

SING TO LIVE

**Júlia Colom brings forgotten songs
of Mallorca back through the people
that sang them**

By Judy Cantor-Navas



“I’ve been able to learn songs from the people who have actually lived them. Just think of the lives that those songs have!”

Júlia Colom

“THIS IS A SONG ABOUT OLIVE trees,” Júlia Colom announces into the microphone. She’s midway through her set at the Primavera Sound Festival, the massive showcase for international rock and rap stars and hometown discoveries that has come to signify the start of summer in Barcelona.

Colom starts to sing “Olivera,” a spare acoustic guitar ballad inspired by an ancient grove of twisted witnesses to history near her family house in Mallorca. The green and grey expanse of land is a testament to the olive’s economic and social role on the island since at least the 16th century, a time before tourism was its main industry. As she remembers in the lyrics of the song, Colom started going there as a little girl to sit in the quiet and sing to the trees.

At 25 years old, Colom has already been performing professionally for

about a decade. She is particularly in demand in Spain’s Balearic Islands and at European traditional music festivals for her mastery of “Canto de La Sibila” (“The Song of the Sybil,”) a dramatic medieval lyric poem prophesizing the end of the world that is sung in Mallorca and other Mediterranean locales on Christmas Eve. Colom says that “La Sibila” has become “kind of cool” since it was awarded UNESCO world patrimony status in 2013. She learned the challenging 14-minute vocal piece when she was still in kindergarten.

In April, Colom released her first album, *Miramar*, which blends 20th-century rural Mallorcan work songs with cosmopolitan electro pop and elements of art rock.

As a new artist at Primavera Sound, Colom was slotted at the ungodly festival hour of 5 p.m., when only eager early birds milled around, browsing T-shirt stalls as they sipped

their first beers.

She stood at the center of one of the festival stages and began to sing an a cappella love song in her native Mallorquí (a regional dialect of Catalan that many locals consider their own language), her voice reverberating in rolling waves that felt like a call to prayer. People responded as if it was, suddenly streaming in to gather at the front of the stage.

Colom and the three musicians in her band, on guitar, drums, and keyboard, looked small on the spot where Bad Religion and Pusha T would perform later in the festival. But projected on the stories-tall screens that flanked the stage, a giant Colom transformed from hesitant newcomer into mythic heroine. Wearing a pleated white mini-skirt and tight stretch lace top, her hair was plaited, her eyebrows thick and straight. She clapped her hands,

swished her hips, and circled her arms in some semaphoric language of her own. Colom was like a riot grrrl version of the typical Mediterranean folk dancer on a postcard, clad in flounced embroidered cotton, her skirt shortened for action, rocking sandals with heels.

Miramar includes three traditional songs — including one that talks about picking figs and another about threshing wheat — as well as seven tracks written by Colom, including “Olivera.” Co-produced with her guitarist and partner Martin Leiton, the record tells a coming-of-age story — one about leaving home and returning to her roots.

Rediscovering Roots

Colom grew up in Valldemossa, a painstakingly preserved medieval village on a hill near the Balearic Sea that is famous as the place where

Frédéric Chopin, the writer George Sand, and her children stayed in Mallorca after the composer was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Today, hikers and buses full of visitors, some with Sand’s memoir *A Winter in Mallorca* in hand, arrive daily to experience the place’s beauty for themselves.

Not far away, on the stone patio of Colom’s family’s home, a refuge filled with flowers and fruit trees, her mother, Maria Antònia, lays out bowls of fresh olives and almonds, picked from nearby fields.

“My family is very roots,” Colom observes. “My mother is an art historian and my father is a social worker. But when my father gets off work he goes to the mountain. He makes honey and sausage, he has a vegetable garden, he hunts with a dog.

“My parents came from families that all year long followed certain cycles, certain activities and ways of



Júlia Colom in concert

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doing things,” she says. “They are things that I’ve lived my whole life, and they are things that the music is very tied to.”

Colom learned “La Sibila” from her grandfather. The church traditionally permitted the chant with Gregorian roots to be sung only by boys. Noting her obsession with the text and her talent for singing, Colom’s parents arranged for her to perform it the next Christmas Eve in a rustic chapel in the hills near their home.

“I guess it was my first gig,” she says with a smile. “It was a tiny chapel with maybe four benches. My brother set the tone for me with a plastic flute.”

Colom’s grandfather also taught her *tonades*, the work songs sung in the fields that were once a part of

Mallorca’s everyday agricultural and popular culture. As a boy, he had learned them surreptitiously from a neighbor, putting his ear to a shared wall between their homes to listen to the man singing.

“I’m sure that my grandfather embellished them and made up his own lyrics,” Colom says. “And I sing them my way too.”

Eager to get out into the world, in the way that young adult islanders tend to be, Colom moved to Barcelona in 2015 to start her music school education, majoring in jazz and improvisation. But she kept thinking about those songs, and started to value them in a different way.

“When I started my studies, I wasn’t conscious of the importance of the music I grew up with, the popular music of Mallorca, the oral tradition,”

Colom says over tea in a café near her apartment in Barcelona. “Singing runs deep in the culture of Mallorca. But I didn’t appreciate it.”

Then she had a realization: “I’m at school, and all around me people are learning songs from the internet, without even knowing where they came from. I’ve been able to learn songs from the people who have actually lived them. Just think of the lives that those songs have!”

“I realized that I had to give them more importance,” she says. “And I started to go to villages to seek out people who knew those songs.”

Work Songs

Song for picking almonds

Song for planting rice

Song for bringing water in cans

Song for planting beans
Song for harvesting potatoes
Song for making olive oil...

Biel Cladera, known by his nickname, Collut, is holding a typewritten list of the *tonades* he remembers. Starting at age 7, when his father became ill and could no longer work, he and his brothers and sisters would get up every morning and ride in a donkey-driven cart to fields and orchards belonging to different owners, to work wherever they were needed that day.

Collut is now 85 years old, and he still lives in the house in Sa Pobla where he was born, on a street where the children of a new generation of agricultural workers, who come from West Africa and Morocco, are playing ball. The street is empty; no tour buses

are parked in this tiny working-class town.

Colom has driven there for a late afternoon visit to Collut. He emerges from his doorway with a welcoming smile, his straight back and infectious vitality belying a life spent working in the fields. In a small living room inside, a row of cane chairs sits waiting against one wall, near a small sofa covered by a colorful crocheted blanket that his sister made.

With a flourish, Collut gives Colom a CD on which he sings 21 different *tonades*. He estimates he knows about 60 in all. “It’s important to teach the *tonades* so they’re not forgotten,” he says. He’s been sharing the songs he knows in an after-school program in the town designed to instill pride in the local families’ culture and agricultural roots through music.

Collut’s voice rings out, his hands gesturing, as he sings a song about beans as emotively as if he were reciting Shakespeare.

At one point, he jaunts excitedly to another room and comes back with several farm tools wrapped in cloth, iron hoes and picks with different shaped heads. He starts to demonstrate the various tasks that they can be used for, passing the tools over the tiled floor as if he were tilling the soil or planting seeds.

“The songs were just another tool when they were working the land,” Colom observes.

She asks Collut about the origin of the *tonades*: “From the primitives I suppose,” he says after some seconds of silence. Then he clarifies his theory by pointing out that the songs’ Arabic tones are part of the imprint left by



Valldemossa, Mallorca



PHOTOS BY DAVID NAVAS

Júlia Colom and Biel Cladera



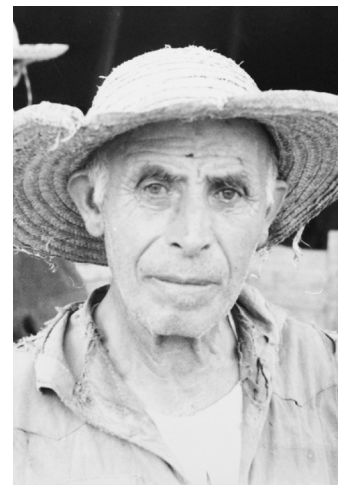
Maria Capó



Francesc Capó Torrens in 1952



Maria Capó in 1952



Miquel Capó Torrens in 1952

ARCHIVAL PHOTOS FROM THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION AT THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL EQUITY.

the Muslim kings who ruled the island from the 9th century until 1129, when Jaime I of Aragon conquered Mallorca.

He doesn't think a lot about the roots of the *tonades*. They had just always been there as Collut grew from child to young man.

"You didn't have to sing well," he says. "You just sang."

Until they didn't. The post-war agricultural mechanization process, which in Mallorca had its greatest impact from 1960 to 1970, changed not only the work in the field, but also the rural musical tradition.

"When the machines came in, they were noisy and competed with the sound of singing," Colom explains. "They also created a situation in which people no longer worked in a group. I think it's a shame that we became disconnected from that form of expression, both artistic and physical.

"Those songs are being forgotten," she adds. "The people that know them are old now and the tradition is dying."

A Visit From Alan Lomax

Maria Capó remembers the July day that Alan Lomax came to hear her sing. It was in 1952, so she must have been 19 years old.

The famed ethnomusicologist, who Capó often refers to as "the American," had with him a tape recorder and a used Leica camera when he came to the family's farm near a fishing village called Soller. The family had 20 cows and fields where they grew wheat and oats.

Capó recalls that Lomax recorded and photographed her, as well as her father, Francesc Capó Torrens, and grandfather Miquel Capó Torrens. The Alan Lomax Digital Archive lists 15 audio entries for Maria Capó, including a song titled "I Like Picking Olives a Lot" and other work songs, traditional folk songs, and tracks with ambient chatter. The photos are there, too.

Lomax came to Mallorca on assignment from the BBC to make field recordings in European countries. His first contact with

Mallorca was in Palma, the island's capital city.

"I was in a folkloric singing group for young people," says Capó. "There was a concert at the Plaza de Toros with different groups like mine."

She remembers it as an exciting day. She took the train from Soller to Palma. Before the show, she and the other girls changed into their costumes, white cotton dresses.

Capó went to a Catholic girls school. She excelled at singing in the church, but it had been hard for her to convince her father to allow her to take music lessons or pursue singing much at all beyond the songs she sang while she picked figs or olives.

"In the old days what was important was the fields," says Capó, who is now 90 years old. She's sitting at a table with Colom, under a lemon tree at a stylish café owned by her granddaughter and her husband, housed in a former olive oil pressing facility in a pastoral enclave called Deiá.

For Lomax, that day at the bullring was less remarkable, maybe even a

source of irritation. He would not have been much impressed by the choreographed spectacle, which was typical of entertainment in those days sponsored by the dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco.

A text on the Association for Cultural Equity website, where the Lomax digital archive can be found, notes that the field recordings and photos from Mallorca and other areas of Spain “bear witness to a time in Spanish cultural history which remains relatively obscure,” revealing “much about the ‘lost decades’ in Spanish history, obliterated in the fear and silence of the Franco regime during the 1940s and ‘50s.”

At a time when the government prohibited the teaching of regional languages like Mallorquí in schools, Franco sought to present a cultural face to the world that was clean and unilaterally Castilian, despite the country’s regional diversity and the poverty and repression that plagued its darkest years. The dictator was keen to take advantage of a fledging

tourism industry that began in Europe in the wake of World War II, and he used folklore — particularly romantic imagery of flamenco and bullfighting — to do so as part of a carefully calculated public relations campaign.

Lomax was not one to take whatever was handed to him and go home, however. In Spain, as he would write in reflections later published in the book *Saga of a Folk Song Hunter*, he sparred with the head of the Spanish Musicological Institute, who, according to Lomax, was a Nazi given refuge by Franco after the war.

Lomax wrote that although he was never detained, he was tailed by the Civil Guard, “who it seems always knew where to find me.” According to Lomax, members of the state police would show up in the most remote and forgotten locations in Spain where he was collecting his work, casting a shadow that effectively scared off musicians he sought to record. An unsealed dossier on Lomax later revealed that the FBI

notified the Spanish authorities that a renowned Leftist was traveling in their country.

Over a six-month period in Mallorca in 1952, Lomax taped the *tonades* sung by farmers and workers in the fields, as well as *gloses* — party songs improvised over a melody — and other traditional forms of popular song. He used the concert at the bullring to make contacts who could lead him to the most authentic musical expressions of Mallorca.

Confirms Capó, “He was looking for people to record.” And after the show, he ventured to Soller. She may be the last survivor of the people who sang for Lomax in Mallorca.

While talking about the experience, Capó breaks into song several times. At one point, she joins Colom, improvising the words to a song about figs.

She stresses that the loss of the music in daily life was not caused only by farm machinery. Tourism, which rose roughly alongside the agricultural technology on the island,

also pulled at Mallorca’s social fabric.

Capó points to olive harvest as an example of tourism’s repercussions: “When they were doing the olive harvest, they would look for girls to pick them. So I always went. The boys would go to the olive fields, because that was where the girls were. When tourism happened, a lot of the boys stopped coming. They went to the port to look for foreign girls.”

For Capó it was a clear sign of the changing times. But there were others. Her two brothers left Spain entirely. As she reasons, “Working in the fields is hard. My father wanted them to have a better life than he had.”

Capó became a seamstress, specializing in creating elaborate embroidered sheets that brides bought for their wedding night. She started her own family.

“People started listening to the radio and they stopped singing,” she laments. The kind of traditional folkloric party music she had sung with her youth group “became

something for tourists.” The *tonades* pretty much disappeared.

“Singing used to be something very personal, not like now,” she sighs, revealing that the *tonades* were part of a past so unconnected that she didn’t sing them for her granddaughter. But recently, she has. “I want people to remember the music of Mallorca.”

The Past Is Present

Colom is adamant that she’s not trying to take over where Lomax left off, recording the memories of the surviving singers who sang the *tonades* in the grain fields and fruit groves of Mallorca. But she can sing them. She confesses that when she started working on her album, she wasn’t sure how to focus it — how to be modern and traditional at the same time.

Miramar, named for a seaside monastery and school looking out to the sea that is another of the singer’s favorite places, succeeds in invoking

the idea of a paradise lost, juxtaposing the forgotten traditional songs with the contemporary musical language of her generation.

That uniting of past and present is perhaps best summed up by “Canta Para Seguir,” the only Spanish-language song on the album, and performed by Colom together with singer-songwriter Pol Batlle:

*Canta para seguir
Canta para vivir.
¿Qué hay después de este mar?
Hay otro Miramar.
La vidente valiente
revela en su mente
Un futuro lugar
para gente corriente.*

*Sing to go on
Sing to live
What is beyond this ocean?
There’s another Miramar.
The brave oracle
reveals in her mind
A future place
for common people. ■*



Júlia Colom