ABSTRACT: This article explores the revival of 1970s and early 1980s balada among middle-class vicenarians in 1990s Chile. In the first section I analyze the stigmas attached to classic balada. While previous studies have tried to explain balada’s bad reputation by considering individual prejudices—aesthetic, political, or socio-economic—in isolation, I propose here that they must be considered together in order to provide more satisfactory answers. In the second half of the essay I study the ways in which two groups of core revivalists, namely radio DJs and rock musicians, grappled with the problem of balada as guilty pleasure. I focus on two radio shows that were instrumental in defining the limits of the revival and framing it as a guilty pleasure, and I analyze a popular 2001 rock cover of the classic balada song “Maldita primavera” that illustrates what made the genre simultaneously attractive and repellent for local artists.

keywords: balada, revival, Chile

RESUMEN: Este artículo es un estudio del revival, organizado por veinte años de clase media, de la balada de los años 1970s y comienzos de los 1980s en el Chile de los 1990s. En la primera parte analizo los estigmas asociados a la balada clásica. Estudios anteriores han tratado de explicar la mala reputación de la balada tomando en consideración prejuicios estéticos, políticos o socioeconómicos individualmente; aquí propongo que es necesario considerarlos juntos para producir respuestas satisfactorias. En la segunda mitad del ensayo estudio la manera en que los promotores originales del revival (DJs y músicos de rock) enfrentaron el problema de la balada como placer culpable. Estudio dos programas radiales que contribuyeron a definir los límites del revival y en promover una estética de placer culpable, y analizo un cover de la balada “Maldita Primavera” grabado el año 2001 para ilustrar qué del estilo lo hacía simultáneamente atractivo y repelente para artistas locales.

palabras clave: balada, revival, Chile

During the late 1990s in Chile, a core group of middle-class vicenarians began promoting a revival of the classic balada genre of the 1970s and 1980s. Although classic balada was still a staple of AM radio and there were several FM stations dedicated to romantic music, the revival propelled the genre...
into unexpected spaces: rock and university-run stations were suddenly interested in programming balada, major recording labels were issuing compilations of classic balada hits, and rock and punk bands were openly acknowledging a passion for the genre and recording covers.

The mainstream pop genre known as balada emerged in the late 1960s as a hybrid of Mexican *bolero moderno*, contemporary Anglo rock ‘n’ roll ballads, and European pop ballads. As such, balada appears simultaneously in several countries: in Mexico with Armando Manzanero and Carlos Lico; in New York with La Lupe; in Spain with Raphael and Julio Iglesias; in Argentina with Leonardo Favio; and in Chile with Los Ángeles Negros. The golden age of balada was the 1970s, with artists such as Camilo Sesto, Nicola Di Bari, Juan Gabriel, José José, and Roberto Carlos.

Balada is the Spanish-speaking world’s version of the international sentimental pop-ballad. As Peter Manuel has noted (2001), the sentimental pop song has been neglected by ethnomusicologists because it openly embraces cosmopolitanism and capitalist commercialism. Balada is no exception, having received scant scholarly attention both within Latin America and abroad. More often than not, critics describe balada as excessively commercialized and monotonous (Rico Salazar 1993, 158; González 2000; Évora 2001, 29).

A common approach among critics of balada is to compare it negatively against its predecessor, the bolero. As soon as balada threatened to replace bolero’s popularity in the late 1960s, critics anointed the latter as the quintessential Latin American romantic song. A darling among literary critics and among scholars in the fields of cultural, gender, and media studies, bolero is by now considered one of the canonical signifiers of Latin American aesthetics and identity. In 1969, renowned Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváís broke new ground in studies of Latin American popular culture when he suggested that bolero had provided generations of Latin Americans with an “educación sentimental,” or sentimental education—an argument later explored *in extenso* by María del Carmen de la Peza Casares (de la Peza Casares 2001; Monsiváís 1970, 342–363). Monsiváís, like most bolero aficionados, is notably less generous toward balada. Peppered throughout his wide-ranging oeuvre are critical reflections on *baladistas* such as Raphael, Emmanuel, and Luis Miguel, all portrayed as “pied pipers of Hamelin” whose songs are indistinct and interchangeable (Monsiváís 1970, 45–63; 1988, 350ff; 1995, 191ff).

In the 1990s, balada revivalists were well aware of the genre’s critical disfavor. These enthusiasts—musicians, DJs, concert promoters, and both male and female fans—had grown up with balada playing in the background and had come to think of it as “someone else’s” music, that is, as music produced for an altogether different generation and demographic. For some revivalists, balada was the music of their parents; for others, it
was the music of the working class, or of women, or of the conservative right. These associations made revivalists ashamed of enjoying balada, thus, they labeled it a guilty pleasure. The question of precisely why the association of balada with these groups made it a guilty pleasure for a generation of listeners is my focus in the first section of this essay. While previous studies have tried to explain balada’s bad reputation by considering individual prejudices—aesthetic, political or socioeconomic—in isolation, I propose here that they must be considered together in order to provide more satisfactory answers.

In the second half of the essay, I study the ways in which the two most public groups of balada revivalists, namely, radio DJs and rock musicians, grappled with the problem of balada as guilty pleasure. I focus on two radio shows that were instrumental in defining the limits of the revival and framing it as a guilty pleasure, and I analyze a popular 2001 rock cover of the classic balada song “Maldita primavera” that illustrates what made the genre simultaneously attractive and repellent for local artists. Both DJs and rock musicians attempted to change the negative perception of balada by reconfiguring its political and socioeconomic connotations. The revival’s excitement, then, lay in its transgressive challenge to politico-ideological and class barriers.

Ultimately, the balada revival evolved in a matter of just a few years from a word-of-mouth shared interest to a profitable commodity. By 2005, classic balada was being marketed as nostalgic entertainment alongside contemporary popular culture mainstays such as 1970s TV variety shows, sitcoms, and cartoons. In this process of commoditization, the shame associated with enjoying classic balada was lost. While classic balada may now appear to be just the latest mass culture expression to have been devoured by the nostalgic “oldies” marketing strategy, the transgressive quality of the revival in the years prior to its commoditization nevertheless makes it fertile ground for exploring political, gender, and class tensions in postauthoritarian Chile.

Guilt Sources

When asked why they consider balada a guilty pleasure, most revivalists will first cite aesthetic considerations such as the genre’s tackiness and melodramatic quality. To this appraisal I would add that a good share of balada, both classic and contemporary, is mediocre and trite in terms of its composition, delivery and production—all the more reason for hip, cosmopolitan listeners to be ashamed of enjoying it. After conversing with Chilean revivalists in 2003, however, I realized that there was more at stake than a mere perverse attraction to over-the-top cheesiness. Among revivalists, the topic of balada carried negative nonmusical connotations too pervasive to ignore.
The most ubiquitous such notions were that balada was the music of *nanas* (maids) and of right-wing conservatives and supporters of Augusto Pinochet’s regime. The former association implies that balada was the music of working-class women from rural or city origins, while the latter conceals a critique of balada for its lack of the sort of political engagement that was highly valued by opponents of the dictatorship.

**Apolitics on TV**

Political disengagement is a defining quality of balada and of pop ballads more broadly. As Peter Manuel writes in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*:

> In the Western world, including Eastern Europe and Latin America, the quintessential musical vehicle for depicting [the modern form of ‘pure’ relationships] is the pop ballad, a transnational genre that rigorously avoids reference to any social contexts or constraints, portraying instead an amorphous, ‘virtual’ world of the emotions. (Manuel 2001)

One of the few studies of the transnational pop ballad and its political implications appears in the essay “*Canção da América*-Style and Emotion in Brazilian Popular Song,” by Martha Tupinambá de Ulhôa (formerly Carvalho) (Carvalho 1990). In this seminal piece, Ulhôa juxtaposes the conservative style and reputation of baladista Roberto Carlos with the more progressive and challenging music of Música Popular Brasileira artist Milton Nascimento. At the core of her comparison are aesthetics: in contrast to Nascimento’s sophisticated lyrics, subtle relationships between form and content, and virtuosic singing, Carlos’ lyrics appear too simple and direct, his use of form predictable, and his delivery too colloquial. After acknowledging that all value judgments are “rooted in aesthetic preferences,” Ulhôa poses a fundamental question: “Why do MPB fans despise Roberto Carlos?” (Carvalho 1990, 339).

The source of this loathing, argues Ulhôa, “was not so much the subject matter, or the form, or the instrumentation, or even the style” (Carvalho 1990. 339–340) of Carlos’ music; “a bigger reason for the polarization in musical taste had to do with the political position of the artist and the public” (340). After the 1964 coup that established the Brazilian dictatorship, the college-educated cultural elite of that country rejected “all the music that implied the reactionary taste” of the military and the right wing of the middle class (339). Ulhôa has carefully chosen the word “implied” here because, as she rightly observes, “Roberto Carlos stayed at the margins of any political controversy, rather, engaging in boastful appraisals of Brazilian symbols such as the flag, or reinforcing some traditional Brazilian societal
values such as Catholicism and romanticism” (339). In the polarized climate under the Brazilian dictatorship, Carlos’ noncritical attitude toward the regime was enough to cast him as pro-military.

In Chile during the 1970s and 1980s, balada’s apolitical stance was also read by many as de facto support for the regime. These were decades of ideological extremism represented through highly polarized binaries; in their course, Chile experienced the 3-year government of socialist Salvador Allende (1970–1973); the coup d’état of September 1973, led by Commander of the Army Augusto Pinochet; and the dictatorship that ensued (1973–1990). The sociopolitical divisions that had developed during Allende’s government only worsened during the 17-year dictatorship. Because most Chileans were forced to choose sides, cultural expressions were considered to signify either resistance against or support for the regime.

Allende’s socialist program actively utilized music to promote its message: “There’s no Revolution without songs,” the leader himself reportedly said (Salas Zúñiga 2003, 15). Musicians of the Chilean political song movement Nueva Canción, such as Víctor Jara, Ángel and Isabel Parra, and groups like Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún became ambassadors of Allende’s political ideals. As part of Pinochet’s attempt to eradicate all traces of socialism, including even the very memory of Allende, those musicians who had enjoyed governmental support were either killed (e.g., Jara), exiled (e.g., Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún), or severely restricted from recording and from performing live (e.g., the Parra family). During Pinochet’s dictatorship, to listen to songs of protest was an act of resilient resistance. Counterfeit tapes of Chilean groups in exile and of Cuban Nueva Trova musicians, such as Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, were considered cultural weapons (Salas Zúñiga 2003, 55–76; Tumas-Serna 1992; Morris 1986; Farley 1984).

Pinochet’s cultural agenda was, however, largely unfocused and poorly planned. Unlike other Latin American dictators, Pinochet never pushed for any particular genre or style of music to represent his government. The one ironic exception was an attempt immediately following the coup to adopt Spanish singer Nino Bravo’s song “Libre” (“Free”), which was very popular in Chile at the time. The regime had hoped that the song might suggest freedom from Allende’s Marxism, but authorities soon realized that it was understood quite differently by the oppressed who desired freedom from the dictatorship (Varas and González 2005, 98–99). While Pinochet did not actively endorse a specific style, however, he censored so many cultural expressions that Chileans considered pro-Pinochet virtually any music he even tacitly permitted. Author José Miguel Varas, writing about the aftermath of the coup, tallies the music left on the airwaves once Nueva Canción abruptly vanished: “the Huasos Quincheros, the sugary songs of Julio Iglesias, and the North American songs of always” (Varas and González 2005, 98).
Balada certainly was not the first romantic-song genre to be associated with dictatorial regimes. In Spain, Latin American bolero enjoyed considerable popularity in the 1950s during the rule of Francisco Franco (Ordovás 1991). The emblematic moment of the marriage of bolero and Franco’s regime came in late 1965, when renowned Mexican bolero composer and self-declared hispanophile Agustín Lara paid a visit to Franco (Moreno Rivas 1989, 149). After Franco’s death in 1975, the Spanish people left bolero in the past as part of a larger project of putting the memory of Franco behind them. Only in the mid-1980s, a decade after Franco’s death, did bolero resurface in Spain (Knights 2002, 224).4

During Pinochet’s dictatorship, the revenues of the Chilean recording industry reached an all-time low. The protectionist tax for foreign musical imports decreased from 94 percent before 1973 to 10 percent in 1979, and local LP pressing halted in 1980 (Salas Zúñiga 2003, 108–109). While local manufacturing languished, imports and sales of blank cassette tapes increased considerably, generating profit greater than the local music industry’s total revenue (Contardo and García 2005, 101). As a result, the only option for local pop artists was to make a career out of TV appearances. As producer Marcelo García (quoted in Contardo and García 2005, 22) explains: “During that period, TV occupied radio’s role. Music manufacturing companies closed down, and labels thought twice before producing a Chilean artist.” Two televised spaces became iconic of Pinochet’s regime: the TV show *Sábado gigante* and the annual song contest *Festival Internacional de la Canción de Viña del Mar*. Despite the fact that both originated over a decade before the coup and are still on the air today, they are symbolic of the dictatorship because, in a repressive environment where countless expressions were censored, *Sábado gigante* and the *Festival* were able not only to survive, but to blossom.

*Sábado gigante* is the longest running TV show in world history. It started in 1962 and still retains the same host, Mario Kreutzberger (a.k.a. Don Francisco), today. Strongly influenced by American variety shows, it was the first Chilean show to award contest prizes (Anon. 1997). The show is known for its multifarious content, including comic sketches, contests, social service sections, *la cámara extranjera* (a Travel Channel-like section), interviews with politicians and personalities, and musical acts. For part of the 1980s, *Sábado gigante* would run every Saturday for 6 hours to consistently high ratings, and it once featured 17 musical numbers in a single episode.5

In 1986, the production of *Sábado gigante* moved to Miami, Florida, and the show began to be broadcasted to the Latino population in Miami through Univision. Intending to reach members of a diverse Latino community, producers of the show developed the slogan “separated by distance,
united by language” (Kreutzberger 2001, 116). According to Don Francisco’s autobiography, *Sábado gigante* became “the first mass-media program that tried to represent all Hispanics on the screen, interpreting their emotions, their tastes, their conversations, their frustrations” (Kreutzberger 2001, 162). The show’s immigration to Miami and subsequent *miamización* were analogous to the processes experienced by other entertainment businesses, such as the music and soap opera industries (Party 2008). The new, *miamizada Sábado gigante* was highly successful. Starting in November 1987, Univision extended the show’s coverage to the entire United States as well as all of Latin America except Argentina (Kreutzberger 2001, 117).

Given Don Francisco’s prominent TV persona, political hopefuls of all inclinations, and from throughout the Americas, have lobbied for his support since the mid-1960s (Lira 2000). Nevertheless, even to the present day, Kreutzberger has stoically resisted making public any allegiance with a political candidate or party. Under the Chilean dictatorship, *Sábado gigante* stayed on the air by carefully avoiding upsetting the censors. In his autobiography, Kreutzberger writes that the show “was a family entertainment balm during the country’s hard days, a time of divisions” (Kreutzberger 2001, 149). However, at a time when so much was censored and when most cultural projects were short-lived, the media ascendancy of *Sábado gigante* and of Don Francisco made them both symbols, if only incidentally, of the regime.

Rafael Gumucio, one of the leading authors of the generation known as the “children of the dictatorship,” argues that, for the cohort who grew up during the regime, Don Francisco and Pinochet are indivisible. In his book *Los platos rotos: Historia personal de Chile*, Gumucio (2003, 135–143) describes the 1970s and 1980s as a claustrophobic time—“there’s nowhere to breathe, nowhere to escape to”—dominated by these two larger-than-life figures: the good one who provides entertainment, and the bad one who rules and frightens.

It was a time of monsters, and against a power that neither explains nor forgives, there stood only the shadow of Mario Kreutzberger, the lone Chilean who achieved fame and fortune in that era without saluting the dictator, albeit without opposing him in anything either. (Gumucio 2003, 140)

Gumucio, the child of political exiles, draws a powerful parallel between *Sábado gigante*’s TV contests and Pinochet’s crimes. He positions himself outside both the Chile of Pinochet and that of Don Francisco, condemned to lose in both worlds: “From Pinochet’s Chile we were expelled; to Don Francisco’s we weren’t invited” (Gumucio 2003, 140).
Under the dictatorship, TV shows had to submit transcripts of song lyrics for approval; hence, uncontroversial performers were the only ones who made it past the censors (Contardo and García 2005, 21). With their straightforward love songs, baladistas were the natural guests of choice, and they constituted the majority of the musical acts on Sábado gigante. Given the absence of a local recording industry, Sábado gigante’s musical segments—including “El ranking juvenil” (“The Youth Ranking”) and “Gente nueva” (“New People”)—were breeding grounds for aspiring baladistas. Singers such as Rodolfo Navech, Luis Jara, Rodolfo “Viking” Valdés, Patricia Frías, Juan Antonio Labra, Irene Llano, and Cristóbal made a living by performing on TV while they waited for recording deals (Contardo and García 2005, 23–4). Myriam Hernández is the only singer to have come out of a Sábado gigante musical segment who eventually launched a successful international career (Party 2008).

Over the years, Don Francisco’s career as a host has also involved successful late-night-type interview shows and a telethon running annually since 1978. Baladistas have been prominently featured on these shows as well. In fact, Don Francisco considers emblematic Venezuelan baladista José Luis Rodríguez (a.k.a. El Puma) his good luck charm. Rodríguez was the guest of honor on several key broadcasts: the pilot of the late-night interview show Noche de gigantes (1976), the pilot of Sábado gigante in Miami (1986), and the 25th year anniversary of Sábado gigante broadcast (1987).6

If the immediate goal of Chilean baladistas was to appear on Sábado gigante, their long-term dream was to perform at the Festival Internacional de la Canción de Viña del Mar. Modeled after European music festivals such as Sanremo (Italy) and Benidorm (Spain), the Festival is the most important pop-song festival in Latin America. The Festival has taken place every summer since 1959 in the most important Chilean coastal city of Viña del Mar, 74 miles northwest of Santiago. For several consecutive days in February, over 10,000 people attend each of the nightly events, and millions more watch it on TV.

The format of the show consists of an international song contest and performances by several established artists. When the Festival started, the contest was the center of media attention, and guest performers were peripheral. After 1967, the main attraction of the festival became the variety of international guests (Vicuña Labarca, Gudack, and Scott 1975). Depending on the year’s budget, guest performers might include either those at the top of their game, like Julio Iglesias and Leonardo Favio in 1969, or has-been acts such as INXS and Kool and the Gang in 2003.

Never has the budget for the Festival been heftier than it was during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.7 The regime co-opted the Festival to disseminate positive images of Chile’s economic well-being to Chileans and
to foreign observers alike. Sergio Reisenberg, director of the TV broadcast, reportedly has said that Festivals of the 1980s
were all very important with respect to technical innovation and quality of the guests. There were resources to bring any artist, and each breakthrough was presented there; it was a world showcase . . . to demonstrate that Chile was doing fine. (Anon. 1997)

The claims regarding the international projection of the Festival were actually deceptive, however. In the live Chilean broadcast, the host would start by welcoming the arena audience and by listing the many countries that were ostensibly watching the show. In reality, the show was never broadcasted live internationally; only a considerably abridged version was internationally distributed (Contardo and García 2005, 84). In its desire to highlight Chile’s progress abroad, the regime went so far as to distribute the broadcast of the 1978 Festival’s closing day in color to its foreign market, while airing it only in black and white to the Chilean people. At the time, the regime considered color transmission within the country an unnecessary cost (Anon. 1997; Contardo and García 2005, 13).

In the early 1960s, Festival organizers catered to Rock and Roll (rockandroleros) and balada (románticos) audiences (Vicuña Labarca, Gudack, and Scott 1975, 31). Later in that decade, however, the Festival began focusing increasingly on balada, and after the 1973 coup, rock’s presence was minimal. This shift can be explained by the producers’ need to screen any controversial entertainers who might take advantage of the live broadcast to speak against the regime. Apolitical baladistas, then, were the safest choice for producers trying to please the censors. In an article about music in Chile during the dictatorship, musicologist Rodrigo Torres casts the Festival as balada’s “loudspeaker” for its role in promoting the genre (Rodrigo Torres 1993, 203).

The 1974 Festival, taking place fewer than 6 months after the coup, was a closely scrutinized event and a paradigm of the venue’s new focus. Not only did censors have to approve every one of the scheduled performers, but artists knew as well that they would be indirectly supporting the dictatorship by performing at the Festival. The guest of honor in 1974 was Spanish baladista Camilo Sesto. In a 2003 interview, Sesto acknowledged that he performed in Chile when no other Spanish singer was willing, and he professed that he was there only to “sing to the people” (Hidalgo 2003). Identified as a supporter of Pinochet’s regime because of this incident, Sesto was later scorned in other countries. Also on the show was Chilean singer, actress, and dancer Maitén Montenegro, a regular Sábado gigante performer and an outspoken Pinochet adherent.
Critics agree that the 1981 Festival was the best in its history to date (Anon. 1997; Contardo and García 2005, 18). The two years leading up to 1981 had seen striking economic growth in Chile; foreign observers were talking about the “Chilean economic miracle.” The Festival, Chile’s window to the world, was the official celebration of this “miracle.” Whereas in previous versions of the Festival there had been a clear hierarchy of one or two headliners followed by filler acts, in 1981 each guest was famous enough to be a headliner in his own right. Guests such as Julio Iglesias, Camilo Sesto, Miguel Bosé, José Luis Rodríguez, and Americans KC & the Sunshine Band and Ray Conniff were at the peaks of their respective careers. Unfortunately, this phenomenon was not to be repeated: the economic “miracle” was short-lived, and 1982 marked the beginning of the worst Chilean economic recession in half a century (Contardo and García 2005, 18).

Balada, with its apolitical lyrics and telegenic singers, effortlessly pleased censors and became a staple on Chilean media. Although only a small minority of baladistas explicitly backed the military dictatorship, the public presence of their music in pro-government venues, most notably TV, was enough to stigmatize it among the opposition. As Juan Carlos Pérez, member of the protest song movement Canto Nuevo, once jokingly told me, “balada was the enemy” (personal communication). The genre’s stigma as pro-regime music partly explains why members of the opposition felt ashamed of taking pleasure in listening to balada. Perceived political allegiances are only part of the explanation because the connotation of balada as guilty pleasure is not limited to this group. Middle-class men and women who had either supported Pinochet or who had been largely apolitical under the regime also had a conflicted relationship with the genre, one that cannot be explained solely by balada’s lack of political engagement. To elucidate the sources of this group’s guilt we need to explore balada’s sociocultural connotations.

Ironing Music

Chilean middle-class listeners born around 1970 consider balada the music of the nana (Chilean term for maid/domestic servant). Like anything the maid might prefer, the music was considered tacky, cheesy, and low-brow—thus, a guilty pleasure. Samuel Araújo’s essay “Brega: Music and Conflict in Urban Brazil,” published in this journal in 1988, is a groundbreaking early study of music associated with maids in Latin America. Originally, the expression brega was derogatory slang used in Rio de Janeiro to refer to a domestic servant. Araújo explains that “as an extension of that sense, the term might also be applied to anything vulgar, dated, [or] kitsch” (1988, 52). Thus, brega music is an umbrella classification for “the music played on the servant’s AM radio” (53). Like Amado Batista, whom Araújo considers...
the quintessential brega musician, most brega artists come from working-class or rural backgrounds. To provide a more nuanced taxonomy, Araújo identifies working subcategories within the genre such as “Deluxe brega,” “Samba romântico,” and “Brega sertaneja.”

Araújo’s “Deluxe brega” is analogous to what I have defined as Spanish-language balada. Unlike regular brega, the “Deluxe” subcategory features an international mode of production resulting in a cosmopolitan sound, and its singers have middle-class origins. This form of brega is the only kind that crosses over to FM radio and international markets. Overall, “Deluxe brega” is the most commercially successful subcategory of brega. Araújo defines it as “a more sophisticated manipulation of musical formulas but still analogous . . . to its less ambitious counterpart, brega” (Araújo 1988, 69). The most important representative of “deluxe brega,” and the best-selling brega artist of any category, is Roberto Carlos, who is considered in his native Brazil to be the “rei da música romântica,” or king of romantic music. Carlos has recorded extensively in Spanish, and he is classified as a baladista in Spanish-speaking countries. Araújo suggests that even though Carlos is an international mass phenomenon comparable to Julio Iglesias and José José, his style is still perceived as maid’s music in Brazil.

In the Chilean context, balada is also linked to maids’ taste, but the implications go further than what Araújo posits for brega in Brazil. Because the maid is a working-class woman employed in a private home, balada has been, by association, coded as working class, feminine, and domestic music. Needless to say, working-class balada listeners are far less likely to associate the genre with the nana. Maids provide a luxury service that only the middle and upper classes can afford. Working-class families rely instead on family members and neighbors for childcare. Chilean rock star Jorge González, who was raised in the working-class neighborhood of San Miguel, explains his connection to balada in the following way:

There is something that surprises me with regard to other musician friends; while they were getting to know [Italo-Belgian baladista Salvatore] Adamo because their nanny would play his music in the kitchen, in my case it was because my mom listened to him. So this is a very big difference, a distinct closeness that defines you. (quoted in Pino-Ojeda 2004, 299)

It is worth noting that despite the class status distinction González highlights, the association of balada with women is consistent across classes.

In Colombia, balada revivalists of the early 2000s nicknamed the genre “música de plancha” (ironing music, or music for ironing), an expression that evokes the physical and social place of balada. Middle-class Colombians usually claim to have first heard balada in the kitchen, while the “empleada
“doméstica” (maid) or nanny was ironing, cooking, or cleaning. An article in a major newspaper in Cali, Colombia, explains, “We all learned these songs in our childhood, in the public buses or when we accompanied nannies or the maid” (Arizmendi 2004). Balada’s classist ties to the figure of the maid continued even after the mass media capitalized on the revival by marketing it as nostalgia. In 2003, the Colombian subsidiary of EMI released a compilation album titled *Lo mejor de música pa’ planchar* (*Greatest Hits of Ironing*), selling 35,000 copies. The soap opera *Amor a la plancha* (*Love, Ironing Style*) soon followed. *Amor a la plancha* tells the parallel stories of a rich woman, her family, and her maid. The popularity of the soap opera contributed to making classic balada, as “ironing music,” even more marketable. In 2004, EMI released a double CD follow-up to *Lo mejor de música pa’ planchar* that sold over 40,000 copies.

The covers of the *Lo mejor de música pa’ planchar* compilation CDs nicely illustrate the association between nana and balada. Volume one shows a woman with rollers in her hair applying lipstick, using the shiny bottom of an iron as a mirror. Volume two presents a woman dressed as a chambermaid, wearing a head scarf and singing into an iron’s plug as if it were a microphone. The detail of the undone hair in both covers is relevant because it speaks of the physical space where this repertoire is enjoyed: the home, and more specifically, the kitchen. The fact that balada is thus coded by revivalists as domestic music for female, motherlike figures suggests yet another source for feelings of shame and guilt, particularly for male listeners.

The highly prejudicial quality of terms such as brega or ironing music has defined the ways in which middle-class listeners irrespective of gender or political affiliation evaluate balada. Middle-class fans labeled balada a guilty pleasure partly because they recognized it as maid’s music. However, to fully understand how balada became a guilty pleasure one has to consider socioeconomic prejudices vis-à-vis the genre’s political stigma introduced above.

**Revival Origins: The Radio Shows**

Now that we have analyzed the stigmas attached to classic balada, we may turn to the balada revival of the 1990s. Because early revivalists were well aware of the genre’s bad reputation, they emphasized the notion of shared shame in order to create a community of fans. Once a core audience was established, revivalists aimed at changing balada’s reputation in a wide variety of ways, from bolstering nostalgia for lost childhood, to treating balada as a form of high art, to recording modernized, hip versions of 1970s classics. In the process of reconsidering balada, revivalists were forced to reassess the social class and political prejudices that had defined the genre for decades.
In her essay “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” Tamara E. Livingston recognizes that music revivals are often catalyzed by what she calls “core revivalists,” that is, a select group of individuals who “feel such a strong connection with the revival tradition that they take it upon themselves to ‘rescue’ it from extinction and to pass it on to others” (1999, 70). Livingston further suggests that “core revivalists almost always come from the ranks of the middle class as scholars, professionals or amateur musicians, dilettantes, and those involved with the music industry” (Ibid.). In the case of the Chilean balada revival, the most influential champions of balada were the DJs and producers behind two radio shows, Placer culpable and maldita primavera.

Placer Culpable

In 1999, Radio Zero, a Chilean mainstream pop/rock FM radio station, launched a daily show featuring balada. The hour-long broadcast was part of the station’s project of developing an alternative to format radio, the reigning system in the country. The premise of the show, as Daniel Maldonado, its creator and DJ, explained it to me, was to reach listeners in their 20s to early 30s; along with listening to mainstream pop/rock—Radio Zero’s core programming—this demographic group had a closeted love of the romantic ballad. Inspired by what he perceived as a conflicted relationship between pop/rock fans and the pop ballad, the radio’s director named the program Placer culpable, or Guilty Pleasure, with the tag line “la música que escuchas en secreto” (“the music you listen to in secret”).

Maldonado’s original project was to focus on the songs of early European baladistas such as Rita Pavone, Gigliola Cinquetti, and Joe Dassin while eschewing an “oldies” format. Thus, Maldonado chose to broadcast popular contemporary balada alongside classics from the 1970s and 1980s: an early balada tune by Umberto Tozzi, for example, might follow the latest hit by Chayanne.

Certainly, Placer culpable was not the only show broadcasting balada in Santiago in the late 1990s. FM stations like Pudahuel (90.5 MHz), Romántica (104.1 MHz), and Aurora (88.1 MHz) focused on balada for most of their daily broadcast. The essential difference between these stations and Radio Zero lay in their target audiences: while Pudahuel and Romántica targeted middle-age women, mostly homemakers, Radio Zero aimed to attract listeners under 30 and of both sexes. For an hour a day, Radio Zero’s Placer Culpable programmed basically the same music that “romantic stations” (Maldonado’s term) broadcasted—though the people who typically set their dials to the latter stations would not have considered balada to be a guilty pleasure. These listeners might also tune in to Placer culpable simply in order to hear the latest hit, not to promote the revival of rare, early balada.
per se. Maldonado recognized a distinction between lower- and middle-
class listeners who phoned in song requests: listeners from working-class
neighborhoods would usually request contemporary balada, while listeners
from middle-class neighborhoods tended to prefer pre-1980 balada.

Despite Maldonado’s original intention to balance classic balada with
new, the nostalgia associated with the “oldies” section of the program be-
came the show’s selling point early on. Indeed, Maldonado was the first
Chilean DJ to market balada specifically as nostalgia: when introducing
classic tunes, Maldonado would reel off familiar childhood associations
with that era. He improvised an example for me during our interview in
2003:

This song is from 1980, 20 years ago. What were you doing 20 years
ago? Were you watching Shazam!? Eating an avocado sandwich? Drink-
ing Milo?

The world of childhood so vividly described by Maldonado’s introduction
is not that of just any Chilean, of course, but specifically that of a middle-
class kid whose family could afford television, avocados, and Nestlé Milo—
the most expensive of powdered chocolate drinks available in Chile in the
1980s. In other words, Maldonado distinguished his programming from
that of “romantic stations” by explicitly packaging balada for a middle-class
audience.

Aware of balada’s stigma among the show’s target listeners,
Placer cul-

pable’s producers felt the need to validate the genre as worthwhile, enjoy-
able music. On air, Maldonado would place calls to famous Chilean per-
sonalities—TV faces, actors, politicians—and ask them about their guilty
pleasures. “When people heard that famous people had guilty pleasures,”
Maldonado explained to me, “they felt it was OK.”

Drawing on his experience as DJ for Placer culpable, Maldonado ar-
gued against the established notion that most balada listeners are women.
Women called in to the program more often than men, but by only a slim
margin: the overall ratio was three to two. Maldonado acknowledged, how-
ever, that the perception of gender imbalance was quite real when it came
to securing ads for the show. During Placer culpable’s 3-year life on the air,
the companies most interested in placing ads were those trying to reach
only a female audience for products such as shampoos, perfumes, gyms,
and spas.

Maldita Primavera

Taking Placer culpable’s “oldies” format as point of departure, another radio
show took over the balada revival project. Like Placer Culpable, the show Mal-
dita primavera (Damn Spring) was built on the premise of guilty pleasure.
Each broadcast opened with the intro to the song that gave the show its name, “Maldita primavera,” one of the most famous baladas of all time, popularized by Mexican singer Yuri in 1981; I discuss this song in extenso in the following section. Over the music, a seductive male voice announces:

. . . No digas que no sientes nada. Maldita Primavera, un programa para recordar las canciones que marcaron tu vida, aunque lo niegues.

. . . Don’t say you don’t feel anything. Maldita Primavera, a show to remember the songs that left a mark in your life, even if you deny it.

The creators and DJs of the show, journalists Paola Zúñiga and Evelyn Briceño, met while working at a Santiago newspaper and discovered that they shared a guilty pleasure: a love for European pop ballads of the 1960s and 1970s. Both DJs were avid listeners of Placer culpable, but they resented that show’s decision to include contemporary balada. Despite the fact that neither had any experience on radio, the pair sold the idea for Maldita primavera to the University of Chile’s radio station.

Maldita primavera was markedly different than Placer culpable. Its weekly 2-hour-long episodes were structured on a theme: songs that deal with eroticism, infidelity, or homosexual relationships, for example, or songs of one specific country. Particularly rich themes, such as special profiles of Spanish, Brazilian, and Italian songs, sometimes spanned two or even three consecutive shows. Most notably, Maldita focused on vintage songs from the 1960s and 1970s, with only rare incursions to the early 1980s.

DJs Zúñiga and Briceño agreed on a cutoff date in the mid-1980s for their playlists, because they considered that the quality of balada decreased considerably thereafter. During the 1980s, the balada industry was centralized in Miami, Florida, and this development affected every aspect of the genre, from sound to distribution to reception (Party 2008). The work of producer Emilio Estefan, Jr., is paradigmatic of this effect. Many revivalists, including Zúñiga and Briceño, resent the miamization of balada, mourning the loss of sophisticated orchestral arrangements in favor of synthesizers and drum machines, and railing against the triteness of Miami-produced balada lyrics. As Livingston notes (1999, 80), this “anti-technology stance” is a common discursive trait among music revivalists. For Zúñiga and Briceño the decline in quality through miamization is not the result of a loss of Latin American authenticity, but a loss in European sound, as they associate the golden era of Spanish-language balada with the “Torrelaguna sound,” developed by the Madrid-based Hispavox label.14

Like the producers of Placer culpable, Briceño and Zúñiga knew they were dealing with a repertoire that had a questionable reputation; they chose to counteract this stigma by taking the most learned approach possible. Although both Briceño and Zúñiga are young and hip, in their role as
DJs they spoke without colloquialisms, opting for a sophisticated vocabulary. Between songs, the extremely informed DJs contextualized the songs with insightful references to contemporary politics, social history, film, and literature. On a Spanish special, for example, Briceño and Zúñiga outlined a sociopolitical history of Spain in the 20th century. On an Italian special, they played songs that had been performed in the Festival di Sanremo while discussing Italian neorealist cinema. The DJs’ educational approach, appropriate for a University-run radio space, is consistent with Livingston’s appraisal that “revivals almost always have a strong pedagogical component in order to pass on the tradition in a controlled manner” (1999, 73).

Briceño and Zúñiga’s passion for balada can also be understood in terms of what sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus (1992) call cultural omnivorousness. Peterson defines omnivorousness as the shift “from intellectual snobbism . . . based on the glorification of arts and the contempt of popular entertainment . . . to a cultural capital that appears increasingly as a willingness to appreciate the aesthetic of a wide variety of cultural forms, including not only the arts, but also a wide range of folk and popular forms of expression” (quoted in Coulangeon and Lemel 2007, 96). The DJs’ openness to embracing a poorly regarded genre like balada can be considered a sign of omnivorousness.

More specifically, Briceño and Zúñiga’s emphasis on an aesthetic appreciation of balada is characteristic of the culturally omnivorous. While listeners of romantic radio stations value balada because it provides ties to social identity, omnivores like Briceño and Zúñiga “appreciate and critique [the musical style] in the light of some knowledge of the genre, its great performers, and links to other cultural forms, lowbrow and highbrow” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904). Coulangeon and Lemel (2007) suggest that omnivorousness can provide a new understanding of Bourdieu’s distinction, namely, that today, the essence of distinction may lie in tolerance and openness:

Given that tolerance in moral and political domain is positively correlated with education and social status, it may be hypothesized that the same holds true in cultural and aesthetic matters: the higher the status and level of education, the greater the openness to cultural diversity. (2007, 108)

This tolerance to diversity appears when cultural relativism replaces “the ethnocentrism central to snobbish elitism” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904).

The DJs behind Placer culpable and Maldita primavera exemplified what Livingston calls core revivalists. And like many core revivalists, these DJs were responsible for more than mere advocacy of their genre. They formulated “a new ethos, musical style, and aesthetic code in accordance with their revivalist ideology and personal preferences” (Livingston 1999, 70). In
effect, they were responsible for framing both the limits of the revival itself and the discourse used to describe it. The radio shows they developed targeted a specifically defined niche market of middle-class vicenarians with a closeted interest in balada.

Next to these DJs, the most influential core revivalists were rock musicians who paid tribute to balada by recording new versions of classic songs. These musicians reinterpreted the originals from a 1990s perspective; that is, they modernized the originals to fit a contemporary aesthetic. Since one of the goals of the modernization project was to reform the negative reputation of early balada artists, the rock covers illustrate this generation’s conflicted relationship with music associated with the dictatorship in general, and with balada in particular.

Balada’s Rock Revival

The balada revival was not limited to the broadcast and reissue of classic songs. It also inspired the production of cover albums, as well as the composition and recording of new songs that reflect the direct influence of early balada. In 1989, Chilean rock band Los Prisioneros recorded a cover of Italo-Belgian Salvatore Adamo’s 1964 hit “La noche” (“The Night”), and in 1991 they composed and recorded “Estrechez de corazón” (“Narrowness of Heart”), a song inspired by “El Amor de mi vida” (“Love of my Life”), a 1978 balada by Spanish Camilo Sesto.15 Also in 1991, Los Tres released “Amor violento” (“Violent Love”), a song modeled on the baladas of Chilean 1960s star Cecilia (Peña 2002, 168). Elsewhere in Latin America, groups of artists released CD tributes to baladiistas, including such titles as Volcán: Tributo a José José (BMG, 1998) in Mexico; Rei, a homage to Roberto Carlos in Brazil (Epic, 1994); and Tributo a Sandro: Un disco de rock (BMG, 1999) in Argentina.

In her essay “A Detour to the Past: Memory and Mourning in Chilean Post-Authoritarian Rock,” Walescka Pino-Ojeda (2004) explores the motivations of 1990s rock bands to recover 1960s balada, rock & roll, and twist. She suggests that Chilean bands like Los Prisioneros and Los Tres turned to nostalgia seeking an alternative to the political binaries offered by Chilean official memory (left/right, Allende/Pinochet). In the ideologically polarized 1970s, when these musicians were kids, “mass culture, interestingly, offer[ed] an escape from that [ideological] absolutism and, therefore, a discursive meaning to commercialism” (Pino-Ojeda 2004, 297). Pino-Ojeda further elaborates:

The nostalgic gesture of going back to childhood and overstepping social boundaries and cultural ideological prejudices begins to metamorphose into an act of self-legitimation, constructing a personal rockero identity through a tradition that remained outside the canon. (2004, 304)
In the case of the balada revival, “overstepping social boundaries” corresponds to the adoption of the maid’s music, and overcoming “ideological prejudices” stands for the connotation of balada as apolitical.

Pino-Ojeda singles out the album *AM* by Javiera y Los Imposibles (Columbia, 2001) as “the quintessential example of the nostalgia which characterizes, with some nuances, Chilean post-authoritarian rock” (2004, 305). Unlike the tribute albums to one artist mentioned above, *AM* pays homage to the genre as a whole. It epitomizes the balada revival by updating the overwrought arrangements and delivery of classic balada with post-“MTV Unplugged” subdued pop rock. Because of the album’s paradigmatic quality, the reminder of this section engages in a close reading of its song selection, its musical choices, and public statements by the band explaining their choices.

The ten covers on *AM* were selected from among the songs band members grew up hearing on AM radio in the 1970s and 1980s; hence the title. Like the radio show *Maldita primavera*, the album exhibits a marked preference for European over Latin American balada. Out of ten songs on *AM*, only one was composed by a Latin American ("Detalles" by Brazilian Roberto Carlos). Four songs were originally Italian, three Spanish, one French, and one British. Table 1 lists each song on the album, the name of the singer who popularized it, and the year it was released.

It is not surprising that the only Latin American baladista chosen for the album should have been Brazilian Roberto Carlos, since he is often held in higher regard than other Latin American baladistas. Carlos has recorded extensively in Spanish in order to reach Latin American audiences outside Brazil, and his greater status could respond to several factors. First, his lyrics, music, and delivery are closer to the European style of singers like

### Table 1. Songs included on Javiera y Los Imposibles’ album *AM*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Name</th>
<th>Original Singer</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“No”</td>
<td>Gianni Bella</td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sinceridad”</td>
<td>Riccardo Cocciante</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Procuró Olvidarte”</td>
<td>Hernando Zúñiga</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Maldita Primavera”</td>
<td>Yuri</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Respiro”</td>
<td>Franco Simone</td>
<td>1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eyes Without a Face”</td>
<td>Billy Idol</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Vivir Así Es Morir de Amor”</td>
<td>Camilo Sesto</td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fresa Salvaje”</td>
<td>Camilo Sesto</td>
<td>1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A ti”</td>
<td>Joe Dassin</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Detalles”</td>
<td>Roberto Carlos</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Julio Iglesias, who barely moves on stage, than to Latin American baladistas like Emmanuel and José Luis Rodríguez, who are more likely to dance and gesticulate while singing. Second, Carlos’ Brazilian accent and nationality lend him a foreign, *ergo* sophisticated, quality. Ulhôa (1999, 21) argues that Carlos had a bad reputation in Brazil until a local revival instigated a reappraisal of his legacy.

The choice of Roberto Carlos’s “Detalhes” as the sole representative of Latin American balada on the AM album is also worth noting. In her analysis of the original song, Ulhôa (2000, 35) describes the tune she considers emblematic of Brazilian *música romântica* as sentimental, but not melodramatic. “In his rendition,” continues Ulhôa, “Roberto Carlos displays an apparent vulnerability, a ‘naturalness,’ which is related to his use of a colloquial intonation in his singing, not only in his relaxed and soft vocal style, but also in his use of intervals that are almost speech-like” (2000, 36). Compared to earlier styles of Brazilian *música romântica*, such as *modinha* and *samba-canção*, or contemporary Spanish-language balada, “Detalhes” sounds conversational, cool, and detached. It is clear that the band has no aversion to melodrama as long as it originates in Europe; cf. the inclusion of Camilo Sesto’s “Vivir así es morir de amor” (“To Live Like This Is to Die of Love”) and Franco Simone’s “Respiro” (“Breath”). Perhaps the band’s selection of Roberto Carlos’s “Detalles” reflects its desire to distance itself from Latin American melodrama.


As I mentioned in the previous section, revivalists strongly associate balada with feminine and domestic imagery. AM’s CD cover foregrounds this association with a recreation of the social space in which the band members might have had their first encounter with balada: a 1970s kitchen. On the kitchen table we can see a battery-operated AM radio and, next to it, four glasses of milk awaiting the children’s return from school. Unlike the covers of the Colombian compilations *Lo mejor de música pa’ planchar*, which focus on the present by portraying the contemporary space for listening to background music while doing house chores, AM’s cover highlights the nostalgic aspect of balada, taking its target audience down memory lane to when they were kids in the early 1970s. The cover, then, visually represents the revivalists’ nostalgic memory.
The song covers included in *AM* feature new, radio-friendly pop rock ensemble arrangements stripped of the over-the-top orchestrations favored in the 1970s and 1980s. The restrained and hip versions include elements of trip-hop, bossa-nova, rapping, and a Cuban *son*.* The cool, restrained, and stylish treatment of the music is the result of a conscious attempt to remove the “cheesiness” of the original. As Parra explained, “the song selection was very AM, but our sound is not AM at all” (Ponce 2001).

The first single and most popular song from *AM* is “Maldita primavera,” coincidentally the same song that inspired the homonymous radio show discussed above. The song is a cover of the most successful single from Mexican singer Yuri’s 1981 album, *Llena de dulzura.* “Maldita primavera” was Yuri’s international breakthrough—it made Yuri the first Mexican singer to earn a gold record in Spain—and is still her signature song.

Adding yet another layer of complexity, Yuri’s “Maldita primavera” was itself also a cover. The Italian original won second prize at the 1981 edition of the Italian Sanremo Song Festival with an excellent performance by Loretta Goggi. After Sanremo, Goggi released “Maledetta primavera” as a single, and it stayed at number one in the Italian charts for 5 weeks. This popularity, however, did not extend to Latin America; thus Yuri’s version was received as an original song. The Spanish adaptation was written by renowned balada lyricist Luis Gómez Escolar, and Yuri’s producer, Rafael Trabucchelli, kept Goggi’s original arrangement.

“Maldita primavera” is an impassioned anthem to lost love, starting quietly with an acoustic guitar strumming a pattern in ¾ meter—a rare time signature for balada—and ending in a bombastic climax with full-blown string orchestra, drums, and backing vocals. This progressive buildup is characteristic of Italian baladas such as the ones by Franco Simone, Gianni Bella, Riccardo Cocciante, and Umberto Tozzi. Musically, the most striking characteristic of the song is its three modulations. It begins in F major, moves up a whole step to G between the first and second verses (1’35”), then down to E-flat for a string section musical interlude, and finally up to A-flat for the last chorus. Several musical elements work alongside the modulations to create excitement and to maintain the attention of the listener: the raising voice register is one—it starts around the middle C and it goes up to a d-flat’—and the epic growth in orchestration and in overall volume is another.

The song’s lyrics are intense and suggestive; the singer’s lover has all too fast replaced her, it seems, and instead of blaming him, she curses spring for having pushed her to fall in love. The song opens with Yuri listing mementos of the relationship: white wine, the night, old songs, an erotic dream. These mementos suggest an adult relationship, not what listeners expected from 17-year-old Yuri; Loretta Goggi recorded the original when
she was 30. Certainly, the song seems out of place in Yuri’s album *Llena de dulzura*. The other lyrics on the album were written or selected with a 17-year old in mind: “Llena de dulzura te esperaré” (“full of sweetness I will wait for you”), “Tú y yo, cogidos de la mano” (“you and me, holding hands”), “porque soy muy joven piensan que mi amor es poco importante” (“because I’m so young they think my love is not important”).

Also at odds with the content and character of the song is the cover image chosen for the single. In it we can see Yuri holding a suitcase (ready to move on?), smiling cheerfully and adorned in gold (golden high-heel shoes, belt, bracelet, and earrings). The cover to the Italian version does not directly reflect the content of the song either, but Goggi’s serious and distrustful expression, as she looks straight at the camera while facing sideways, seems related to the pathos of the song.

“Maldita primavera” became Yuri’s emblematic song, and to this day it is saved for the climax of her live shows. The song is so popular throughout Latin America that it is often used to represent the balada genre as a whole: it was chosen as the opening track of the balada compilation *Lo mejor de música pa’ planchar*, for example, and, as we saw above, the song gave its name to one of the revivalist radio shows. Its anthemic and theatrical quality also made it a staple of Latin American drag queen shows. For this reason, author Alonso Sánchez Bauté titled his 2002 award-winning novel about Colombia’s most famous drag queen *Al diablo la maldita primavera* (*To Hell with Damn Spring*) (Sánchez Baute 2002).

When confronted with the project of covering “Maldita primavera,” Javiera y Los Imposibles chose to rearrange and reinterpret the song considerably. Parra downplayed the dramatic quality of the original because she considered Yuri’s singing “vulgar”:

“I sing “Maldita Primavera” more like Javiera & Los Imposibles than like Yuri. . . . To me, the most vulgar thing about Maldita Primavera was the singing. . . . Yuri’s an incredible singer, but I chose to take away some of the drama in it. I’m not a 1980s Mexican blond. (Ponce 2001)

Parra was also unimpressed with Yuri’s arrangement. In another interview, Parra speaks more specifically about the musical changes they made:

Even though the song is originally by an Italian, Yuri’s arrangement of Maldita Primavera is very poor. I believe it’s one of the few cases [on the album] where our version made the song grow musically, because we changed the harmony and the backing vocals. We made it much sadder, more docile, and we have to recognize that it turned out well. (Anon. 2001)
With its cover version, Javiera y Los Imposibles wanted to “rescue the song and make it more beautiful in its arrangement” (Ponce 2001).

Several production choices by Javiera y Los Imposibles work to remove the melodramatic quality of Yuri’s song and make it more hip and detached. Gone is the orchestra, and in its place we hear a traditional pop rock ensemble. Through heavy use of compression, the cover version presents a minimal dynamic range, thus eliminating the Italian-style crescendo of the original. The voice is placed at the center at maximum volume for clarity and emphasis. Javiera y Los Imposibles eliminated the acoustic guitar intro and the orchestral interlude before the last chorus. Most strikingly, they discarded all modulations: their version begins and ends in F major. The lack of modulations not only contributes to an overall simpler effect, but it also reduces the vocal range. While Yuri covers from a C to a d-flat, Parra’s version goes up to a b-flat.

Despite Parra’s negative view of the original version of “Maldita primavera,” the singer argues that her band recorded the album not with irony, but with sincere respect for the “great composers that created such an interesting sound” (Anon. 2001). This apparent contradiction dissolves when one notices that Parra is asking us to reappraise balada in terms of songwriting and arranging, not performance. Like core revivalists Zúñiga and Briceño, the DJs of the Maldita primavera radio show, Parra focuses on songwriting in order to celebrate the auteur status of the composers.

It is fascinating that of all Chilean rock bands, Javiera y Los Imposibles would be the one to record a tribute album to balada. Javiera Parra, born Javiera Cereceda in 1968, is the granddaughter of the renowned Chilean folk singer-songwriter, poet, and visual artist Violeta Parra (1917–1967). Violeta Parra’s oeuvre inspired the pan-Latin American protest song movement, and her children, Isabel and Ángel (Javiera’s father), were among the founders of the Chilean political song movement known as Nueva Canción Chilena in the late 1960s. As mentioned above, Nueva Canción performers were persecuted by Pinochet’s dictatorship, and many—including Javiera Parra’s father and aunt—had to live in exile. Not surprisingly, in Parra’s family the apolitical, censor-approved balada was not the music of choice. Parra had to overcome certain prejudices in order to start enjoying balada: “there was a time when one somehow rejected that music” (Ponce 2001).

That time was when Pinochet was in power. The left’s rejection of balada, however, extended beyond Chile’s return to democracy in 1989. During the 1990s, Chilean intellectuals argued that the country had fallen into a period of amnesia: too eager to embrace long-lost democracy, Chileans had too fast forgotten about the atrocities that occurred under the dictatorship (Moulian 1997; Richard 1998). Far from a mere intellectual pursuit, the concern was fueled by the fact that torturers, murderers, and conspirators still had not been brought to justice.
Even today, Chilean *Nueva Canción* evokes both the Allende years and resistance against the dictatorship. Many left-wing intellectuals continue to see politically engaged song as an antidote for the country’s amnesia. In 2004, Patricia Vilches published in this journal her essay “From Violeta Parra to Víctor Jara and Los Prisioneros: Recovery of Collective Memory and Cultural Identity through Politically-Engaged Music.” In it Vilches juxtaposes a pessimistic view of contemporary Chile as a country without memory with an idealized view of the presidency of socialist Salvador Allende. She argues that political songs can contribute even now to the recovery of historical memory and to the construction of cultural identity.

Vilches’s wish is anachronistic in 2004, even reactionary, and she knows it. After extensively praising the power of politically committed music, in the article’s last paragraph Vilches summarizes her argument and specifies to whom the message is directed:

> Despite the fact that today the Chilean mass media is anesthetized by the eagerness to sell [products] and the fear of politicization . . . there is a legitimately ideological *part of us* that can be recovered through the imaginary, poetics, historical processes, and the subjectivizing commitment localized in the collective memory of the songs of Violeta [Parra], Víctor [Jara], and Los Prisioneros. (Emphasis mine; Vilches 2004, 209)

Vilches’s collective “us” refers to Chileans who experienced the ebullient late 1960s. Younger generations of Chileans have distanced themselves from prescriptive propositions, like Vilches’s, that purport to tell them how they should relate to their own past. As the balada revival shows, the generation born around 1970 may consider the music that recalls the comfort of the childhood kitchen more relevant than the collective memory of a time before its birth.19

Moreover, the question of amnesia cuts both ways. Some may claim that Chileans have forgotten both Allende’s contributions and Pinochet’s crimes, while others would prefer to turn the tables and highlight the faults of Allende and the legacies of Pinochet. In the first decade post-dictatorship, these two sides mapped straightforwardly onto the positions of the left and the right, respectively. As the sun set on the 1990s, however, this simple polarization was unsustainable.

Pinochet’s detention in London in 1998 forced Chileans to see their past refracted through the prism of the world media.20 Suddenly, the whole world seemed to recognize that Pinochet had committed crimes and had violated human rights. In the face of such overwhelming opinion, Pinochet’s defenders, who had for years claimed that no such crimes had occurred, had to reconsider their position. Unable to assert Pinochet’s innocence, but nevertheless desiring his safe return to Chile, they claimed that extradition
would violate Chile’s sovereignty; thus even Pinochet’s most ardent defenders found themselves advancing the argument that the dictator should be put to trial at home. This seemingly minor shift marked the twilight of the Pinochet era.21

Once the right relinquished its unconditional support for Pinochet, the left opened up to a more nuanced evaluation of both Allende’s and Pinochet’s contributions. In 2001, Jon Beasley-Murray argued that Pinochet’s celebrated neoliberal economy has its seeds in Allende’s policies (Beasley-Murray 2001, 33). In 2002, in a chapter titled “The Desire for a Different Chile,” left-wing sociologist Tomás Moulian wrote about the contradictions and imperfections of Allende’s government (Moulian 2002). The most thorough discussion of the contributions and limitations of both Allende and Pinochet to date appears in Patricio Navia’s book *Las grandes alamedas: El Chile post Pinochet*. Self-consciously playing provocateur, Navia questions many of the historical claims raised by the left since Chile’s return to democracy in 1990. Navia, a left-wing political scientist trained in the United States, convincingly refutes two long-standing assertions: first, that Chile was doing “better” before the coup d’état than in 2004, and second, that Chileans were more politically active before the coup than in 2004 (Navia 2004, Chapters 1 and 2, respectively).

The *balada* revival illustrates the political, gender, and class tensions present in Chile in the aftermath of Pinochet’s detention in London. As the country was rewriting the most controversial period in its recent political history, a generation profoundly defined by the dictatorship was blurring the line between public and private memory. The mix of seduction and repulsion that balada provokes is what made the genre a guilty pleasure. And for middle-class listeners, the shame of balada resided specifically in its connotations as apolitical and as maid’s music. Early incarnations of the balada revival, such as the radio shows *Placer culpable* and *Maldita primavera*, embodied a generation’s conflicted attitudes towards balada by acknowledging the guilt and celebrating the pleasure. Within a couple of years, however, classic balada became a mainstream commodity, best exemplified by the commercial success of Javiera y Los Impulsibles’ *AM*.

Livingston recognizes the creation of a “revival industry” (1999, 79) as the final step in a successful revival phenomenon, and the balada revival is no exception. In 2001, the same year *AM* was released, a savvy Chilean concert promoter by the name of Patricio Sánchez patented the term *kitsch* to market a series of nostalgia parties in downtown Santiago (Maira 2005). Sánchez used the word kitsch as synonymous with anything-goes nostalgia. Balada played a prominent role in it, but anything and everything from 1970s TV show themes to hits by The New Kids on The Block can be found too. Sánchez’s business vision proved correct; he went on to
market an array of commodities, such as CD compilations (Nostalgia Kitsch, 
Navidad Kitsch, a series titled Íconos Kitsch), radio shows (Radio Kitsch and 
Kitsch AM), and a website (www.kitsch.cl). As Sánchez’s case illustrates, the 
balada revival evolved from music-centered cult to mainstream multimedia 
industry, shedding along the way its guilty-pleasure overtones to become a 
profitable by-product of nostalgia.

Notes

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Marisol García for their careful readings and constructive criticism.

2. To date, there is no complete monograph devoted to balada. Scholarly stud-
ies that either feature sections on balada or deal with it indirectly include Stigberg 
(1985); Araújo (1988); Geirola (1993); Pacini Hernández (1997); Ulhôa (2000); 
and Araújo (2002). For an entertaining, albeit not entirely successful, apologia for 
balada, see Moya Méndez (2001).

3. In addition to sources cited above, a basic bolero bibliography might include 
Bazán Bonfil (2001); Knights (2002); Pedelty (1999); Pineda Franco (1996); George 
Torres (2002); and Zavala (2000).

4. Mark Pedelty (1999, 51) argues that Agustín Lara’s apolitical stance was a 
response to a highly politicized post-Revolutionary Mexico: “The 
bolero, partly as 
a popular reaction to the relentless political propaganda of the state, had through-
out its reign remained largely apolitical. Agustín Lara, for example, remained defi-
antly apolitical in the face of the nationalist critics, who painted him as a decadent 
Malinchista (meaning ‘sell-out,’ named after Hernando Cortés’ native interpreter 
and mistress, La Malinche).”

5. In the 1990s, Sábado gigante’s duration decreased to 4 hours (Contardo and 

6. Noche de gigantes was a Johnny Carson-inspired talk show that aired on Sat-
rday evenings. Don Francisco, then, was on the air for more than 8 hours each 

7. During the 1980s, the government’s TV station, Canal 7, also enjoyed a larger 

8. In the United States, Ray Conniff’s popularity decreased with the advent of 
rock ‘n’ roll in the mid-1960s. In Latin America, however, Conniff and his Orchestra 
enjoyed wide following until the 1980s.

9. It must be stressed that balada’s media ubiquitousness was not the result of 
direct promotion of the genre on the part of Pinochet’s regime. In his approach to 
cultural politics, Pinochet exhibited considerably less vision than Getulio Vargas 
of Brazil or Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. While Vargas and Trujillo played an active role in the transformation of Latin American regional styles—samba
and merengue, respectively—into national dances. Pinochet’s efforts focused on banning rather than on promoting cultural forms (McCann 2004; Pacini Hernández 1995).

10. Directed by Mario Ribero Ferreira and Adriana Suárez, “Amor a la plancha” won the best soap opera award at the 2004 Cartagena Festival.

11. In 2005, a show on the Québécoise radio station (Première Chaîne), Fréquence libre, had a similar feature employing the same concept in French: Plaisir coupable.

12. The demographics of callers alone are not enough to determine the overall demographics of Placer culpable’s listeners. Regrettably, Radio Zero conducted no marketing or audience studies for the show. Even if we had demographic data regarding Placer culpable’s audience, we could not extrapolate it to describe all balada fans. As suggested above, balada’s core listenership was tuning in most frequently to stations that focused on romantic music, such as Radio Pudahuel and Aurora.

13. Despite Placer culpable’s success, Radio Zero’s attempt to target a holistic listener, one that enjoys a number of different genres, failed. Placer culpable was cut off because other (read romantic) stations owned by the same corporation complained that Radio Zero was stealing their audience.

14. The emblematic lush sound of 1970s Spanish balada, known as the “Torrelaguna Sound,” was developed by producer Rafael Trabucchelli and arranger Waldo de los Ríos. Examples of their joint work include Jeanette’s “Soy rebelde” (1971), José Luis Perales’ “Y te vas” (1975), and Yuri’s “Maldita primavera” (1981), which is discussed in detail in the latter part of this essay. For a detailed discussion of the miamization process, see Party (2008).

15. Walescka Pino-Ojeda (2004, 300) argues that Los Prisioneros’ version of “La noche” breaks a triple taboo: “recovering a product stigmatized as ideologically alienating and lacking in ‘cultural’ value; being inserted in a musical code marked by rebellion (rock); and being recorded amid the musical climate of Canto Nuevo, in which openly denunciatory or existential songs were considered imperative.” This song was included in Los Prisioneros’ album Ni por la Razón ni por la Fuerza (EMI Latin, 1996).

16. The album cover image is actually a still from the set of the first single’s video clip.

17. This Italian style was popularized in the United States by Laura Branigan in the 1980s. Branigan had two hits with English versions of songs by Umberto Tozzi: “Gloria” (Branigan, Atlantic 1982) and “Ti amo” (Self Control, Atlantic 1984).

18. The reference to “old songs” in “Maldita primavera” is likely one of the reasons why DJs Briceño and Zúñiga named their balada radio show after the song.

19. The 2004 film Machuca, directed by Andrés Wood, deftly presents a similar tension. Throughout the film, the main character’s psyche is shaped by both external political turmoil and the internal struggle of his parents’ crumbling marriage.

20. For an insightful analysis of the cultural implications of Pinochet’s detention, see Richard (2000).

21. Pinochet’s detention can be considered the first act of 1999’s presidential campaign. Pinochet’s image was so damaged that, during the campaign, right-wing hopeful Joaquín Lavín had to considerably downplay his earlier support of Pinochet’s regime.
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