

**Jan Jerzy Najdowski**

ORCID: 0009-0000-6541-4587

## **ARGENTINE ROCK AS A SOURCE OF NATIONAL MEMORY: A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND ITS VALIDATION**

### **Introduction**

While there is a lot of research on Latin-American music regarding its way of addressing certain social and political problems, it is less often perceived as a source of collective memory and as a way to share personal experience with others using artistic means. Argentine rock is broadly considered a remarkable music genre which played a substantial part in developing the country's society in terms of artistic and cultural awareness, creating life-lasting bonds between listeners and helping them survive one of the most dangerous and politically unstable periods in the history of Argentina, that is, from the late 1960s until the end of the military dictatorship in the early 1980s. Regardless of the passage of time, ballads of such notable Argentine bands like Sui Generis and Pescado Rabioso are still present in popular culture and their lyrics painted on city walls.

The main objective of this article is to examine the role of Argentine rock as a repository of national memory and its role in validating the collective experience of the generations that witnessed the development of the genre leading to its heyday in the early 1970s and whose shared memories may reverberate through contemporary history of Argentina and other Spanish-speaking countries. The first part of the research offers a summary of the historical and cultural circumstances of the rise of Argentine rock, along with the ideas, objectives and motivations of its most renowned representatives, besides their artistic activity. It is followed by a description of the landmark Argentine rock song, "Para quién canto yo entonces", which brings together the main themes of the genre

and stands out as a protest song, offering a sincere and deeply self-conscious point of view. Consequently, the current author provides a philological translation of the lyrics from Spanish into English. The subsequent section outlines a more individual example of counterculture in Argentine rock, which concerns the life and work of Luis Alberto Spinetta (1950–2012), a renowned musician and poet native to Buenos Aires. It focuses on Spinetta's major inspiration and his links to the philosophy and attitude of the avant-garde French poet, Antonine Artaud. Afterwards, the current author provides his own philological translation of the song *Por*, taken from Spinetta's most acclaimed album *Artaud*, released in 1973. The text is considered as controversial and revolutionary in terms of language and poetic imagery, which marks the singularity of the author's way of retaining his experience and sharing it to the public. The respective songs suggest two different ways of contributing to collective memory and validating it; the first is a subtly elaborated protest song and the second constitutes an assault on the canons of popular music and introduces an intimate, unedited message.

### **Emergence of Argentine national rock in the River Plate region: An overview**

It would not suffice to limit a discussion of the origins of the musical genre called *Argentine national rock*, which emerged under the influence of local folklore and modern Western music of the 1960s, to a mere description of its distinctive features, complexity, and an analysis of its most notable examples. The emergence and development of that cultural phenomenon has its roots in several decades prior to the artistic activity of such songwriters as Gustavo Santaolalla with his groundbreaking group *Arco Iris* or the band *Sui Generis* from Buenos Aires, renowned until today. All the aforementioned representatives of the genre created their works in Argentina's capital, in a city whose cultural diversity and connections with the countries of Anglo-Saxon musical culture anchored Argentine national rock in the Platine region.

Argentina's turbulent history after the achievement of independence in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century involved repetitive coups d'état, periods of persistent military dictatorships and dominance of populist political parties interspersed with brief stretches of peace and development. Works of art were created in the shadow of authoritarian governments, perpetual crises and other adversities. It was particularly music that gained great importance among society, which is attributed to the fact that text garners more attention when it is amplified by the vehicle of music.

Valeria Manzano (2014, 394) points out that national rock played multiple cultural roles in Argentine society. The members of certain political movements, particularly the enthusiasts of left-wing Peronism, considered the musical current as a social response to government-imposed norms of behaviour. Furthermore, rock in Spanish was often perceived as a sign of “national liberation from neo-colonialism” (Manzano, 2014, 394). The latter context is best understood in light of the fact that rock songs gained popularity not only in Argentina, but also in other Latin American countries, such as Chile and Colombia, which shared the yoke of repression and organised institutional violence with the Argentines. In any case, it was the younger generations who firmly opposed all forms of authoritarian models of government, both in the cultural and political environment (Manzano, 2014, 394).

“Native” rock music became enormously popular in Argentina in the late 1960s; especially the period between 1966 and 1976 stands out as a decade considered vital for the growth of the movement. It was the time when the foundations of this musical genre were laid: a combination of tango and other genres of traditional music and rock harmonies and rhythms (Vila, 1989, 1–28, cited in Manzano, 2014, 394). The originality of this cultural current does not only lie in blending tradition with modernity. In contrast to their counterparts in the Anglo-Saxon music scene, numerous representatives of Argentine rock primarily pursued artistic creativity rather than seeking fame and commercial success. As regards the historical circumstances of the formation of Argentine cultural trends related to the emergence of rock decades after, it is vital to mention the time of Juan Domingo Perón, who was the president of the country between 1946 and 1955, as his government ended in a military coup d’état (Manzano, 2014, 395). The latter event started an era of political instability marked by the prohibition of the dissemination of Perón’s ideology. During that time, a profound mistrust towards conservative thought arose in Argentine society, which eventually resulted in another coup d’état in 1966, led by General Juan Carlos Onganía. Along these lines, institutional control of society was strengthened. The authorities covered their actions behind a will to protect the nation against the influence of communism (Manzano, 2014, 395). Despite repetitive acts of intense censorship of published content, the Argentine rock movement continued to grow dynamically, particularly in the first four years of its formation (1966–1970). It is remarkable that in Argentina, especially from the beginnings of the seventh decade of the 20th century, music did not necessarily maintain such close links with the transmission of left-wing revolutionary ideas. The notion of rebellion and search of freedom were considered from a vastly individual point of view. Consequently, there was

notable polarisation in the Argentine national rock scene. To some extent, music often constituted a space for criticism of contemporary authorities, connecting rock figures with members of political movements of the revolutionary left-wing. Various representatives of the academic or military sphere insisted that musicians should support the revolution or “collective liberation” (Manzano, 2014, 397) more firmly. Especially the year 1974 influenced existing themes in Argentine rock music, due to right-wing Peronist groups returning to power. According to their narrative, youth was synonymous with perversion, danger to political stability and drug consumption. Obviously, due to the cruellest military dictatorship in the history of Argentina established in March of 1976, from that coup onwards, there was a noticeable decline of Argentine rock culture, especially in terms of vigorous, critical attitude. These last two years before the Dirty War brought immense creativity to the Argentine rock landscape.

Before I introduce the figure of Luis Alberto Spinetta, a representative of Argentine national rock, I would like to provide a relevant example of a struggle that formed a part of creative works by the Argentinian rock artists text from the song called “Para quién canto yo entonces/For whom do I sing?”<sup>1</sup> written in the turbulent year of 1974 by Charly García for his famous duo Sui Generis:

Para quién canto yo entonces	Yo canto para esa gente Porque también soy uno de	Yo canto para usted Porque atrasa los relojes
Si los humildes nunca me entienden	ellos Ellos escriben las cosas	El que ya jamás podrá cambiar
Si los hermanos se cansan De oír las palabras que	Y yo les pongo melodía y versos	Y no se dio cuenta nunca Que su casa se derrumba
oyeron siempre	Si cuando gritan vienen los	
Si los que saben no necesitan que les enseñen	otros Y entonces callan	
Si él que yo quiero todavía está dentro de tu vientre	Si solo puedo ser más honesto que mi guitarra	

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<sup>1</sup> The following is the author's translation of the song.

For whom do I sing then?	I sing to all these people,	I sing to you, Sir
If the humble don't	for I'm also one of them	As you're the one who slows
understand	They write their things	down the clocks
If my brothers get bored	down	The one who will never
Of the words they're	And I assign them melody	change
always told	and verses	And who's never noticed
If those who know don't	If, when they shout, some	That his house is falling
want to be taught	others come and they get	apart
If the one I await is still in	silent	
your womb	If I only could be more	
	sincere than my guitar	

The song is one of the most remarkable and iconic traces of Argentinian rock culture, as its main poetic images and themes constitute somewhat a summary of the genre and its historical background. The opening verses reflect the feeling of futility which affected so many songwriters at the time, whose work was expected to be a platform for supporting certain ideologies, while their message was rather full of raw, youth experience, sincere to the core. Therefore, the following verses illustrate the solitude of a struggling singer, along with his constant pursuit of a sense of belonging and a desire to represent the youth and speak for them: “ellos escriben las cosas y yo les pongo melodía y versos / they write their things and I assign them melody and lyrics”. In addition, the speaker mentions the following significant and recurrent patterns of the history of Argentina: repetitive coups and the distance between the government and the citizens. This panoramic image directs the light of our investigation to a singular figure, which seemed to be fiercely independent and politically uninvolved, and yet one of the most notable artists of the movement, Luis Alberto Spinetta, whose songs provide an example of an intimate and individual heritage which also constitutes a part of collective memory.

### **Luis Alberto Spinetta: An individual experience of retaining collective memory**

Even though the musical and poetical art of Luis Alberto Spinetta is often considered as boldly individualist, probably due to the views represented by those Argentine activists who stood by assigning ideological role to modern and popular music in the 1960s and 1970s, a closer depiction of his creative motivation is necessary. It would be difficult to comprehend his message

without taking the historical and political background of his life into account. At this point, I will take a closer look at the individual role of the musician as a more intimate sign of a particular time in the development and crisis of Argentina.

Gabriel Meza (2017, 260) places Luis Alberto Spinetta (1950–2012) among the most outstanding figures of Argentine national rock and notes that the recognition of the Buenos Aires-born artists was not a fleeting fame arising from the popularity of such albums as *Almendra*, *Almendra II*, *Pescado Rabioso 2*, *Artaud* or *Durazno Sangrando* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the contrary, his legacy is recognised until today and his popularity has not faded despite the emergence of so many musical genres and the rapid advancement of sound production in recent decades.

For instance, Spinetta's most remarkable album entitled *Artaud* and released in 1973, written in honour of the eponymous French author Antonin Artaud, represents an individual's struggle against external and internal adversities, at the same time being an example of the close link between literary works and music in the Argentine national rock scene (Meza, 2017, 266). All the lyrics were inspired by the fundamental concepts of the artistic legacy of the French playwright and poet whom Spinetta admired so much. The songwriter decided to follow the path of Artaud in terms of lyrical solutions, the value of introspection and the stimuli that guided the Frenchman instead of devoting attention merely to issues of grief and similar feelings (Diez, 2006, 290, cited in Meza, 2017, 264). A successful record and powerful, multisensorial transmission of experience and memory that characterises the art of Spinetta is thoroughly examined in the investigation carried out by Paola Andrea López (2019, 151–170). The analysis synthesises the playwright's point of view regarding the role of theatre and highlights the importance of a combined expression of emotion, experience and meaning (López, 2019, 162) through extralinguistic means, such as dance, gestures and any kind of disciplined bodily movement, which corresponds to the entire submission of rock lyrics to rhythmic rigour and other elements related to music; the latter component is mentioned by Meza (2017, 262–263). Furthermore, López (2019, 151–170) outlines the following issue: the link between the artist's life and experience and their work, which also enhances the authenticity of the artist and enables them to perform a function described in the following way:

El artista como héroe, y el heroísmo de Artaud, se reconocen en tanto proponen una nueva dimensión de lo artístico y de lo estético, en la que el

creador es punto de partida de lo creado, expresando con mayor intensidad una realidad que no le es ajena, de la que es consciente y con base en dicha conciencia, crea<sup>2</sup> (López, 2019, 163).

Such a vision of the artist coincides with the value of introspection and self-knowledge, which is also mentioned in Juan Carlos Diez's interview with Luis Alberto Spinetta (Diez, 2006, 289–291). This approach introduces the vision of the author as an individual truly alienated from the society due to the common lack of understanding of his work and whose action is a display of bravery. Luis Alberto Spinetta even uses the term *kamikaze* (Diez, 2006, 287–288) in reference to this kind of artist, particularly regarding their rebellious nature, the risk they take and their unavoidable clash with the opposing aesthetic needs of society (Diez, 2006: 287–288). Before I move on to comment on the creative attitude of Spinetta as a unique form of acquiring and sharing experience, I would like to recall the following statement of Antonin Artaud himself:

Lo importante es poner la sensibilidad, por medios ciertos, en un estado de percepción más profunda y más fina, y tal es el objeto de la magia y de los ritos de los que el teatro es sólo un reflejo<sup>3</sup> (Artaud, 2001, 104, cited in López, 2019, 168).

In regard to this tendency to unveil the hidden and obscure layers of personal experience and identity, it is reasonable to assess the link between surrealism and the creative attitude of Spinetta. Restiffo introduces the origins of the aforementioned current in the following way:

El surrealismo surgió en la Europa de entreguerras, en la Francia del fin de siècle. Intentó ser una respuesta al empobrecimiento progresivo de los valores humanos y espirituales, una forma de salvaguardar la propia integridad amenazada por una sociedad hipócrita y corrupta, un ensayo de buscar la libertad en el ensueño, en el propio Yo interior<sup>4</sup> (Restiffo, 2005, 502).

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<sup>2</sup> “The artist as a hero, and Artaud’s heroism, are recognised insofar as they propose a new dimension of art and aesthetics, in which the creator is the starting point of what is created, expressing a reality that is not alien to them with greater intensity, of which they are aware, and based on such awareness, they create”.

<sup>3</sup> “It is crucial to place sensibility, by certain means, in a deeper and finer state of perception, and such is the object of magic and rituals, that theatre is merely a reflection of”.

<sup>4</sup> “Surrealism emerged in interwar Europe, in fin de siècle France. It was intended to be a response to the progressive impoverishment of human and spiritual values, a way



These circumstances indicate a similarity between the surrealist movement and the early Argentine rock music of the late 1960s, with Luis Alberto Spinetta as one of its leading artists. What united the representatives of the movement was the intention to confront both traditional music genres and artists who imitated Western trends, creating trivial lyrics centred on superficial pleasures. The first authors of this current opted for writing in Spanish and expressing more complex issues (Restiffo, 2005, 503). In addition, Restiffo (2005, 511) enumerates more properties of Spinetta's art which may be attributed to surrealism: the correspondence between music and lyrics with respect to their vagueness, spontaneity and loose expression, the songwriter's belief in his ability to alter the contemporary art world with his creation and the desire to stay independent of popular and commodified music. However, the properties of the melody and the imprecise compositional methodology, scarcely defined by the songwriter, do not allow us to classify Spinetta as a representative of surrealism. Within this context, I will provide the lyrics of the song called *Por / For*<sup>5</sup> from the landmark album *Artaud* published in 1973, which might be considered as the most illustrative of his work and the absurd use of language visible in associations between transcendental themes and random words. Due to such a spontaneous, unrestrained and rebellious way of writing, many songs written by Spinetta resemble unedited drafts, and, consequently, fly in the face of contemporary musical and cultural tendencies, being a message causing confusion, misunderstanding and humour:

Árbol, hoja, salto, luz	Hijo, cama, menta, sien	Hombre, rayo, felpa, sed
Aproximación	Rey, fin, sol, amigo	Extremidad, insolación
Mueble, lana, gusto, pie	Cruz	Parecer
Té, mar, gas, mirada	Alga, dado, cielo, riel	Clavo, coito, Dios, temor
Nube, loba, dedo, cal	Estalactita, mirador	Mujer por
Gesticulador	Corazón	
Tree, leaf, jump, light	Son, bed, mint, temple	Man, lightning, plush, thirst
Approximation	King, end, Sun, friend	Extremity, insolation
Furniture, wool, taste, foot	Cross	Opinion
Tea, sea, gas, look	Seaweed, die, sky, rail	Nail, intercourse, God,
Cloud, she-wolf, finger, lime	Stalactite, vantage point	terror
Gesticulator	Heart	Woman for

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of safeguarding one's integrity menaced by a hypocritical and corrupt society, an attempt to seek freedom in a dream, in one's inner self".

<sup>5</sup> The following is the author's translation of the song.



For Ruíz (2012, 129), this particular song reveals Spinetta's tendency to use language in an absurd, hilarious and playful way. The blending of two contrasting, dissimilar realities, which are sacredness and irony, may be considered one of the most distinctive and original features of the songwriter's output. The song, whose title consists of the preposition *por*, is an extreme example of such attitude. In terms of content, *Por* is entirely composed of nouns which belong to diverse semantic categories, such as: vegetable world, bodily matters, objects of everyday use, landscape observation, sexual activity, faith and spirituality. Such an impressionist constellation of words can be a starting point of reconstructing a story, based on searching for coherence between respective nouns. It is worth noting that the final verse of the song ends with a preposition *por*, which cannot complete a phrase. This selection indicates a separation between the syntactic order and the semantic content. Ruíz (2012, 130) notes that some significantly symbolical nouns, which refer to crucial matters, not to mention their power of suggestion (tree, light, son, Sun, cross), coexist with those that describe trivial or everyday matters (wool, seaweed, rail, plush, extremity). In such a combination, what stands out is the majesty and weight of the sacred, somehow clashing with the light playfulness of language (Ruíz, 2012, 130). Besides, such vague and spontaneous combination of nouns perfectly complements the wandering, reflective melody of the song.

## Conclusion

The two examples of Argentine national rock analysed above, respectively "Para quién canto yo entonces" written by Charly García and interpreted by his Buenos Aires band Sui Generis from 1974 and *Por*, a song by Luis Alberto Spinetta, illustrate two significant examples of retaining an individual experience and transmitting such content to a vast group of listeners, contributing to the national memory with artistic activity. The first example of an instrumental-lyrical style typical of Argentine rock appears to be an attempt to represent the generations who lived in the shadow of authoritarian governments and senseless promiscuity in the early 1970s. The second song, written by Spinetta as part of his most remarkable music album *Artaud*, portrays an individualist and fairly unbiased way of opposing the musical trends of the day and the traditional use of language and grammar, along with adding some kind of shock value to songwriting, without supporting a particular social group nor expressing a sense of belonging.

Both the first and the latter point of view expressed in respective songs validate a national, collective experience shared by Argentine citizens; such shared

knowledge and emotions are transmitted in the songs in two dissimilar ways. While the first analysed song, 'Para quién canto yo entonces' by Charly García can be perceived as a vivid form of resistance and an attempt to spread a questioning attitude, representing the feelings of youngsters who shared the author's point of view and situation, the second song appears as a distant memory of a turbulent decade, but also as a way to alleviate the composer's own anxiety, according to the conversation between Spinetta and Diez (2006, 291). Under these circumstances, the author himself becomes part of his own audience, sharing a potentially unedited, inner monologue, completely unlikely to achieve commercial success in a song, but being a truly authentic experience turned into music and words.

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