



10-1-2007

Rock Subversivo: The Response of Argentina's Youth to El Proceso

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Introduction

In Argentina today, the memory of the military government that ruled between the years 1976 and 1983 remains a sharp one. The question of reparations for those who disappeared as a consequence of state or guerrilla terrorism remains hotly debated. “Repression” and “oppression” have strong connotations linked to the violence of the military regime. It was a sad time in Argentine history, one that many have not been able to forget. The period was marked by sharp social divisions, disorder, and moral confusion; indeed, many Argentines were afraid to articulate their views out of fear of retribution from either the state or armed guerrillas groups. In spite of this fear, Argentines needed to find ways to express themselves. If nothing else, they needed a medium through which to voice their innermost concerns and anxieties, political or otherwise. Artistic and cultural expressions, such as literature or music, offered such a medium and, as a result, they soon became highly politicized. In the realm of music, rock became one of the most important modes of expression for certain sectors of Argentine society. Most notably, young people found in rock music a way to come together and create an identity that was their own and that opposed the moral tenets of those in power. What follows is an analysis of the role played by Argentine rock among those people who grew up under the military government that ruled between the years 1976 and 1983.

Argentine Society & *El Proceso*

In 1955, a military coup had brought down the government of Juan Domingo Perón in an attempt to erase the “laziness, disorder, and promis-

cuity of the low classes” associated with Perón’s government. Under the ensuing military government, leftist factions such as the *Montoneros* (a guerrilla group faithful to the ousted Juan Domingo Perón) and the *Ejército de Revolución Popular* (the military branch of the Argentine communist party) rose up to challenge the authority of the military government. As the spiral of violence spun out of control, the dictatorship was forced to call free elections in 1973. An aging Perón, who had been in exile until then, won these elections only to die a year later, leaving the presidency to his third wife Isabel. Under her rule, violence again increased and Isabel failed to control the factionalism within her own party. As criticism mounted and the economy disintegrated around her, the military began devising plans for her overthrow.

On March 24, 1976, the Argentine army’s tanks rolled on to the streets of Buenos Aires. Led by *La Junta de Comandantes* (the joint Commanders in Chief,) the military “removed from office the president and vice-president as well as provincial governors, municipal officers, the members of the Supreme Court and higher provincial courts, and the attorney general.”¹ The Junta proceeded to consolidate the executive and legislative branches, and then declared General Jorge Rafael Videla president of the nation. Although the Constitution remained in effect, the military government “assured itself extraconstitutional authority in the area of national security” through the Institutional Act of June 18, 1976.² Armed with not only rifles but also the trappings of constitutional authority, the military government set out to limit society’s political involvement across the spectrum. By banning certain Leftist parties, limiting union activities and suspending the right to strike, the regime managed to quell the political activity of its most outspoken critics. “In effect, the military sought to marginalize the Argentine populace from politics: no participation, no (political) roles.”³

Under Videla the military regime pompously declared itself the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process, usually referred to as *El Proceso*.) The name chosen by the military government reflects the military’s perception of itself as the “custodian of the nation,”⁴ and it also illustrates the nature of the social and economic program set forth by this new dictatorial regime. In many ways, this new military government was idealistic and sought to fundamentally alter the functioning of Argentine society. Indeed, its goals were to “transform the country’s economy and to drastically reorient Argentine society.”⁵ Economically, the government sought to open up Argentina to the rules of the free market, and to limit the government’s own role in the economy by selling public enterprises, and reducing tariffs and subsidies. One of its top priorities was the elimination of currency inflation. In the effort to achieve this, the government loosened its

control over interest rates and allowed private banks to charge their own rates. Additionally, they pursued other neo-liberal measures – all aimed at loosening the state’s grip on the economy. While noteworthy, these measures were only partially successful.

On the social front, the armed forces assumed the responsibility of “definitively eradicating the vices that infect the country.”⁶ The “failure to observe basic moral principles in the exercise of public, political, or union offices or activities that involve the public interest” was declared a crime against the nation.⁷ A lack of patriotism or respect for authority, and the embracing of leftist ideologies or “nontraditional” morals were all considered treasonous and the new government made it a priority to crack down on these anti-national sentiments. In the place of such immorality, the military was to uphold “Western and Christian values” as a counter to the decadence brought about by the “subversive” elements that corrupted Argentine society. The military coup of 1976 set out to defend the community from immorality and its leaders sought to guarantee the survival of Argentine society at all costs.

The costs of these policies were astronomical. Between the years 1976 and 1983, the military government detained and “disappeared”⁸ somewhere between 15,000 and 30,000 Argentines. These disappearances are one of the most painful memories left by *El Proceso*, and they were a traumatic experience that Argentine society continues to deal with today. Even today, anyone who visits the central *Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires is likely to see the *Madres* and *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*, mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared who still demand that justice be served. Even I have heard my mother’s stories about how my grandmother burnt some of her books for fear that someone might report her, or about a businessman who was shot dead by guerrilla fighters only blocks away from my mother’s home. The reign of terror during these years permeated all aspects of Argentine society, no one was free from it and most people tried not to bring unnecessary attention upon themselves. For in the mind of the military regime, indecency, violent guerrillas and other subversive elements were all a part of the same “cancer” (such was the vocabulary used in official documents) which ate away at the foundations of society. As a result, the government’s attack on subversion included such strategies as kidnapping, torturing, murdering, censoring, and incarcerating.⁹ In the words of Colonel Néstor Bulacios, an officer in the army during *El Proceso*, “we will not put down our weapons until the felons, the instigators, the murderers... have been crushed... there is no room for indifference or neutrality... One is either with the fatherland and its people or one is against it... only the annihilation of our enemies will bring peace.”¹⁰ Caught in the crossfire of this “Dirty War” was

the remainder of a terrorized Argentine population.

Thus was the everyday reality of a *Proceso* which dictated social, economic, political, and cultural life in Argentina between the years 1976 and 1983. As a regime obsessed with order and discipline, and one that emphasized public morality and obedience, it took the initiative to preserve the people from what it considered to be subversive attacks. It was a violent regime that wanted to “reorganize” the nation and stopped at nothing to do so – it tortured and killed, kidnapped and threatened. This regime proposed to save the nation, to reinstate its natural values, and it would have no mercy for those who dared contravene it. Yet under these conditions, a whole generation of Argentines grew up, and for many, these conditions proved intolerable.

Youth, Culture and Resistance

The government felt that the youth constituted a major threat to the nation’s health; the military authorities felt that youths and their predilection for strange fashions, music, drugs, free love, and other nonconformist ideals led directly to the development of subversive culture.¹¹ As a result, police and army officials were more prone to hassle young men and women than they were older individuals. This in turn explains the great surveillance and suppression imposed upon Argentina’s universities during *El Proceso*. Indeed, universities had become extremely politicized institutions in the years before *El Proceso* and many left-leaning guerrillas had recruited militants from among the disgruntled Argentine students. The rise of the *Madres* and *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* also indicates the high percentage of young men and women among the victims of state repression (67% of the disappeared were between the ages of 18 and 30.)¹² Moreover, the Western and Christian values that the dictatorship held most dear, were the very same values that youth movements throughout the world (Argentina being no exception) were beginning to question. For instance, those young men and women who had led the American counterculture movement or the Paris riots of May ’68 all shared the same highly critical of notions of society – those same outcries against “Western morality”, progress, and human worth that were being expressed by Argentine youth. Mind altering drugs, love-ins, and bizarre fashions were a way of rejecting the values of order, decency, and realism that for decades had been central to Western society. However, as a result of the brutal terror campaign at home, the Argentine youth found that the public manifestations of these ideals and the organization of mass movements similar to those developed in Western countries was practically im-

possible. Instead, they needed to find alternative ways of expressing their discontent.

In many ways, the state terror promoted by *El Proceso* was leading Argentina down the path of totalitarianism for, in the words of one scholar, the state in its hunt for subversives “permeated all Argentine cultural activity. The tentacles of the authoritarian state smothered Argentine culture through black listing and active censorship of books, music, newspapers, and radio stations. Additionally, they closed universities, mandated who could and could not produce art, and prohibited many movies.”¹³ Nevertheless, in spite of the strict control, writers, artists, and musicians always found ways of expressing themselves and getting around censorship.

In the case of literature, Beatriz Sarlo, a renowned Argentine cultural critic, explains that writers went against classical models of narration in order to “explore narrative models capable of organizing a social experience whose horror initially appears to defy course.”¹⁴ Under this new literary model, authors presented Argentina’s social situation as morally problematic. More importantly, “when the military dictatorship froze public political forms of reflection, literary discourse was able to propose itself as a space for reflection” about the country’s moral situation.¹⁵ However, these reflections were not explicitly political; instead, they focused on subjectivity and abstract social concerns. Two examples of this demonstrate this notion of subjectivity quite well. In the novel *Nadie Nada Nunca* by the Argentine author Juan José Saer, fear permeates the tale without ever becoming an explicit theme. The novel *Hay Cenizas en el Viento* by Carlos Dámaso Martínez is imbued with the theme of death although it is never specifically placed within the Argentine context. In the same manner, the themes of being disappeared, of violence, of chaos, of persecution, etc. are constantly addressed in the Argentine literature of the 1970s. However, by alluding indirectly to these themes, the authors could engage with them on a fictional level and thus avoid raising the attention of the censors. This digression into the realm of literature demonstrates that cultural and artistic expressions were in fact being used in Argentina as a way to obliquely express the troubled concerns of the authors and their readers.

Rock Nacional

Music, and *rock nacional* (national rock) in particular, enters the cultural scene in much the same way as literature. As student youth and political youth movements died out were suppressed and died out, young Argentines sought out new ways to express their collective identities. In the

following paragraphs I will show how rock, with its inherent ability to develop a sense of community while promoting unconventional values, became one of the prime mediums for youth expression.

Pablo Vila, a journalist who has studied Argentine popular music in depth, observes that in 1976-7 there was a boom in concerts throughout the city of Buenos Aires that did not correspond with a rise in record sales.¹⁶ This, he explains, indicates that culturally, the aesthetic value of music was not as important as was the opportunity to experience music collectively. Pipo Lernoud, Editorial Director of *Expreso Imaginario* (*Imaginary Express*), one of the first and most popular rock magazines in Argentina, wrote that “music...is the strongest vehicle of union that we have.”¹⁷ In a sense, going out to the Luna Park (a historic venue in Buenos Aires) or any other rock venue became a political assertion. As one of my uncles explained to me, “you have to realize that we would come out of those concerts at 2 am AM and we had to take the bus or train through stations where we would see contingents of soldiers armed with submachine guns. And at the same time our parents worried over us, but they couldn’t stop us from being teenagers.”¹⁸ As this vignette demonstrates, young Argentines were taking incredible risks in attending concerts as they exposed themselves to the state’s agents of repression. At the same time, they were striking out on their own, leaving the protection of home in order to enjoy rock music along with their friends. A friend’s father, who grew up during this period, explains that bands such as Serú Girán “gave the audience a sense of something shared because we all identified with it, and that’s what made the music popular.”¹⁹ Laura, a young woman from Salta, in Northwestern Argentina, wrote to the *Expreso Imaginario* and said “I remember the environment I lived those days in that glorious coming together where love and union filled my lungs...we all know that disunion, egoism, and racism rule the world.”²⁰ These comments demonstrate that those who attended the ritual of the rock concert entered a private world of union, love, and freedom – a world that was distinct from the harsh reality of state officials and soldiers. Indeed, thanks to the music, listeners of rock felt a renewed sense of “togetherness” that the violence of state and guerrilla terrorism had nearly stripped from Argentine society.

Rock nacional provided an opportunity for youth to express ideals that were contrary to those upheld by the reigning administration. My friend’s parent described how rock music inspired “a sense of hope and support that stayed with the people during tough times. They gave a sense of unity and questioned the law imposed upon us at that time as well as a sense of liberty, the right to love, the right to a dignified future, at least the possi-

bility of having the right to pursue happiness.”²²¹ Pipo Lernoud wrote that his magazine, the aforementioned *Expreso*, promoted the search for “an independent culture, based on human values and in the exaltation of life more than in the demands of the market or ideological dogmas of any sort.”²²² Not everyone, however, was taken in by the magazine’s rhetoric: Ricardo García Oliveri, a reader of the *Expreso*, criticized the stance taken by the magazine as implying that “we are the good, the pure, and everyone else is rotten.”²²³ Although some readers might have disagreed, this was exactly the point; those who listened to rock felt that they were not like the rest, and they most certainly took pride in that fact. Rock nacional was “a region of poetry and music which disrupts, which confuses, which illuminates.”²²⁴

These traits are what made rock nacional appealing and unique – the music belonged to Argentina’s youth, and its ideals were those of its young people. Moreover, the ideals rock upheld went against the need for “order, work, hierarchy, responsibility, national identity, honesty... in the context of Christian morality” endorsed by the military government.²²⁵ endorsed by the military government. Indeed, anyone could see that “these people with long hair and faded jeans, neglected by irresponsible parents, were far from the regime’s sacred Western values.”²²⁶ Argentine rock paid little attention to the country’s traditions; it was rebellious, and hedonist, and had little regard for work, progress or production. Rock was a “way of life.”²²⁷ Differentiation entailed “not adopting the values of the elite, but to step out of the system, and jump over the palisades of mass society.”²²⁸ Rock was countercultural because it implied a rebellion against discipline. Pujol calls this a parallel world, one inhabited only by Argentine youths.²²⁹ Rock nacional “dislocated itself from the establishment... in order to represent new and changing youth identities.”²³⁰ It provided those people growing up during *El Proceso* with the means to escape an oppressive discourse that left no room for alternatives; it was a reaction to a society that was too scared to raise its voice against the oppression it suffered.

Serú Girán: A Brief Case Study

In 1978, David Lebón, Oscar Moro, Pedro Aznar and the legendary Argentine musician Charly García created the band Serú Girán. By 1979, this band had become extremely popular; all of my relatives with whom I had the opportunity to talk with about this topic mentioned this band as one of the most important of the era. The outstanding melodic structure of the band’s music was coupled with a symphonic rock feel and American musical influences ranging from jazz, to funk, and bands such as Crosby, Stills,

Nash, and Young. Despite a slow start, the band soon reached the pinnacle of Argentina's rock scene and the musicians were hailed as "the Argentine Beatles." As one of the more commercially appraised bands, Serú Girán brought together a large sector of Argentina's youth and placed a strong emphasis on typically "young" ideals.

On their first self-titled album the band included the song "Seminare"³¹ which started off with García's soft piano and the high-pitched vocals of Lebón, and gradually gained momentum with the entrance of an acoustic guitar, a bass and percussion section. The voices in unison of García, Lebón and Aznar add an extra strength to the song. The feeling one gets when listening to the song is of a bitter-sweet plea: while containing a plaintive tone it also uplifts the listener who can find some relief embedded deep within the sadness of the song. In terms of lyrics, the song is a call for love expressed in a state of confusion, loss and despair. The second stanza reads, "there are no potions for love/ where are you? where am I? / because we are in the street / very far from the sun that burns with love." By presenting the difficulty of attaining love, and the expression of a confused state of being, the words express a moving but troubled sense of existential anomie that begs for the healing touch of love.

In the band's second album, *La Grasa de las Capitales* (The Grease of the Capitals,) they included the troubling song "Viernes 3 AM"³² which recounts the thought process of a man about to kill himself. Like "Seminare," this song cries for an alternate reality, one where happiness and love can be attained, but in the end, everything stays the same and escape by way of death is the only escape. The second stanza presents the narrator's call for a different world: "the dream of a sun and of the sea / and of a dangerous life/ changing the bitterness for honey / and the grey city for roses." But only escape through death will allow the narrator to attain that world: "you put the barrel to your forehead / you grit your teeth / you close your eyes and see / all the sea in spring." A hopeless lament ends the song: "it's always the same/ those who can't take it anymore/ they go away."

The song "Canción de Alicia en el París," from the album *Bicicleta*, provides us with another prime example of Serú Girán's music.³³ from the album *Bicicleta*, provides us with example of Serú Girán's music. This track was extremely well received at the 1980 concert the band played at Obras; in *Expreso Imaginario*, Jorge Nasser wrote that "'Alicia en el país' is, in my opinion, the best song. The lyrics are beautiful and the music is completely different from Charly's previous productions."³⁴ According to Sergio Pujol this song was "a quite realistic description of Argentina under *El Proceso*...like the country it inhabited, Alicia's song transmitted fear and un-

certainty.”³⁵ With violent and uncanny images such as “a river of heads crushed by the same foot/ play cricket under the moon,” and ominous warnings such as “don’t tell what you saw behind the mirrors / you’ll have no power, no lawyers, no witnesses” the song characterized Argentina as purely nightmarish: “We are in no man’s land. But it is mine / The innocent are guilty. Says his highness the King of Spades.”

This very brief tour through some of Serú Girán’s most popular songs illustrates how the band made a call for an alternative reality, one ruled by love and higher ideals of spirituality. Indeed, all three songs condemn the gray world of oppression bereft of hope that Argentines faced in the street and wish for a world of sun, honey, roses, and sea. Although the lyrics convey a bleak social situation that can only be escaped through death and fantasies, Serú Girán’s lyrics are “firmly rooted in the realities of our country and our continent.”³⁶ Without explicitly addressing the country’s problems, the band nevertheless managed to express the malaise that affected its citizens. These lyrics are emblematic of the frame of the mind of the youth culture of rock that contrasted its deepest desires with the oppressive reality of the country’s social and political situation.

Rock nacional became the voice of an entire generation of young Argentines who suffered the hardships of *El Proceso*. The music became a rallying point for those people who felt that something was not right with the world in which they lived. For these young people, going to a concert and singing along with a thousand other voices was a way of claiming their own identities. Suffering oppression together gave them a sense of camaraderie which found its best expression in shared musical tastes. Moreover, rock became the vehicle for this self assertion precisely because it did not bow down to the moral dictates of the military regime. Rock proved to them that they were not alone in their suffering and it reinforced their beliefs in an alternate world where one could express oneself freely. It provided young people the opportunity to come together and create an identity of opposition that no soldier could ever take away from them. It was subversive rock.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina*, OAS/Ser.L/V/11.49 doc. 19 (Washington, D.C., 11 April 1980), 16.

² Patricia Weiss Fagen, “Repression and State Security” in *Fear at the Edge*, ed. Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992) 52.

³ Herbert C. Husser, *Argentine Civil-Military Relations: From Alfonsín to Menem* (NDU Press, 2002) 40.

⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁵ Gary W. Wynia, *The Politics of Latin American Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 231.

⁶ Junta Militar, "Proclama de *El Proceso* de reorganización nacional," in Sebastián Barros, *Orden, Democracia y Estabilidad* (Córdoba: Alción Editora, 2002) 52.

⁷ Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Repression and State Security" in *Fear at the Edge*, 53.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Husser 41.

¹⁰ Hilda López Laval, *Autoritarismo y Cultura: Argentina 1976-1983* (Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, 1995) 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Pablo Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina," *Popular Music*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (May 1987): 129-148.

¹³ Laval 99.

¹⁴ Beatriz Sarlo, "Strategies of the Literary Imagination," in *Fear at the Edge*, 239.

¹⁵ Ibid., 240.

¹⁶ Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina" 133.

¹⁷ Pipo Lernoud, "Editor's Letter," *Expreso Imaginario*, No. 48 (July, 1980).

¹⁸ Personal Correspondence, April 30, 2007.

¹⁹ Personal Correspondence, April 19, 2007.

²⁰ Laura in letter written to *Expreso Imaginario*, No. 48 (July, 1980).

²¹ Personal Correspondence, April 19, 2007.

²² Lernoud.

²³ Ricardo García Oliveri in letter written to *Expreso Imaginario*, No. 49 (August, 1980).

²⁴ Interview with the band Almendra from the magazine "Mordisco" in Pablo Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship..." 138.

²⁵ Captain Elías quoted in Sergio Pujol, *Rock y Dictadura* (Buenos Aires, Emecé Editores, 2005) 19.

²⁶ Sergio Pujol, *Rock y Dictadura* (Buenos Aires, Emecé Editores, 2005) 21.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁰ Pablo Vila "Argentina's Rock Nacional: The Struggle for Meaning," *Latin American Music Review*, Vol. 10, No.1 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 1 - 28.

³¹ Serú Girán, "Seminare" in *Serú Girán*, D&D Producciones Fonográficas SA, CD.

³² Serú Girán, "Viernes 3 Am" in *La Grasa de las Capitales*, D&D Producciones Fonográficas SA, CD.

³³ Serú Girán, "Canción de Alicia en el País" in *Bicicleta*, Universal/Polygram, CD.

³⁴ Jorge Nasser, "Serú Girán: Creciendo sin esquemas" *Expreso Imaginario* No. 48 (July, 1980).

³⁵ Sergio Pujol, *Rock y Dictadura*, (Buenos Aires, Emecé Editores, 2005,) 164.

³⁶ Lernoud.