

From Cuyo to the Seaboard: Irish Roots in Popular Argentine Music

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Abstract

The vast territory of the Argentine Republic contains areas with various geographical characteristics where specific musical forms are developed, an expression of the cultures endemic to each place. Because of its character as a metropolis, Buenos Aires was the centre of its music, the tango, and was the sounding board and the platform for the diffusion of regional musical rhythms. In the 1960s, this diffusion was dedicated to the rhythms of the Argentine Northwest, the zamba and the chacarera, and the groups that cultivated them. Before this, it had been the centre of Cuyo music, in the 1940s. 1980 was the high point of coastal music, especially the chamamé. As important representatives of these last two musical trends, Buenaventura Luna and the Sheridan brothers were examples of Argentines of Irish origin who participated actively in the creation and interpretation of the music of their respective regions.

In September 2009, it was twenty years since the traffic accident in Bella Vista in the Province of Corrientes in the Northeast of Argentina. That accident took the lives of Joaquín and Miguel Ángel Sheridan, known as 'Gringo' and 'Michel'. They participated, together with other chamamé musicians, in an artistic tour that they had planned to conclude at a popular music festival in France to which they had been invited.

Joaquín Sheridan and Julio Cáceres had set up the group Los de Imaguará in 1977 in the City of Mercedes, in the centre of the Province of Corrientes. The group also included two guitarists, one of whom, from 1983, was Miguel Ángel Sheridan. During that period they recorded five albums, including *Viajeros de Sueños*, *Chamamecero*, *Nuestro Canto* and *Memoria de la Sangre*.

'Gringo' and 'Michel' Sheridan pulled out of Los de Imaguará in 1986 to set up a new group named Quinteto Reencuentro, together with their brother Santiago, known as 'Bocha', Ricardo 'Tito' Gómez and Orlando Caroso Gutiérrez. Quinteto Reencuentro debuted in June 1986 in the City of Corrientes. At the time of the tragedy, the group had recorded three albums, *Neike chamigo*, *El canto de nuestra gente* and *Por el viejo camino*. The popular resonance that they achieved in such a short time was extraordinary. They broke records in audiences with a musical repertoire that rescued successes

of the 1950s from oblivion. Famous chamamés, such as 'Basilio Magos', a chamamé that was a success for the Santa Ana Quartet, that had been forgotten, recovered their place in Joaquín's bandoneon, 'Michel's voice and his duet with 'Bocha'. Julián Zini, a Catholic priest, provided a strong spiritual impression reciting poems during the group's performances. In the year 1991, "Bocha" Sheridan returned to the group. The results of this new group were the albums *Al fin de cuentas* and *Por este sueño azul*.

The Sheridan brothers, three of a family of seven children of Andrés Aníbal Sheridan and Eva Jesús Ramona Vallejos, dedicated to cattle-raising at the 'Paraje San Salvador', knew how to express emotion in music and in singing. In order to do this, they chose the musical form of chamamé, happy and stimulating, which reached all of the peoples of the Argentine Mesopotamia. Andrés, the father of these musicians, and his five brothers, were sons of Felipe Santiago and grandsons of Philip Sheridan and María Cook. Philip, who had been born in Ireland in 1857, began the life of the Sheridans in the countryside of Corrientes at the beginning of the twentieth century, raising Aberdeen Angus cows and Romey Marsh sheep. Still, in the City of Mercedes, in the centre of the Province of Corrientes, you can see the red stone house that Philip acquired in order to settle there with his family.

On the other side of Argentina, in Huaco in the department of Jáchal in the area before the mountain range in the Province of San Juan, Buenaventura Luna was born on 19 January 1906. He was a journalist at the daily *La Reforma*, the information organ of the Unión Cívica Radical Bloquista, and later at his own newspaper, *La Montaña*, with the motto 'Learn as if you will live forever. Live as if you will die tomorrow.'

After this, he distanced himself from politics, and from the graphic media he moved to radio. On Radio Graffigna, today Radio Colón de San Juan, he produced and directed various programmes during the 1930s ('A.Z. Zafarrancho Oral' and 'Doble Zafarrancho Vocal'), before travelling to Buenos Aires in 1938 with *La tropilla de Huachi Pampa*. From 1940, he directed a programme on Radio El Mundo in Buenos Aires that was called 'El fogón de los arrieros', for which he wrote scripts in verse that were later dramatised as a radio soap opera. To speak of 'El fogón de los arrieros' is to mention the most listened-to programme in radio during those years, with the presence that radio had in city and countryside homes. 'El fogón de los arrieros' was the scene where not only *La tropilla de Huachi Pampa*, but also *Los manseros de Tulum* and *Los pastores de Abra Pampa* found their place.

That was how figures such as Antonio Tormo began to achieve celebrity. He arrived with Buenaventura Luna as part of *La tropilla de Huachi Pampa* and in 1942, he separated from the group in order to start his solo career as 'el cantor de las cosas nuestras', the first great success as a solo artist in Argentine traditional music. From his place on 'El fogón de los arrieros', Buenaventura Luna broadcast Cuyo music to the Argentines, giving the first inspiration for the diffusion of traditional music, through groups that remain in the popular memory, such as *Quilla Huasi*, the last and probably the most remembered of the traditional groups in whose creation Buenaventura Luna was involved.

This programme, as well as '6 estampas argentinas' and 'La voz del hogar', on the same

station; and 'El canto perdido' and 'Al paso que van los años' on Radio Splendid, were the platform that made Buenaventura Luna into an undeniable reference in Argentine radio. He always found space to make reflections of a philosophical or sociological nature, in which he cited José Ortega y Gasset or José Hernández.

At least forty of the poems he wrote were published after his death: in 1962, an analysis of his work and an anthology of twenty poems were released in a publication that it is impossible to find today in public libraries: *Buenaventura Luna, mensaje de tierra adentro*. In 1985, as part of an homage to him by the National Senate thirty years after his death, *Buenaventura Luna, su vida y su canto* was published, which is also difficult to find today. In this work, we can see a fine language, where metaphor and personifications are included, using the sonnet, *alejandrinos*, and the Spanish traditional octosyllabic.

In the field of popular song, he is the author of 'Vallecito', 'Zamba de las toderías', 'Puentecito de mi río' and more than two hundred other songs. He used indigenous terms, archaisms and *criollismos* that were composed according to the meter of bagualas, bailecitos, cifras, cuecas, chacareras, estilos, gatos, milongas, tonadas, triunfos, waltzes and zambas. *Tributo a Buenaventura Luna*, published by the provincial body of the San Juan Tourist Office and *Un homenaje a Buenaventura Luna, su vida y su obra*, produced in 1996 by Meloepa, are two discographic registers that recover a part of the enormous quantity of lyrics to which Buenaventura Luna put music. This allows us to recognise that he was also a musician: in one sense, yes, although he did not know how to play any instrument, nor how to write a score on a pentagram: he whistled the music and dictated it in this way to his companions, who put it to paper and to keyboard. The result was a new song with lyrics by Buenaventura Luna and music by Hermes Vieyra, Eduardo Falú and Oscar Valles.

But what did Buenaventura Luna have to do with Ireland? One hundred years before he was born, during the first of the British Invasions of

the River Plate, the soldier John Dougherty arrived as part of a battalion. The British troops were confined to various provinces of the Viceroyalty. Almost three hundred of them were destined for San Juan, John Dougherty and his brother William among them, and they arrived there in December 1806. John Dougherty married María Mercedes Cabot and went to live with her in Tucumán, where he came to be known as Dojorti. One of the two children of this marriage, Eusebio Dojorti Cabot, settled in San Juan and married Josefa Maso there in 1837. From this marriage, Eusebio Dojorti was born. He exercised the role of sub-delegate of the government in Jáchal and married Josefa Delfina Suárez Tello, the proprietor of a mill in Huaco, a village next to that city. Eusebio and Josefa are the parents of Ricardo Dojorti, the first *intendente* of Jáchal, who married Urbellina Rocco and gave birth to another Eusebio: Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti.

In this village of Huaco, next to the old mill, Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti shared his childhood with workers and peasants that worked for the family, understood their ambitions and difficulties and took upon himself the commitment to give voice to those feelings and to fight for a better life for all. In order to

express those ideals, Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti borrowed the name of one of the workers of his parents' house, Buenaventura Luna, who was in charge of the herding of the animals and responsible for milking, and who passed on to the young poet the first stories by the campfires or on the saddles.

He left Huaco and Jáchal at a very young age, but everyone there still remembers him. They remember him as Buenaventura Luna, but also as 'El Cabezón (Big Head)', in what can also be considered a distinctive characteristic of an Irish person among the *criollos*. Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti, Buenaventura Luna, died in Buenos Aires on 29 July 1955 from cancer of the larynx, which deprived him of his voice as a singer, though not of his love for song.

Because of the origin of their families and their surnames, both Buenaventura Luna and the Sheridan brothers are recognisably Irish, but they are also recognisable for their love for music as an expression of the feelings of the land in which they were born.

Eduardo Cormick

Notes

1 Eduardo Cormick has received literary prizes such as the Iniciación de Novela from the National Secretary of Education for his novel *Almacén y despacho de bebidas El Alba* (1992), the Joven Literatura prize from the Fundación Fortabat (1996), and Edenor - El arte de la novela corta from the Fundación El Libro for his book *Quema su memoria*, which features the character of William Brown in his old age as protagonist (2004). He also published *Entre gringos y criollos* in 2006, comprising narratives about rural and urban life in the province of Buenos Aires.

