

The music of the revolution; strength and hope in El Salvador

by Geoff Martin and Cathy McDonald

The evening was an unqualified success. Spirits were high in the Green Room of the Student Union Building after the performance at the Rebecca Cohn auditorium of Yolocamba Ita last Saturday night. The concert-goers were discussing the spirited music of 'the Yolos', a five-man musical group from El Salvador. The young musicians had a message to bring, to inform people of their hope and their struggle to create a new peace in their country.

The message may have been somber but their medium wasn't and by the end of the concert the 900 Haligonians who had packed the auditorium were on their feet, dancing and singing in Spanish.

However, the revolution seemed to be closer at hand the next morning when two Gazette staff members interviewed band member, Guillermo Cuellar. Guillermo waited, subdued, for the first question. He didn't seem interested in small talk and spoke as if each word had its own burden. Yes, he'd been in Halifax once before, and yes, the group would perform at cities as far west as Winnipeg on this tour.

"We go to Mexico after each tour, stay one month...two months, and then go again."



Guillermo Cuellar discusses his country, his people, and his struggle.

Yolocamba Ita is not touring to make their music or their band more popular. They are working for the revolution in El Salvador. The band left the country two years ago to use their music to inform people of the situation in their country, to raise support and money for the struggle against the repressive ruling junta.

The band members, Alvar Castillo, Franklin Quezada, Roberto Quezada, Guillermo Cuellar and Paulino Espinoza, work in the movement under the direction of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario). The FDR is a coalition created in 1980 when the major popular

organisations came together to co-ordinate the civil war. The FDR co-ordinates the movement that will one day create a new society, says Guillermo Cuellar. It works to educate and politicise people and to organise the struggle.

The FMNR (Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation) is the underground military vanguard of the FDR. Since 1979, 38,000 Salvadoreans have been killed. The Central American country is a bit bigger than Cape Breton.

Gazette: Your songs sound very happy. Are they happy songs? Are you happy when you sing them?

Cuellar: Yes, most of our songs are happy because our people have a history of being, well, not happy, but very strong. Some songs, some words, are very serious. I would say that our songs are strong, as my people are.

Gazette: What was the purpose of the audience participation at the concert?

Cuellar: In my country we understand that we can't make a change without the participation of the people. Similarly, outside we understand that we can't do the solidarity work only with a few persons. We want the audience to feel the same way that we feel in our songs. We don't agree with concerts where the singers are very serious and they don't laugh. They sing very nice, but they are not communicating anything to the people. We don't want that the people only listen, we want the people to get up and do something. The important thing is the participation of the people.

Gazette: You said last night that you sometimes sing songs to keep people awake during an occupation. What kind of situations are those and do they happen often?

Cuellar: Yes, we have a lot of experience doing this. For example, in occupying the cathedral. The popular masses would organize a demonstration against the government, for example against a massacre in the countryside, or against a strike that was put down. Once we were inside the cathedral, the police and the national guard would encircle it and want to get inside. They know they can't because it's very difficult for the national guard to come in and get everybody out by force.

Gazette: It'd be bad PR?

Cuellar: Yes. I think now maybe they would do it. They are doing many things.

But at that time we stayed inside for five days and it was very important for the people to keep the same spirit all the time, not to be afraid, not to be nervous, and to keep awake the whole night to keep guard. The music was the way to keep the people awake. With the music dancing, and with the music laughing, it is like a liberation inside yourself. This is the important role music has now in El Salvador.

(In an occupation in) the Ministry of Labour (building) it was the first experience with us with the music. We were there for 10 or 11 days inside. We had someone very important in the government with us so we knew we were a little bit safe. The national guard had shotguns pointed, but they wouldn't do anything. So we had a very nice



Yolocamba Ita played at the Rebecca Cohn last Saturday

experience with the music. We had parties, small theatre for example, some poetry...we understood then that cultural workers could participate very strongly inside the movement.

Organizing a revolution; education, politics and weapons

In 1980, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), a coalition of eleven political groups opposed to the military government, formed in El Salvador.

At that time, the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN) also formed. A coalition of anti-government militias unified under one command, the FMLN takes its name from Farabundo Marti, the peasant communist leader of the 1932 uprising in which 30,000 peasants were killed by the army.

In fact, this past Tuesday, October 12, the FMLN has launched its largest offensive of the year, east of San Salvador.

Gazette: What is the FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front) and what does it do?

Cuellar: Okay, well, the FDR has a background in the popular mass organizations, which have been working in the country since 1974. In my country there are five mass organizations. In the beginning each one was working by itself for the people.

In 1979, October 15, you know that in my country there was a coup. After this the popular organizations made a big organization called the National Coordination of Popular Mass Organizations.

Late in the year the Social Democrats (an opposition party) and all the organizations like the two Universities, the National University and Catholic University, professional organizations and others joined together and they made the Democratic Revolutionary Front in 1980.

Gazette: It's been said the FDR is a coalition of the right and left. Is that true?

Cuellar: No, no, it's not true, not the right and the left.

Gazette: By that they mean the FDR encompasses many aspects of the political spectrum.

Cuellar: Umm, no, I don't think so. We have to say that when you have a big organization with many smaller organizations inside, you have to be careful about the leaders. This is one of the main problems in the unity. We understand that the leaders inside the union are the popular mass organizations, and inside the popular mass organizations are the workers and the peasants. So you have a big unity that is organised and is based in the class interests of the workers and peasants.

Gazette: There are eleven groups in the FDR, aren't there?

Cuellar: That's right. For example, there are five mass organizations: revolutionary organizations, students, teachers, church groups, the Social Christian Movement, the Social Democratic Party, and some other ones that I can't remember right now.

Gazette: The American media tries to play the FDR as a Marxist-controlled group. How do you react to that?

Cuellar: Marxist, well, our unity is built as I told you before around the class interests of the workers. This is really clear, it is not, for example, the same as the Chilean experience, which was another kind of unity, very different. Popular Unity in Chile didn't have clear class interests. In Nicaragua, all the people fought against one person (government leader Somoza). Here we can see one class against another class (in El Salvador) as most people are peasants who work the land and live in really bad conditions. And there are not too many industrial workers as there aren't too many factories in my country.

Gazette: And then there's the '14 families'.

Cuellar: Right, the oligarchy. The main point is that it is not a fight between the people and one person, but one class against another class. Is the struggle Marxist? Well, I don't really know, but the direction inside the FDR is really clear to us.

Gazette: About two years ago, wasn't the leadership of the FDR abducted and murdered?

Cuellar: Yes, November 27, 1980, two years ago, yes, and the conditions are worse now than back then.