

## Victor Jara

**An Unfinished Song: The Life of Victor Jara**

By Joan Jara

Ticknor & Fields, 278 pp., \$15.95

By Jay Walljasper

Singer Victor Jara was singled out for brutal torture when Chilean military leaders decided in September 1973 that the country's experiment in ballot-box socialism had gone on long enough. A high-ranking officer bloodied Jara in front of a crowd at a sports-stadium-turned-prison-camp, daring him to sing after a bruising avalanche of punches.

Jara got through one verse of "Venceremos"—his song that had become an anthem for the supporters of President Salvador Allende—before fists again battered him. The next day his body, punctured by machine gun bullets, turned up among a heap of corpses dumped along a roadside.

Joan Jara—who fled to her native England after the coup—spent years piecing together the story of her husband's last hours in the hands of right-wing soldiers who considered him as dangerous as Allende. But it's the only bit of conventional historical research in this biography, *An Unfinished Song*, which is really a memoir of the life she shared with one of the world's most influential folk musicians.

Jara posed a genuine threat to the rightists who rule Chile. His politically charged songs—inspired by folk tunes he learned in countryside villages and urban shanties—stirred masses of people. His music unleashed the same hopes as Allende's 1970 election victory.

Jara's campaign concerts during the 1973 mid-term elections helped beat back right-wing efforts to defuse the Allende government by packing the national

legislature with hostile lawmakers. That's why he and other prominent Chilean artists were butchered right alongside government ministers when Allende's enemies opted for bullets rather than ballots.

After the coup, the state record company was a chief target of right-wing mobs marauding through Santiago, where master tapes made by Jara and other performers of the New Chilean Song movement were stored. Later, the military government even tried to ban the playing of certain traditional Latin American instruments that these folk-singers had made popular.

Joan Jara, once a dancer with the Chilean National Ballet, offers a vivid picture of the cultural flowering that accompanied the left's rise to power. She describes the enthusiastic artistic experiments of the '50s and '60s that drew on both high art traditions imported from Europe and the culture of Chileans—projects that laid groundwork for later political alliances between working people and the intellectual community.

But drawing a clear portrait of her husband proves more difficult. We first meet him as a young scholarship student from Santiago's slums enrolled in the dance class she taught at the university. Then he takes up the cause of Chile's peasants, wandering the countryside to sing with them in their shabby kitchens. Later he becomes the bright new star of Chilean theater, directing productions of Brecht and Gorky. She dutifully chronicles all his triumphs—musical tours of Eastern Europe, theater tours of the U.S., speaking tours of South America.

Her pride in Jara is understandable, but it stands in the way of letting us know him. Only occasionally does she let slip a random detail—he was grouchy in the morning—that lets us share her memories of him as a man, rather than some dusty idol perched in the Hall of Revolutionary Heroes.



Contemporary jazz musician Melba Liston



Slain Chilean singer Victor Jara

Joan Jara does a much better job recounting the story of Allende's Chile through her own eyes—telling us not about some bigger-than-life heroine but a real woman with everyday concerns.

Victor Jara's records remain as shards that show some of the hopeful spirit afoot in Allende's Chile. And so do these memories of Joan Jara.

## Jazzwomen

**Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen**

By Linda Dahl

Pantheon, 371 pp., \$12.95

By Susan Anderson

This book represents a pioneering approach to a nearly untouched subject in the literature of Afro-American music—jazzwomen. Until now, there have been a few biographies of premiere black women vocalists—Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne—and a few recently published surveys. But *Stormy Weather* provides new material and is likely to become a major reference in the field.

Linda Dahl has attempted several formidable tasks in this volume. She has culled an enormity of biographical data on women contributors to jazz, including progenitors in the gospel and blues forms. She discusses various types of women jazz musicians—instrumentalists, vocalists, composers, bandleaders—and of various nationalities. She confronts the ideologies that have hampered women musicians.

*Stormy Weather* is, at its heart, a directory, a cataloging of the known and the unknown women in jazz music. The chapters are carefully organized by types of musician and include sections on the contemporary scene, as well as a profile segment based on interviews conducted by the author. There is a dizzying breadth of information.

But the detail, while enlightening, is also wearing. And the kind of jazz press lingo that the author resorts to throughout the text, writing that one musician "gigged" at a certain club, "fronted" for a certain band, "cooked" on her instrument, also is trying.

Dahl documents how difficult jazz women's lives were and are. But black male jazz musicians have articulated these hardships, have asserted that, in the words

of Archie Sceppe, "jazz is a music born out of oppression, born out of the enslavement of [black] people." The question in dealing with women jazz musicians (especially black) is: what specific difficulties did they face as women? Did the texture and meaning of their lives differ historically from those of male jazz artists?

*Stormy Weather* does not examine its abundance of detail to respond to these questions, and while the author writes of the "dictates of the Afro-American aesthetic" and mentions the phenomena of segregated performances and race records, racism is practically a non-issue. *Stormy Weather* conveys the sense that the overriding obstacle shared by these women was fighting to be taken seriously by their male counterparts.

An anti-woman bias among individuals in the jazz world is strongly documented, however. This is seen in Dahl's passages on the female vocalist of the big band era. Known as a "gal yipper," "canary" or "warbler," "she was like a singing cheerleader for the team behind her.... As in the traditionally male-dominated games of basketball and football, the team took care of business...musical business...while the vocal pom-pom girl stood supportively and decoratively on the sidelines."

Dahl offers a lively section of "Profiles" that reassuringly reveals the potency of jazzwomen working today—such as Carla Bley, Helen Hume, Melba Liston. In her chapter, "The Contemporary Scene," Dahl argues there is a new sensibility among the musicians themselves, a consciousness about shared plights that manifests itself in festivals, conferences and organizations devoted to women's participation in jazz. She has included a short list following the book's appendix of "Organizations that promote women in jazz."

■ Susan Anderson is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.

## Bluegrass

**Bluegrass Breakdown**

By Robert Cantwell

University of Illinois Press, 328 pp., \$19.95

By Bruce Kaplan

This book is about the social history of bluegrass music.

Bluegrass is in some ways—as much as jazz—a quintessentially American musical form. Its sound is often used to evoke images of rustic purity and naturalness—it's "Bonnie and

Clyde" and "Beverly Hillbilies" music. But as Cantwell argues, it is as much music spawned by the steel mills and radio technology of the North as the meadows and pastures of the South.

For all its archaic imagery and associations, bluegrass in its contemporary form is only about 40 years old, and is largely due to the creativity of one man, Bill Monroe. Most of the major early bluegrass artists—including the brilliant banjo innovator Earl Scruggs, whose particular crisp and ringing single-note technique is what many people instantly think of when they hear the words "banjo" or "bluegrass" or "country music"—were at one time members of Bill's band.

Bill Monroe was born 70 years ago in Western Kentucky, and he grew up listening to and playing old time rural dance music and singing and hearing the old hymns and ballads. But as a teenager he also encountered the blues—black music in the form of Arnold Schultz, an itinerant guitarist and railroad worker, one of the most fascinating and enigmatic figures in American musical history.

He influenced directly not only Bill Monroe, but also Ike Everly, the father of Don and Phil, who were among the major connections between country and rock music.

In 1929, 18-year-old Bill Monroe joined thousands of other rural people in the journey to the urban North—the Whiting-Gary-Hammond area. In addition to factory jobs, Bill and his brothers discovered there a large number of rural people concentrated in a small space, who wanted to hear the songs and dance the dances of home. They began performing, and soon were signed to play on the *Barn Dance*, a Chicago radio program on a station with a clear channel signal that reached most of the eastern half of the country. This playing led to touring, and the brothers became full-time musicians.

A process occurred in string band music very similar to the one going on in the Chicago area with traditional jazz. New Orleans jazz and traditional rural string band music both featured several lead instruments all playing a tune simultaneously, possibly backed by some rhythm instruments. In the '20s and '30s, as young urban white men began to adapt the New Orleans sound, soloing began to be the featured event in jazz. In the '30s and '40s, the same change occurred in string band music, led by Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys.

There are some problems with the book. The writing is not always clear, and certain aspects of bluegrass are ignored or glossed over. Also, there is perhaps too much focus on Monroe and not enough on other musicians or the audience. Why hasn't bluegrass connected to the rural audience as well as the more glittery Nashville emanations, if, as the author argues, it is such an important expression for rural people? Despite limitations, it is a pioneering work and takes the social history of bluegrass seriously.

■ Bruce Kaplan is president of Flying Fish Records.



## ART»ENTERTAINMENT

## CULTURE WATCH

## NEH's neocon crusade risks agency's future

By Pat Aufderheide

"The greatest advances in the humanities have already been made," pronounces William Bennett, head of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It all happened in the period between the ancient Greeks and the end of the Renaissance, mostly to white men.

In his three-year tenure, Bennett has radically refocused the \$132 million agency, noted in its 16-year history for funding projects as diverse as the traveling King Tut exhibit, the films *Heartland* and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, and town-hall type meetings.

The agency has been a spark to make the humanities part of working people's lives, and it has promoted academic innovation, especially in programs for minorities and women. Bennett, however, has cut experimental and public programs, boosting emphasis on traditional academics and trimming the budget. His rubric for the new era is "excellence in education."

The shift has been so dramatic that a report accompanying the 1984 appropriations bill notes that improving education "is not the principal responsibility for the Endowment," which should recognize that "improvement of humanities—the quality of life—occurs outside of the classrooms also." Putting teeth in its criticism, the report recommends shifting funds back into public programs.

But Bennett is not a man to be balked by a simple run-in with Congress. He is used to it (see *In These Times* last week). He is crusading for a return to the perspective of the ancient Greeks, who knew that "the most important thing is to live well and to die with honor."

What does it mean to live well? "Not to betray your friends, your God or your country," as he expressed it succinctly to *In These Times*. Or, as he phrased it to academic administrators recently, it is to find answers to the fundamental questions: "Who am I? What's it all about? What do I owe my country? What is courage? What is friendship?"

This view of the humanities makes sense given Bennett's own background and personality. A man who came up the hard way, having had the Brooklyn street scruffiness brushed off him by Jesuit schooling, he found in "great books" an assertion of authority that still affords him comfort.

As he told a group of college administrators recently, "Some books were of help to me [in answering these questions], and I *NEH chief Bennett looks on as Reagan announces the agency's new library initiative.*

won't keep secret which ones they were now that I have this job, this opportunity."

But recent revelations raises doubt about whether Bennett has in fact been a good student. In 1980, Bennett had argued in the Heritage Foundation's Mandate for Leadership that the NEH should narrow its focus and streamline its operations. Under his direction, however, the re-focusing and streamlining has had a peculiarly idiosyncratic orientation.

In his first year at NEH, Bennett returned nearly a million dollars rather than spend it on public projects. Meanwhile, he used his own public affairs department to describe him in

press releases as "a prominent Reagan administration spokesman on education."

The tactic was so bold that Rep. Sidney Yates, father of the NEH, protested about it in appropriations hearings last March. Bennett told him that the billing was attributable to excessive zeal on the part of his staff (something the staff was reportedly surprised to hear). However, he added, "a public affairs office is supposed to make you look good, so—"

Bennett has also created NEH projects that offer forums where the chairman's views can be heard. He targeted NEH

staff time and funds to kick off a splashy name-the-great-books campaign last summer, soliciting must-read lists for high school students from friends, from high school teachers in the NEH summer seminars program and through a George Will newspaper column.

The survey was heavily weighted in favor of people likely to turn in Harvard five-foot-shelf titles, since more than half the original respondents were teachers reading classics on NEH money, and it resulted in headlines for Bennett and for his classics campaign.

Earlier this spring, the NEH hastily threw together four university conferences on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. Since the conferences "should take place as soon as possible," wrote the project coordinator Edward Erler (a Bennett appointee) in an internal memo, "it will be necessary to depart from regular contractual procedures."

Since the Bicentennial continues into 1987, not everyone would consider this an emergency item. But one disaffected NEH'er noted, "These people don't know where they'll be in 1985"—after the election. Three of the conferences featured Bennett as keynote speaker, and the fourth featured John

Agresto, the man Bennett brought with him from his neo-conservative think tank, the National Humanities Center.

In this publicity push, Bennett allies himself staunchly with the White House. When Rep. Yates asked him why he had allowed himself to be dubbed a Reagan spokesman, Bennett replied, "I am proud of the fact that I am a member of this administration." Bennett's personal loyalties may explain some NEH actions that have been widely interpreted as politicizing the cultural agency. Take, for instance, recent recess appointments to the National Council on the Humanities.

The Council, an advisory group, is supposed to be composed of scholars and experts in the humanities. But Richard W. Lyman, Rockefeller Foundation president and former Council member, commented, "The chief common thread [among the appointees] seems to be working for the right-to-life movement. Three of them have no academic qualifications."

Among the appointees are Helen Marie Taylor, former actress and co-chair of Virginia state Moral Majority; Mary Jo ("Call me Jo!") Cresimore, a homemaker and Republican Party activist; and Kathleen S.



National Endowment for the Humanities