achieving a perfect balance between musical improvement and popularity, *Primera Plana* was critical of the old master: "formerly vanguardist, he stopped short on the path of renovation. Today he lives off of his legend, and the music of peoples does not progress with legends." The magazine, and the particular branch of the anti-Peronist intelligentsia that it represented, still sought to lead the nation down the path toward progress and modernity, but they no longer believed this goal could be achieved in an inclusive way.

The elitist, anti-democratic orientation that characterized *Primera Plana's* criticism also informed some of the music produced in the mid-1960s. Beginning in 1963, the Dutch multinational Philips Records began to focus its efforts on recording Argentine folk music with the goal of selling records not only in the domestic market, but also internationally. Toward that end, the company embraced the most modernizing and sophisticated folk musicians. As the

⁴¹ *Primera Plana* (May 25, 1965), 52.

company's local artistic director, Américo Belloto, put it, "The public demands quality. And quality is also good business."⁴² In this way, the commercial imperatives of transnational capitalism reinforced local ideologies. Several of the pro-Frondizi intellectuals who had elaborated musical nationalisms in the early 1960s now developed sophisticated musical projects aimed at middle-class and elite audiences. Philips Records had its biggest success with Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla*, a Catholic Mass based on Argentine folk genres, which became an international bestseller after its release in 1964. Following this success, the company released several albums that combined a non-partisan nationalism with aesthetic sophistication and highly prestigious musicians. In 1965, Ernesto Sábato collaborated with Eduardo Falú on *Romance de la muerte de Juan Lavalle*, a musical version of one section of Sábato's prize-winning novel from 1961, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*. In 1966, Ramírez and Félix Luna released *Los caudillos*, a folk cantata dedicated to eight legendary, popular leaders of the nineteenth century. Lavishly orchestrated and accompanied by lengthy liner notes, these were albums that aimed at an educated audience, and they were celebrated by the middle-class press.⁴³ Just as many intellectuals had given up on the effort to win over the Peronist masses, these artists embraced Philips's highbrow strategy and acquiesced to the class-based segmentation of the Argentine market for music.

By 1966, the constituency for an inclusive, modernizing democracy under non-Peronist leadership had nearly disappeared. While Peronist and non-Peronist revolutionary movements appeared on the left, much of the country's anti-Peronist intelligentsia, like *Primera Plana* itself,

⁴² *Confirmado* (May 7, 1965). On Philips's business strategy, see Díaz, 145–87.

⁴³ *Primera Plana* (11/1/66).

moved toward support for a military coup.⁴⁴ Needless to say, among the causes of the June 28 coup, political and economic conflict loom larger than rock and roll. Nevertheless, the drift away from the inclusive nationalism of the Frondizi campaign and toward the elitist, anti-democratic orientation of *Primera Plana* was a cultural transformation. In the late 1950s, popular music might well have been expected to reinforce Frondizi's inclusive coalition building. After all, folk music, and even tango, had substantial constituencies among both Peronists and anti-Peronists. Yet the advent of rock and roll and, especially, of the Nueva Ola undermined efforts to construct an inclusive musical nationalism. This new pop music, produced and disseminated by multinational corporations, was very far from the sophisticated versions of cosmopolitan modernity that middle-class Argentine intellectuals embraced. As a result, many of these intellectuals gave up on their dream of high-quality Argentine popular music capable of appealing to the masses. In essence, they gave up on the masses.

⁴⁴ Daniel Mazzei, "Periodismo y política en los años '60: *Primera Plana* y el golpe militar de 1966," *Entrepasados* 7 (1994).