

The Disappeared Not Resolved: Interview With Roberto Marquez, Director of Illapu

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Photo of Illapu. Roberto Marquez is on left with boots. Copyright of photo unknown

Summary

In this Part Three of the series on human rights in Chile, we change gears a little bit to discuss what was taking place in the broader context of the Chilean dictatorship. The music group Illapu, which has earned multiple platinum awards, was just beginning to become popular when the coup forced its members to split up. In 1988 they returned to Chile after living in exile for many years. Now, the band is one of the most well-known music groups in Chile. I sat down in 2002 with the director and lead singer, Roberto Marquez, to talk about how the group got started, how it developed, and what he thinks about the issue of the disappeared.

Historical Context

The name of the group, Illapu, is a word from the Quechua language (the Quechua are indigenous people in South America who are descendents of the Incas) that means “lightning bolt.” The group formed in 1971 during the height of a musical movement called *la nueva canción chilena*, or Chilean New Song. The seventies was a time of great political upheaval in Chile. Salvador Allende, a Socialist, was elected president in democratic elections. Many young leftist adults, including my Chilean mother, were fantasizing about a world of equality, philosophizing about the best forms of government. Capitalism was a failed experiment. It was Marxist ideology that would bring the poor out of their misery.

Chilean artists blossomed with art seen as contemporary but specifically Chilean. Political and social commentary was the way of the music world, with groups like Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani, and individual musicians such as Victor Jara, who all sang about the world’s injustices. Victor Jara even adapted Pete Seeger’s “If I Had a Hammer,” and sang it in Spanish throughout Chile. People were dreaming of a bright future.

Illapu was formed within this socio-political context. But the members of the group had more indigenous blood. They were from the north of Chile, specifically Antofagasta, a region

previously inhabited by the Incas. It also used to be owned by Bolivia, and further north was Perú. Now, all of it belongs to Chile. But cultural identity does not follow such strict borders. The musicians used Andean instruments, something Roberto Marquez tells me was not used very much before they arrived to the music scene. They were complete with panpipes, *charango* (traditionally made from the back of an armadillo), *quena*, and other native instruments, as well as the guitar. They could play complex Andean music because they had many members in the group – music such as melodies that were split between 3, 4 or more persons on panpipes.

It is always interesting to note the broader historical context. Consider that when Illapu was just beginning to become known, Nixon was president (1969-1974) followed by Gerald R. Ford (1974-1977). These were the times of Watergate (1972); the National Security Agency was conducting illegal domestic eavesdropping programs;¹ the oil crisis ensued with oil prices quadrupling;² people were protesting our involvement in the Vietnam war. The case of Roe vs. Wade (1973) was decided by the Supreme Court, which helped the women’s movement gain strength. Gloria Steinam co-founded the feminist magazine, *Ms.* (1971, with an insert in *New York Magazine*). All of these things were happening while Illapu was formed and when the coup d’état took place (1973) in Chile. So, I found it appropriate to interview the director of Illapu, Roberto Marquez. He is an excellent musician and singer and had much to say about their music.

Interview

[Interview conducted in Spanish. Translations are mine.]

Ramón Bannister (RB) – “Do you consider your music to be within the Chilean New Song movement of the early seventies and the second New Song movement after the coup?”

Roberto Marquez (RM) – “We appeared at the end, when the [1st] movement was at its height. We were especially motivated precisely because of everything that was happening at the cultural level at that moment in Chile. We are not absolutely ascribed to the movement because, first of all, we came from Antofagasta, which is a city very far away from Santiago [capital city near the middle of Chile]. It is 1200 Km (745 miles) from Santiago where the cultural movements are developed. So, since we come from such a faraway place, we’re a little disconnected with that. Our music has its own particular elements. It is not ascribed to a form of doing music that exists within the New Song movement.

“So, we came with a very different style, much more rooted in Andean music, much more rooted in the social, folkloric phenomenon of our region, with a strong regional

focus, and a form of music very much not known at that time in Santiago. What's more, at first when we arrived to Santiago, many people thought we performed Bolivian or Peruvian music. It wasn't Chilean music. That is, they did not recognize it as such. And obviously it was a music that we did that was cultivated in our region of Antofagasta, in Iquique, in Arica [three cities in the north of Chile]. So, we gave ourselves the assignment to engross ourselves a little in the New Song movement. But as I told you, our music was distinct."

It is worth noting that *nueva canción* (New Song) was a music that encouraged social change from the 1960s to early 1970s. It was banned right after the coup because it was associated with the left. After the coup, the movement had similar musical roots but functioned more to counter the dictatorship – and a new, younger generation performed it. So, its name was changed to *canto nuevo* (also translated "new song"). In any case, when I asked the question I thought he would give me a quick "yes;" instead he gave me a much more complex answer. And he wasn't finished. He went on to explain what happened to the group after the coup.

RM – "After the coup we disbanded so that we could be safe. Three members of the group went back to Antofagasta, and the remaining three of us stayed in Santiago to play miscellaneous music, such as boleros, in bars in order to survive.

"When the coup happened, the New Song movement practically ceased because the instruments were banned, the ponchos were banned; the form of performing the music that characterized the movement was banned practically by decree. At that time there begins a development by the youth, perhaps inspired by the previous famous music groups, to form more music groups. The first to use Andean instruments again [after the coup] is a group called Barroco Andino.³ The group did baroque music with Andean instruments precisely because Andean music was prohibited at that time. But since it was classical-style music, the dictatorship didn't object to it initially, especially because the group didn't perform at the usual venues for the New Song movement.

"Almost on par with Barroco Andino we again formed a music group in Antofagasta. At that time, [the musicians who went to Antofagasta] encouraged us to go to Antofagasta and join their group to form Illapu."

It was mid-1974 when they founded Illapu for the second time. They began performing at universities and other venues and eventually got discovered by a record producer, Camilo Fernandez, who offered them the opportunity to record an album. They recorded a mix of music from Bolivia, Peru, original tunes, and even some classical music, following the lead of

Barroco Andino. Roberto says that the music represents what they lived during those times: fear and repression in a diverse culture.

Before they recorded the 2nd album they travelled to Argentina. There the members of Illapu heard a song that was commonly sung at festivals. They decided to re-write the song and arrange it according to their own style of music (for you music aficionados of Latin America, Roberto mentions that they made up a rhythm that was somewhere between the *huayno* and the *candombe*). The final arrangement was called, “Candombe para [for] José,” which made the group famous in Chile. The song got high rankings and sold a high amount of albums. It catapulted them to “first place” in the media, as Roberto explained. After that, many other Andean music groups sprang up, founded by people who didn’t even know Andean music. Then, seventeen minutes into the interview, Roberto brings up again this theme of the New Song movement in Chile before (*nueva canción chilena*) and after (*canto nuevo*) the coup.

RM – “Well, we stayed in between *nueva canción* and *canto nuevo*. That’s because we came before *canto nuevo* and we almost didn’t interrupt our activities during *nueva canción*. So, we were neither in one movement nor in the other. Meanwhile, we kept a particular musical sound that absolutely separated us from the groups ascribed to *nueva canción* and the groups ascribed to *canto nuevo*. Musically speaking, Illapu is nourished with folkloric music from the Altiplano in both *canto nuevo* and *nueva canción* styles. We mix everything. But we recognize the connections we have with them. We performed with the musicians of *nueva canción*. And we performed at anti-dictatorship events with the people of the *canto nuevo* period after the coup.”

That was a fairly long but interesting explanation of how their music is connected to this politically-inspired music, before and after the dictatorship. They were principally inspired by past musicians who encouraged social change. As Roberto said, “When we compose a song we write about mankind and his environment. That is, we don’t sing to the river for the river, but rather we sing about the person who lives next to the river.” But they stay away from easy classification. You can’t call their music *nueva canción*, or *canto nuevo*, or Andean. It is all of the above – a fusion of various cultures that points to their identities as modern, Andean urbanite Chileans with complex historical experiences living in rural, urban cities in Chile and abroad. Yes, abroad. They were eventually exiled out of the country.

When Illapu finished recording another album in the summer of 1979 (“Grito de la raza”), the members went on their second European tour. It was a long tour, and the album was supposed to be released sometime in 1980. But that’s when the dictatorship sent the group into exile. They first lived in Paris, then moved to Mexico City. Illapu’s music reflects the members’ experience living in exile as well as their experience in Chile.

RM – “We are strongly linked to our history. We feel that in Chile there is a lack of acknowledgement towards our history. There is still a period of darkness that has not been resolved. That is the period of Allende, the coup, living in exile. It is still a fragmented history. We claim responsibility for our history, and our songs are faithful reflections of that.

“Like in the album “Vuelvo Amor” (“I return, my love”) – it is an album that represents our return, but it’s also about the return of many people and many lived experiences of an enormous collective that lived states of exile of distinct types. There are many kinds of exile, and each individual lives and develops within it in different forms. I’ll tell you that we’re not even a group that sits down and discusses these themes, we don’t philosophize over these things. We’re the type of people who create with respect to a sensitivity that is very down to earth. “Nosotros somos tipos que...tenemos, que creamos a partir de una sensibilidad que es muy muy muy la piel, muy de piel.” But when we do an album we notice that inside those 10 or 12 songs we see a historical moment in our country.

“We lived in France, and nevertheless we gave ourselves the task [to find out about Chile] because we were interested to know what people experienced in Chile. So, people who passed through Paris in those years spent time with us. We spent hours talking, especially about what was going on in Chile and what people experienced. So, our music strongly reflects what had been experienced by our people, by our country. Or, what many times people can’t say, we say it in [our] songs.”

A few days before our interview I had heard Roberto mention the topic of the disappeared. It was at a concert attended by tens of thousands of people on a street called La Alameda, the main street in Santiago. I decided to ask him what he thought about the efforts to bring back such a controversial past.

RB – “There are a lot of people who say that we should forget about what happened in the past so that we can continue into the future. There are other people who say that we should remember the past and that we need justice. Other people say we should remember what happened, but that justice is not necessary. What do you think? Should there be justice?”

RM – “We believe that the theme of the disappeared is one that is not resolved. Moreover, just as I told the people on La Alameda, the song, “Tres versos para una historia” (“Three verses for a history”) will continue being in our repertoire until the problem is truly resolved. You don’t get anything when you use politics and stick into people’s heads that you don’t want to see or hear about the problem. The only way

history and your mistakes can serve you is when you recognize your mistakes, or when you are able to look at your history, assume the history as yours, and in that way you'll be able to continue into the future. That will permit you to avoid repeating those horrors, if you will.

"You understand? That is, we are not willing to leave a topic like the disappeared, especially in a society like Chile, which has not been able to resolve the problem, which has not had the bravery to resolve it in a just way.

"Because the only thing that is asked is to know what happened with the disappeared. What happened? Who is responsible? I think that there has to be a punishment to make an example out of those responsible, so that what happened is never repeated again. Because the problem of the disappeared in Chile has not been resolved."

The Longer He Lives, The Better The Chance To Prosecute

Since we had this interview in 2002, Pinochet died (2006) and more cases have gone to court in Chile. A few years before Pinochet died, I attended an international conference in 2003 attended by Chileans, academics, and journalists (including John Dinges). In a speech, one famous activist/lawyer proclaimed her hope that Pinochet not die. "Long live Pinochet!" she yelled out to a room full of shocked intellectuals. But then she explained her reasoning. The longer he lives, the more chances lawyers had to re-interpret the law and attempt to force him to face a judge.

That never happened. I will not hide my opinion that Pinochet should have gone to jail. He was ruthless and didn't care about anyone but himself, as proven by not only the horrible crimes he committed but by the millions of dollars he hid from his own people, such that even his ultra conservative supporters were disappointed. As I mentioned before, human rights is about humanity, not whether you're conservative or liberal. Since I last visited Chile in 2009, I did see an important change. People accepted the country's history more than in 2002. I sensed that Chilean society was finally beginning to move on. But the stories of Ana, Inelia, Victoria and hundreds of other families are still just under the surface, waiting to be discovered.

¹ Aid, Mathew. 2008 (November 14). "National Security Agency Releases History of Cold War Intelligence Activities." Last accessed on October 3, 2009, from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB260/index.htm>

² Recession.org. "1970's Oil Crisis." Last accessed on October 3, 2009, from <http://recession.org/history/1970s-oil-crisis>

³ Recent Youtube video, which gives a good indication of what it must have sounded like in the 1970s. Last accessed on October 3, 2009, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-0bUh0803M>