



PROJECT MUSE®

Musicians in Transit

Karush, Matthew B.

Published by Duke University Press

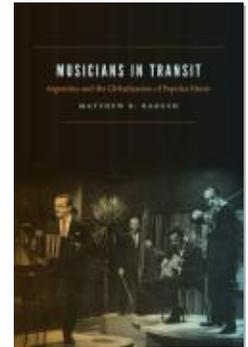
Karush, Matthew B.

Musicians in Transit: Argentina and the Globalization of Popular Music.

Duke University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64063>

INDIGENOUS ARGENTINA AND REVOLUTIONARY LATIN AMERICA

Mercedes Sosa and the Multiple Meanings of Folk Music

In 1972, the Argentine folk singer Mercedes Sosa scoffed when an interviewer asked about her income: “In this country you make a lot of money being Sandro or Palito Ortega, not Mercedes Sosa.”¹ Having recently performed at the Colón Theatre, the most prestigious concert hall in Buenos Aires, she drew a sharp distinction between herself and these ostensibly more commercial artists. And yet by the following decade, Sosa was a massive star who sold out huge arenas and whose albums set sales records. Moreover, much like Sandro, Sosa achieved impressive levels of fame outside of Argentina. Sandro’s manager had boasted that the singer surpassed Carlos Gardel in his capacity to sell movie and concert tickets throughout Latin America.² Two decades later, the reporter Víctor Pintos compared Sosa to the same standard, claiming that she was a bigger draw abroad than even Gardel.³

Sosa’s commercial success inside and outside of Argentina reflected her capacity to bridge two historic models of transnational engagement: one that

looked toward Europe and the United States and another that forged connections with the rest of Latin America. She first achieved success by following the same path as Astor Piazzolla: she was a vanguardist performer whose music and image were in dialogue with current trends in Europe and the United States and who attracted an urban, middle-class audience interested in a cosmopolitan version of Argentine nationalism. However, in the 1970s, Sosa also emerged as an icon of revolutionary Latin Americanism, a politicized version of the Latin American identity Sandro was forging at the same time. She was now engaged with musicians and audiences throughout Latin America, and she began to appeal to a broader audience at home. She was as prestigious as Piazzolla, and yet her audience was not limited to intellectuals and connoisseurs. She was as popular as Sandro, and yet she was never denigrated as *mersa*.

What enabled Sosa to combine these two transnationalisms was the innovative persona that she created for herself in the mid-1960s. Sosa had been a conventional folksinger of only modest success. In the early 1960s, she became a founding member of the leftist *Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero* (New Songbook movement), which combined traditional song forms with sophisticated poetry and an emphasis on social themes. But this affiliation failed to win her large audiences. Sosa became a star by reinventing herself as an embodiment of indigeneity. She crafted this performance style by drawing on contemporary trends in North American folk music as well as on a tradition forged by earlier Argentine musicians who packaged their art to appeal to the primitivist sensibilities of European audiences. As an up-to-date image expressed through aesthetic vanguardism, her new persona appealed to the cosmopolitan middle class. The multinational record company, Philips, saw its commercial potential and gave Sosa the platform she needed to reach audiences in Argentina as well as in Europe and the United States. Yet by locating an essentialist indigeneity at the heart of Argentine national identity, Sosa had also connected the country to the rest of Latin America. In this way, she enabled Argentine young people to reimagine their nationality and their Latin American-ness.

Eventually, the revolutionary implications of Sosa's art alarmed the country's military rulers, who pushed her into exile in 1979. Three years later, as the dictatorship's hold on power began to falter, she returned to Argentina and accomplished another self-transformation, expanding her repertoire and emerging as a broadly popular figure able to bring together disparate communities in the name of building a socially just, democratic society.

Refashioning Folk Nationalism

Mercedes Sosa was born in 1935 to a working-class family in the provincial capital of San Miguel de Tucumán. Her mother worked as a maid and laundress, while her father was a manual laborer in the sugar industry, the largest employer in the province. Although the family could not afford a radio, she grew up listening to music on the neighbors' radios and developed a fondness and aptitude for singing. Her parents were avid Peronists, and on October 17, 1950, they traveled to Buenos Aires to participate in the official commemoration of the movement's origin. Sosa took advantage of the freedom her parents' absence afforded by visiting a local radio station that was hosting a competition for unknown singers. With the encouragement of her friends, she entered the contest, inventing the pseudonym Gladys Osorio in a vain attempt to hide her identity from her father whose idea of feminine decency did not include performing on the radio. Her victory in the contest launched her career as a singer. Once her father's opposition was overcome, Sosa signed a contract with the radio station and also began performing at a circus and a local amusement park.⁴

Although she enjoyed listening to a range of popular music, Sosa identified herself as an Argentine folksinger from the very beginning of her career. Her winning song in the 1950 radio contest was "Estoy triste," which had been a hit for her idol, Margarita Palacios, a folksinger from the neighboring province of Catamarca. In need of more songs to sing, she bought copies of the Buenos Aires music magazine *El alma que canta* and copied down the lyrics of the latest folk hits, focusing particularly on songs popularized by Antonio Tormo, at the time the genre's biggest star.⁵ Sosa's early repertoire made her a typical singer in the folk music field of the early 1950s.

As a recognizable genre, Argentine folk music originated in the work of a group of intellectuals writing in the early twentieth century. Concerned by the massive waves of European immigrants flooding the country, Ricardo Rojas and others hoped that Argentina could maintain its national identity by preserving and inculcating rural folk culture. In the 1920s, Argentine scholars intrigued by this idea and by the growing, international discipline of folklore studies began to visit remote populations in order to collect songs and other pieces of rural culture.⁶ Like their counterparts in the United States and Europe, Argentine folklorists such as Juan Alfonso Carrizo saw the material they collected as elements of an isolated, premodern tradition that needed to be preserved from the taint of urban, commercial culture. Thanks in part to the sponsorship of Tucumán's sugar industrialists, Carrizo and his colleagues focused their efforts on Argentina's northwestern provinces. Their collections

depicted this region, far removed from the cosmopolitan modernity of Buenos Aires, as “the historic center of Argentine nationality.”⁷

Under the influence of these ideas about nation and region, the commercial genre of folk music first emerged on the country’s radio stations in the 1930s. Many of the most prominent artists were from the Northwest, but other regions were represented as well, including the Littoral in the northeast and Cuyo in the west. Despite this regional diversity, folk music was constituted as a single, national genre, so that cross-regional hybrids became increasingly common. The singer Antonio Tormo scored folk music’s first massive hit with “El rancho ‘e la Cambicha” in 1950, the same year that the fifteen-year-old Mercedes Sosa began her professional career. The song, suggested to Tormo by his record company, RCA Victor, was a *rasguido doble*, a version of the *chamamé* rhythm native to the Littoral. Yet Tormo replaced the accordion typical of that region with guitar accompaniment in the style of the *tonada* from his native Cuyo.⁸ Nevertheless, the hybridity of “El rancho ‘e la Cambicha” was inaudible to most Argentine radio listeners, to whom Tormo was marketed in explicitly national terms. A typical ad described him as “What all Argentina was waiting for! The greatest singer of criollo feeling.”⁹ Regardless of its specific provincial pedigree, folk music was the musical representation of the nation, valued in large part for its capacity to embody an Argentine national identity uncontaminated by modernization and foreign influence.

Although folk appealed to many urbanites who also enjoyed tango and jazz, Tormo’s unprecedented success revealed the emergence of a new audience shaped by major demographic and political shifts. In the 1930s and 1940s, the country underwent a significant process of import substitution industrialization, which in turn triggered substantial internal migration, as thousands of rural Argentines moved to Buenos Aires and other cities seeking jobs in the growing manufacturing sector. Disparaged by middle-class and elite porteños, these migrants may well have responded to folk music because it reminded them of their provincial homes. In the political arena, migrants and other working-class Argentines rallied to the cause of populist Colonel Juan Perón, electing him to the presidency in 1946. While actively promoting industrialization and dramatically improving the standard of living of Argentine workers, the Perón regime continued many of the cultural policies enacted by the previous military government. Under the influence of a group of Catholic nationalist intellectuals, that government promoted the dissemination of folk music in the schools and passed regulations limiting the amount of foreign music that radio stations could play. While Perón’s relationship with many of the Catholic nationalists was strained, he shared their enthusiasm for promoting national

unity and moral virtue through folk music. His government subsidized folk music organizations, festivals, and *peñas*, and chose folk musicians to represent the nation abroad. The same cultural nationalism that could make life difficult for jazz musicians like Oscar Alemán or Lalo Schifrin was a boon to most folk artists. Typical was the case of Mercedes Sosa, who like many other folksingers in Tucumán, sang at official events organized by the Peronist provincial government.¹⁰

Despite Peronism's support for the genre, folk songwriters avoided any explicit affiliation with the regime. Instead, nostalgia and melodrama dominated the lyrics of these years. As Claudio Díaz has demonstrated, folk lyricists composed in a language they copied largely from gauchesque literature, a genre that included such works as José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879), taught to generations of Argentine schoolchildren as the national poem. Folk lyricists used the informal contractions (*pa'* instead of *para*, for example) and rural terminology typical of this literature in order to convey authenticity.¹¹ Among the recurring tropes in folk songs was that of the *pago*, or home village, figured as an idealized space representing values threatened by modernization. Folk lyrics expressed nostalgia for the bravery, generosity, and patriotism of the gaucho or provincial resident of the past, values that were ostensibly lacking in the urban present.¹² At the same time, folk lyrics betrayed the influence of the popular melodrama typical of other forms of mass culture. For example, Margarita Palacios's "Estoy triste," the song Mercedes Sosa sang in the radio contest of 1950, told a tale of unrequited love that would have fit in well on the radio melodramas of the period: "Ay, ay, ay / how sad is my life. / I have no more happiness / the one whom I loved so much has gone away."

As Oscar Chamosa has argued, folk music's particular relationship to Peronism allowed it to survive the *Revolución Libertadora*, the military coup that overthrew the regime in 1955. The regime's support for *peñas* and for the use of folk in the schools had enabled the genre to grow. Young Argentines were now more familiar with folk music than they were with tango. However, since the genre was never explicitly Peronist, it was largely unaffected by the de-Peronization campaign that followed the coup. The only prominent folksinger whose career did not survive the transition was Antonio Tormo, who was so closely associated with his fan base of Peronist internal migrants that he was blacklisted under the new regime.¹³ For the most part, though, folk music's depoliticized, nostalgic nationalism was as well suited to the *Revolución Libertadora* as it had been to Peronism.

Yet folk music did more than survive; it became the nation's fastest growing genre, easily eclipsing the tango. By the early 1960s, the largely anti-Peronist,

urban middle classes had enthusiastically embraced it, producing a “folk boom.” In 1962, porteños heard an average of sixteen radio programs per day dedicated to folk music, and every television station featured folk music programs as well.¹⁴ This impressive commercial success was enabled by transnational developments. As I have argued elsewhere, the tango’s immense popularity in the 1920s and 1930s had been due, in part, to the fact that it could be packaged as a domestic alternative to jazz, the sonic emblem of modernity. An urban dance music played by big bands, tango paired well with swing jazz. In Buenos Aires night spots and on the city’s radio stations, *orquestas típicas* playing tango alternated with jazz bands. But by the mid-1950s, jazz had given way to rock and roll and other genres in the United States. In this context, tango’s big-band orchestration and its jazz-era associations began to seem old fashioned.¹⁵ Ironically, folk musicians, who had always prided themselves on their traditionalism, suddenly seemed much more up to date. After all, a folk revival had been under way in the United States since the 1940s. Originally associated with leftist supporters of the labor movement like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, North American folk music became a commercial phenomenon when Seeger’s group, The Weavers, recorded Leadbelly’s “Goodnight Irene” in 1950. Although the advent of McCarthyism drove leftist folk music underground, by the late 1950s, apolitical groups like the Kingston Trio became big stars. North American folk musicians never achieved the sort of popularity in Argentina that rockers like Bill Haley did, but they were heard there. Both the Weavers’ “Goodnight Irene” and the Kingston Trio’s big hit, “Tom Dooley” (1958) were released in Argentina, and a Spanish version of “Greenfields” by the Brothers Four went to number three on the Argentine top ten in 1961.¹⁶ In this context, Argentine musicians strumming acoustic guitars and singing songs rooted in traditional, rural traditions fit comfortably in the soundscape of cosmopolitan modernity.

Argentine folk music was not an imitation of its North American counterpart. It had its own traditions, and it was based on local rhythms rather than on English ballads and the blues. Nevertheless, the music of the folk boom did betray some North American influence. The biggest folk acts in Argentina in the late 1950s and early 1960s were vocal groups. This style certainly had precedents within local folk music, but vocal groups underwent several changes during the boom years. In the 1940s, the Ábalos Brothers, from Santiago del Estero, played a wide range of traditional instruments from the Andean region, including the flute known as the *quena* and the charango, a small stringed instrument of the lute family. However, following the success of Los Chalchaleros, from Salta, most vocal groups adopted a more stripped-down instrumental lineup of two or three guitars and the drum known as the *bombo*

legüero. Beginning with Los Fronterizos, another group from Salta who debuted in Buenos Aires in 1958, folk groups moved away from the simple two-part harmonies of the Ábalos Brothers and Los Chalchaleros, adopting more complex three- and four-part schemes.¹⁷ This approach may have been modeled on the Kingston Trio, but it was just as likely inspired by Doo-Wop groups like the Platters, who, as we have seen, were enormously popular in Argentina. In any case, sophisticated vocal harmony was a signifier of cosmopolitan modernity in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Argentine folk groups were enthusiastic adopters. Groups like Los Cantores de Quilla Huasi and Los Huanca Hua also abandoned the gaucho performance attire typical of many folk musicians in favor of jackets and ties. Dressed in this way and playing acoustic guitars, Argentine folk groups looked quite similar to North American folk acts.

These aesthetic transformations helped make folk music appealing to the urban middle classes. In addition to multipart harmony and modern performance attire, lyricists like Jaime Dávalos and Manuel Castilla brought a more abstract, literary style to the genre, while classically trained musicians and composers like Eduardo Falú and Ariel Ramírez introduced musical complexity. This new generation of artists retained folk music's explicit celebration of national tradition even as they embraced ostensibly universal standards of quality.¹⁸ Even less ambitious songs like Roberto Cambaré's "Angélica," one of the biggest folk hits of the period, pointed in this direction. A relatively simple love song, "Angélica" deployed poetic images that contrasted with the direct, popular melodrama of Tormo's hits: "If your love was an eagle, my poor soul was a dove." This was a folk music purged of lowbrow associations and thus available for adoption by the anti-Peronist middle classes. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Astor Piazzolla had emerged as a symbol of a cosmopolitan, modernizing nationalism. The new folk music spoke to this same impulse. Rogelio Frigerio's developmentalist magazine *Qué*, which had paid such close attention to Piazzolla's tango innovations, celebrated the guitarist and composer Eduardo Falú for overcoming "routine" and for his "clear, polished, and brilliant technique . . . a lesson of what is necessary to do in the field of popular music."¹⁹ Falú and others demonstrated that an elevated folk music could reconcile nationalism with progress and modernization.

The complexity that ambitious folk musicians like Falú brought to the genre was, for the most part, melodic and harmonic. Folk music could only function as a recognizable expression of national tradition to the extent that it preserved traditional rhythms. Yet here too there were changes. In particular, the genre began to lose its regional and rhythmic diversity. During the boom years, the *zamba*, a northwestern music and dance form derived from

the Peruvian *zamacueca*, gained prominence not only over rhythms from other regions, such as the *chamamé*, but also over other Northwestern forms like the *chacarera*. As Pablo Vila has argued, the *zamba* lacked the festive tone of these other forms. Its seriousness made it a better fit with the poetry of the new generation of lyricists and responded to the aesthetic tastes of middle-class listeners who preferred a more sophisticated version of folk music.²⁰ Much like Piazzolla's New Tango, the *zambas* written and produced during the boom were folk songs for listening rather than dancing.²¹

Despite this increasing standardization, the field of folk music was not homogenous. On the contrary, a class-based hierarchy separated groups like Los Chalchaleros, who attracted a popular audience, from more vanguardist groups like Los Cantores de Quilla Huasi and Los Huanca Hua, who aimed at more educated, elite listeners.²² The magazine *Folklore*, edited by the radio and television host and impresario Julio Márbiz, sought to unify these various ideological positions by means of a patriotic discourse that identified all forms of folk music with national authenticity. The magazine celebrated the commercial success of folk, particularly among young record buyers, as a victory over the Nueva Ola and other foreign musical styles: "The cycle of the pachanga, the cha-cha-chá, and rock—of blue jeans, sideburns and violence—is over. We believe that our people have made contact, for the first time, with something they carry within: the love of their fatherland."²³ Nevertheless, the tensions between nationalism and authenticity on the one hand and cosmopolitanism and commercialism on the other were frequently visible in the magazine. *Folklore* celebrated Los Huanca Hua for crafting sophisticated, modern arrangements, even as it reported that the group rejected the label "nueva ola of folk music" because their music was not a passing, commercial fad but deeply rooted in "ancient" tradition.²⁴ Artists like these carefully negotiated the competing pressures to be both old and new, authentic and commercial.

Mercedes Sosa was already a professional folksinger when the boom began, but it took her several years to develop a distinctive persona and to acquire a national audience. She took her first step in that direction in 1957 when she moved with her new husband, a guitarist and songwriter named Oscar Matus, to his home province of Mendoza. There, she joined a circle of intellectuals and artists, including the guitarist Tito Francia and the poet Armando Tejada Gómez, with whom Matus had been composing songs for several years. Together, they forged a tight-knit artistic community and began to imagine a new approach to folk music that would culminate with the founding of the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero in 1963. In broad strokes, they pursued the same goal as the other folk innovators of these years: they aimed to elevate

folk music by adding complexity and sophistication to both the music and the lyrics.

Despite being based in a provincial capital some seven hundred miles from Buenos Aires, these musicians and poets were a self-consciously cosmopolitan bunch. By 1950, there were four radio stations broadcasting in Mendoza, providing performance opportunities for local musicians but also bringing the latest trends from Buenos Aires and beyond to the Mendocino audience. Both Francia and Tejada Gómez worked for one of these stations, the former as the principal guitarist in the house band and the latter as an announcer. Francia's position, which he had held since the late 1940s, made him fluent in all of the popular genres of the day. In addition to providing accompaniment to folksingers such as Antonio Tormo and Hilario Cuadros, Francia played tango and bolero, formed his own "hot jazz" band, and played classical music.²⁵ According to Tejada Gómez, it was Francia's harmonic knowledge—a knowledge the guitarist acquired primarily through jazz—that made the group's musical innovations possible. As María Inés García has demonstrated, Francia's compositions featured chords that were much more typical of jazz than they were of Argentine folk music: ninths and elevenths, as well as augmented fifths and sixths.²⁶ And as the group's most accomplished musician, Francia exerted a significant influence on the other composers. By his own account, he gave Oscar Matus guitar lessons, teaching him how to "insert avant-garde chords."²⁷

More than just a source of harmonic sophistication, jazz provided a model of musical innovation and a means to achieve it. As Sosa later described it, "We based ourselves on jazz so that our music would be new."²⁸ Recalling his own experience at the radio station, Tejada Gómez emphasized the cosmopolitan diversity of the music he and his compatriots listened to:

We were youth who liked jazz, Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, la tonada, la cueca: we never made a boundary for music. . . . I got a musical education from [radio station] LV10, as much in jazz as in folk and classical music. I educated myself in the station's record collection, which had thousands of records. My job was to transmit the concerts that closed the late-night broadcast. It was an hour of symphonic music. In that way, I tuned my ear, and I fell for jazz. I found a phrase from Duke Ellington that I stuck on the wall of the studio, which said: "jazz is not a rigid concept, it's life." Even then, I already thought that folk music was also not a paleontological concept, it was life in movement.²⁹

Tejada Gómez's comments suggest that jazz may have played a similar role for the Mendoza musicians as it did for Astor Piazzolla. In both cases, jazz sanc-

tioned an effort to bring sophistication and innovation to a traditional musical form.

After trying and failing to break into the commercial folk music circuit for several years, Sosa finally secured a recording contract. Her debut album, *La voz de la zafra* (The Voice of the Harvest), was released on RCA Victor in 1962. The album represented something of a compromise between the aesthetic and ideological principles of the Mendoza group and those of the multinational record company. Since eight of the twelve songs were Matus/Tejada Gómez compositions, *La voz de la zafra* did feature many of the musical and lyrical hallmarks of what would become the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero. Nevertheless, in an effort to make the music more commercial, RCA Victor paired Sosa with a band and backup singers, thereby placing her voice in a highly conventional setting. The title of the album was a reference to the sugar harvest and, thus, to Sosa's origins in Tucumán, a biographical detail underlined in the liner notes in order to establish her provincial authenticity. Strangely, though, a majority of the songs (including several of those by Matus and Tejada Gómez) were based on themes and rhythms not from Sosa's Northwest but from the Littoral.³⁰ In 1960 and 1961, when the album was recorded, the triumph of the zamba was not yet definitive. At the time, the biggest new female star in folk music was Ramona Galarza, a singer from the province of Corrientes who was strongly identified with the Littoral. Galarza produced a series of top-selling albums for Odeon, featuring music from her home region with full band arrangements.³¹ RCA Victor likely hoped that Sosa could emulate the success of Galarza and other singers, a calculation that is evident in the photograph featured on the cover of *La voz de la zafra*. Sosa's makeup and carefully arranged hairstyle—vaguely reminiscent of Jackie Kennedy's bouffant—amounted to an image of modern, cosmopolitan femininity that closely matched Galarza's look.³²

In a broader sense, *La voz de la zafra* reflected the business strategy of Ricardo Mejía, the producer who was at this very moment in the process of assembling the *Club del Clan* on behalf of RCA Victor. Although his focus was on the pop styles of the Nueva Ola, Mejía was open to recording other genres of music if he thought he could make them commercially viable. For example, he agreed to record Piazzolla's first album with the Quinteto Nuevo Tango in 1961, so long as the group also recorded a dance record that might sell more copies.³³ Like the Piazzolla dance album, *La voz de la zafra* represented an attempt to place an innovative artist in an aesthetic context drawn from more commercial versions of his or her genre. In both cases, the strategy failed. The Piazzolla dance album sold fewer copies than its ostensibly more artistic counterpart, Sosa's debut album made very little impression, and RCA Victor moved

FIGURE 5.1 • Mercedes Sosa in RCA Victor publicity photo from circa 1962. *Folklore Extra: Vida y éxito de Mercedes Sosa* (circa 1967).



away from this sort of experiment. Piazzolla's next couple of albums came out on Columbia, and by 1963, Mejía was being criticized by tango fans for ignoring the genre.³⁴ Within folk music, other multinationals including Odeon and, especially, Philips would take the leadership role. Sosa later commented that RCA Victor had deemed her album “uncommercial” and therefore refused to promote it.³⁵

The vanguardism of Piazzolla and Sosa posed a challenge for RCA Victor, but in Sosa's case the difficulty was compounded by her politics. Sosa's repertoire betrayed the leftist orientation of her Mendoza circle and, in particular, that of lyricist Armando Tejada Gómez. In the late 1950s, Tejada Gómez was one of many young leftists who embraced the progressive anti-imperialism of Arturo

Fronzizi's presidential campaign. He joined the candidate's party and was elected to serve in the provincial legislature. But after the election of 1958, Fronzizi quickly turned to the right. Under the influence of developmentalist guru Rogelio Frigerio, the new president signed a series of agreements with foreign oil companies; embraced the free-market policies of his minister of economics, Alvaro Alsogaray; and enacted a controversial educational reform that favored private and Catholic schools. Fronzizi's leftist supporters, including Tejada Gómez, reacted with horror. Fronzizi's betrayal of the left, together with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, radicalized many young Argentines, some of whom embraced the idea that the country required a revolution of its own.³⁶ For his part, Tejada Gómez joined the Communist Party, an affiliation that soon extended to others in his artistic circle, including Mercedes Sosa. Matus and Sosa, who had been frustrated by their inability to penetrate the Buenos Aires folk scene, relocated to Montevideo in late 1962. There, they were warmly welcomed by leftist intellectuals including the poet Mario Benedetti and the journalist Carlos Núñez, and they performed at Communist Party events.³⁷ The failure of *La voz de la zafra* combined with their modest success among the small, leftist audience in Uruguay convinced them to change directions. They wrote to Tejada Gómez and returned to Mendoza, prepared to launch a movement.

In 1963, eight years after Piazzolla had issued his "Decalogue," Tejada Gómez, Matus, and Sosa, along with other members of their Mendoza circle, published their own manifesto calling for a "New Songbook." The two documents had much in common. Like Piazzolla, the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero warned of the danger posed by foreign pop music—what the folk musicians called "the invasion of decadent and distorted forms of foreign hybrids." And both movements were deeply vanguardist, promising to elevate the quality of Argentine popular music. Yet while Piazzolla offered his innovations as a way of halting the commercial decline of tango, the Mendoza group confronted a folk boom. As a result, the Nuevo Cancionero musicians identified commercialism as the main threat to quality and promised to denounce all "crude" folk music produced for "commercial ends." They criticized "postcard" songs that expressed nostalgia for the landscape but had nothing to say about the daily struggles of the people who lived and worked in it. Like other folk innovators, they sought to reconcile tradition and progress, singling out Buenaventura Luna and Atahualpa Yupanqui as two earlier folk musicians who had initiated "a reformist impulse that broadens its content without resenting its autochthonous roots." Finally, the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero rejected "closed regionalism" in favor of national and even international ambitions. The movement sought

to create music that could “express the whole country” and pledged itself to “communication, dialogue, and exchange with all of the similar artists and movements in the rest of America.”³⁸

Although the Nuevo Cancionero movement’s musical ambitions did not distinguish the group from other musicians who were trying to make a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan form of folk music, the social content of its lyrics did. The poetry that Tejada Gómez wrote for many of the songs in Sosa’s early repertoire went beyond the nostalgia and melodrama typical of folk music in order to describe the exploitation and suffering of Argentina’s contemporary, rural population. “Zamba del riego (Irrigation Zamba)” is typical in its focus on a poor peasant engaged in specific tasks and forced to bear the weight of an oppressive social system. Tejada Gómez’s lyrics celebrated the songs themselves, and by extension the composers and performers, for their capacity to lift the spirits of the poor. As he put it in “La de los humildes,” a song included on *La voz de la zafra*, “One has to sing this zamba / Sister of the humble / sower of hopes.” The early songs of the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero stopped short of an explicit call for revolution, but they did imply that folk singers might serve as intellectual guides for the poor, supporting them and helping to awaken them to consciousness.³⁹

Matus and Sosa returned to Buenos Aires in the year following the publication of the manifesto, but they continued to struggle professionally. As Sosa later recalled, “We wanted to create a show that was serious and different, in which the lyrics could be clearly heard, etc. We refused to sing in peñas for people to dance and nothing more.”⁴⁰ This attitude, so reminiscent of Piazzolla’s insistence on playing music for listening, limited them to a small audience of young leftists: “Our movement was for a minority . . . we had a very loyal public, a politicized public.”⁴¹ To a certain extent, Sosa’s vanguardism militated against her attempts to gain popularity. In an interview in a Córdoba newspaper, she was not shy about criticizing folk musicians she considered crudely commercial: “I hate vulgarity. I do not believe in the cleverness of those who out of snobbery or to make money quickly, produce all kinds of vulgarity, of absurdity. I deny that pieces like those made by [Rodolfo] Zapata are an expression of the people, and I also reject those who consider it ‘popular’ to express themselves in coarse and crude language.”⁴² Rodolfo Zapata, Sosa’s target here, had scored a hit in 1961 with “La gorda,” a comic chacarera in which the singer poked fun at his overweight girlfriend.⁴³ Sosa claimed to be making music that was more truly popular, but her criticism of Zapata, very much in keeping with the Nuevo Cancionero manifesto, was frankly elitist. Given this attitude, as well as the sophisticated jazz harmonies and highbrow poetry of her songs, it is

no wonder that Sosa's audience—like Piazzolla's—was limited to a small group of connoisseurs. And yet, in 1965 Sosa would suddenly emerge as a major star, and by the end of the decade, she was a national icon.

Inventing Indigeneity

According to every account of Mercedes Sosa's career, the dramatic turning point came in January 1965 at the annual folk festival held in the small town of Cosquín, Córdoba. The Cosquín festival, created in 1961 with the support of the national and local governments as well as the financial backing of the state-owned oil company, was the biggest stage in folk music. Beginning in 1963, Julio Márbiz, the editor of *Folklore* magazine, served as the festival's master of ceremonies. Despite Márbiz's reputation for playing favorites, Cosquín, like the magazine, was a neutral arena in which all of the various styles of folk music, from the most traditional to the most avant-garde, were represented.⁴⁴ As a relatively minor folksinger, Sosa was not even on the official program in 1965.⁴⁵ The singer Jorge Cafrune, who had been named the "revelation" of the festival three years earlier, invited her onstage and introduced her to the crowd. Accompanying herself on the bombo, Sosa sang "Canción del derrumbe indio." The performance made such an impact that within a year, it was already legendary. By 1966, she had a contract with Philips and was well on her way to stardom.

Sosa achieved this dramatic reversal in her career trajectory by designing a new mode of self-presentation that emphasized her indigeneity. According to one account, when she took the stage at Cosquín a shocked Márbiz asked, "Who is that woman who looks like a servant?"⁴⁶ A description of Sosa's early performance style reveals the visual cues that helped produce this snap judgment: "A face of severe indigenous reminiscences, expressive and without makeup. . . . Almost always dressed in a black outfit partly covered by a poncho, both garments that give her such a strange personality that in her first performances people would ask each other: 'did you hear that Indian sing?'"⁴⁷ Having abandoned the carefully coiffed look favored by RCA Victor, Sosa now wore her straight, black hair long and unstyled. Her hair, her lack of makeup, her poncho, her angular facial features, and her skin tone all read as Indian. In this context, Márbiz's assessment reflected a common interarticulation of class and ethnicity: she looked like a servant to the extent that she looked like an Indian. But whereas she clearly was not trying to pose as a servant, Sosa's indigenous image was intentional. "Canción del derrumbe indio," the song she chose for her impromptu debut at Cosquín, bemoaned the fall of the Inca

FIGURE 5.2 • Sosa's new look. *La Nación* (February 12, 1967).



empire from an Indian's perspective: "I had an Empire of the Sun / great and happy / The white man took it away from me." In her breakthrough performance, she not only looked like an Indian. She spoke as one too.

Sosa's new persona built on an *indigenista* tendency in Argentine folk music that had begun to challenge dominant nationalist ideologies. Unlike many other Latin American countries, which officially embraced ideologies that celebrated *mestizaje*, or race-mixing, most Argentine intellectuals had long clung to an image of the nation as white. Confronted by massive waves of immigration, they celebrated the *criollo*, or native, population as the essence of the nation, but they emphasized the Spanish origins of this group rather than their indigenous or mestizo identities. Thus the folklorist Juan Alfonso Carrizo described the rural people of Tucumán as "white of the Spanish type" and argued that their music constituted a local version of the folk culture brought by the

Spanish conquistadors.⁴⁸ For nationalist intellectuals and popular authors, Indians figured mainly as the savage enemies against whom the gaucho—the true national prototype—proved his valor. But while this sort of racism dominated the depiction of Indians in Argentine folk music, other messages were also apparent. Despite their barbarity, Indians constituted an authentic part of the rural, premodern landscape for which folk musicians expressed nostalgia.⁴⁹ In the late 1930s, Buenaventura Luna gave his group the partly indigenous name, “La Tropilla de Huachi-Pampa,” and in 1940 when the Ábalos Brothers opened a *peña* in Buenos Aires, they named it *Achalay*, a Quechua expression of satisfaction.⁵⁰ Although these early examples were relatively isolated, indigenous stage names were common among the folk acts that emerged in the 1950s, including Horacio Guarany, Los Cantores de Quilla Huasi, and Los Huanca Hua. These names implicitly acknowledged the indigenous as a fundamental element within Argentine national identity.

The key figure in the valorization of indigeneity within folk music was Atahualpa Yupanqui. Born Héctor Roberto Chavero in 1908, Yupanqui formulated his pseudonym by combining the names of two Inca kings. Although he was born in Buenos Aires Province, Yupanqui spent part of his youth in Tucumán and traveled extensively throughout the Argentine Northwest, learning the music of the region. As a lyricist, he broke decisively with the racism that dominated depictions of Indians in folk music. One of his first compositions, “*Caminito del indio*,” recorded in 1936 and likely written in the late 1920s, uses the image of the ruins of the Inca road system to link the contemporary indigenous population of the Northwest to the majestic Inca civilization of the pre-Columbian past. Sung from the perspective of an Indian, the lyrics describe the hardships suffered by “my old race.” In songs like this one, Indians emerge as a suffering people but also as a source of wisdom. In his essays, Yupanqui rejected the opposition between gaucho and Indian. He described the highland regions of Jujuy and Tucumán, inhabited by Kolla and Calchaquí communities, as “*indocriollo*,” positioning the indigenous as a fundamental contributor to native Argentine culture.⁵¹ For Yupanqui, who joined the Communist Party in 1945, these positive depictions of Indians were intimately connected to his denunciations of the exploitation of the poor. His social consciousness, most famously expressed in a line from the song “*El arriero*”—“The suffering is ours but the cows belong to someone else”—was a major source of inspiration for the lyricists of the *Nuevo Cancionero* movement.

In the 1950s, the exoticizing gaze of European audiences reinforced the idea that Argentine folk music was built on indigenous foundations. Persecuted by the Perón regime, Yupanqui traveled to Europe in 1949. In Paris, he

was enthusiastically received by Communist Party members and fellow travelers, as well as by the singer Edith Piaf. Despite Yupanqui's obvious professionalism and the fact that his French performances and recordings included a cosmopolitan mix of Caribbean, Brazilian, and Chilean songs as well as Argentine ones, Parisian reviewers saw him as an embodiment of indigeneity: "Behind Atahualpa Yupanqui, large, powerful, with bronzed skin and slightly slanted eyes, a great countryside extended, with the solitude of its open spaces and its Indian people. For us, he opened up 'the vein of the Indian's ancient suffering . . . Indian sounds, Indian silence, Indian sweat.'"⁵² Yupanqui's performances in 1949 and 1950 ignited a fad for South American folk music in the French capital, and Parisians tended to respond most enthusiastically to music they heard as indigenous. Traveling and performing in Europe in 1950, folk composer Ariel Ramírez found that "the Europeans are interested in what is most pure and simple, the elemental and indigenous."⁵³ Based in Paris from 1952 to 1956, the Argentine folk duo formed by Leda Valladares and María Elena Walsh also recognized this preference: "Of all of our repertoire, they always liked the *bagualas* and *vidalas*, the most purely indigenous songs, most."⁵⁴ Valladares noted the irony that while Europhile Latin American elites often disdained their own folk music, Europeans were themselves amazed and attracted by the power of the primitive, folk cultures of the Americas.⁵⁵

As a result, when Mercedes Sosa was developing her persona in the early 1960s, the range of ideas about indigeneity in Argentine folk music had expanded. As the growing number of groups with indigenous names indicates, a cosmopolitan audience in Buenos Aires was ready to embrace the idea of an indigenous contribution to national identity. It was this worldview—one forged in encounters between Argentines and Europeans—to which Sosa appealed. She developed her indigenous persona not by studying the musical cultures of actual Indians but by leveraging her own mestizo features, performing songs on Indian themes composed by non-Indians, and in general, drawing on stereotypical ideas about Indians as long suffering and wise. Hardly traditional, the image she created—that of an opinionated, politicized, and proud indigenous woman, playing a bombo, and singing songs with avant-garde melodies and challenging lyrics—amounted to a strategic and thoroughly transnational essentialism.

Sosa had engineered a remarkable self-transformation in the years since *La voz de la zafra*. She looked so different now that when *Folklore* ran an old photograph of her, the magazine had to print an explanatory caption: "Do you recognize her? It is Mercedes Sosa. What happens is that when Mercedes sings, the whole soul of the earth comes down on her. Here, she is calm and photogenic."⁵⁶ *Folklore* described her new, more indigenous self-presentation

as a product of her musical passion. As she emerged on the national stage in the years following her Cosquín performance, much of the press coverage of Sosa remarked on her indigenous appearance and typically connected that indigeneity to her authenticity and to the intensity of her mode of expression. Describing her “native timbre and gestures,” one article concluded that “Mercedes Sosa is an Indian voice who in each song leaves a piece of her soul waving on the microphones.”⁵⁷ According to another, she had a “face of Indian-like (*aindiadas*) features without the shadow nor hint of makeup, a penetrating look and an authentic simplicity that was not prepared by any promoter.”⁵⁸ For the radio and television host Blackie, Sosa appeared almost as a force of nature: “Her particular custom of not wearing makeup or doing her hair strengthens the impression that we are before a telluric phenomenon.”⁵⁹ These accounts emphasized the distance between Sosa’s appearance and that of whiter, more packaged, and less powerful folksingers. Her indigeneity indicated not lower-class status but sincerity, passion, and authenticity. At the same time, Sosa’s indigenous persona explained her lack of makeup and plain hairstyle, thereby enabling her to deviate from dominant notions of femininity.

Since Sosa’s ability to perform indigeneity relied on the evidence of her body, commentators now obsessed over her physicality. After reporting that Sosa described her ancestry as a blend of Indian and European elements—one of her grandmothers spoke Quechua, while the other spoke French—a writer for *Primera Plana* insisted on emphasizing the physical evidence of her indigeneity: “In this curious mixture the aboriginal undoubtedly predominates; and Mercedes—high cheekbones, very black, straight hair—is proud of them.” In a not-too-subtle reference to Sosa’s weight, the same article described her as a “robust and Indian-like woman.”⁶⁰ As a woman who was, according to another article, “too fat to make a physical impact,” Sosa was gendered in particular ways.⁶¹ Most notably, many accounts constructed her as an asexual figure by emphasizing her maternal role. Typical was an article about the 1969 edition of the Cosquín festival that featured a photo of Sosa smiling with her son and referred to her as “the Mother of the Festival.” According to the caption, “All the dramatic ferocity, the savage blood that Mercedes Sosa puts into her singing, disappears when she is accompanied by her son.”⁶² Maternity humanized her, reducing the danger implicit in her exotic indigeneity. Eventually, these gender and ethnic essentialisms would be interarticulated in the label, “the Pachamama of folklore,” which assimilated her to the Inca earth goddess.⁶³

An article on the 1968 Cosquín festival in the women’s magazine *Para Ti* suggests the way that the gendered and racialized aspects of Sosa’s persona worked together. The article documented “the woman’s presence” at the festival,



FIGURE 5.3 • *Folklore Extra: Vida y éxito de Mercedes Sosa* (circa 1967).

describing the main female performers as well as the anonymous women who worked in other capacities. The caption to a photograph of Sosa on stage connected her to female indigenous labor: “Calchaquí hands wove Mercedes Sosa’s poncho.” This connection was made even more explicit by the other photographs on the page: beneath the image of Sosa were two photographs of indigenous women, a Kolla and a Toba, engaged in craftwork at the festival’s artisan fair. Sosa was not exactly figured as an Indian here since the layout implied that real Indian women—Calchaquies, Kollas, and Tobas—did not perform on stage, but neither was she merely an artist or performer. Instead, she embodied and expressed a more abstract or generic indigeneity. As a woman, she was the bearer of racialized tradition. When asked what Cosquín meant for women folksingers, she responded, “It is not professional performance. It is giving and receiving the purest and most legitimate aspect of the passion of Argentine song which unites us (*nos hermana*) in one undeniable (*irrenunciable*) race.”⁶⁴ Here, she explicitly disavowed her professional identity and embraced her function as a preserver and transmitter of an essentialist identity.

Sosa's indigenous persona enabled her to overcome the limits that her aesthetic vanguardism and leftist politics imposed on her commercial viability. As Illa Carrillo-Rodríguez has shown, her performance identity reconciled two distinct models of authenticity. Whereas for traditionalists, authenticity required "fidelity to practices understood as folkloric," folk music innovators stressed "creative originality." As the most visible member of the Nuevo Cancionero movement, Sosa was firmly in the innovators' camp. Nevertheless, the intensity of her performance seemed to tether these original songs to lived experience. In other words, her persona implied a deep connection between her own life and the subjects she sang about, giving her songs the appearance of testimony. Moreover, her roots in Tucumán were often leveraged to grant her a measure of traditionalist authenticity. At Cosquín, Jorge Cafrune had been careful to introduce her as "a tucumana," and many magazine profiles of her followed suit, thereby linking her to the region that folklorists had long ago identified as the geographical center and symbolic wellspring of national culture.⁶⁵ But, of course, many other folksingers were from Tucumán. What made Sosa stand out to so many observers was her visible connection to indigeneity. It was this aspect of her persona that allowed her to maintain an essentialist form of authenticity even as she championed a vanguardist musical project. Her indigeneity guaranteed her folkloric legitimacy, enabling her to avoid the censure of traditionalists even as she was embraced by the most progressive, cosmopolitan elements.

Comparing Sosa's persona to that of Chilean folksinger Violeta Parra helps underline its novelty and explain its impact. Eighteen years older than Sosa, Parra also began her career as a conventional folksinger, eventually specializing in the collection and performance of folk songs written by amateur musicians from rural Chile. Later, she began to write her own material, which she performed alongside the songs she collected. In the mid-1950s and again in the early 1960s, Parra traveled to Paris, where she achieved a level of commercial success that she was unable to replicate at home. As Ericka Verba has argued, Parra performed the role of an authentic exotic in Paris, but not in Chile, where audiences continued to see her as a professional musician who "interpreted" the culture of rural folk.⁶⁶ Although Parra would later be celebrated as a sort of founding mother by the Chilean, leftist folk movement known as Nueva Canción, she was struggling to make a living at the time of her suicide in 1967. The fact that she did not perform indigeneity in the way that Sosa did might be attributable to her personal inclinations. Or perhaps the attitudes of middle-class Chileans, who tended to think of their country as a homogenous nation of Europeanized mestizos, left no room for such a performance.⁶⁷ In any case, Sosa's success demonstrated that Argentine audiences would respond

to an indigenous persona in much the same way as Europeans did. They too wanted to see a representation of authenticity, albeit one that was articulated with a highbrow aesthetic. Sosa's impressive commercial success was a testament to the power of that image.

By 1966, Sosa was an emerging star in Buenos Aires, but she reported that she had not yet won over audiences everywhere: "Even today, when I travel to the interior, I feel the resistance of people to something that is trying to break with what many performers have managed to establish as traditional even if it is not authentic or profound. Moreover, I always feel this before I begin to sing, because not everyone is ready to accept a woman who plays the drum, a woman who does not style her hair, who does not wear makeup, who is not overly romantic and syrupy."⁶⁸ Sosa's comment is a useful reminder of the extent to which she challenged established gender norms. Her embrace of a more natural, less coiffed appearance predated by at least two years the emergence of hippies as a visible presence in Argentina.⁶⁹ Perhaps equally novel within the sphere of folk music, Sosa presented herself as an opinionated, assertive, and self-possessed woman, criticizing more commercial folk musicians and describing the exacting criteria by which she selected her repertoire. But Sosa's comment also reveals that the reinvented version of herself was a bigger hit in Buenos Aires than it was in the provinces. She attributed this disparity to the more conservative gender politics of rural people as well as their attachment to more traditional forms of folk music.

Yet from a broader perspective, Sosa's greater initial success in Buenos Aires reflected the fact that her image—in its gender characteristics, its artistic vanguardism, and most importantly, its indigeneity—was deeply cosmopolitan. Sosa, whose nearest indigenous relative was a grandparent, and who had no direct experience of Indian lifestyles or culture, had not simply stripped away artifice in order to allow a true essence to express itself. On the contrary, her new persona was a strategic essentialism developed through an engagement with images and ideas that circulated transnationally. Not only was her indigeneity shaped by European responses to South American music, but her persona also reflected more recent trends in the United States. In interviews, she noted that the members of the *Nuevo Cancionero* movement listened avidly to Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.⁷⁰ Baez, who would later befriend Sosa and perform with her in Argentina and elsewhere, seems like an obvious inspiration. Her politicized traditionalism made her extremely prominent in the early 1960s, even landing her on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1962. And as the *Time* article makes clear, Baez's image contained many of the same elements that would feature in Sosa's: "She wears no makeup, and her long black hair hangs like a drapery . . .

[her voice] is haunted and plaintive, a mother's voice, and it has in it distant reminders of black women wailing in the night, of detached madrigal singers performing calmly at court, and of saddened gypsies trying to charm death into leaving their Spanish caves."⁷¹ This description of a "natural" feminine look and a sound that was somehow maternal, even as it was exotic and ambiguously racialized, prefigures the responses to Sosa that appeared a few years later. Whether or not Sosa consciously borrowed elements from Baez's style, it was an image that undoubtedly circulated in Buenos Aires. Sosa was embraced in Buenos Aires first, because the capital was home to a cosmopolitan audience whose aesthetic preferences had been formed in dialogue with European attitudes and North American cultural commodities.

Cosmopolitan Nationalism

Sosa's new persona led to her affiliation with the Dutch multinational, Philips Records, a relationship that would have a significant effect on her career. Unlike RCA Victor, whose dominance in the pop field encouraged it to focus on selling to the domestic and Latin American markets, Philips's strategy for folk music was aimed at appealing to higher-class record buyers at home as well as in Europe and North America. Toward that end, the company became the primary outlet for recordings by the most prestigious and innovative artists, developing a reputation for sophistication. Philips's biggest success was Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla*, a Catholic Mass based on Argentine folk genres, which became an international bestseller after its release in 1964. Like other Philips folk albums, this one included lengthy, pedagogical liner notes and cover art that broke with the criollista tradition of singers in gaucho attire. As the company's artistic director, Américo Belloto, put it, "The public demands quality. And quality is also good business."⁷² Sosa came to Philips shortly after her performance at Cosquín, when Ernesto Sábato and Eduardo Falú invited her to perform a song on an album they were recording for the company. Based on a section of *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, Sábato's prize-winning novel of 1961, *Romance de la muerte de Juan Lavalle* was released to great acclaim in May 1965. The company was impressed with Sosa's performance and agreed to record a solo album.

In June 1966, Philips released what some in the press mistakenly referred to as Sosa's debut LP, *Yo no canto por cantar*.⁷³ Two more albums followed over the next year. These albums avoided the over-orchestration and backup singers that RCA Victor had imposed. With a few exceptions, Sosa is accompanied only by guitar and occasional percussion. Following the lead of other folk innovators, her guitarists, Tito Francia and later, Kelo Palacios (Margarita's son), alternate

between brief, strummed passages that indicate the traditional rhythm and more virtuosic sections that sound almost improvised. While Tejada Gómez and Matus are represented on the albums, Sosa also included works by other avant-garde folk poets, such as Horacio Lima Quintana and Manuel Castilla. The sparser instrumentation enabled Sosa to develop a more dramatic singing style. She sang in a rich, precise contralto, avoiding melisma. Keenly aware of the power of dynamics to express emotion, she moved from a quiet whisper to a loud, almost declamatory call. In these louder passages, the commanding authority of her singing voice resonated with the Pachamama imagery that now attached to her: her voice suggested wisdom and power rather than flirtatiousness or girlish innocence.

Sosa's affiliation with Philips identified her with the most prestigious and cosmopolitan segment of the folk scene. Reviewers were impressed by her high standards and commitment to artistic quality. *La Prensa* praised her accurate pitch and argued that her fast rise was "no mere phenomenon of popularity" since she avoided appealing to "easy tastes."⁷⁴ Similarly, the magazine *Confirmado* complimented her for singing exclusively "songs with high artistic value." At the same time, though, this reviewer hinted that Sosa's power was due to something other than polished technique and an impressive repertoire: she was, according to the review, "the most interesting and visceral woman's voice that has appeared in folk music these last years."⁷⁵ Though more confident, dramatic, and unadorned, Sosa's voice was not, in fact, radically different from the one that appeared on *La voz de la zafra*. What gave it so much power now—what made it so "interesting and visceral"—was her embodiment of Argentine indigeneity. This persona, based as it was on an engagement with European sensibilities, was perfectly compatible with Philips's highbrow marketing strategy. It certainly appealed to European audiences. In 1966, she was invited to join a package tour assembled by Lippmann + Rau, the concert agency famous for bringing African American blues artists to Europe. The tour, which included Ariel Ramírez, Los Fronterizos, and on some stops, Astor Piazzolla, took place the following year, visiting some ten countries in Europe.⁷⁶ In a promotional film from the German leg of the tour, Sosa can be seen singing "Canción del derrumbe indio," dressed in her customary poncho and accompanying herself on the bombo.⁷⁷ Her performance of indigeneity was perfectly calibrated to appeal to the European taste for the passionate exotic.

As an artist who recorded on the prestigious Philips label and performed in Europe, Sosa appealed to the same cosmopolitan nationalism as Piazzolla did: she too performed an authentic Argentine musical genre in a sophisticated style that impressed Europeans. Sosa, though, was also linked to a specific

version of nationalist history, a link first established by her participation in the Sábato/Falú project, *Romance de la muerte de Juan Lavalle*. In the mid-1960s, Sábato was the prototypical writer of Argentina's cosmopolitan, urban middle class. Although solidly anti-Peronist, he presented himself as a proponent of ideological balance. Unlike so many other Argentine intellectuals, Sábato intended to avoid a polarizing account of the nation's history, and toward that end, he treated the independence-era general, Lavalle, as a tragically flawed hero whose struggle could be appreciated by all Argentines regardless of political affiliation.⁷⁸ By choosing Falú to compose the music for the piece, Sábato selected an ambitious artist who appealed to an audience with self-consciously cultivated tastes.⁷⁹ This was an ostensibly nonpartisan, patriotic version of Argentine history expressed through a highbrow aesthetic project.

Several years later, Sosa would lend her voice to a series of similar folkloric interpretations of nationalist history composed by Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna and also released on Philips. Luna was a journalist, historian, and folk music fan who, like Sábato, had been an ardent supporter of Frondizi in the late 1950s. In 1964, Ramírez asked him to write the lyrics for *Navidad nuestra*, a piece to be included on the B-side of the *Misa criolla* album. They continued the partnership two years later with *Los caudillos*, a folk cantata dedicated to eight legendary, popular leaders of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ These caudillos were divisive figures, attacked by liberals and celebrated by revisionists. Yet Luna, like Sábato before him, personalized them, telling their stories as epic tragedies while refusing to take sides in historiographical debates. Ramírez even boasted in interviews that he and Luna were careful to make sure “that no compatriot would feel offended in his legitimate feelings for the respect that all the figures of our history deserve.”⁸¹ In 1969, Luna and Ramírez followed up *Los caudillos* with *Mujeres argentinas*, eight folk songs about specific women in Argentine history—some famous, some obscure, and some fictional—and they invited Mercedes Sosa to sing them. The result was another work that combined aesthetic sophistication with an inclusive nationalism. A typical review described “the high artistic quality (*jerarquía artística*) of ‘Mujeres Argentinas,’ enhanced by the warm and eloquent voice of Mercedes Sosa . . . a notably successful attempt at stylizing through the magic of music and poetry characters and elements that were formative of the national being.”⁸² As this description suggests, listeners heard the work as a demonstration of “quality” but also as an exploration of the historical roots of the national essence. Sosa's persona fit the project well on both scores.

The two major hits from *Mujeres argentinas* leveraged Sosa's persona in different ways. “Alfonsina y el mar,” about the suicide of modernist poet Alfonsina

Storni, drew on Sosa's authenticity as a creative, original artist, untainted by commercialism. Meanwhile, "Juana Azurduy," about a legendary, female soldier who fought against the Spanish in the Wars of Independence, resonated with Sosa's image as a powerful, assertive woman but also with her embodiment of an essentialist version of national identity. As the lyrics indicate, the mixed-race Azurduy was born in "Alto Peru," present-day Bolivia but at the end of the colonial period part of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, whose capital was Buenos Aires. The song firmly situates Azurduy in the indigenous world of the Andes by alluding to Tupac Amaru, the indigenous leader who led a massive rebellion in Peru in the 1780s. Yet it also ties her to the origins of Argentine patriotism: "I love the fatherland before its time." Sosa's performance of indigeneity made her uniquely well suited to deliver this message. The result was a powerful intertextuality: together, Luna's lyrics and Sosa's voice located the roots of national identity in a distant, quasi-indigenous past.

Whereas Sosa's involvement in historical projects initially deepened her association with prestigious folk innovators and cosmopolitan intellectuals, it eventually expanded her appeal beyond these elite sectors. In 1970, Ariel Ramírez invited Sosa to contribute to the soundtrack he was composing for a new film by Argentine director Leopoldo Torre Nilsson. Based loosely on a book by Ricardo Rojas, *El santo de la espada* (1970) was a biopic about Argentine independence hero José de San Martín. Torre Nilsson followed it with an historical epic about another military leader in the war against Spain, Martín Miguel de Güemes. Ramírez again created the soundtrack and invited Sosa to sing two songs. Moreover, the screenplay for *Güemes, la tierra en armas* (1971) included a depiction of Juana Azurduy, and since Sosa was now identified with her, Torre Nilsson cast her in the part. These films represented a radical change in style for Torre Nilsson, who had achieved critical acclaim in Argentina and abroad for intimate films featuring psychological character studies. By contrast, the new films were epic in tone, depicting heroes generally devoid of psychological nuance. Although they are now critically derided, both films were major box office hits. Yet it was not primarily a commercial calculation that led Torre Nilsson to adopt this new cinematic style. Instead, the director's turn to the patriotic, historical epic was a response to the heavy-handed censorship imposed by the military government that had taken power in 1966. Not wanting to leave the country, Torre Nilsson decided that patriotic films set in the distant past would least antagonize the regime. In order to satisfy General Onganía, the de facto president, the director depicted patriotic, military heroes who disdained political intrigue. The result so perfectly suited Onganía's project that thousands of schoolchildren were required to see it.⁸³

Mercedes Sosa, member of the Communist Party and the voice of the leftist Nuevo Cancionero movement, was now involved in officially sanctioned, patriotic projects of massive, commercial appeal.

Icon of Revolutionary Latin America

In the first few years after her breakthrough in 1965, Sosa's career had remained within the confines established by the Philips strategy: her domestic audience was primarily cosmopolitan, middle-class Argentines, and her international touring was primarily limited to Europe. Nevertheless, there were hints of a broader, Latin Americanist agenda. The manifesto of the Nuevo Cancionero had called for collaboration with like-minded musicians from throughout the Americas, and Sosa acted on this impulse almost from the beginning. Her first album for Philips included not only "Canción del derrumbe indio," whose composer, Fernando Figueredo Iramain, was Ecuadoran, but also "Canción para mi América" by the young Uruguayan singer Daniel Viglietti and "Tonada de Manuel Rodríguez," based on a poem by the Chilean Pablo Neruda.⁸⁴ While the former placed the figure of the Indian at the center of a vaguely revolutionary project, the latter celebrated a Chilean hero of the independence wars against Spain. This early juxtaposition of songs valorizing indigeneity with a song celebrating the patriots of the independence era begins to suggest the Latin Americanist implications of Sosa's nationalism. Sosa's embodiment of indigeneity meant that her version of Argentine national identity turned away from European Buenos Aires and toward the Andes, home to pre-Columbian civilizations. Similarly, attending to the history of the independence wars meant remembering a period before national identity, when patriots from throughout the continent were united in their struggle against Spain. Her performance of the role of Juana Azurduy—identifying a mixed-race, Argentine national hero from "Alto Peru"—enacted both of these impulses. In the early 1970s, even as she was solidifying her status as a mainstream symbol of Argentine national identity, Sosa helped forge a revolutionary vision of Latin American unity.

The musical basis of this new Latin Americanism developed in Paris. French audiences had learned to associate authentic South American indigeneity with Atahualpa Yupanqui and other Argentine folk musicians, who thanks to decades of folklore studies emphasizing the centrality of the Northwest, tended to specialize in rhythms derived from the musical genres of the Andes. By the early 1960s, as musicologist Fernando Rios has demonstrated, the Latin American folk scene in Paris was dominated by Los Incas, a group composed of two Argentines and two Venezuelans. Heavily influenced by the Ábalos Brothers,

Los Incas adopted an Andean repertoire and an instrumental lineup that included the quena and charango, Andean instruments that the Ábalos Brothers had played in Buenos Aires in the 1940s. Violeta Parra and her children, Angel and Isabel, heard this music in Paris, enthusiastically adopted it, and brought it back to Chile, where it became the basis of that country's Nueva Canción (New Song) movement.⁸⁵ Andean music had a leftist association in Paris, thanks partly to Yupanqui's influence and the role of Chant du Monde, the record label of the French Communist Party, which released several records by Yupanqui in the early 1950s. This undoubtedly made it more appealing to the Parras and to the Chilean bands that followed their lead. Before the mid-1960s, Andean music was extremely uncommon in Chile, but now, thanks to these encounters with Argentine folk musicians in Paris, groups like Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún made it the soundtrack to Salvador Allende's socialist movement. The music of the Ábalos Brothers, Los Incas, and Inti-Illimani was aimed at cosmopolitan, urban audiences and therefore was only distantly related to the music played by indigenous communities in the Andes.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the Nueva Canción groups used sonic and visual allusions to Andean indigeneity—Andean rhythms and instruments, ponchos—in order to express a revolutionary Latin Americanism.

Andean folk genres and leftist politics represented common ground between Mercedes Sosa and the Chilean Nueva Canción movement. Yet even though Sosa was becoming a star in Argentina just as Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún were emerging, she did not forge a connection with her Chilean counterparts until the early 1970s. The groundwork for a Latin American folk music movement was laid at the first Encuentro de la Canción Protesta, held in Havana in 1967, which brought together leftist musicians from throughout the Americas. However, the Argentine delegation to the Encuentro included Oscar Matus, but not Sosa, who had divorced Matus the previous year.⁸⁷ Fittingly, Sosa was in the middle of the Lippmann + Rau European package tour at the time of the Encuentro. She spent the late 1960s building her audience in Europe and among the cosmopolitan middle class in Buenos Aires, becoming in the process a much bigger star than Matus ever would. It was only once she had achieved commercial success and cemented her status as an artist of prestige and a symbol of national identity that Sosa began to embrace her Latin American counterparts. This chronology helps account for Sosa's ability to hold on to an elite and middle-class audience in Argentina even after she became identified with revolutionary Latin Americanism.

Sosa finally became aware of the new Chilean folk music in 1968 when some Argentine friends gave her a copy of Violeta Parra's final album.⁸⁸ The

following year, she performed in Chile for the first time and recorded a single for Philips with Parra's "Gracias a la vida" on one side and "Te recuerdo, Amanda" by the leftist Chilean singer Víctor Jara, on the other. In 1971, she recorded an entire album of songs by Parra. The album included paeans to Latin American solidarity, such as "Los pueblos americanos" as well as political songs like "La carta," about a young man murdered for joining a strike, which Sosa recorded with the Chilean group Quilapayún. By covering Parra's songs and collaborating with leading figures in Chile's Nueva Canción movement just months after Salvador Allende took power, Sosa performed her own act of revolutionary solidarity. Parra's "Gracias a la vida," "Volver a los 17," and "La carta" became fixtures in Sosa's performance repertoire. Through her adhesion to the revolutionary cause in Chile, Sosa had deepened her commitment to building an anti-imperialist, Latin American unity. She began to tour extensively in Latin America, returning to Chile in 1971 and performing in Uruguay, Mexico, and Venezuela in 1972.⁸⁹

As she engaged with Latin American audiences outside Argentina, Sosa's persona underwent a transformation that soon reshaped her image at home. Argentines and Europeans tended to see Sosa as indigenous, yet in much of Latin America, official ideologies of mestizaje and indigenismo meant that allusions to indigeneity were far less novel. In this context, Sosa's poncho, black hair, and mestizo features did not conjure an essentialist primitivism so much as they seemed generically and proudly Latin American. In interviews on these tours, she emphasized a leftist version of Latin American solidarity. In Venezuela, she declared simply that "my commitment is with the people."⁹⁰ In Mexico, she explained that she developed her role as the voice of "the oppressed" precisely by recognizing herself as Latin American. As the reporter paraphrased her, "She discovered America and before her appeared a Latin America burdened with problems, with similar cultural patterns and ideas."⁹¹ In another Mexican interview, she denounced "colonizing music" from the United States (making an exception for "artists like Bob Dylan") and claimed to represent "a new music, inspired by traditional rhythms and by popular revolutionary poetry."⁹² As she toured Latin America, Sosa was less a symbol of the indigenous roots of Argentine national identity than an icon of revolutionary Latin Americanism. She brought this message back home both by incorporating more radical songs in her repertoire, including many by Chilean and Uruguayan composers, and by performing alongside Nueva Canción musicians in Argentina. In 1971, for example, she sang with Quilapayún and the Uruguayan group Los Olimareños at the Gran Rex Theatre in Buenos Aires.⁹³ For many young Argentines, Sosa's Latin Americanism was an important

element in their process of radicalization. For example, student activist Horacio Ungaro “locked himself in his room for hours to read Lenin . . . [and] listen to [rock group] Sui Generis and to Mercedes Sosa. Latin America invaded his spirit not only through the popular mobilizations in Chile and Uruguay but also through the songs of Quilapayún and Daniel Viglietti.”⁹⁴ For Ungaro and many others like him, Sosa connected Argentina to the revolution that seemed to be sweeping through Latin America.

Although Sosa’s growing radicalism did occasionally attract unwanted attention from the Argentine dictatorship, she managed to retain her stature in the country. In 1968, after she performed alongside Horacio Guarany at a concert in la Plata in support of striking oil workers, she found it difficult to book concerts for the better part of a year.⁹⁵ She seems to have dealt with this official harassment partly by adopting a self-conscious political naiveté: “In truth, I do not know if my songs are political or not, since I don’t understand anything about politics.”⁹⁶ Sosa also had influential friends, including a multinational recording company and prominent, mainstream intellectuals. Finally, her vanguardism—in particular, her preference for poetry over slogans—probably helped as well. She often remarked on her refusal to sing protest songs whose lyrics lacked literary value.⁹⁷ This tendency infuriated the Peronist militants Eduardo Duhalde and Rodolfo Ortega Peña, who criticized her for avoiding any concrete reference to the specific problems facing the country. They described her recording of Viglietti’s “Canción para mi América,” and its refrain, “Lend your hand to the Indian. It will be good for you,” as “a sort of indigenista pepsi-cola.”⁹⁸ But the same vagueness and universalism that irritated Peronist militants probably helped Sosa avoid incurring official persecution. Since her protest songs made no reference to specific political actors or policies, they could be embraced by listeners from across the political spectrum. As a result, she continued to receive rave reviews in elite newspapers, whose reporters generally ignored the political content of her songs and stressed either her technical prowess or her artistic integrity and sincerity: “It is the triumph of the authentic. Of someone who only sings or interprets when she completely identifies with the song.”⁹⁹

Nevertheless, as social conflict continued to deepen, it became increasingly difficult for Sosa to hold on to both the mainstream and the radical segments of her audience. In 1969, Peronist workers and militant students united in a series of massive mobilizations that shook the dictatorship. The following year, the Peronist guerrilla group Montoneros kidnapped and killed Pedro Aramburu, the general who led the coup that overthrew Perón in 1955. Faced with deepening polarization and increasing violence, General Alejandro Agustín

Lanusse, who had taken over the presidency in 1971, actively sought to engineer a return to civilian rule, even as he continued to pursue a hard line against the guerrillas. In this context, there were hints that certain elite sectors were becoming uncomfortable with Sosa's politics. In a review of the concert featuring Sosa alongside Chilean and Uruguayan *Nueva Canción* acts, the magazine *Panorama* described her as "the most proud and perfect of the night," but criticized the "confused and trivial poetry" of her current repertoire. Moreover, the reporter alleged that the lyrics inspired many fans to invade the theater without paying.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the magazine *Primera Plana* spoke of a contradiction between Sosa's politics and her pursuit of "quality," asking why she continued to perform "some songs of shaky artistic value by Armando Tejada Gómez."¹⁰¹ These critiques revealed a growing tension between her status as a symbol of apolitical Argentine nationalism on the one hand and her status as an icon of a politicized, revolutionary Latin Americanism on the other.

In the early 1970s, though, there was still space available for Mercedes Sosa in the Argentine public sphere. In fact, 1972 represented a high-water mark for her performance of both officially sanctioned *Argentinidad* and revolutionary Latin Americanism. That year, Héctor Olivera and Fernando Ayala directed *Argentinísima*, a documentary film featuring musical performances by the biggest stars in folk music. A follow-up to Julio Márbiz's radio and television programs and an enormously popular LP of the same name, the film depicted folk music as a symbol of Argentine national identity. Sosa performed "Alfonsina y el mar" in the film's penultimate scene, followed immediately by Piazzolla's *Conjunto 9*, the only nonfolk act included. Both her choice of material as well as her position in the film's lineup emphasized Sosa's vanguardism. Nevertheless, the cinematography—a tight close-up on Sosa's straight, black hair and then on the emotive features of her face bathed in bluish light—highlighted her iconic, aestheticized indigeneity. Sosa had now been involved in three of the four highest grossing Argentine films of the 1970–72 period.¹⁰² Yet even as her participation in these films demonstrated her acceptance into the mainstream, 1972 also saw the release of her most political album to date, *Hasta la victoria*, including revolutionary songs by Víctor Jara and the Uruguayan Anibal Sampayo.¹⁰³ In August, she headlined a folk concert in the Colón Theater, the most prestigious performance space in Buenos Aires. Despite the fact that President Lanusse was in attendance, Sosa did not alter her repertoire for the occasion, including several protest songs alongside what she described as "poetically valid" material without an explicit political message.¹⁰⁴ At one point during her set, the audience chanted "Down with the dictatorship!" apparently undeterred by the presence of the dictator himself.¹⁰⁵ The Colón performance

suggested that even as she reached the highest rung on the ladder of artistic prestige, the political implications of her revolutionary persona could no longer be ignored.

Sosa's final project of 1972, the *Cantata Sudamericana*, was a further installment in her work with Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna. With songs representing various South American genres, including bossa nova and cumbia, the album went beyond the Argentine folk of their earlier projects. Luna and Ramírez were hardly radicals. Within the music world, they represented the most prestigious, sophisticated branch of folk. Still, describing the *Cantata*, Luna sounded almost revolutionary: "The cantata proposes to exalt, to dignify the elements of Latin American reality . . . in order to arrive, in this way, at something that some call liberation."¹⁰⁶ Whereas *Mujeres argentinas* had drawn on Sosa's embodiment of an essentialist national identity, the new project resonated with her revolutionary Latin Americanism. Within a month of its release, the album was among the best-selling LPs in Argentina.¹⁰⁷ Sebastián Carassai has recently argued against accounts that depict a general trend toward the radicalization of middle-class, Argentine youth in the 1970s. Even in the midst of polarization and violence, he claims, most young people rejected political militancy.¹⁰⁸ But Mercedes Sosa's prestige and prominence is a reminder that as late as 1972, there was a substantial, mainstream constituency in Argentina for nonviolent expressions of revolutionary Latin Americanism, that such expressions, in other words, were not so radical. Many people who would never join the guerrillas, sang along with Mercedes Sosa's version of Tejada Gómez's "Canción con todos": "Sing with me, sing / American brother / Liberate your hope / with a shout in your throat!"

Over the next few years, the space available for these expressions began to close. Unable to control the country, the military regime finally stepped down and allowed Perón to return from exile. After another landslide electoral victory, the aging leader began his third term as president in October 1973. Nevertheless, the return to democracy did not lead to a decline in social conflict or the eradication of state terror. On the contrary, Peronism itself now split into right and left factions. With the sponsorship of certain elements of the government, a paramilitary organization known as the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, or Triple A, began to assassinate suspected guerrillas and other leftists, a campaign that intensified after Perón's death in 1974.¹⁰⁹ That year, the Triple A began to threaten leftist artists, leading to the exile of several, including folksinger Horacio Guarany, with whom Sosa was closely associated (she had recorded his "Si se calla el cantor" in 1973).

Sosa now found it increasingly difficult to find a mainstream audience for her work. In a 1974 interview, she insisted that she was not a political singer

who sang only for politicized audiences—“The artist has to tend toward being popular, not shut oneself up in small groups of intellectuals”—but she acknowledged that some listeners now rejected her for political reasons: “I now know that there is a certain kind of person who likes how I sing but does not like what I sing.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, Sosa could not control the meanings that audiences made of her work. Even though she had never espoused revolutionary violence, her recording of “Juan Azurduy” was embraced by militants. Her performance of the part in *Güemes, la tierra en armas* had emphasized Azurduy’s self-sacrifice and her fidelity to her husband alongside her bravery, yet for many Montoneros the character was an expression of the “masculinized” female guerrilla.¹¹¹ Sosa had benefited enormously from her connection to the prestigious, apolitical wing of folk music represented by Ariel Ramírez, Eduardo Falú and others, but in the polarized context of the mid-1970s she was increasingly pigeonholed as a leftist. Sosa continued to perform in Argentina whenever possible, but in response to the challenging environment, she also adopted a heavy schedule of international touring. In 1973 alone, she performed in the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Spain, France, the Soviet Union, and Uruguay.¹¹² Meanwhile, Sosa’s association with leftist folk singers from throughout the continent deepened, culminating in her 1975 visit to Cuba, where she was celebrated as one of the central figures in revolutionary, Latin American song.¹¹³

As she was becoming ever more firmly identified with revolutionary Latin America, Sosa acquired a new nickname in Argentina, one that linked her more explicitly than ever before with the poor. Like many Argentines with mestizo features or dark complexions, Sosa had long been called “negra” by friends. Since the early twentieth century, “negro/a” was a common Argentine term of endearment whose inversion of racial hierarchy lent it a populist charge. Yet the massive internal migration that began in the late 1930s and the close political bond forged between the so-called *cabecitas negras* and Perón made the term more problematic. Now “negro/a” conjured a much more concrete class affiliation: “negros” were the poor, often dark-skinned masses who inhabited the *villas miserias* of Buenos Aires. As a result, when Sosa became a star in the 1960s, the press never referred to her as “negra,” preferring instead “indígena” or “aindiada.” These terms linked her to a remote, abstract indigeneity and, as I have suggested, helped turn her into a symbol of an essential Argentineness. Sosa’s artistic vanguardism, her prestige, and her highbrow aspirations would have made “la negra” unsuitable, at least as part of her public persona. Yet in 1975, mainstream publications began to adopt this nickname for her. After yet another international tour, one newspaper celebrated the return of “la ‘negra’

Sosa,” while the fan magazine *Radiolandia* explained the nickname to readers who might not yet have heard it: “La Negra (as all her friends lovingly call her).”¹¹⁴ This transformation in Sosa’s public persona reflected a larger transnational trend toward race consciousness. In particular, as Eduardo Elena has demonstrated, Peronists, who used to studiously avoid racial terminology, now embraced it. While intellectuals examined the role of racism in Argentine society, activists now proudly claimed to represent the interests of negros.¹¹⁵ Even though Sosa was no Peronist, her new identity as “la negra” gave her a powerful populist appeal. It further tipped the balance of her iconicity away from apolitical, highbrow nationalism and toward a much more concrete affiliation with the poor. Likewise, it changed the meaning of her Latin Americanism. As “la negra,” Sosa became a representative of the Argentine poor; as such, her calls for Latin American solidarity sounded much more revolutionary and class conscious than those of a moderate progressive like Félix Luna.

In 1975, Sosa received a series of ominous threats from the Triple A. The harassment worsened after the coup of March 1976, which installed Argentina’s most violent military dictatorship. In response, she tried to keep a low profile, performing in much smaller venues and avoiding any overtly political songs. In 1978, the junta explicitly banned four of her recordings from the radio and television, including two songs from the *Cantata Sudamericana*.¹¹⁶ As sung by Sosa, these abstract appeals to South American unity were now deemed subversive. That same year, authorities threatened to jail any record store owner who sold Sosa’s most recent album, a tribute to Atahualpa Yupanqui.¹¹⁷ The following year, she was briefly arrested after a performance in La Plata. In this context, it was increasingly difficult for Sosa to find work, and in 1979 she finally left the country for exile in Spain and France.

The Return of La Negra

In February 1982, as the increasingly unpopular military dictatorship struggled to hold onto power, Mercedes Sosa returned to Argentina for a series of concerts at Buenos Aires’s Teatro Ópera. In order to engineer her return, the rock producer Daniel Grinbank booked the 2,400 seat theater for eleven nights, covered the walls of Buenos Aires with posters, and placed ads in the newspapers. Cleverly, he did not apply to the authorities for permission until the first three shows had already been sold out. The junta, anxious about its public image, allowed the shows to proceed, although it did establish certain preconditions. Sosa agreed not to perform “Juana Azurduy” or “La carta” (though she later broke this promise in the case of the “La carta”), not to invite the

blacklisted Victor Heredia to perform with her, and to allow a police presence in the theater. She eventually sold out all eleven shows, and the concerts earned universal praise in the media.¹¹⁸ One newspaper reported on the “obvious censorship” of certain songs and suggested that the spontaneous chant of “La Negra no se va” (La Negra will not leave) demonstrated that the audience embraced Sosa in a spirit of resistance to the dictatorship. But the overall tone of the event was peaceful and inclusive. Sosa introduced herself the same way she did when she performed abroad: “I am Mercedes Sosa, I sing, and I am Argentine.”¹¹⁹ This simple declaration of nationality was echoed in the title of the double album recorded at the concerts, *Mercedes Sosa en Argentina*. In the end, she achieved more than a triumphant return; she made herself into a national symbol perfectly suited to Argentina’s imminent, democratic transition.

Illa Carrillo Rodríguez has argued convincingly that the 1982 concerts “were the locus of a process of negotiation in which different forms of consensus were sought and attained.”¹²⁰ The effort to forge consensus, to imagine an open and unifying national community, went beyond Sosa’s willingness to accept the terms stipulated by the junta to include her decisions about which songs to perform and which guest performers to invite. At the Ópera, she sang many of her trademark songs, including “Alfonsina y el mar,” “Canción con todos,” and the Violeta Parra songs “Gracias a la vida” and “Volver a los 17.” However, she also sang songs by the Cuban singer-songwriters Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, as well as “Los mareados,” a classic tango from the 1920s. This repertoire definitively pushed her beyond the genre of Argentine folk music. Even more striking, Sosa invited two rock performers onstage with her, singing “Cuando ya me empiece a quedar solo” with Charly García and “Sólo le pido a dios” with León Gieco. García’s introspective lyrics about the price of fame resonated with the theme of the artist as a tortured, creative soul in songs like “Alfonsina y el mar.” By contrast, Gieco had forged a folk-rock image partly modeled on Bob Dylan. He and Sosa performed his antiwar anthem “Sólo le pido a Dios” as a full-throated sing-along.¹²¹ By singing with these two musicians, Sosa implicitly rejected the critique of cultural imperialism that had long kept folk nationalists—including those of the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero—from embracing local rock music. She built a bridge to the rock audience, including it within a new, more inclusive vision of the Argentine nation.

As the military relinquished power following the debacle of the Malvinas War, Sosa achieved a level of popularity that far exceeded her earlier audience. Some 800,000 copies of *Mercedes Sosa en Argentina* were sold during the first four months of the democratic government.¹²² By 1989, well over 2 million copies had been sold, making it easily the best-selling record of the decade

in Argentina.¹²³ During the democratic transition, Sosa periodically reenacted the ritual of national unity she first performed at La Ópera, staging concerts before massive audiences. In 1983, she sold out the twenty-five-thousand-seat Ferro Carril Oeste stadium in two days. Once again, León Gieco and Charly García accompanied her on stage; this time the singer-songwriter Piero performed with her as well.¹²⁴ In 1984 and again in 1985, she performed multiple sold-out concerts at the twelve-thousand-seat Luna Park stadium. At all these shows, she incorporated music from a wide range of genres and countries, including, for example, songs composed by Brazilian popular singer Milton Nascimento and by Argentine rocker Fito Páez, alongside material by the younger generation of Argentine folk musicians, as well as a selection of her older hits. According to press reports, the audiences at these concerts were diverse, “a public of all ages and all levels” according to one reporter, “young and old, students and workers, employees and executives” according to another.¹²⁵ At one of the 1985 concerts, some fans held banners for the Unión Cívica Radical, the centrist party then in control of the government, while others brandished signs for the Frente del Pueblo, a leftist coalition, and still others proclaimed their support for the popular soccer team Boca Juniors.¹²⁶ Sosa had emerged as a unifying figure, identified with the nation above all divisions, partisan or otherwise.

Since she first embraced her indigeneity in 1965, Sosa had publicly symbolized Argentine national identity. It was her embodiment of a deep, national essence that led Ernesto Sábato, Félix Luna, and Leopoldo Torre Nilsson to cast her in works that exalted patriotism. Yet she was also affiliated with a revolutionary Latin Americanism that pushed in a very different direction. By the mid-1970s, these two sides of her persona were no longer sustainable: embraced by the militant left and rejected by the patriotic right, Sosa could no longer represent the nation for all. Yet in the early years of the democratic transition, she reestablished and even expanded her national iconicity. Although she had performed in popular movies in the early 1970s, it was in the early 1980s that she became a pop star on a massive scale, capable of selling out huge arenas. Sosa’s music, like Astor Piazzolla’s, surely evoked nostalgia for many fans, yet given its mass appeal it must also have resonated in other ways. Her selection of material—her openness to rock music, in particular—contributed to her new popularity, but the biggest factor was a change in the transnational political context. By the mid-1980s, Central America had become the principal Cold War front in the Western hemisphere. While the U.S. government funded massive counterrevolutionary campaigns in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, many of the anticommunist military dictatorships established in South

America in the 1960s and 1970s came to an end. In Argentina, the junta's reign of terror had destroyed the institutional basis of the left in the late 1970s. Now the end of the dictatorship put the extreme right on the defensive as well. In this context, Sosa's politics were far less threatening.

During her years of exile, Sosa had deepened her Latin Americanism by touring annually throughout the region, including a particularly extensive swing through Brazil in 1980, and by expanding her repertoire to include a greater number of songs by composers from outside Argentina. But in the early 1980s, her calls for regional solidarity resonated not with left-wing revolutionary movements, of which almost no trace remained in Argentina, but with the common experience of democratic transition. She continued to sing socially conscious songs like Víctor Jara's "Plegaria a un labrador," but in the new context, these songs no longer seemed like those of a revolutionary militant. In her late forties at the time of her return to Argentina, her age accentuated her maternal image, especially as she mentored younger folk and rock artists.¹²⁷ In this way, Sosa now appeared as a sort of conscience of the nation, insisting that social justice be among the core values of the nation in the process of being reimagined. Even the meaning of her nickname, "La Negra," by which she was now called in virtually every publication, had shifted. While the name still alluded to her mestizo features and to her affiliation with the poor, it also conjured a more general identification with the whole Argentine pueblo. A typical account of her first Luna Park concert of 1984 highlighted this identification: "As if every day that had passed [since her last performance in Buenos Aires] had generously watered and fertilized her representativeness, La Negra was the transportation of thousands of Argentines toward memory and hope, toward accusation and homage, toward anger and tenderness, toward longing and brotherhood."¹²⁸ The name, La Negra, reinforced her "representativeness," her capacity to speak to and to move "thousands of Argentines."

Sosa was clearly associated with the Argentine human rights movement. The song, "Como la cigarra," which she sang in her 1982 comeback concert, became a hymn to resilience in the face of state terror. Written a decade earlier by María Elena Walsh, the song's lyrics were reinterpreted in light of the disappearances suffered at the hands of the dictatorship: "So many times, they erased me, so many times I disappeared, I went alone and crying to my own burial." Given the scope of Sosa's popularity, it was not surprising that Raúl Alfonsín, Argentina's first democratic president after the end of the dictatorship, sought her public support for his government. For her part, Sosa responded positively to these overtures. In the early years of the transition, Alfonsín's policies were very much in line with the demands of the human

rights community. The new government established a truth commission to uncover the crimes committed by the military regime, and it put the nine junta leaders on trial in 1985. Later though, Alfonsín responded to persistent pressure from the military by supporting laws to limit the prosecution of military officers for crimes committed during the Proceso. He incurred the opposition of some human rights groups by seeking to limit the pursuit of justice in order to facilitate national reconciliation.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Sosa remained a fervent supporter of Alfonsín.¹³⁰ Although this loyalty may have reflected a personal friendship, it also made sense in light of Sosa's identity as a representative of the Argentine people. In the early years of Argentina's new democracy, both she and Alfonsín stood for national unity in the effort to rebuild Argentina after a long experience of violence and division.

Even as she attained massive popularity in Argentina, Sosa spent much of her time abroad. Of the 240 concerts she performed between 1987 and 1990, 207 took place outside of Argentina.¹³¹ She continued to perform throughout the world in the 1990s and, despite poor health, the 2000s as well. In 2009, just months before her death, she recorded a double CD, entitled *Cantora*, composed of duets with major figures from Argentine and Latin American rock and pop. She had long since outgrown the role of Argentine folksinger to become what one newspaper called "the great voice of America."¹³² In addition to old friends like Charly García, Fito Páez, León Gieco, Víctor Heredia, and Caetano Veloso, the album also included younger musicians, including the Colombian pop star Shakira. Perhaps most noteworthy was a version of "Canción para un niño en la calle" recorded with René Pérez, or Residente, of the critically acclaimed, Puerto Rican hip hop group Calle 13. A denunciation of child poverty with lyrics by Armando Tejada Gómez, the song features the socially conscious poetry typical of the Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero; Sosa first recorded it in 1967. The 2009 version includes lengthy raps by Pérez, but as if to restore the song's connection to Argentina, it also features a bandoneón. That Pérez would embrace the opportunity to record this song with Sosa suggests that the identity she forged in the 1960s and 1970s continues to be relevant. More than just a relic from the Cold War, Sosa's version of revolutionary Latin Americanism is still a vital resource on which leftist artists from the region can draw.