

Does the Old Song Matter When Life Invents New Ones to Sing?

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☒ Listen to Grenada - Grenada

While reading this issue, have a listen to Grenada perform the **song** that inspired their name.

At a trot, at a gallop,
our squadron rode forth,
and 'La Manzanita'
was sung in the fight.

The vast, endless steppe,
its fresh green expanse,
still remembers

that song today.

But my companion
sang another tune,
a song from afar,
from a distant land.

He sang while gazing
toward his homeland:
'Grenada, Grenada,
a land without equal'.

He sang with devotion,
that song from his heart.
Why did Spain
dwell in his soul?

Why, and since when,
who can say,
have Spanish songs
been heard here?

Without hurry,
the dreamer replied:
'Grenada, in books
I first came to know.
Its name gives meaning
to my noble quest.
Grenada, of Spain,
a place of honour'.

I left my cottage,
I went off to war.
The land in Grenada
must go to the poor.
Farewell, my family,
my childhood home.
Grenada, Grenada,
a land without equal'.

– Excerpt from 'Grenada' by Mikhail Svetlov

Written by Soviet poet Mikhail Svetlov, 'Grenada' is a poem about a humble young man who, shortly after the October Revolution, dreamt about a place in a distant and beautiful land called Spain. An illiterate man, 'Grenada' is the misspelled name that he remembered, a place that he wanted to go to nevertheless, to fight

on the side of the oppressed in their struggle for land. In short, this poem is about the spirit of internationalism, the feeling of solidarity with a place you can barely pronounce, and a people you do not know personally. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in the 1930s, this poem took on a new meaning, inspiring many Soviet readers to support the anti-fascist struggle. In the same spirit, a group of young Soviet musicians decided to name themselves Grenada.

‘Today, unfortunately, almost no one remembers the meaning of the poem’, one of Grenada’s founders and artistic director, Tatiana Vladímirskaya, told me in our interview. We playfully joked that it is also because of internationalism that we found ourselves – a Russian and a Chinese person – communicating in Spanish, the closest thing to a common language we have.



Left: Grenada’s TV performance in the Soviet Union, 1979. Tatiana is third from the left; Right: Grenada in Caminito, Argentina, 1989.

When Grenada was formed in 1973, the world was a very different place. The Chilean government under socialist President Salvador Allende was undergoing a **coup** backed by the United States. ‘In practically every factory, every school, every institute, every university, everyone in the Soviet Union was very worried for Chile and wanted to show their solidarity, their internationalism’, Tatiana recalled. ‘So we brought this song – “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido” (“The People United Will Never be Defeated”) – and translated it into Russian so everyone could participate through song’.

Since that first song, and in the fifty-one years that have passed, Grenada has learned and played hundreds of songs in thirty languages, accompanied by instruments they encountered along the way, totalling over 860 in their collection. The ensemble has performed across the globe, from the World Festival of Youth and Students in Cuba to the Festival of Political Song in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), receiving many awards and accolades along the way.



Grenada musical ensemble in Moscow, Russia, 2022.

Tatiana explained how the group developed its concept of ‘political song’, which sits at the core of Grenada’s philosophy. Using the example of Chilean singer Victor Jara, killed during the coup against Allende’s government, she said, ‘if a person is formed as a political person, then anything that they sing, dance, or express in other forms, will all be a political song’. In other words, the political and technical formation of a musician – the creator and performer of political song – are inseparable.

Just as the young soldier in Svetlov’s poem found his body and mind in Spain, the artists of Grenada fostered a lifelong connection with the countries and peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. For Tatiana, this journey with Latin American political song began in her childhood, during Che Guevara’s visit shortly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. She was amongst the children standing in the first row to receive Che in the Young Pioneer Palace while the anthem of the 26th of July Movement played. ‘Of course, I didn’t know anything about that yet, but the feeling was so strong that I never forgot it’, she said.



Left: Che Guevara in Moscow, USSR, 1960; Right: Victor Jara in Moscow, USSR, 1972.

In the years that followed, Tatiana began to study Spanish through the Cuban comrades enrolled at the military academies in Moscow, some of whom formed groups to teach Cuban dances to local people. Little by little she learned the language, familiarising herself with the history of the peoples and struggles on the distant continent, that led her to the Institute of Latin American Studies in the Russian Academy of Sciences, where she works today.

Continuing on this long and winding road was not easy. Yet even after the Soviet Union was collapsed and throughout the most difficult period of the 1990s, the group found a way to carry on its work. Many became schoolteachers, who in that shock-therapy period earned a meagre monthly salary of US\$10. 'We survived, but we didn't sell out. We continued to be ourselves'.

Political song is still an effective way to teach young people in Russia today. 'We think that education is even more important than before and we try to pass on knowledge, mixing culture and politics', Tatiana said. Their latest performance 'The Knight of Hope', referring to Jorge Amado's biography of Brazilian communist leader Luís Carlos Prestes, exemplifies this ethos, melding film, choral music, and live instrumentation.



Left: Poster for Grenada's performance of 'The Knight of Hope', 2024; Right: The Prestes family in Moscow, USSR, 1971.

Tatiana along with Serguei Vladímirsky, her late husband and Grenada's musical director, were friends of the Prestes family when they lived in Moscow in the 1970s during their exile from the military dictatorship in Brazil. Tatiana tells me, through such performances today, Grenada opens up a conversation with people who may have heard of Prestes but were unaware that he was the general secretary of the Communist Party of Brazil, or that the writer Jorge Amado and architect Oscar Niemeyer were also Brazilian communists. 'And this is something strange in Russia but important, because it seems that all the Latin American intellectuals are communists', Tatiana added jokingly. In addition to performances and weekly practices, the group gathers every Saturday evening to discuss the situation in Latin America over tea and biscuits.

Of the countless performances throughout the years, Tatiana told me about one of her most memorable experiences. It was 1989, a festival held in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to celebrate the centenary of *L'Internationale*, whose lyrics were written by Eugène Pottier in the trenches of the 1871 Paris Commune. The anthem was set to music in 1889 by Belgian-French socialist composer, Pierre De Geyter. *L'Internationale* was the anthem of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and was often played or seen on television', Tatiana recalled. It was also sung during her visits to the Prestes family, who stood on their feet while singing, which puzzled her. Carlos Prestes explained to her, 'So many people in the world died for this song that I cannot stay seated when this song plays'. Grenada took this to heart and continue to play *L'Internationale*, always while standing.



Serguei Vladimírsky and Tatiana Vladimírskaya in Berlin, German Democratic Republic, 1987.

Returning to that festival in Berlin, Tatiana described the experience as ‘something extremely important for us because it was a demonstration of how a song can, in reality, reunite the whole world’. Over a century and a half has passed since the Vendôme Column, the monument to Napoleonic imperialism, was toppled and the Communards renamed the plaza ‘Place Internationale’. On the fifty-fifth anniversary of the Paris Commune, 10,000 Chinese workers and peasants gathered in southern China to sing *L’Internationale*, in spite of the rain. Rather than calling the Paris Commune a failed uprising, Mao Zedong praised the young workers’ state as a ‘bright flower’, which produced the ‘happy fruit’ of the October Revolution in Russia.

Looking back on this history, it is from the bright flowers of the Paris Commune and the October Revolution that more fruit has emerged, and more will be born. After all, as German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote in the song ‘Revolution of the Communards’, ‘our future must be built by our dictate’, with people’s art and music as monuments of struggle to usher in that future. You can read my essay about the cultural work during the Paris Commune along with an introduction by Vijay Prashad in *Paris Commune 150*. We also have a portrait of Brecht, born this month in 1898, alongside others in our featured **February portraits**. In celebrating the life and work of Grenada’s founding member, Serguei Vladimírsky (1951–2006), our art department’s Vanshika Babbar has created a drawing in his memory. Along with Grenada, we continue to keep the music alive:



Portraits of Brecht and Vladímírsky.

Life invents
new songs to sing.
Friends, does it matter
the old song?
It doesn't matter,
there's no need to mourn...
'Grenada, Grenada,
a land without equal.'

Warmly,

Tings Chak

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