



WORLD MUSIC SPECIAL

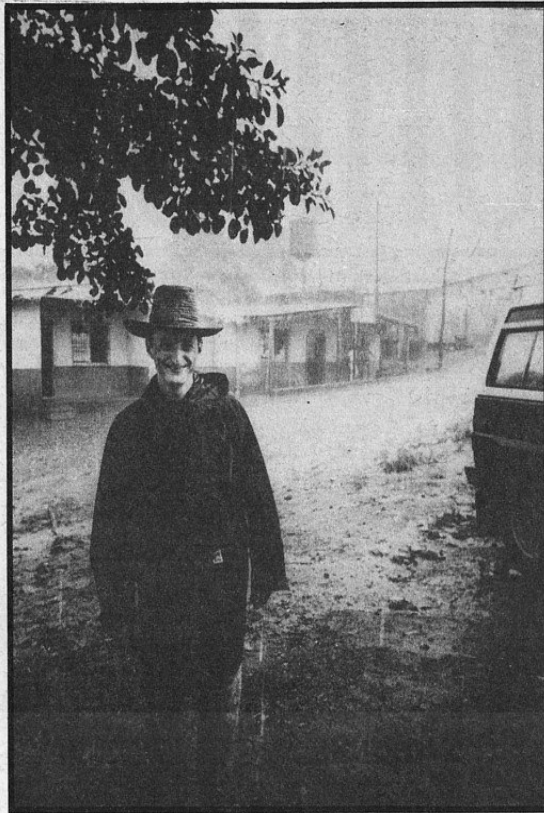
ANOTHER DAY,

BILLY BRAGG goes to Nicaragua, meets the Sandinistas, and presents us with his holiday diary, straight from the war zone.

The woman with the walkie-talkie at Los Angeles International Airport was helpfully checking that our luggage was being transferred from a Vancouver flight on to the next leg of our journey. "Let's see, you're going to Guatemala city and then to somewhere else" she said, as she flipped through our tickets. The letters MGA signifying our destination obviously didn't mean anything to her. "Managua, Nicaragua", I said helpfully. "Oh God!", she said, looking incredulously at our three faces, "Good luck!".

At 11pm LAX is still a bright and busy place. Lights shine and shopping opportunities spring up every few yards. Except, that is, in Terminal Two. One of the first intercontinental terminals built here after the war and about to be demolished, every shop in Terminal Two closed at 9pm. A tiny, disgusting cafeteria is all that serves the 200 or so people awaiting the departure of the night flight to Guatemala City and they sit with their luggage and families while three Pan-Am employees order people about in Spanish. As far as they are concerned, the Third World begins here.

Fifteen hours later, after stops in Guatemala and El Salvador, our plane executes a long banking turn and begins its descent to the A C Sandino Airport. The view from my window, the green fields (looking not unlike Northamptonshire) that go down to the Pacific Coast



A big hat and a culture-shocked mind . . .

change to the still-active volcano Mount Masaya, and on the shores of a huge lake—Managua itself. On a hillside above the city I see, Hollywood sign-style, the letters FSLN big, bold and white, the initials of the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

One of their representatives meets us on the tarmac and immediately I became aware of the different atmosphere. None of the menacing uniforms, dark glasses and guns that we'd seen in Guatemala. Nicaragua doesn't even require its visitors to have visas, a current passport will do. I am dismayed to find that at customs there was a special channel for diplomats and journalists! I would have thought that both those professions would be high on the black list come the revolution!

There's no special channel for pop stars so I braved the normal route and gained entry. We are then put into cars and taken to our hotel.

The Hotel Las Mercedes has recently been completed by the government to compete with the American-owned Intercontinental Hotel where Howard Hughes lived for a while in the Penthouse Suite and is now the haunt of various tourists and CIA operatives. In my chalet at La Mercedes I have a shower, and then blandly flip through the TV channels, amused to find Roy Rogers introducing *Happy Trails Theatre* live from Tennessee on the Nashville Network. Why the Sandinistas choose to watch this crap is a puzzle to my culture-shocked mind. Maybe its because Roy wore a big hat like Sandino did.

The next morning, still dazed and a little intimidated by the heat, we were driven around the city and the consequences of the earthquake were still to be seen. I had forgotten that Managua was devastated by a massive earthquake in 1972 which left 20,000 dead in its wake. The whole of downtown Managua was levelled. All that remained was the National Assembly Building, the shell of the Cathedral, a couple of cinemas and the Bank of America skyscraper.

The dictator Anastasio Somoza took control of most of the foreign aid that flowed into the country and used it to increase his personal fortune from \$600 million to \$1,600 million (coincidentally the same amount of foreign debt that the Sandinistas inherited in 1979).

Amongst his get-even-more-incredibly-rich-quick schemes was the sale of donated blood from around the world to private blood banks in the USA. When the Sandinistas took over they had not only a capital ravaged by civil war but one still strewn with rubble from the earthquake. They sensibly declined to build on that unstable spot and Managua remains a city without a centre, a collection of suburbs around a large park.

I was invited to Managua to take part in the First International Book Festival, first of its kind not only in Nicaragua but Central America as a whole. In a country which won the UN Literacy Award in 1980 for its vigorous literacy campaigns and whose nine man ruling National Directorate includes 5 published writers and poets, the Book Festival was of great cultural significance.

At the opening reception I was seated at a table with my interpreter and two journalists from Cuba, one of whom, upon finding out that I was British, began telling me how much he admired "Madame Thatcher". I really didn't need this from a middle aged, cigar smoking, reactionary apparatchik of the Cuban Revolution, so I asked his colleague to compare what was happening in Nicaragua to the situation in Cuba. He thought for a moment and said: "Well, Cuba is a Marxist state. Nicaragua is . . ." he paused again and concluded, "an interesting experiment in social democracy."

The image of Nicaragua as some sort of a Marxist totalitarian state

as *Time* magazine often refers to it is simply not borne out by the facts.

Amnesty International's negative report on human rights in Nicaragua was based on information given by the CIA-funded Permanent Commission of Human Rights. An investigation by the Nicaraguan National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNPPDH) which was set up at the suggestion of the UN and is 90% funded by charity, showed Amnesty's allegations to be unfounded. The report has since been withdrawn.

Which is not to suggest that Nicaragua is some kind of paradise. For the average Nicaraguan everyday life in this Third World country is a struggle. It could be better if it wasn't for the war. Nicaragua has been at war for six years and the drain on the country's resources has been considerable. 50% of their economy is now directed towards defending their borders from Contra terrorist raids. Four years ago 60% of the government budget was spent on health, education and infrastructure.

The population of Managua has swollen by 400,000 to 1 million as refugees from the war zones flee to the capital city building themselves whole new barrios (boroughs) of makeshift wooden houses. The water supply in Managua has to be turned off during daylight hours for two days every week to conserve supplies.

The cost in human suffering has been even greater. Since 1981, 22,000 people have been killed as a result of fighting between the Contras and the Sandinistas, a death rate which, when compared to the United States, is a higher percentage of the population than has been killed in all the US's 20th century wars from World War I to Vietnam added together.

I did a couple of gigs in Managua one at the Sandinista Cultural Workers Union, a sort of coffee bar cum restaurant with an aerobics studio next door, and one at the Cinema Altimeria. Here I was opening for the great Nicaraguan songwriter Luis Enrique Mieja Godoy, who asked me if I knew the famous British songwriter and poet Attila The Stockbroker! The two of them had met at the Berlin Political Song Festival last February. Small world.

The highlight of the Book Festival

ANOTHER THREE QUID

al for me however was a 4-hour spectacle entitled 'Meet the People' in which the 300 delegates to the Festival had the opportunity to ask questions to members of the Sandinista Government.

Among the two dozen assembled on the platform before us were Miguel D'Escoto, the Foreign Minister, Sergio Ramirez the Vice President and Daniel Ortega the President of Nicaragua. The very fact that these people were willing to answer and question from the floor impressed upon me how far this 'experiment in social democracy' was progressing. Can you imagine even a Labour government laying themselves on the line like this?

First up was a question about the Contragate Hearings then taking place in Washington DC. Daniel Ortega dismissed them as an exercise in hypocrisy, asking why these powerful men spend so much time debating whether or not the Bolland Amendment had been infringed, when US Government-backed Contras had been infringing human rights in Nicaragua for the past six years?

Asked by an American delegate if there was any incidence of AIDS in Nicaragua Health Minister Dora Maria Trellez replied that none had yet been reported but that her resources were limited when it came to combatting the virus. The biggest killer of infants in Nicaragua is diarrhoea; the biggest killer of adults, the war.

Was there freedom of speech in the country after the Sandinistas closed down the main opposition, US-funded, newspaper *La Prensa*? The paper was closed after it had openly advocated negotiations with the Contra terrorists. The Sandinistas have always said they will negotiate only with the US Government.

"If a dog bites you, you don't talk to the dog, you talk to its master", Daniel Ortega has said. As the lesson that the US must learn in dealing with Nicaragua is the lesson of Vietnam, so the one Nicaragua must learn with the US Government is that of Chile.

In 1973 the CIA used the right wing opposition newspapers to encourage the de-stabilisation that gave the military the excuse to overthrow the socialist government of Salvador Allende. The Nicaraguan *Prensa* printing plant is



Singing for the Sandinistas

still intact, the journalists still free and Ortega has said that as soon as hostilities cease the paper can reopen.

In El Salvador no opposition newspapers are closed down. Their editors are regularly assassinated. And while the US Government accuses the Sandinistas of being totalitarians, not two miles from where Daniel Ortega was speaking, the US Embassy Information Service was distributing 7,000 free anti-Sandinistas books in Spanish completely unhindered.

Someone claiming to be from the Political Science Department of Cambridge University asked what threat Nicaragua was to the USA? A good example of real democracy in Central America was the reply.

The celebrations of the 8th anniversary of the FSLN Triumph on 19th July 1979 were this year held in Matagalpa on the edge of the war zone, in direct defiance to the Contras operating in that area.

A week later the road north from Managua is still festooned with FSLN banners, pictures of Sandino and huge billboards bearing the image and quotations of Carlos Fonseca, founder of the FSLN in 1961, killed in battle in 1976, and up there alongside Sandino as a national hero.

Also to be seen, unlike the Marxist states of Eastern Europe, are billboards and graffiti representing the six other political parties, three to the left and three to the right of the Sandinistas, who took part in the 1984 international monitored

project at La Dalia we were visiting.

At the tiny clinic, Mike explained to us the difficulties of administering to a scattered population in the war zone with such limited space and supplies.

In the surgery, two doctors consulted at the same time. The room where women gave birth was used simultaneously for inoculations. The area designated to treat up to 20 infants a day for diarrhoea was about the size of two lavatory cubicles. And when the power goes off they can lose up to \$300 worth of refrigerated vaccines.

Although they have been a specific target for the Contra's campaign of terror, there are enough doctors and medical staff now trained from the local population. They merely lack facilities. Scottish Medical Aids' project is to increase the clinics' capacity sixfold. To build and equip the new enlarged health centre will cost around £80,000, the average price of a Top 40 video.

Of the many 'Internationalist' volunteers in Nicaragua by far the most numerous are from the USA. Their presence helps the local population to understand that their enemy is not the American people but the US Government and its Central Intelligence Agency. The question of what will happen if American troops invade was one best answered by a *camposino* at La Dalia.

"Before the Revolution I had nothing. Now I have this little piece of land. Whoever comes out of the hills to take it from me, I will defend

it. And the way I feel about the value of my death for this little piece of land and the way a young US Marine feels about dying for it are two very different things."

After a week in Nicaragua, we flew back to North America to do some shows. One of the stop-offs on the flight to Miami was San Pedro Sula in northern Honduras where the Man From Del Monte rules supreme and there are pineapple and banana plantations as far as the eye can see.

This is why the US Government want to snuff out the Nicaraguan Revolution; if the threat of good example catches on in Honduras, in El Salvador, in Guatemala, then the interests of multinational fruit companies that run these economies to their advantage, will be threatened. If the Sandinistas succeed, then the repercussions in North America and Europe may result in us having to pay more for our fruit salads!

In dictator-infested Latin America the repercussions are much more significant. Nicaragua has mounted a major challenge to the Monroe Doctrine, the US foreign policy that opposes the influence or interference of any outside powers anywhere in the Americas and has given the US a free hand in the region since its inception in 1823.

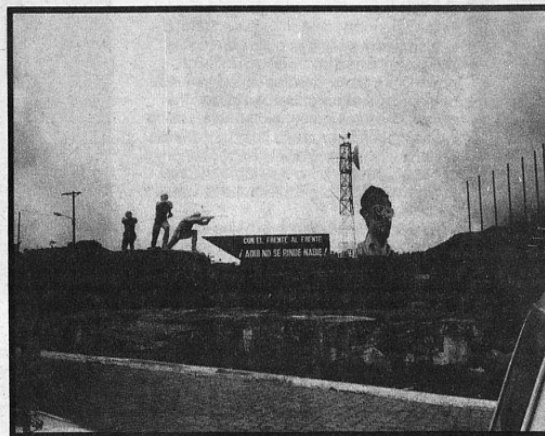
Back in New York City, I took part in a medical aid benefit for Nicaragua. Along with Living Colour, 10,000 Maniacs, Paul Kantner (ex-Jefferson Airplane) we raised \$16,000. The highlight of the evening was the appearance of Luis Enrique Meija Godoy and Band. The atmosphere was electric, the audience disapproving a widely held belief that "Yanks don't like politics in their music".

Talking with someone from Boston after the show, he was amazed to find out that there was a McDonald's in Managua.

"Despite that", I said, "the food there was really good so they can't be Marxists".

He asked me what "Libre Patria O Morir!" on my FSLN T-shirt meant. (It means Free Country or Death). I wrongly translated it as "Live Free or Die". "Whoah!" said the voice of American youth, "that's a heavy slogan. How about 'live free or ... try to live free'".

I thought of the people of Nicaragua trying to do just that.



The thriving 'experiment in social democracy' . . .