

THE "NOVA CANÇÓ", THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A POPULAR INITIATIVE



© ROBERTO COGGIOLA

THE PHENOMENON OF THE "NOVA CANÇÓ" EMERGED AT THE END OF THE FIFTIES, WITH THE APPEARANCE OF "ELS SETZE JUTGES". IT REACHED ITS PEAK AT THE END OF THE SIXTIES, WITH THE MASSIVE RECITALS BY RAIMON, SERRAT AND LLUÍS LLACH.

MIQUEL PORTER LECTURER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

Towards the end of the fifties, when the attempt at cultural genocide which the Franco regime had launched against the national cultures of Spain was beginning to take shape, a phenomenon emerged which we call the "Nova Cançó" (New Song). It was 1959 when Lluís Serrahima published an article in the magazine "Germinàbit", which, under the title "We need songs for today", supported what in fact is a normal occurrence in any language.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then and plenty has happened in every field—ideology, politics sociology, economics and culture—, so that we can discuss the phenomenon with an insight that was not available to the pioneers.

To start with, people have often spoken of the "Nova Cançó" as a *movement*, something that was organized and structured from the word go, and this isn't strictly accurate.

It's true that a confused idea of what was needed did exist, not so much amongst the pioneers themselves as amongst their potential public. But, in fact, only a handful of people were aware of the possible importance of what was happening, while the vast majority were quite content to "express themselves" or "enjoy themselves", without going any further and without a real awareness of the political significance of the events.

This is easily corroborated if we realise how, from the very beginning, there was no unifying doctrine, no shared opinions or common approach, but, on the contrary, a number of initiatives from different sources and with differing aims, sometimes even contradicting one another. The "Germanes Serrano" or Josep Guardiola, for example, professionals who had used Castilian until then, recorded commercial melodies before the first reformist moves were made, and the same could be said of Font Sellabora, who called himself the "Trobador de Catalunya", a true pioneer who failed to achieve the recognition he deserved.

One thing is true, however. The nucleus formed by myself, Lluís Serrahima, Jaume Armengol and others, encouraged and guided by people like Josep Benet, Joan Serrahima and others belonging to earlier generations, formed part of a united move which was at the same time open and which faced up to the sociological, cultural and psychological reality of the time: a group which sought to renovate, rather than innovate, to bring things up to

date with a certain critical awareness, bearing in mind that this attitude in itself constituted a challenge to the laws of the day, a defence not only against the Franco regime but also against the excessive reaction, intolerance and stagnation. These were the objectives that would later lead in a thousand different directions, but which for the time being were concentrated around this early group.

We kept our eyes and ears open enough to realise that the position we had adopted—straddling various forms of what has been referred to as singer/songwriting—wasn't and had no reason to be the only one. While the future "Els setze jutges" were taking shape, a number of possible options were encouraged. If what we wanted was for Catalan songs to be heard on the stairs when people were washing up, we had to remember that these dish washers could belong to a wide range of different backgrounds or age groups.

While we tended to take our inspiration from French music, from deeply rooted local traditions or from negro spirituals, others based their work on jazz, melodic music or other experiments of different types. A joint performance at the "Centre Comarcal Lleidatà", in Barcelona, left this early diversity of options quite clear and also demonstrated the viability of the project.

For a variety of reasons, the original group of renovators took shape as "Els Setze Jutges", and made its first public appearance at the CICF premises, where Josep Maria Espinàs, who at that time was translating the songs of Brassens into Catalan, took part for the first time. The warm welcome afforded by the urban middle classes reinforced the successes in country districts and villages and this led to an increase in the means of diffusion available, such as radio and records.

In 1962, the new "Edigsa" record label provided limited but effective promotion, though this undoubtedly served as a warning to the authorities, who had previously not taken much notice of what we were doing but who now began to get worried. Very soon we had administrative obstacles to deal with, along with censorship and even trouble with the police. At that moment, the arrival on the scene of the Valencian singer Raimon started what could be described as the Catalan version of the "protest song". With time, and without ever joining any group, Raimon was to become one of the pillars of the "Nova Cançó" and, going

beyond protest, with words by Salvador Espriu, Ausiàs March or his own, he developed towards highly poetic music.

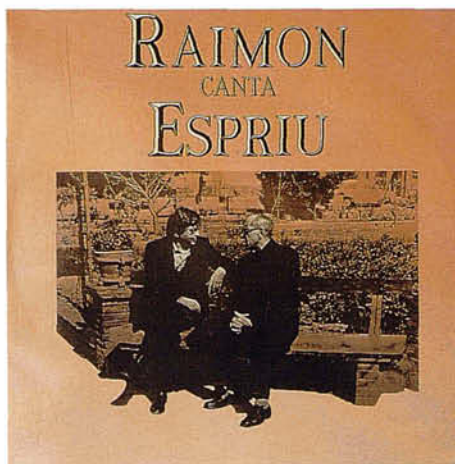
"The Setze Jutges", who once defined the words and music they wrote as a "tender, ironic chronicle of the Country", were also quick to adapt the work of poets like Joan Salvat Papasseit, Josep Carner, Salvador Espriu or Joan Oliver, who occasionally wrote texts dedicated to some of the singers.

After 1963, an increasingly necessary and intentional diversity arose, with the emergence of instrumental groups like "Els quatre gats", "Els quatre Z", "Els tres tambors" or "Els Dracs" heavily influenced by blues, jazz and rock. Salvador Escamilla, Grau Carol, Magda, Mercè Madolell and others adapted world famous songs, Núria Feliu devoted herself to the great jazz numbers, and Francesc Heredero adapted Elvis Prestley's hits. Children's songs were performed by Maria Cinta or "Queta i Teo" and there were even religious singers like the Capuchin Father Ladislau; all helped to shape an area where everything was equally necessary. Amongst these personalities, special mention should be made of the Valencian Ovidi Montllor, the Majorcan Guillem d'Efak, Jordi Barre, from Perpignan, or Xavier Ribalta, from the mainland. But perhaps the most representative, along with "Els Setze Jutges", were the components of the so-called "Grup de Folk", which was soon to give rise to groups and personalities with their own, well differentiated public, as in the case of Jaume Arnella, la i Batiste, Xesco Boix, "Falsterbro 3", Gabriel Jaraba and, especially, Jaume Cisa and Pau Riba, who were later to follow a highly successful career. Another facet was that of the satirical songwriters, who were also very popular: Pere Tàpies and "La Trinca" used an approach which was frequently sardonic, with such professionals as the journalist and author Jaume Picas collaborating in writing the words.

The success of "Se'n va anar" at the V Festival of Mediterranean Song marked the group's coming of age, and at the same time provoked a hardening of official positions, but nothing could now hold back the rise of what had started so timidly, almost in secret. Performances followed each other in their thousands all over the *Principat*, and great shows were organized at the Palau de la Música, as well as morning sessions at the Teatre Romea. The singers visited the universities, the schools, the workshops and the factories,



© ROBERTO COGGIOLA



and travelled the countryside village by village. They went abroad, giving conferences in Occitania and Brittany. "Els Setze Jutges" performed in Marseilles in 1965, and the following year Raimon performed in Paris.

In 1967, another record label, "Concèntric" appeared, but others, amongst them some multinational companies, were also issuing records in Catalan. In 1967, when "Els Setze Jutges" had their full line-up—Miquel Porter, Remei Margarit, Josep Maria Espinàs, Delfí Abella, Francesc Pi de la Serra, Enric Barbat, Xavier Elies, Guillermina Motta, Maria del Carme Girau, Martí Llauredó, Joan Ramon Bonet, Maria Amèlia Pedrerol, Joan Manuel Serrat, Maria del Mar Bonet, Rafael Subirachs and Lluís Llach—differences arose as some members also wanted to sing in Castilian and others, naturally enough, wanted to go professional. At this

point the group's pioneers started to drop out, so as not to be in the way of the new proposals that were arising as a result of the new times and the new conditions. The massive recitals by Raimon and Serrat, and later Lluís Llach, marked the movement's peak, towards the end of the sixties.

Later, the incorporation of new voices—Marina Rossell, Ramon Muntaner, Joan Isaac, Joan Baptista Humet—and large-scale concerts such as the open air events at Canet de Mar—25,000 people at "Canet Rock" in 1975—ensured the stability and continuity of modern Catalan song, despite the enormous pressure from the big record companies, who had imposed Anglo-Saxon models, the change in political and social conditions, produced by the transition from the dictatorship to democracy, and the usual developments in taste as the new generations took over.

But it should be remembered that the "Nova Cançó", a popular offer, open to all, triggered off similar or related activities throughout the Peninsula, especially in Valencia—Els Pavessos, El Tall—, in the Balearics—Isidor Mari—, in Catalonia North—Jossiane— and, further afield, the Basque song movement, the Nova Trova Galega, the Nueva Canción Castellana, and the Nueva Canción Aragonesa, as well as having a decisive influence on the new music of Occitania and Brittany.

Today, with a normal political situation, many of the best-known names from the past still perform and new names arise, although, as a result of changing fashions and social conditions, the singer-songwriter is going through a situation of crisis, as happens with young people's music in any western European country. New times and new people bring new songs! ●