



university one of the main subjects I studied was philosophy , and I did a lot of thinking and studying about various aspects of philosophy but I had some very left wing lecturers amongst the lectures I attended. So I got involved in my student days with left wing politics. I had a phase of being connected with Fircroft College in Birmingham in Selly Oak, which was a very interesting place where working men could go and have a chance at having higher education. Of course they were coming from working backgrounds and then studying and making sense of their lives in terms of socialist theories and studying Marx and things like that. My dad was very keen on music. He was most unusual for that time, because he had a fantastic collection of every kind of music that you could imagine, from African drums, which people never had in those days, African drums, flamenco, world music, to classical music, to jazz, and a vast collection of folk music. When I was at university in Aberdeen I had a lot of experience in the folk scene there with a wonderful singer, Jeannie Robertson, who I used to sing with. So I'd got those strands of my life sort of coming together by getting involved with the Grey Cock, which then of course developed into Banner. It developed from the Grey Cock experience really.

Q: How did you get involved in Fircroft College?

JS: Part of my degree had been in the history of art. When I did my teacher training year I did art so that I could become an art teacher, and I ran an art class at Fircroft College. I don't know how far you want to go with the folk club and Charlie, or do you want to go on to Apolo now?

AS: I arrived in Birmingham in the summer of 1976, that unforgettable one-off summer in the history of Britain. So that knocked me about because I wasn't expecting that, hotter than where I come from. I arrived here not because of my looks or my interests but tragically because of a fascist military coup, the coup led by General Pinochet supported by the US and the CIA, which is very well documented. At the time of the coup I was a senior civil servant working for Allende's government at a development corporation called Corfo. I was the regional manager at the time of the coup. Consequently, I became a target for the repression and thanks to the TASS trade union whose sponsorship eventually managed to get me a visa to get me out of the concentration camps established by Pinochet. I got my

first university degree in Chile in business studies, so I was qualified as an administrative manager.

Q: What did you study?

AS: Business studies, and the speciality was administration of organisations. But I was very much the unusual case of a handful of professionals, and my dad was a docker and my mum was a working class woman, and we were the first generation ever to have gone to university in that family. My brother and I managed to graduate, and basically that's the background to me prior to getting to Britain. I was at the time very much an ordinary young man and it was just the arrival of people like Allende who shook up the political spectrum and encouraged young people to take up a much more serious and important role in the running of society. That was very much something that was expected, perhaps in my case because my father had brought us up in a very political family background. He had been a trade unionist, who had been persecuted during the 1950s because of his politics and his role in the union. Consequently, we had continued connection to the ideas of a socialist victory, which eventually took place in 1970. So my life really changed very much from 1970 onwards, and 40 years later I have to regard myself as an exile.

Q: How old were you in '76?

AS: In '76 I was 29 and arrived here on my own, literally being put on a plane and landed in London from Santiago, no family, no friends as such. Members of the trade union were waiting for me at the airport, with a very warm welcome. From there after two or three weeks in London I moved up to Coventry where there was a program to help the Chilean refugees, part of the Chilean refugee project. I lived there with a family in Coventry while I was learning English at Warwick University. Associated with that, I had been given by the World University Service a grant to do a postgraduate degree here in Aston.

Q: In what subject?

AS: Connected to management. The subject was operational research. After my arrival and having done some English lessons, the year after I had to take on the academic aspect. At the same time, I joined the little Chilean community in exile and I was active, as I'd always been. We set up a group because we needed more solidarity work, a folk group called Venceremos, which is the name of the political song in Chile, Venceremos – we shall win, is the translation for it. So we decided that we needed every possible way of getting solidarity with our people, as the repression was so harsh and continuous back in Chile. So myself, who had never even touched an instrument, put a couple of lyrics together in the shower and had to learn how to perform and how to sing and how to dance as well. It was a totally new feeling and I think that had been the feeling of exile – you faced totally new challenges. As I was saying, the cultural ? and political thing had been your subject, but culture ? in my case was new to me. Also we did a lot of fundraising, so I ended up having to chop sacks of onions to make Chilean pasties, which are now internationally known, the famous “empanadas”. So we were doing that and not just making them but also taking them around Birmingham to sell and being very profitable. I think the drive of people like us seems very different to most cases of refugees because we were a political group with an identity. For a long time, the Chilean community had the expectation of being able to return. For a long time, people like us had our so-called luggage still made up in case it happened, but it didn't, so we settled here in Britain.

Q: How did you come across each other?

JS: Are we going to jump to there or should I be filling you in more with the background to Banner?

Q: Yes okay.

JS: Because that's quite a bit further on chronologically. Having joined the Grey Cock I became part of a group. We had this business of little groups that would take the responsibility for the evening in turn. The group that I was allocated to first was with Charles Parker and Bob Etheridge, and I worked with them for quite a long time, just the three of us in the group. Later I was in a different group. But Charles Parker used to come to stay. At

that time I was living with my parents, and he used to stay at our house when we had our rehearsal sessions. So I got to see quite a lot of Charles Parker as a result, and to have conversations with him as well as having the rehearsals. Rhoma Bowdler quite often would come to our rehearsals and she'd be there as well. There was discussion then and I got to know Rhoma Bowdler quite well as a result. I think she was someone who'd trained as a teacher, as a drama teacher, relatively late in life. She was so keen on how through drama you could teach any subject. She would say, 'I teach my maths through drama, I take them out in the playground and I get them to move around to teach them numbers.' She felt that drama was a fantastic vehicle for teaching almost anything and I think she inspired Charles to think along those lines as well. There was a lot of discussion between them of using drama to make the Radio Ballads more accessible, to dramatise the Radio Ballads (made earlier by Charles, Ewan MacColl, and Peggy Seeger) Of course they started with The Big Hewer, which then we transmuted into The Collier Laddie. We used the script I think verbatim of The Big Hewer, as I remember. Then of course Rhoma was making these little scenes to dramatise it and then Charlie had the idea of having this back projection screen with the images that were relevant to the scenes. He of course had gone with Peggy and Ewan to all these different coalmining areas. When they'd been making the radio ballads they'd had to do all this interviewing of people, so they knew all the characters. Then he went back to the places that he'd been to with Peggy and Ewan and asked them to be photographed and to be videoed as well. Before, they'd just been recorded, and then afterwards he went back there and got these shots of them, photographs as well as bits of video I think. It was him going back to those same places to make the visual thing, which before had just been sound. He worked like a maniac, Charlie, going all over the place again. Then Rhoma of course was doing all this work to dramatise the shows as well, so it was a combination of the two of them really that was the spark there. I seem to remember a meeting of people from the Grey Cock and them putting it to us that we should start this project of trying to dramatise the Big Hewer and asking us whether they were they going to get the commitment from us to get going. People were excited by it, so they got the commitment from us. On more than one occasion we had these gatherings to get us to gel as a group. Of course Rhoma was the one who knew how to get people to work together as a drama group, and she put us through all sorts of exercises to achieve that. We had one weekend in Park House very early on with Charles and Rhoma doing lots of exercises, drama

exercises, singing and creative work. It was great, it was really exciting and inspiring. I think we all got a terrific buzz out of it. There was a lot of that groundwork to make us into actors. None of us had had experience of that, and then this group of people who'd learned a few folk songs in the past and knew some of them reasonably well, were suddenly having an awful lot more demanded of them. She really worked hard on us. She used to be quite disciplinarian as well. I can't remember all the details now but I remember we got up at 6 o'clock in the morning. We're all sleeping in sleeping bags in a tent somewhere and got up to get on with the work. Then there was another place, another terribly cold church somewhere near Spark Hill. It was absolutely freezing, and we had to work there. I remember Rhoma saying, 'Well if you're working hard enough you wouldn't feel the cold.' There was a lot of work put into making this group of people into actors basically, and it was good. We worked, as I say, on The Collier Laddie show and we went around mainly to miners' socials to perform that in the early years, to the places where the material had come from. We went to various places in Wales and the north country to perform. I seem to remember the response being varied. We had fantastic support from the audiences in some places and a bit of wondering what on earth it was all about in other places. But we were always put up by the mining communities for sleeping wherever we went, and had tremendous hospitality that way. So it was a real experience.

Q: In what way?

JS: Well it was being so part of a group and doing something so different that none of us had done before. And feeling that we were, well certainly from my point of view, it was great to be doing something that was expressive of what my thoughts were about the political situation and feeling that it was putting something over that was important to express.

Q: What was it about the political situation at the time that made the group or Charlie want to put on The Big Hewer?

JS: I can't remember. Saltley Gate and everything came later, all of that. We're talking now about the early '70s. When was Collier Laddie?

Q: '73.

JS: Ya, very early '70s.

Q: Who was the group?

JS: There was Dave and Chris, there was Doreen and John Fryer, there was Joan Smith, Bob Etheridge.

Q: Joy?

JS: Joy. Who was that little chap with wiry grey hair? Bill Shreeve. He was always sitting next to me and telling me dirty jokes during the rehearsals. When we were supposed to be serious he kept trying to make me laugh. There was a young man with a beard, was he called Peter? He had a fantastically deep voice. I don't think he stayed after that first show. Of course there was Richard Hamilton.

Q: Were Chas and Eileen involved?

JS: Yes, I'm just trying to think in what capacity. Yes they were. I don't remember at what stage Peter came into it, Pete Yates, but he wasn't there right at the beginning.

Q: Can you tell us what Park House is?

JS: I think Park House was where Charles's family stayed, I think they rented it. It was a big country house near Bromyard.

Q: So you had sessions there?

JS: Well I just remember this one weekend there when we were sort of having to get this intensive bonding thing going.

Q: What happened after Collier Laddie?

JS: I was involved with the women's show and I was involved with the Saltley Gates show as well. For some reason the first Chile show I was away and I wasn't involved in that, but I do remember that Victor Jara's wife, Joan Jara, came and spoke to the group and everyone was very deeply affected. I had learned something about the Chilean coup so I saw the show between '73 and '76 because it was before Apolo came over. I was approached by someone called Margaret Stanton, who was a wonderful woman who was in the Communist party, and she was organising a march in Birmingham to highlight what was going on in Chile. By that time some Chilean refugees had arrived in Birmingham, including Mauricio who used to perform at our club. As I say, Margaret Stanton was organising this thing under the banner of Chile Solidarity Campaign. She asked, would Banner do a street theatre show at this demonstration? Dave and Chris were already working on something else, I can't remember what it was, so I agreed to take on the responsibility of doing this street theatre show about the situation in Chile. Because of taking on that responsibility, I got much more deeply involved in what had happened in Chile. Obviously I had to do a lot more research, I found out all that was going on there, and I was horrified of course by all the terrible things that were going on. I already knew a bit about it but I learnt an awful lot more and I got then much more deeply involved with Chile Solidarity in Birmingham. Pete Yates and John Wrench agreed to work with me to create that street show. We used some of the original script that Banner had used for Viva Chile; I don't know whether they called it Viva Chile originally, I think I called it Viva Chile. But they agreed to work with me on that. We had a huge demonstration in Birmingham City Centre and we performed the thing in Chamberlain Square. I think Rhoma helped us with some ideas. Charlie was Pinochet and there was a photograph of Charlie as Pinochet. Oh and Dave Rogers agreed to perform in it, he performed in it but he hadn't got time to actually be involved in the writing of it and the research and all of that – that was me and John. It was mainly me doing the research and then John and Pete coming along and us revamping what had been an indoor show to make it a street theatre thing which would be more physical in a way. We had a rope to indicate the balance of power and you were sort of pulling one way to the right and then pulling to the left and pulling to the right and that kind of thing. Obviously we must've had some input

from Rhoma I should imagine as well, through Charlie, for ideas to dramatise it. Because of being so involved with that personally, I got very involved with the whole Chile situation. I started trying to help Chilean families in Birmingham and I set up a linking of Chilean and Birmingham families . After that my uncle stayed friends with one Chilean family for 20 years. You know that chap who did that wonderful poster of Pig Town Fling? Minto, Dave Minto and his wife, I linked them up with a family, and several other Chilean families with Birmingham families, just to try and help and give them support. I got very involved with the Chilean community in Birmingham and that's how it was really that I met Apolo. So later when Apolo arrived in Birmingham it was Mauricio who said, 'Oh somebody's just arrived in Birmingham, can you find him somewhere to live?' That was the other thing I was doing, I was trying to help people to get accommodation. That's how I met Apolo, and he came to lodge with some friends of mine not far away. So that's how we met.

Q: So Apolo, what are your memories?

AS: Mauricio was really the link for our eventual deep involvement but also he was very good at making political connection. He had seen the other politics of the Grey Cock Folk Club and, like Joan was saying, he would perform there on his own. He had seen a Banner show prior to anyone. I think he was the true kind of pioneer for the Chilean community to make the links. Everyone else followed really. The one person over anyone else I give credit to at that time is Mauricio. He had time and energy so, when a new family arrived in exile with three young members, the Aburto brothers, he realised there would be resources enough to set up the folk group. So it was again Mauricio who drove it. On our first performance when we launched ourselves, people couldn't believe it. Suddenly there were Chileans singing there with different instruments never seen before, pan pipes, a charango and drums and so forth, and then from there we were just a big hit because everyone wanted to book the group. We wanted just to launch ourselves as an avenue to promote our resistance and our work for our comrades back in Chile. So Venceremos was the connection then and at the same time he made the connection with Joan for what was to be the Viva Chile show.

JS: We had the third show of Viva Chile.

AS: Ya, so that's the later one. So the Chilean group became active and would go anywhere in the Midlands and even Sheffield; I remember we went to Sheffield on one occasion? We just did it for the expense of the petrol, we didn't charge anything. We went to church events, international organisations, trade unions, labour parties. We did a lot of joint events, we performed at the Star club. So we never stopped really as a band in the early years. That was a really great avenue because when you cannot be very eloquent in terms of communicating with a language that wasn't ours, wasn't Spanish, then music and that kind of thing just makes a huge impact. But we were always trying to see what other forms of political action we could get into. So when Joan came forward with that suggestion, and having seen some of the Banner performances, we saw the potential for us yet again to get the message in a different way.

JS: So we did a third Chile show. There was the original one that was done after Joan Jara's interview time, really early on, not long after the coup itself. Then there was the street theatre one, which was certainly before '76; it was when Mauricio was around, because I remember him being there with us, but Apolo wasn't there. Apolo came in '76 and it was before Apolo came. Then after Apolo was with us, the third, probably about '77 or '78.

AS: What?

JS: Our show.

AS: Probably it was '78 because in '77 we launched Venceremos.

JS: So probably around '78 we did a third show, and again it was sort of based on the first two. I've still got the script of that. We did the third show, and in that one we used the Chileans: we used 'Polo, we used Sadi, who else did we use?

[...]

I just remembered, in those early times when Banner was evolving and Rhoma was working on us as a drama group to get us to be able to express ourselves or express what needed to be expressed, we were also as a group attending political education classes. We were going

to George Thompson, around to George Thompson's house and having a lot of political discussions as well. I'd forgotten about that. It was a very intensive experience really in that early formation of Banner. Of course it wasn't called Banner at first, and it was because of the scene of those wonderful images of the marches with all the banners that that name was suddenly alighted on, because it was such an impressive visual thing.

Q: When you were part of the resident group at the Grey Cock, rehearsals were at your house?

JS: Yes.

Q: And Rhoma attended as well – in what capacity?

JS: It's just her friendship with Charles Parker I think, plus I think she'd started doing a little bit of singing herself and she came into the group a little bit as a singer, not very much. Her main input was in the drama sphere. I think Bob Etheridge's partner as well, she used to come sometimes. She was a sweet little shy woman, Kathy. She used to sometimes come to our group too, but not on a regular basis. It was mainly me, Bob Etheridge and Charles who were the sort of core of the group.

Q: With the Chile show, the first emanation was a Banner production?

JS: Inspired by Joan Jara, the interview with Joan Jara. I was away at that time, I didn't get involved in that one. But, as I say, when I saw it and I learnt a bit more about it, I wanted to know more. Then it was Margaret Stanton asking me to do the street theatre one that got me really involved in the whole Chile issue.

Q: So the first emanation was not street theatre?

JS: No, the street theatre show was me taking the responsibility for it and John and Pete working with me and Charles performing in it. It was me, Pete and John who got our heads together but obviously we must've had help and advice.

Q: Did you involve Chilean performers in that one?

JS: Not at that stage. Dave came into the final performance, Charles and the three of us, I think that was it.

AS: That would be prior to '76, maybe just after '76 we appeared in the scene after that year. Before that, nothing apart from Mauricio doing his solo thing. Before that, the Chilean community here had not shown any input of any kind. It was that drive which happened to be Mauricio primarily and the arrival of this group of brothers who happened to be musicians – natural musicians, not trained musicians.

[...]

So it's a totally different approach, and that was the reason that the group never eventually had any projection because there wasn't a true trained musician to take it the next stage up. I think that eventually faltered really, Venceremos, but it was really crucial during the early years.

JS: As a political voice, yes it was.

Q: What kind of reception did you get as Venceremos?

AS: Well as Venceremos we had a massive impact. Nothing like that had ever hit the Midlands, nothing like that. The only thing that people had come close to it was the professional Chilean political bands like Inti-Illimani and Quilapayun, who would do worldwide tours in solidarity and performed at the Digbeth Civic Hall. But we were the first local group based here in Birmingham, and that allowed us to reach all of the Midlands. We went everywhere, wherever a group invited us. I think because we had no intention to make a living out of it or anything, we were just playing for nothing. We were all on social security and had no money to move about. Just to give you an example, we had no instrument and I decided to help by buying a guitar using an old-fashioned thing prior to this online purchasing, which was a catalogue. There was one of our Chilean members of the community who was a catalogue company representative. In the catalogue you go there

and select the item that you want to buy, and I paid over a weekly basis like a pound or 50 pence. One of the guitars that I bought with my own little bit of money I paid off that way – I think it took about 50 weeks. The buggers lost them because they went to perform years later I think somewhere in the north, and they decided to leave all the instruments inside the car, so somebody broke in and took away all the instruments. I never bloody touched that guitar because I never learned to play the guitar. Nobody there in the group had that kind of training to teach other people. So you were a natural musician, like happened to these three brothers, and Mauricio who had been learning for a long time.

JS: In that third Chile show, which we were just saying must've been probably '78 because it was a little while after you arrived that we did that – Apolo was in it, I was in it, I wrote it. I did that one virtually on my own.

AS: Ya, you did all the script. Also Renate directed.

JS: Renate directed it, that's right. Renate directed it, Richard was in it, the three brothers were in it.

AS: All the Venceremos group and in addition were people like Adrian, who was a social worker.

JS: Adrian and Bill Gurney.

AS: And I think we had other friends of Bill Gurney, but I don't recall their names. But they were people who were very transitive really in the group.

JS: But Bill Gurney, Apolo was lodging with Bill Gurney, so he lived not far from where I lived. Bill Gurney taught drama in his school so he had some ideas as well for that. Didn't he do a show in his school about Chile afterwards?

AS: Yes he wrote a play of the life of Joan Jara's husband, Victor Jara. They wanted to mention Victor Jara because he's a very important political icon for us. Victor Jara was a

musician, a theatre director, composer, and very influential on all the political Chilean culture of the time and ever since because his ultimate fate at the hands of fascism was torture and execution. He had become an icon for us. He was married to Joan Jara, a British subject, and her profession was a modern ballet dancer; she married Victor in Chile. Tragically, the day after the coup she became a widow with two little kids in Santiago, and eventually had to come back to Britain with the kids just to ensure their safety. So Victor Jara is important to be mentioned in that context. So Bill Gurney went on to write a show about Victor's life to be performed in secondary school.

JS: That's something really again that was typical of what was going on with Banner, that there were these constant offshoots, like the fact that I then took the responsibility for that show. Then that involved all those Chileans and then because Bill was involved in this as well because of him knowing us, and his drama experience, then he goes on and writes a show for kids in his school. There was that kind of rolling thing going on with Banner all the time, there were little groups trying to do similar things. It was a very creative time really.

Q: Even now there's a Victor Jara festival in Wales set up by Latin American activists.

AS: No, primarily by people in Machynlleth who are British people and very much influenced by the Chilean refugees and also by the life of Victor Jara. Tony Corden and Keith Jackson, two friends of ours, they came together by chance because they came from England to live in the little Welsh town, and they realised they had this in common, and the Victor Jara festival took off from there. Obviously, they needed the support of the old faces of exile, including myself and others, to join in and help to develop it.

JS: Keith Jackson, when he lived in Sheffield, he was supporting the Chilean community just after the coup. As I was involved in Birmingham, he was involved in supporting families and connecting with the Chilean community in Sheffield. So he'd got that interest, a particular interest in Chile.

Q: I understand that July 2017 is the next festival Mogs Russell and Tim Hollins are going to perform a little show, another offshoot to their work with Banner theatre. There'll be four of them. I find those connections amazing.

AS: The fact that Tim and Mogs play such an important role in developing all the workshops and running them and organising them is again another contribution to the Victor Jara festival.

JS: Of course Tim and Mogs, they did the Irish show with Jan and Spud, and that was another offshoot; Telling Tales.

Q: Could you talk more about Victor Jara and his role in the new song movement? My understanding is that the influence of that political approach to culture went way beyond Chile and affected the continent.

AS: I'm not an expert in cultural matters, but interested in music and singing, therefore I have organised several Latin American events where I live. The person who's given all the credit is Violeta Parra. Violeta Parra in fact this year was the 1st centenary of her birth. She died long before Allende came to power; she tragically committed suicide. Violeta Parra was a unique woman because she was a total working class person from a peasantry background who lacked formal education, but she self taught, and ended up all over the world. She even performed at the Louvre Museum in the '60s or '50s; where she had an exhibition of her patchworks. She was an artist in the making of massive patchworks but she was a wonderful composer and singer. When she returned to Chile in the late '50s she set up the so called Peñas. A Peña is like a folk club in Spanish, and this was where all of the young aspiring musicians came around, and one of them was Victor Jara. Victor Jara was influenced by Violeta and they realised that their political interests with this new way of communicating important political messages, social messages, was there, and then they developed that. They used traditional instruments some of them indigenous instruments plus obviously the traditional Spanish guitars and so forth, and they developed a totally different approach to it. Violeta herself had been politically aware; she had been a member of the Communist Party. A lot of her songs were international denunciation of dictatorships and violation of

human rights all over the world. She was very much a politicised folk artist and therefore all her messages transpired to the younger generation. Victor became emblematic because he wrote plays, directed plays. He came to Stratford-upon-Avon actually when he was part of a cultural exchange between Chile and Britain. In the late '60s I believe he was in Stratford-upon-Avon for the Shakespeare festival. He was the first director of Quilapayun, which is a Chilean emblematic musical group, but then he launched himself and that's when he actually reached his pinnacle in a way. His songbook is massive and the messages to me are equivalent to Garcia Lorca. He was a poet really, and that's another horrific crime committed by fascism. They murdered Garcia Lorca, they also murdered our, not just political singer, but real poet, a man of incredible ability for putting across messages and also being able to influence so many lives. I remember he also gave credit to people like Pete Seeger. He translated Pete Seeger's political songs into Spanish and which were also performed by him during that period in Chile. So I say, Victor Jara is a very important icon, very important and you can see everywhere his material. You just go on the internet and you find all that. There is a Victor Jara centre foundation set up by Joan in Santiago and the family, but also there are Victor Jara festivals in Chile as well. It's an ongoing way of retaining our political and cultural heritage and to further develop it.

JS: It's interesting actually, as well as the singing and playing, that he was also dramatising things as well. Banner came to that, starting with the singing and then doing the dramatising; there's those strands there. But he was using, as were the Grey Cock Folk Club, following the example Ewan MacColl, trying to use the old traditional styles of folk singing and folk music to express a modern reality, to say something about what was the here and now for them then. It's the same idea really – Victor and Violeta Parra were doing the same. They wanted to reject the States and the Pop culture and go back to the style of singing from the people before, the more traditional form of music making and singing but with topical political messages. It's a parallel thing really to what Ewan MacColl was doing. Of course Ewan MacColl had an enormous impact on Charles Parker; obviously Charles Parker worked with him making the radio ballads. Charles Parker was then singing from the same hymn sheet with the Grey Cock, and the Grey Cock ethos so heavily influenced early Banner.

Q: Why was it important to go back to older forms of musical expression?

AS: I think it was part and parcel of all the political changes that were happening in Chile. There had been a number of attempts before Allende came into power to shake up the whole of our society, a society that was built on inequality and extreme exploitation and so forth. Accompanying that it is the commercial consciousness that we see from countries like Britain every single second of our life coming from television, internet, you name it. In the '60s, I was one of the ones who were very keen to be open to The Beatles and the Stones and all of that. That was the kind of culture we had – we never were exposed to our traditional culture because that wouldn't sell well for the people after money. So we had all these images and suddenly we're there paraphrasing English lyrics that we could not understand. As a youngster we went partying, it was all foreign music, rock and roll and you name it, until this period, just prior to Allende's victory late '60 and '70s, arriving with this incredible range. This is such an important achievement because people think, oh it cannot be done. Well, in three years of Popular Unity, which is what it lasted before the Fascism destroyed it, the youngsters where I come from wanted to play traditional music. It was a proliferation of groups similar to Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani and they would want to wear "ponchos" in bloody 30 degrees heat!. But these young progressive people who took up the new Chilean song movement wanted to give themselves a new image, and if you see the early images of Quilapayun they're quite impressive, big bearded men with big fantastic ponchos and these instruments. That was unheard of because poncho, guitars, pan pipes in a racist society like that of Chile, it was something only for the "Indians", or indigenous to do where they live isolated. But suddenly all of that had been rescued and given a very professional kind of music because members of the big bands like Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani were educated professional musicians. They were not just like us here in Birmingham, a few amateur people trying to sing together, they were people trained at university. So the quality of their compositions was massive and everyone wanted to become a copycat of the Chilean movement and forgot about becoming rockers or anything, and that only in three years. Obviously, the radio stations broadcasted a lot of this popular music but it was done with a good modernist slant. For the youngsters it was cool to be there. You had people who had never touched an instrument trying to learn the panpipes.

JS: Of course in the '70s in Britain there was a lot more folk music and lots of people wanting to...

AS: It was the political drive, there was a political drive to do it. It wasn't let's go back and forget about the world, this is about how you can change society. The message and the music had a huge influence.

JS: There is quite a parallel really isn't there, because in the '70s there was a lot more folk music in Britain and it was a lot more political. It wasn't just coming from Ewan MacColl, there were other people – Dick Gaughan and Sam what's his name from the south. There was a lot more use of folk music for political messages.

AS: You'd see groups like Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani in Chile in the '70s, performing at marches and demos where there would be a million people there. That's what you're talking about. You're not talking about little clubs. They went through the clubs because Violeta Parra had the Peñas, as I mentioned earlier on. But by the time Popular Unity arrived to power you had real entertainment with big bands for half a million, a million people. You can imagine the effect and impact.

JS: I suppose you know in Britain they never really had a left wing government to sort of encourage this kind of thing.

Q: That was a huge threat to Pinochet.

AS: Well to the right wing yes, the Tory or Conservative party of Chile. The upper class, as you know, had suddenly been shocked as we nationalised every possible natural resource. We took over the banking and financial service industry and nationalised it too, we changed the university teaching curriculum and made them tuition free for the workers' children. There's another thing I wanted to mention. As we did that show Viva Chile we had people coming to see that. There was a group of people that were based at Birmingham University and one of them a lecturer at the Contemporary Arts in Birmingham University. He was also

influenced by it. You know the Rambert Ballet? He created a political ballet show along similar lines like the Viva Chile ballet, isn't it?

JS: No, Ghosts or something.

AS: There was a ghost one as well but there is something about...

JS: Christopher Bruce was a director at Rambert Ballet who was very political and he did a fantastic ballet about Garcia Lorca and he did a ballet about the situation in Chile as well.

AS: Anyway, that inspired Andy.

JS: Who ran a dance society at Birmingham University.

AS: He was a lecturer at the university.

JS: Ya.

AS: Anyway, the thing with that, Andy said, I can do a local version of that and I need a band for it. So "Venceremos" at that time, said bingo! For us anything to do with spreading the word, it was on. So we dedicated quite an involvement there because suddenly you had to perform for people dancing to live music, so Venceremos did that and we had a show called "The Tears of My Mother".

JS: Ya, My Mother's Tears.

AS: My Mother's Tears. I think it was based on a play, on a Greek play that had made an impact on Andy.

JS: It was a fantastic dance society because he used to get dancers from all over the world to perform. You'd have a Chinese dancer one month, you'd have an Indian dancer another

month. It was really a very special dance society. Then he himself choreographed this piece on Chile, on the coup really.

AS: Well he based it on ?, a Greek tragedy ?. I think if I remember correctly it was on the coup that took place in Greece in the '60s where its nature was very relevant to the Chilean situation. He adapted it to Chile.

JS: It was very powerful.

AS: So that was another spin off of that kind of thing. Can we have a little break?

Q: Sure.

AS: I just wanted to mention that with Venceremos we went around doing a number of solidarity concerts. On a number of occasions we had a contribution by people who play with Banner, a member of Pig Town Fling particularly, they supported our work, and events here in the area. I wanted to mention that in particular, the role of people like John Wrench and Pete Yates. We were yet again able to get a great number of people along and make more contacts in different contexts. The other thing I wanted to say was that before arriving in exile I'd never seen anything like the Banner type of plays. The only thing that I saw in Chile was traditional political theatre without music or without imagery, so it was quite a learning curve for me to appreciate that and in fact appreciate the message in such a different kind of mixed media, which was very much to my liking and very invigorating, very much helping to pick up even when the language was an impediment. The visuals and that kind of thing allow you to see it in context. So my first early show, although I couldn't follow all the exchanges, I was still able to grasp the primary message or the core message of the production. So in that respect I wanted to say that as a political refugee I was happy to learn that a group of people have empathy for people like us who have been born 15,000 miles away. It's not just satisfying but also reassuring that we humans are all alike, that we react and we've got this trait in us, the progressive one, the humanitarian one, which come before the self interest one. That does something which reassures me over the years. I appreciate so many people, like my wife, who are prepared to make that commitment to

help people like us. That lesson is perpetuating now in the new generation and we see that. Recently I was at an international conference in Aberystwyth and they were exhibiting and talking about tapestries, tapestries made primarily by women, but apparently some men make contribution in this area. The tapestries made in Chile under the Junta became famous.

JS: Chilean patchworks really.

AS: They are called “arpilleras” and they are patchworks, very much the thing we mentioned about Violeta Parra earlier on. Basically using a bit of material and cuttings and all the rest, they were telling stories of repression and so forth. That was one of the things that arrived from Chile, more or less clandestine, and we here in Birmingham were able to distribute them to people who wanted to buy them or put them on display in galleries and so forth. But in Aberystwyth, it was really nice and very touching because one other participant at the exhibition was the daughter of a Chilean refugee couple who arrived in exile here in Birmingham.

JS: At the same time as you.

AS: That was mid '70s. This young kid, she was three when she arrived, she was now a mature woman, a teacher at a secondary school, and she was working with tapestries to bring about new messages on pressing matters. So the cycle continues and I don't think it'll ever stop. People will just learn from each other. You carry that baggage of previous experiences over to the next generation.

JS: And like our daughter, Laura, now setting up this charity to help refugee women who are on their own having babies. She spends a lot of her time doing that.

Q: What did you bring to Banner? What did they learn from you?

AS: Well I don't think they learned enough, I suppose. I don't know, obviously one member of Banner, Joan, learned a lot of things from me.

JS: I can remember the first time I saw him singing in this new group that had formed, Venceremos. I remember they were standing up there so solemn and Apolo was singing so passionately I thought, oh god, he's a bit too much for me.

AS: That was the nature of Venceremos. We were not singing lovely folk songs, we were singing political songs with a lot of feeling because they were songs of struggle and resistance. Still occasionally we get one or two people from that group together and I sing very much emotionally, because they're hymns really, they're very powerful hymns. But I don't know what I can pass on to Banner, probably I would hope the satisfaction that they met people from other cultures who were coming here not just as transient people and not prepared to join in. The political exiles have always joined in with the British political life and have been in all the different campaigns in one form or another, in the CND marches and the anti-war marches. That has been our role. We have basically accommodated ourselves and become part of the massive solidarity political movement which still exists in Britain.

JS: And obviously you taught us an awful lot about Chile. For example, it was only because of knowing a little bit about Chile and then getting involved with writing that show that I got so deeply involved in what happened in Chile. Then through doing that show that passes the message on to a lot of other people. So it snowballs. People, through the Chilean refugees, learnt about that situation in Chile, which is a very important political message for everybody .

Q: I'd also say... the importance of international solidarity and understanding the role of imperialism and being able to develop a critique.

AS: Once I settled here in Britain I was invited by the trade union movement a number of times and then by churches and amnesty groups to give talks, and I do something similar in North Wales. I don't like talking about myself but I like talking about the subject, the issues, why we had a Popular Unity movement and what it meant for Latin America, and how Venezuela is going through exactly the same thing that happened to us. There is an ongoing coup in Venezuela, it had been unleashed and the dark hands of the CIA and all that lot are

behind it. They used people tragically in large numbers. It happened to us, we had a huge number of people being used and the media [used] the terrorist attacks to create chaos. Then they said, well we have to bring law and order. Then they invite the heavies and the heavies bring along torture, concentration camps, disappearances, loss of civil rights. Under Pinochet there were no elections, all the election registers were destroyed. So yes I always see myself as a witness, not a passive witness but an active one. My role is to tell about my experience. A few years ago we set up the Chile Forty Year Campaign to remind people that 40 years ago the coup had taken place, and now here in Britain the right are putting into practice what it was imposed in my country. They made changes over there, using the military, a shock doctrine, and in a very short time social and economic liberties were taken away. Following the privatisation of our life, the breaking up of communities, now there is no solidarity, isolating people from each other, and making the rich extremely rich. So that's what happened here over a large number of years, in Chile it was done in a very short period and very dramatically. So today's Chile is the product of the neoliberal gurus, it's a "wonderful" example of what they can give to the world – go and see Chile. Tragically, there's a number of idiots who are still thinking they can buy into that little experience, not appreciating that in order to deliver that you have to have what I just said – executions, disappearances, loss of rights, undermining of the Country's economic sovereignty and then when you are in that situation, if you are a true, honourable, decent person you wouldn't surely want to live in that kind of society.

Q: Were those things explored in the final iteration of Viva Chile?

JS: I think they were.

AS: Ya, the disappearances was a part of that.

JS: The poverty after Pinochet, the terrible poverty that ensued.

Q: What was your motivation for doing it, and in what way did it differ from the street theatre piece?

JS: Well the street theatre piece was closer to the event I suppose, so it was telling the public what had happened and telling the public that Britain had been involved and had helped this thing to happen, and pointing out ways to protest about that. The third show did go into more depth, bringing in the wider political issues.

AS: I think we had somebody who related things at the same time.

JS: I'll have to get it out.

AS: ...and all the attacks in economic terms by the dictatorship as well. You had the comparison, wasn't it?

JS: Yes because it was later and Pinochet's regime had been established for a while and all the negative impact of that was in the show.

Q: Did you perform in that, Apolo?

AS: Ya, with the rest of Chileans compañeros. Because of our lack of verbal ability in the English language, we were just the bodies there, we were not having an important role.

JS: Well they were musicians.

AS: We were playing music and making up the numbers in the background. I think I had about two phrases in the show, and I struggled most of the time to learn them. It was something we'd never been exposed to, but it was learning in every respect. I think it did exactly what it said on the tin!

JS: [There] was [another] Chilean friend, he had plenty to say because his English was really good.

AS: I was also going to recount, although I wasn't there at the street show, what happened to poor Charlie Parker.

JS: Ya because he fell off.

AS: He was playing Pinochet.

JS: He was Pinochet, and towards the end of the show he fell off the stand. We were quite worried about him but we thought, well this is symbolic, Pinochet is going to fall.

AS: I think he hurt his leg. He wasn't particularly young then, must've been in his 60s. In the street theatre.

Q: Banner still performs that show in '78?

JS: No, the street theatre was a one-off for this big demonstration, Chile solidarity demonstration.

Q: So it was only performed the once?

JS: I think so. But then when we developed this later show, we performed that a few times. I can't remember where but I remember we performed it for the club in that place near the repertory theatre.

AS: We performed in a big pub.

JS: In a big pub we had near the repertory theatre for a while. We used to meet there in the club and I remember performing there. But we performed it other places. After I met Apolo we did a lot of work with the Chile Human Rights Committee in Birmingham with Harry, the person we've just been to visit yesterday; he was the chairman. We used to be going all over the place giving talks and things. When you say what did the Chileans give, they gave the knowledge and the motivation for people like me and Harry to go all over the place to Unions and meetings of Amnesty. We were constantly giving talks about what happened in

Chile and what was happening now. We became kind of experts in a way at the time and spent a lot of time on it.

Q: One of the things that I'm aware of as a member of Banner Theatre at the time is that the Chileans, either in the form of just supporting an event through food and that, but also Venceremos performing jointly at events that Banner would organise in support of other causes. I thought that was a really important contribution.

AS: You'll have to double check that but I do remember a particular performance with Banner as a backup during some of the shows, Sadi himself in particular. Venceremos basically fell apart, as I was saying to you, and didn't last more than two years, basically because they did not have a musical vision of what they could do with music. So Sadi ? he played quite a few times on the May Day in Digbeth Civic Hall. So we went on doing all those kind of things because we had on the whole an internationalist approach to life. I personally don't see myself as a Chilean really. Culturally more like a Latin American.

JS: We did loads of things with Iraqis didn't we. We were particularly involved with the Iraqis, weren't we.

AS: We were with the Iraqis when it wasn't fashionable, when Saddam Hussein was a friend of Britain and a friend to America. We were the ones to give solidarity to the first handful of persecuted people to arrive here. But we did the same solidarity campaigns with the Turks who were at war with the Kurds, plus all of the work for Nicaragua until eventually the Sandinistas came to power. So we have been involved in all that kind of thing until we left Birmingham but now living in North Wales we carry on with our own campaign.

Q: Joan, can you tell us about your involvement in Banner shows? You mentioned the women's show.

JS: I wasn't involved in any of the writing of that. I was helping getting props and stuff for it, I remember, at one stage. I wasn't in it to begin with but there was a kind of, there were lots of little scenes in it and the little scenes were held together by a kind of storyteller

character. Somebody else was doing that to begin with, I think she was called Lynne. For some reason she dropped out and then I became this sort of introductory person.

Q: Are we talking about the first women's show called Womankind?

JS: I think that was it, ya. I remember Chris was supposed to be the woman who just got married and all that. She was miming putting nappies on the line and I remember she used to put these nappies on the line and then she used to go like this. I thought, what's she doing? I realised, because I never had a machine to wash my nappies, that they'd scrunch up in her machine and she had to straighten them out. Silly little details like that. Then Joy and Pete had this rape scene in it, oh my god. But anyway, it was kind of symbolic. It was all hung together with this person who I played eventually to do that. But it wasn't, obviously because I wasn't involved in the writing of it, it wasn't as deep an involvement with that. Then the other show that I felt really pleased to be part of was the Saltley Gate. I was involved with that, and I think I had to do different bits in it. I think I took on different personae, as I can remember, in that show.

Q: Why were you pleased to be involved in it?

JS: I think I'd got quite involved with the miners' strike and everything at the time, so I was really pleased to be doing that. I remember that when we showed it the first time there was such a reaction. It was a wonderful feeling that the audience was so excited by the show, solidarity with the miners. I can remember at that time that we'd do shows and then people would say things like, 'Oh we're only speaking to the converted; what's the point, we're only speaking to the converted.' I used to think at the time, 'That's not a sensible way to think about it, because even the converted can get converted in a different direction.' There was always a massive amount of information in the shows. They were learning opportunities for loads of people who had sympathy with the theme but didn't actually know that much detail. Banner provided an enormous amount of detail for people to understand the issues better. So even if the audience was already sympathetic, it was a consolidation for them of their attitudes and feelings and, as I say, a learning process for them. Things like the motor trade show, I learnt a lot from going to see that. I wasn't in that but I learnt a lot from it. All

of that was very important. As we know in hindsight, your supporters drift off in other directions. Unless you have something to keep the message alive, they're going to forget the message and the young people aren't going to learn the message. That's the other thing, along with the audience of people who perhaps already support you, there'll be young people for whom it's all totally new. So I don't think that attitude of, 'Oh it's no good because it's speaking to the converted,' is helpful at all really.

Q: What other shows were you involved in?

JS: I think this Chile show must've come after that, after the Saltley Gate one. It was after, so I got very heavily involved with the whole business of Chile. Then of course it was after we did the show that we had the girls, wasn't it? We got married after that. We got married in '80 and Laura was born in '81. Well once we had Laura, that was the end of it and there was no chance of me being in Banner then because obviously you've got to have a heavy commitment to be in it and I was completely out of it then because of the girls, out of that side of things. I was still doing political stuff but not getting involved in shows, because you have to be at certain places at certain times.

Q: Were you involved in The Great Divide?

JS: No. I remember seeing it and being very impressed by it. I always came to the shows but I knew I couldn't commit to them with two babies very close in age.

Q: What was it like being in Banner?

JS: Oh it was great. It was like a family. It did have a very strong family feel. Some people liked each other better than others and all the rest of it, as in families, but it had a very strong family feeling in those early years. It was very much a group thing; it was very, very much a group thing. You know how in drama groups people talk about characters having strops if they're not given the best position and all of that kind of thing. There was never any of that. Nobody made a fuss if they didn't get the part that they wanted or anything like that. It was very much you're doing it for a reason, basically for a political reason. You get on

with the job, you accept the job you've been allocated and you just get on with it. There was none of that histrionics that's connected with drama groups, there was none of that. It was very much a really working together kind of atmosphere.

Q: What were people like to work with, especially the people we can't interview because they're not around anymore? What was Renate like?

JS: Well Renate was lovely, I'm terribly fond of Renate. I said I was early on in the folk club with Charles Parker and Bob Etheridge, but then I was for a long time in a group with Renate, John Wrench and Richard, just the four of us. We were together as a group for a very long time and we loved it, it was just lovely. We did quite a few of our evenings on a political theme and did a bit of research into things. Not always, but quite often we did that. We had a lovely time together, we got on really well together as a foursome. It was great fun and we were really cheesed off when I think some word had come on high that the groups had all got to be split up and rejigged, because we had such a good time together.

Q: How long were you together as a group?

JS: Years. I can't be accurate about it but I would say it must've been at least two years, perhaps even longer. But then of course we became very good friends and went on holiday together and things like that as well. It was lovely. Renate was very good, when she was directing the Chile show she was very good.

Q: In what way?

JS: Well in what way was Renate very good when she was directing the Chile show? She was sort of firm with us but thoughtful and imaginative. Renate was a big loss really when she died so young. What was the original question?

Q: About what it was like being with Banner.

JS: It was a huge pleasure really being a part of the group. I suppose that's why I carry on going to Youlgreave and things like that, because it's just that little remnant of that sort of family feeling. It was very strong then, it was a very strong commitment really that we had.

Q: What did you learn from your time in Banner?

JS: Well as I say, the shows actually educated me. Each show required a lot of research, so I was getting a political education myself through being involved in it as well as everything else. And obviously that nice sense of that group solidarity, trying to do things together. And quite a bit of fun. I think on the whole, I think partly because of Charlie, I remember the very first time I went to the Grey Cock, sitting there and having the giggles because I thought, god, this is like being in church. Everyone's taking themselves so seriously here, and I just had a fit of the giggles. Still I thought I'd give it another go, and then I got into it. But there was that element I think in Banner and the Grey Cock, of people taking themselves too seriously. At the same time, a lot of the issues that we were dealing with were serious and needed a serious approach. But I think there was an ethos of... it worked in a way because it made us all so well behaved, keeping together and not making a fuss if you had to do something you didn't really want to do. We were quite sort of disciplined in a sense. That's why I say I used to enjoy having Bill Shreeve, because he just used to keep entertaining me all the time and making me laugh when I shouldn't have done. It was quite funny. I think there was a general sort of affection between people as well. I suppose those early workshops and everything, people were quite physical with each other at a time when perhaps it wasn't as common as it is now. People do quite a lot of hugging and kissing now; it's become much more normal. But I think in those early days it wasn't very British really, and we were doing quite a lot of hugging and kissing and everything. I was doing a lot of it anyway, or people were doing it a lot to me. But it was a nice warm family feeling. When I was brought up, my own family was very physical, so I liked that. I was always very physical with my mom and my brothers, so that was a nice aspect of it.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

AS: Not really, not in my case.

JS: What I will try and do is look up those scripts.

Q: And a photo as well.

AS: A photo of the street show I think is still in the house.

[ END ]