



Luis Rico Sings for a Better World

In a beautiful fusion of song and narrative, Bolivian singer LUIS RICO shares his own experiences of Bolivia's social, economic and political realities. In a nation affected by dictatorships and corrupt governments, his 32 recorded albums bring music to the people of the Amazon. JANSET BERZEG spoke to him during his visit to Australia.

When did you start singing? What does music represent to you?

I think music in its essence is a recreational instrument that enhances spirituality in a human being. If you add an additional dimension to reflect on life, or human rights, for example, then the song becomes a useful tool to try to achieve a better, more equitable and less violent world.

I was a happy student when studying in provincial Bolivia. I felt lucky to have access to a university education. Initially I chose to study the orthodox branch of economics while I dreamt about solving economic problems and easing the suffering of the world.

I studied in Potosi, the most historic city in Bolivia that has a long history of exploitation by Spaniards in the struggle for its gold and silver mines. During my years at university in Potosi, I started playing my guitar at social events that catered to different social classes. This helped me understand the different ways of life and the social inequalities that existed between Indigenous peoples, labourers, mine administrators and the owners of the mines.

When we played for the poor, we drank pure alcohol

with them, and when we played for the owners of mines, we were offered whisky.

In 1967 during the traditional celebrations of San Juan (at which people burn furniture and other wood items on the streets. Because it is the coldest night of the whole year in Bolivia, we were at a party. There was food, music and dancing when suddenly a young man announced that something strange was happening in Siglo 20, a well-known mining camp, where a massacre was taking place.

The dictator General Barrientos had ordered the killing of the miners and their families, who had gathered at Siglo 20 from all around Bolivia to morally and economically support Che Guevara's guerrillas.

Che was in Bolivia that year but he had health problems so the miners wanted to help his guerrillas and that was a good enough reason for Barrientos to order the massacre. Eighty seven miners, women and children lost their lives that night. So I asked myself: what is it that I do? And, what is it that I should be doing? I dropped out of university, and started writing music and singing. I have been a musician for the last 45 years.

We went through a difficult period when the infa-



mous Operation Condor was taking place. From exile, and in prison, I wrote a good quantity of songs about the political situation.

They were love songs for our country. Love songs against persecution, the suffering of children, the terror and the massacres that took place during the dictatorship. In the end we did manage to regain democracy. However it brought more shame than the times of dictatorship.

I lived in fear all the time, and was imprisoned eight times. I was forced to sign documents that declared that I wasn't going to produce or sing any protest songs. But I knew that there were so many marginalised Indigenous peasant communities. The country had also become a breeding area for international non-government organisations, but no one really knew what they were actually doing there.

That was around the same time that I started to travel to the Amazon to experience the way of life of the Indigenous peoples, to learn about their concerns and how the government and the church managed to get there. The government was there to take away their land and resources. So I started focusing my music on

strengthening Indigenous cultures and our ties with them.

What is the current political situation in Bolivia?

After long periods of dictatorships and corrupt democracies, today we have an Indigenous president who was elected by peasants, workers and indigenous peoples, those who have been among the most marginalised. They provided him a helping hand to become president.

However he is now following the advice of experienced politicians who in my opinion, have not followed his vision, and have contributed to him making mistakes. As always, in an imperfect democracy, there are privileged sectors of the ruling party and those who grow coca and do not pay taxes.

Apart from having made Indigenous Bolivians more visible, have things improved with the new government?

Bolivia is home to 32 different Indigenous groups including the Aymara, the Quechua and the Guaraní. President Evo Morales is also from an indigenous background. He did not have a chance to study at uni-

versity. There is a national park in the middle of Bolivia, which is considered to be the lungs and the centre of the Amazon; this area is called TIPNIS (Indigenous Territory and National Park Isiboro Sécure).

Morales wants to build a highway across the TIPNIS, which will serve the economic interests of Brazil, so it can access world markets rapidly and cheaply. The purpose is also clearing out more land for cocaine production. The area where cocaine is grown is too small and no longer caters for the big demand.

Bolivia produces absolutely nothing. We only have a raw materials-based industry so it is hard to justify how the highway that will cross our sacred lands is going to help Bolivians. The Indigenous people are protecting their land against the Brazilian authorities and the political and cocaine-based economic interests of Morales, who is surrounded by an army of corrupt politicians behind him.

The current government's policies are not fair. There are Indigenous ruling party supporters who enjoy privileges while there are other Indigenous groups that inhabit the TIPNIS who are quite marginalised. Some of them are even being persecuted and accused of opposition to President Morales' political project.

What do you see happening in the near future?

Well, Morales himself has turned into a power driven politician who wants to extend his mandate to more than three or four terms, despite the fact that the constitution prohibits re-election. Just like in the case of Chavez. So, the problem is quite complex.

I believe that Morales has made big mistakes when he followed his own political advisors, acting against the interests of his own people, the very people that actually helped him come to power. This is socially quite painful for the people. Now the President is in the process of initiating what he calls "a community consultation" to get the Indigenous peoples to agree and collaborate to the construction of the highway that will cross untouched Amazon lands. It is obviously a forced, obligatory consultation.

I wrote a song about this project which has become a symbol of the Indigenous people's fight to preserve

the area and since then Morales considers me to be part of the opposition, just for being on the side of the indigenous peoples. I think that Morales needs to listen to all Bolivians and not only his advisors and those privileged people. He likes to be applauded and he has lost his way.

What do you want to achieve with your music?

Luckily I happen to write songs that become emblematic of the struggle of the Indigenous people to preserve the Amazon and their human rights. My music is current and connected with the issues. I am always prolific, producing music and writing songs.

I think music has a big role to play in providing leadership and influencing public opinion, just like the mass-media does. I have a duty to convey the truth about the actions of a government that calls itself "Indigenous".

Through my music I ask for respect for democracy and the human rights of all Bolivians.

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You have just given a public lecture at ANU in Canberra where you spoke about dictatorship and democracy in Bolivia. What is your connection with universities?

I had my first experience in Bolivia with a lecture at the Université de Tous les Savoirs which is a system of free education that was proposed by the French embassy in Bolivia. This year there will be 365 keynote lectures of important scientists, academics and researchers. They also invite people like me and we talk about what we know. The first time

I was invited, I suggested summarising the history of Bolivia in twenty songs. It was a challenge but everyone loved the concept.

Do you have any message for readers of Refugee Transitions?

Australia is a beautiful country; multicultural and multiethnic. I am glad to have been invited to Australia for the third time, because it allows me not only to connect with the Bolivians and other Latin Diasporas here, but also, to bring some issues to the attention of the broader Australian community, like the challenges that our Indigenous peoples are facing today. We have to keep talking about these issues so the younger generations can enjoy discrimination-free lives. ☞