

A Song For Nicaragua: Local Musicians Exchange Hearts and Arts in Central America—Jeffrey Steele

"INTERNACIONALISMO ES
... REVOLUCION!"

"And how late are we for *this* gig?" In this country of limited physical resources, we are beginning to grow accustomed to engagements not starting on time, and so no one insists on having the question answered. Our vehicles pull up alongside a courtyard of what was once an oligarch's estate, perched on a hill overlooking the capital city, and is currently being used to train police cadets. Our attention is immediately diverted to a courtyard-full of these cadets, who have begun cheering, stamping and clapping before any of us have even set foot on the ground. They continue to greet our arrival at a deafening pitch as we unload and set up. We stop to return the applause, and wonder amongst ourselves if we will be able to *play* anything to match this, our mere arrival, for net entertainment value. They chant their patriotic *consignas*: "Cultura es..." with the response, "fusil artistico de la Revolucion!" (Culture is the artistic rifle of the revolution). It is as though we are returning folk heroes.

We are a group of ten artists and eleven musicians from the United States, the "Artists' Brigade for the New Nicaragua"—the first of what we hope will be many cultural brigades to that country. With aims similar to those of the coffee and cotton brigades (organized by solidarity associations in Europe and the U.S. to assist the tireless people and the battered economy of Nicaragua in these labor-intensive harvests), the Artists' Brigade was assembled by "Arts for a New Nicaragua," a committee of people based in Boston who have experience with cultural work in Nicaragua. Recognizing the need not only for materials, but also for instruction, "Arts for a New Nicaragua" invited a variety of professional musicians and artists to form a brigade, in cooperation with the Sandinista Ministry of Culture.

"A cincuenta anos... Sandino vive!" (For fifty years, Sandino lives), the cadets shout. We then try to teach them something in Spanish, the chorus to a song by our Boston friend,



Paris Psanos, Brian Folkins and Alice St. Clair playing for troops in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, a region under contra attack.

Betsy Rose: "We may have come here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." (*Hemos llegados en distintos barcos, estamos en el mismo bote ahora.*) The song catches on well, musically and ideologically. I then break into a rock'n'roll poke at North American *machismo* (and tribute to Jimi Hendrix), "Got to drive an American Car." This prompts a cadet to leap onto the stage and dance devilishly next to the back-up vocalists. We follow with a somewhat nonsensical Latin number, "Porompompero," affording solos on violin and saxophone as well as large group vocal harmonies.

At the Nicaraguan end, our brigade was coordinated by Sonia Cano, who heads International Relations in the national office of the Centers for Popular Culture (CPC). In her mid-thirties, she has five children, two living at home, two studying in Cuba, and one stationed at the Front, where the Sandinista Popular Army and Militia fend off the U.S.-backed *contras*. The three of us who arrived three weeks ahead of the Brigade in order to facilitate preparations, were amazed and inspired by our first meeting with Sonia, in which she explained the aims and expectations the CPC had developed for our trip. The painters were not simply to paint murals; they were to work with Nicaraguans to de-

velop mural designs and impart techniques. The musicians were not coming just to entertain and give a few lessons; we were to be sent to military installations and hospitals, and to conduct a five-day seminar for music teachers from nearly every region of the country. From the first, and throughout the entire trip, we were respected as proven masters in our professions.

"Si Nicaragua vencio... El Salvador vencera!" (As Nicaragua triumphed, El Salvador will triumph), the cadets chant after Roger and Laura sing Fred Small's "No More Vietnams." We try to end our program with "Limpopo," a song about the liberation of Zimbabwe, but the cadets are so enthusiastic about these analogies to their own revolution that there appears to be no way to cap the flood of applause and chanting. So Debra brings out her puppet, and the two of them perform Carlos Mejia Godoy's famous "Nicaragua, Nicaraguita" on kazoo. Three cadets decide to prolong the concert further by playing the same author's "La Consigna."

The Nicaraguan songs we heard generally fell into two categories: *Romantica* and *Testimonial*—the latter describing personal experiences with the revolutionary process. Though there appeared to be a limited number

of stock strums and picking patterns in use, Nicaraguan singing was never limited in its intensity or passion. Regrettably, very talented musicians are forced to play horrible instruments, since they can't get decent guitars. I would like to suggest that someone go down there and make some.

We found ourselves frequently changing our repertoire as we got to know our audiences better, generally favoring the inclusion of more Spanish lyrics. We found ourselves scratching "Woke up this mornin' with my mind stayed on Freedom" when we discovered that the word "Halleluja" made audiences uneasy in the more conservative towns where church and state are most sharply polarized. Mike and I abridged our guitar and cello arrangement of the Adagio from Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez" to fit the needs of most of our audiences. Choosing the four songs required for a Sandinista TV program was difficult, given the eclectic nature of our repertoire; but when the show was aired a few days afterwards—we had to wander the streets of Grenada in search of a family with a TV set and space around it for fourteen of us—we were pleased with the effect.



The Sandinista government puts an unprecedented emphasis on cultural activities. In a country trying to pull itself back together after a revolutionary war, and struggling with economic sanctions, trade embargos and mercenary attacks—all sponsored by the richest country on earth—one might expect cultural work to be given low priority. But here is a government in which many leaders are practicing poets or writers; a government that came to power through a grass-roots movement originating in religious communities and schools; a government whose first major decree, once in power, prompted thousands of volunteers who *could* read and write to journey to the farthest corners of the

country in order to instruct those who couldn't; a government that, having now also learned from its mistakes in the Miskitu territory, respects, and actually promotes, the indigenous culture of each region. One of my students in the Music Seminar spoke proudly of how the regional CPC at which he teaches is better funded than many because it is located in a coffee-growing area under *contra* attack. The Sandinistas realize that their strength does not come from ammunition alone.

"Internacionalismo es...Revolucion!" This *consigna* appears to have originated at this particular cadet school in acknowledgement of the support given the Nicaraguan revolutionary process by *Internacionalistas*, citizens of countries all over the world. We walk up the hill to a vista of Managua, cadets buzzing around us full of questions..."When you go back to the United States, will you be punished for coming here?"..."Which of the women in your group are married?"...They all ask to have their pictures taken with each of the women..."What does one of those guitars cost in the U.S.?"...They shimmy up palm trees and cut us each a coconut. Then one cadet motions me aside: "Please, I want that when you return to your country, you tell everyone there what is really happening here. I know that the people of the United States are not the same as their government. They need to know the truth. That we are people just like them. That we want freedom. That we want peace. That we are being murdered at our borders. Can you bring the truth to the people of your country?...We don't want war."

He stands close to me and fixes his deep brown eyes on mine, and I realize that mine are moistened with tears. I reply in halting Spanish, "I am going to do...everything I can."

Jeffrey Steele is a composer, performer and teacher in the Boston area—his primary instrument being the classical guitar. He is currently writing an opera, La Tienda, based on events in Aguilares, El Salvador, in the year 1977. The other musicians on the Brigade were: Michael Babinchak, Laura Burns, Brian Folkins, Paris Psaros, Roger Rosen, Alice St. Clair, David Schanzer, Willy Sordill, Rosemarie Straijer and Debra Wise.

Part two by Roger Rosen to be in next issue.