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Rock & Resistance: Pinochet, Censorship and the Powerful Rock & Roll of Chile

By Ashley Cendejas

Between 1973 and 1990, General Augusto Pinochet ruled the South American Republic of Chile. Under Pinochet's authoritarian military dictatorship, the people of Chile were subjected to nearly three decades of violence and censorship. Under the heavy surveillance of Pinochet's regime, authors, broadcasters, journalists, and even influential members of society were suppressed from speaking against the Pinochet regime. These oppressive measures of silencing opposition directly led to the creation and evolution of alternative creative outlets for victims of the government's widespread oppression and persecution. This essay explores the origins, growth, and long-term impact of Chilean rock music as it developed as a platform to protest or bring attention to the atrocities of the Pinochet dictatorship. Through an analysis of surviving archival records, musical lyrics, and published interviews of Chilean rock musicians, including the prominent band *Los Prisioneros*, my essay aims to carry out two central objectives. First, it will establish the damaging effects of the widespread violence of Pinochet's reign over Chile during the latter twentieth century through the Chilean rock artists' perspectives and their influence on the public. Secondly, primarily through my analysis of lyrics and the testimonials of musicians, I argue that Chilean rock music was an act of bravery and a medium of resistance against the injustices, censorship, tyranny, and brutal violence of the Pinochet regime.

Prior to Pinochet's rise to power, Chilean President Salvador Allende had introduced revolutionary policies that were met with resistance from some members of the Chilean government. Born and raised in Santiago, Salvador Allende was Chile and South America's first socialist president. As the leader of the Popular Socialist Party, Allende's socialist policies clashed with the capitalist members of the Chilean government, contradicting the morals of

influential conservative leaders, which placed Allende on a dangerous pedestal.¹ Along with influential Chilean politicians and prominent Chilean military leaders, like General Pinochet, the government of the United States of America also considered Allende a threat to capitalist rule in the Americas.² With fear that Chile would add to the list of socialist countries such as Cuba and the Soviet Union, the American government's involvement in Chilean politics became especially overt. The Secretary of State of the United States at the time, Henry Kissinger, described the Chilean government under Allende's rule as a "challenge to the United States and the stability of the Western Hemisphere."³ Considering this characterization of the Allende government, the United States backed the overthrow of the Chilean government, arming and helping General Pinochet and the Chilean military to plan and execute a coup d'état on September 11, 1973.

This sudden and unjust rise to power led to the torture of members of the Chilean public who opposed the overthrow of the Allende government.⁴ Any person with significance in Chilean society who had public resistance against the dictatorship posed a threat to Pinochet and became subject to severe, life-altering torture. Notable groups that participated in anti-Pinochet resistance included university professors, musical artists, lawyers, doctors, and students. The torture that many endured was heinous, resulting in mass trauma among the population. As addressed in the *Recintos* archive assembled by *Museo de la Memoria y Derechos Humanos*, a museum dedicated to highlighting the Chilean public's experience with human rights violations during the Pinochet regime, the dictatorship inflicted wicked and atrocious crimes against

¹ Hugo Zemelman and Patricio Leon, "Political Opposition to the Government of Allende," *Government and Opposition* 7, no. 3 (1972): 327–50.

² Patricio Navia, "Pinochet: The Father of Contemporary Chile," *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 3 (2008): 250–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.0.0051>.

³ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982).

⁴ Brian Loveman, "Military Dictatorship and Political Opposition in Chile, 1973–1986," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 28, no. 4 (1986): 1–38.

political prisoners. These crimes include but were not limited to food deprivation, sleep deprivation, electric shocks, dog mauling, brutal beatings with blunt objects, violent hair cutting, waterboarding, mock executions, hanging, intense interrogation under threats, held at gunpoint, deep water submergence, being thrown in pig pens, being urinated on, suffocation, breaking of bones, sexual assault with animals, and in most cases, death with no trace of the victim's body.⁵ As documented by the *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, nearly 3,400 Chileans were "disappeared" or murdered, and 30,000 to 100,000 Chileans experienced torture by military officers in detention camps, jails, and other government buildings under Pinochet's dictatorship.⁶²

Among these Chilean activists murdered was Victor Jara, a folk-rock singer-songwriter and teacher prevalent in Chilean culture for his political lyrics containing anti-fascist themes (Figure 1). As part of a new musical phenomenon, *El Canto Nuevo*, a political movement in folk music that challenged sociopolitical themes, Jara was essential to folk-rock artists' collaboration on political themes, as his musical work was effective and widespread among the Chilean public. His song, *Venceremos*, was made in political support for President Allende's second term election. Jara also wrote an anti-war anthem, *El Derecho de Vivir en Paz*, a powerful song that protested the Vietnam-American War. The Pinochet regime sought to repress these powerful sentiments and subjected Jara to extreme torture and the ultimate form of censorship: an isolated death. On September 11th, 1973, the same day as the coup d'etat that placed Pinochet in power, Victor Jara was kidnapped alongside thousands of other political activists.⁷

⁵ "Recintos," Museo de la Memoria, accessed February 9, 2025, <https://interactivos.museodelamemoria.cl/recintos/>.

⁶ Patricio Navia

⁷ "Pinochet Coup & the Murder of Folksinger Víctor Jarajara v. Barrientos," CJA, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/jara-v-barrientos/>.



Figure 1: In 1969, Jara appeared in protests the Vietnam War in Finland.

Moments before his subsequent murder, Jara mustered up his last words into a song that mirrored his emotions on the political state of Chile. Witnessed by thousands of other detainees, one of his most potent literary pieces was born, an untitled poem called “*Estadio Chile*”, named after the location of his last moments. The gut-retching testament captured the sentiments of Chile, and the excruciating emotions Jara lived through. Sung to thousands of other political prisoners, the song survived in the audience's memory.⁸ As preserved through the recollection of detainees who heard it, the translated lyrics are as written:

*There are five thousand of us here
in this small part of the city.
We are five thousand.
I wonder how many we are in all
in the cities and the whole country?*

⁸ Stephen Tapscott, ed., *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 337.

...

*How hard it is to sing
when I must sing of horror.
Horror which I am living,
horror, which I am dying.
To see myself among so much
and so many moments of infinity
in which silence and screams
are the end of my song.*

Jara used these intense lyrics to encapsulate his anger, desperation, and vulnerability in his last moments. The opening lines, “*There are five thousand of us here in this small part of the city,*” suggest both a sentiment of isolation and unity in Estadio Chile, the location of their detention. “Five thousand” highlights not only the political prisoners but also people with distinct lives, yet all the same, that were oppressed by the regime. Despite the many people imprisoned with Jara, their political power remained limited, invoking a sense of hopelessness in escaping political detention. The repetition of “horror” throughout the second verse highlights the physical and emotional pain inflicted by the regime on the Chilean people and the nationwide torture that was to come. With the words, “*How hard it is to sing when I must sing of horror.*”, Jara drew attention to the difficulty of the circumstances inflicted on him. Conscious of the dangers, he acknowledges his and his audience's pain. Jara utilized the lyrics “*Horror which I am living, horror which I am dying.*” to similarly channel national sentiments about despair and pain under the Pinochet regime. Caught in a continuous repetition of oppression, Jara expressed through these words that even the act of living itself feels as though it is a form of emotional, political, and physical dissipation and a precursor to an imminent death. This dual side to life and a martyred death encapsulates the brutal experiences of the Chilean people. In a time when

kidnappings, torture, and executions were widespread, this song echoes the necessity for survival as a form of resistance.

Victor Jara's song encapsulates the heavy emotional burden of living in an authoritarian regime while simultaneously acknowledging an artist's responsibility to deliver to an audience. It covers the overwhelming and devastating cost of residing in Pinochet's dictatorship. From the raw perspective of a political prisoner with a unique and far-reaching platform. These characteristics sew together collective identity, horrific torture, and censorship in the most extreme form into an influential ode to Chileans, the nation's story, and resistance. The Chilean military murdered Victor Jara on September 16th, 1973, because of his influential song. Jara's last moments were in Estadio, Chile; he was shot 44 times in the hands of the Chilean military and later found in an abandoned field.³ Despite his tragic death, his influence as a political activist and resistance against Pinochet's regime remains treasured in Chile. In 2003, Estadio Chile was renamed Estadio Victor Jara for the late singer.⁹ Jara's work is still promoted and continued by the Victor Jara Foundation, established by his wife, Joan Jara. Jara's dedication to the Chilean people, public activism against Pinochet, and passion for human rights will maintain his legacy for centuries.¹⁰

Inspired by Victor Jara's legacy, three Chilean university students, Jorge Gonzalez, Claudio Narea, and Miguel Tapia, emerged onto the Chilean rock music scene in the 1980s. These three young men formed *Los Prisioneros* in 1982, which became one of the most influential and dominant socio-political bands in Chile, selling upwards of one million records

⁹ "Estadio Víctor Jara (Estadio Chile)," *Ir al inicio*, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.monumentos.gob.cl/monumentos/monumentos-monumentos/estadio-victor-jara-estadio-chile>.

¹⁰ "Re-Entry," American Civil Liberties Union, February 15, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/re-entry>.

globally (Figure 2).¹¹ Still facing the implications of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, *Los Prisioneros* wrote lyrics criticizing Pinochet's socio-economic systems, disappearances of Chilean civilians, and other elements of the over-decade-long oppressive rule of the authoritarian regime.¹² Their first studio album, *La Voz de los '80*, was released on December 13, 1984, and quickly became the most important Chilean rock record among youth audiences.⁸ With songs targeting U.S. imperialism, sexism, and media crises in Chile, this debut album elevated *Los Prisioneros* to a national level, gaining attention from Pinochet's military government. On December 7th, 1985, *Los Prisioneros* were set to perform *La Voz de los '80* on *Sexta Teletón* on the Chilean National Television, which was run by Pinochet's regime. After a few seconds on air, the band's televised performance was abruptly cut and removed from the broadcast by the Chilean military.¹³ This program's censorship was an evident example of Pinochet's active efforts to limit the voices of the people. Despite the suppression of speech, the government continued to censor *Los Prisioneros*. Between the years 1985 and 1988, Pinochet continuously oppressed *Los Prisioneros*' voices. Claudio Narea, guitarist for Los Prisoneros, reflected on their experience as a revolutionary band during the Chilean dictatorship, stating: "We couldn't play a tour of 40 cities. We only played seven times. We couldn't get more venues...Nothing happened to us physically, but they started to veto us, then we couldn't be on magazine covers, we couldn't be on important shows."¹⁴ Their powerful lyrics resonate with the Chilean population, allowing

¹¹ Enviado por:, "Encuentra Aquí Información de Rock En La Sociedad Contemporánea Para Tu Escuela ¡Entra Ya!: Rincón Del Vago," Encuentra aquí información de Rock en la sociedad contemporánea para tu escuela ¡Entra ya! | Rincón del Vago, March 7, 2017, <https://html.rincondelvago.com/rock-en-la-sociedad-contemporanea.html>.

¹² "Music and Dictatorship in Europe and Latin America," Brepols Publishers, accessed February 10, 2025, http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod_id=IS-9782503527796-1.

¹³ "La voz de los 80". *Televisión Nacional de Chile*. 2012-03-02. Archived from the original on 2 March 2012. Retrieved 2023-02-14.

¹⁴ *Break It All: The History of Rock in Latin America*, directed by Rodrigo H. Vila (Netflix, 2020).

for some form of cathartic release and social connection among fans and listeners as they lived under constant specter of Pinochet's oppressive government.



Figure 2: *Los Prisioneros* in 1987. From left to right: Jorge Gonzalez, Miguel Tapia, and Claudio Narea.

Often, their lyrics served as a powerful vehicle for protest in a time when the government could disappear any public critics of the regime. “*El Baile de los que Sobrán*,” one of Chile's most renowned protest songs, was released in 1986 on *Los Prisioneros*' second studio album, *Pateando Piedras*. “*El Baile de los que Sobrán*” covers the complex themes dealt with by youth in 1980s Chile. With lyrics criticizing the country's economic state, addressing the failed educational system in Chile, and condemning the declining job market for recent graduates, *Los Prisioneros* allowed young Chileans to feel acknowledged in difficult and hopeless times. These selected lyrics best encapsulate the significance of “*El Baile de los que Sobrán*” and are translated as follows:

My friends have all stayed, just like you

This year was the last one of the games

The twelve games

*Come join the dance of the people leftover
Nobody will be missed
No one really wanted to help us
They told us when we were kids
"Play as students, Men are brothers
And together they must work"
You heard the advice, the eyes in your teacher
And there was so much sun over our heads
And it wasn't very true, as those games in the end
Were for others with awards and futures
And left my friends kicking stones
Come join the dance of the people leftover
Nobody will be missed
No one really wanted to help us
[Hey! I know some stories about the future
Hey! The time I learned about them was the safest one
Under our shoes, mud and concrete
And the future is nothing of what was promised in the twelve games
Others were taught secrets that you didn't know
Others really got that one thing called "education"
They asked for effort, they asked for dedication
And for what? To end up dancing and kicking stones*

In the first set of lyrics in “*El Baile de los que Sobrán*,” the band dives into the “*twelve games*,” a reference made to the 12 years of formal education required to qualify for a job in Chile.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Pinochet’s dictatorship’s implementation of ‘Chicago Boys’ policies had severely limited job opportunities in the country. “Chicago Boys’ referred to a group of Chilean economists, who were educated at the University of Chicago and served as Pinochet’s economic advisors.¹⁶ Responsible for implementing the free-market model in the Chilean economy, the Chicago Boys cut government spending and privatized social welfare programs.¹⁷ With the increasing unemployment rate in Chile, dubbing these 12 years of schooling “games” acknowledges the foolish, illogical motive of earning a degree to obtain a job in a place where the job market is deteriorating daily.

¹⁵ “Profile,” www.chileeducation.info, Accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://www.chileeducation.info/k12/chile-k-12-educationsystem.html#:~:text=Compulsory%20education%20in%20Chile%20lasts,education%20is%20compulsory%20in%20Chile>.

¹⁶ “Music and Dictatorship” Brepols Publishers.

¹⁷ Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, “The Rich,” in *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet*, ed. Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 219, ISBN 978-0-393-30985-0. Valerie Brender, “Economic Transformations in Chile: The Formation of the Chicago Boys,” *The American Economist* 55, no. 1 (2010): 111–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40657832>.

Following the reference to the failing job economy and unemployment caused by Pinochet, *Los Prisioneros* references naiveness in childhood and socialist themes. To pay homage to their infancy in Chile, *Los Prisioneros* included lyrics containing popular socialist ideologies that reflect those of former President Salvador Allende's government. Raised in a country that prioritized community, as reflected in the lyrics "*Men are brothers, And together they must work,*" *Los Prisioneros* soon had these beliefs attacked, starting with the coup d'etat that removed Allende and replaced him with Pinochet. *Los Prisioneros* alluded to a sense of naiveness, so innocent to believe that a country could run on simple, community-supported ideas. Continuing their criticism of quality education and the lack of job opportunities, *Los Prisioneros* also touched upon the socioeconomic privileges of Pinochet's dictatorship. *El Baile de los que Sobrán* provides emotional disillusionment, unequal distribution of opportunities, and disappointment in the country's then-state, comparing the tales they recalled as children to the current reality. Alluding back to the "twelve games," *Los Prisioneros* recalled the uncertainty of their future and the devastating state of their present, crushing the spirits of Chileans who once believed as children. This dismay in the future evokes agony, despair, and defeat among those promised a fruitful life without an oppressive dictatorship.

With the lack of educational and job opportunities, accompanied by poverty and sociopolitical tension, the Chilean lower class was at a heightened disadvantage in climbing the economic ladder. Stuck in a place of hopelessness, *Los Prisioneros* channeled their frustrations with the lyrics: *Others were taught secrets that you didn't know; others got that one thing called "education."* This expression of frustration encapsulates the growing disparities in education and job opportunity access in 1980s Chile. The lyrics refer to social hierarchies that gave opportunities that those of lower social standing cannot access, creating a generation-wide feeling of being left behind. When *Los Prisioneros* included the lyrics: *"They asked for effort, they asked for dedication,"* it conveys a sense of expected commitment from the young generation, yet the payoff is absent. Continuing with the lyrics: *"And for what? To end up dancing and kicking stones."*, which implies that even with hard work in education and perseverance, underprivileged Chileans could not achieve upward socio-economic mobility due to the country's state. Although *"El Baile de los que Sobrán"* was written in response to the regime's impact on the Chilean public, this powerful song of resistance has since transcended borders and generations. In 2018, for example, students performed *"El Baile de los que Sobrán,"*¹⁸ This song has remained as influential and powerful as the day it was written, continuing to carry new generations through times of hardship and despair.

¹⁸ Dictatorship, Higher Education and Social Mobility • Higher Education and Mortality: Legacies of an Authoritarian College Contraction • the Intergenerational Transmission of Higher Education: Evidence from the 1973 Coup in Chile," Becker Friedman Institute, accessed February 10, 2025

Los Prisioneros continued to use their music to battle the regime until the Chilean public voted out Pinochet's government in the famous 1988 Chilean presidential referendum. This referendum was Pinochet's attempt to legitimize his rule via a democratic mandate. Jorge Gonzalez, Claudio Narea, and Miguel Tapia of *Los Prisioneros* were dominant members of the musical scene during these initial moments of the presidential referendum. "We started to express our opinion, and we played at the "No" events.", commented Narea. "No" referred to the decision to remove Augusto Pinochet from political power in Chile, permanently ending his dictatorship. A landslide vote decided the country's future: 56% voted to end the almost two-decade-long rule.¹⁹

Despite the new transition of power, the wounds of Pinochet's dictatorship persisted in Chilean society. Following Pinochet's regime was Patricio Aylwin, a Chilean lawyer, author, professor, and politician affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party of Chile. Elected after the referendum, Aylwin, a close comrade of Pinochet, decided to maintain the former dictator's influential role in the Chilean military and refused to charge Pinochet for his human rights violation against the Chilean public.²⁰ This lack of accountability allowed Pinochet to walk away from the damage he was responsible for, as the Chilean people realized that there was no proper transition of power; Aylwin was essentially under the influence of the former dictator.²¹

¹⁹ Lli, "NDI: Standing with Democracy over Military Dictatorship - Chile's 1988 Presidential Plebiscite," Lli, October 26, 2023, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/ndi-standing-democracy-over-military-dictatorship-chile-s-1988-presidential-plebiscite>.

²⁰ Admin, "Lessons from Patricio Aylwin," *Global Americans*, July 1, 2020, <https://globalamericans.org/lessons-from-patricio-aylwin/>.

²¹ Nibaldo Galleguillos, "From Confrontation to Friendly Persuasion: An Analysis of Judicial Reform and Democratization in Post-Pinochet Chile," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Latino-Américaines et Caraïbes* 23, no. 46 (1998): 161–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41800070>.

The rock-ska band, *Los Tres*, emerged during the Aylwin administration and continued to channel Chilean society's frustration with persistent socio-economic and political issues and tensions. Originating in Concepción, the folk-rock band formed by Alvaro Henríquez, Francisco Molina, Titae Lindl, and Angel Parra Jr. in 1987. They released their debut self-titled album a few years after their formation, and their lyrics were poetic and criticized Chilean leadership in a manner that reflected the activism of Victor Jara. In this album, various songs embedded remnants of Pinochet and his existing influence in the Chilean executive branches. "*Flores Secas*" and "*Pajaros de Fuego*" ruminated on the deep-rooted pain embedded in Chilean society. "We were the soundtrack to that shitty time.", expressed Henríquez. "In *Los Tres*, we had a powerful political awareness." *Los Tres* reflected on their resistance, releasing their most critical song, "*La Primera Vez*." The lyrics are as translated:

In the streets that gave you,
The power that now rots you,
You asked a thousand favors and said something else
Head between legs
You already tried to please them
You were prepared, you did not apologize
I have never wished harm on anyone
This is my first time
I have never wished harm on anyone
This is my first time
Nauseated by betrayals
You vomited in their faces
And you do not think that maybe they would come back for you
Those streets became cloudy

They were lost in the shadows
Of the remorse that now makes you fall
And I want you to fall
And may you fall to your knees
They spit in your face, and you know how to die
I have never wished harm on anyone
This is my first time
I have never wished harm on anyone
This is my first time

Infused with polka-inspired rhythms, “*La Primera Vez*” maintained the political resistance of a rock song with the poetic grace of a romantic ballad. In the initial lyrics, *Los Tres* acknowledged Pinochet’s unjust authority over Chile and criticized his brutal terror in the country. “You were prepared; you did not apologize,” evokes the common sentiments about Chile after the Pinochet dictatorship. Despite severe human rights violations under his authoritarian government, Pinochet walked away without consequences, living a peaceful life in Santiago, Chile. The following lyrics: “I have never wished harm on anyone; this is my first time,” encapsulate the frustration, anger, and resentment of the Chilean public toward Pinochet and his regime. Responsible for thousands of deaths, numerous economic disasters, and an overall poor quality of life, “wishing harm” represented the emotions and sentiments of the Chilean population, desiring Pinochet and his regime to suffer as the nation did for 17 years.

Henriquez explains that “*La Primera Vez*” was created to call out the regime for its repeated lies and mass murders, as it was composed of “deep hatred” towards the Pinochet government. *Los Tres* continued these ideas of loathing and frustration with the then-current political state of Chile with the following lyrics: “Those streets became cloudy, They were lost in the shadows.” Referencing the nation’s depressing conditions, “cloudy” highlights the country-wide resentment towards Pinochet’s impact on Chileans’ quality of life. *Los Tres* then alludes to the “lost shadows” or lost lives because of the dictatorship’s censorship and violent repression. Targeting leftists, socialists, and public activists against the regime were kidnapped and tortured, with at least three thousand having been disappeared or murdered by Pinochet’s military agents. “And I want you to fall, And may you fall to your knees” further amplifies the damaging effect of Pinochet's regime, causing the public to loathe him for his political actions and wishing him the same suffering and humiliating end Chileans had to endure as a result of his government. The former dictator, however, would not meet his demise until a quarter century after his 1973 military coup d’etat. During a visit to London in 1998, British authorities captured Pinochet on charges relating to human rights violations, including genocide and terrorism.²² Eight years later, still amid court proceedings regarding his crimes, Pinochet died of natural causes, never having been convicted of any crime he committed against the Chilean public.

²² Paul R. Bartrop and Samuel Totten, "Pinochet, Augusto, Case Against," in *Dictionary of Genocide*, vol. 1 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2007), 331, ISBN 978-0-313-34642-2, OCLC 883597633, archived from the original on August 29, 2021, retrieved August 29, 2021.

Regardless of the painful, soul-deteriorating experience that was the Pinochet dictatorship, the Chilean population persisted in the difficult times and channeled their resistance into rock music. Not only does it serve as a historical narrative for the Chilean people, but the political rock music of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1980s serves as documentation for a tormenting time for the Republic of Chile. The appreciation of this powerful collection of songs and poems honors the bravery of musicians, their duty as public activists, and their experiences as members of society during the dictatorship. Fighting debilitating censorship, highlighting nationwide frustration, and the disappearances of hundreds of thousands demonstrate Chilean people's resilience and resistance through the lens and soundwaves of music. The strength of the Chilean people, as shown by the evocative power of their music, serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of a society under extreme oppression. Political rock music provides a voice for the silenced and a timeless reminder of the strength found in artistic expression. The way these songs resonate with Chileans and international listeners highlights the importance of music as a tool for memory and resistance. Ultimately, these musical legacies ensure that the atrocities of the past are reflected while also inspiring future generations to safeguard the freedoms that were once so brutally taken away.

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