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Murdered Chilean folk singer laid to rest after 36 years

Thousands pay tribute to singer Victor Jara, who was shot after the brutal Pinochet coup of 1973

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The Observer, Sunday 6 December 2009



A mourner snaps a picture next to a painting depicting Chilean folk singer Victor Jara during his funeral in Santiago, Thursday, Dec. 3, 2009. Photograph: Roberto Candia/AP

The Chilean folk singer Víctor Jara, who became a symbol of opposition to the regime of Augusto Pinochet, was finally laid to rest in an emotional funeral in Santiago – 36 years after he was tortured and murdered by the military government.

Thousands of Chileans turned out to pay their respects to Jara, who rose from humble rural roots to become a renowned singer and theatre director in the early 1970s, when Chile witnessed a flourishing of radical ideas and the popular arts under Salvador Allende.

Yesterday's funeral cortege was led by the singer's British widow, Joan. It was the second time she had buried her husband. In September 1973, a week after Pinochet led a coup against Allende, she took his lifeless body, riddled with machine-gun bullets, to Santiago's general cemetery and arranged a hasty, clandestine burial before fleeing into exile.

The opportunity for a dignified funeral for Jara arose in June, when his corpse was exhumed in a bid to find

out more about who killed him and how.

A former army conscript, José Adolfo Paredes Márquez, has been charged with Jara's murder as a result of the new inquiry. He denies involvement, but told investigators that an army officer known as "El Loco" played Russian roulette with Jara as he was held in Santiago's football stadium after the coup. The officer allegedly held a gun to the singer's head, spinning the cylinder and firing repeatedly, until eventually a single bullet blasted into the singer's brain. Paredes said soldiers were then ordered to finish Jara off by pumping more than 40 bullets into his body.

Investigators are still trying to trace "El Loco" and another officer, known as "El Príncipe" (The Prince), who, according to survivors, was particularly sadistic. The only person to have been convicted in relation to his death was a guard at the stadium. It was there that the singer was tortured and shot. His corpse was dumped outside the stadium and later taken to a mortuary for his widow to collect.

The public funeral was welcomed by leading politicians in Chile, which is in the middle of a hard-fought election campaign. "Finally, after 36 years, Víctor can rest in peace," said Chile's president, Michelle Bachelet, who herself was a victim of the Pinochet regime and spent years in exile.

Bachelet joined thousands of Chileans who filed past Jara's coffin during a two-day wake for the singer. Many of those who attended had, like Joan Jara, lost loved ones at the hands of the military.

"This is my father," said Cecilia González, pointing to a black-and-white photograph pinned to her lapel. "He was a doctor who gave safe housing to a priest in the days after the coup. The priest was discovered and shot dead by a Chilean soldier. They arrested my father and tortured him and he died of his injuries. They killed our relatives, just like they killed Víctor Jara."

Jara's coffin was draped in his signature black-and-red woollen poncho during the wake. Wreaths of red roses and carnations were placed around it and some of those who arrived to pay their respects brought guitars and played his songs.

An activist in the Chilean Communist party for much of his adult life, Jara remains a hero for the left and for musicians, not just in Chile but throughout Latin America and beyond. The Clash and U2 are among the groups who have paid homage to him.

His handsome face, with its strong jawline and mop of curly black hair, is still a familiar sight on posters in Chile, and his music remains popular.

Many of his best-known songs, such as *Te Recuerdo*, *Amanda* (I Remember You, Amanda) and *Herminda de la Victoria* (Herminda from Victoria), are simple ballads chronicling the lives of Chile's poor and downtrodden, its factory workers and its farmers.

Others, such as El Derecho de Vivir en Paz (The Right to Live in Peace), refer to the international events of Jara's age, such as the Vietnam War.

Jara rose to prominence in the late 1960s as part of the Nueva Canción (New Song) movement, which sought to infuse music with social commentary. With songs such as Preguntas por Puerto Montt (Questions about Puerto Montt) – which remembered a notorious massacre of landless poor in southern Chile in 1969 – he helped pave the way for the election of Allende in 1970.

Throughout the three tumultuous years of Allende's government, Jara remained loyal to the president and his ideas. The two men died within days of each other.

The inquiry into who should be held finally responsible for his death goes on. "We need to know," said Guillermo Tellier, leader of the Chilean Communist party. "We know how Víctor Jara died, but we don't know who ordered his murder."

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