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Set to music: Archbishop Romero's story against backdrop of civil war

by Rhina Guidos by Catholic News Service

Washington — While many along the Eastern seaboard grumbled about the continuous snow this winter, Uruguayan singer-songwriter Luis Alfredo Diaz Britos saw an opportunity instead of a reason to complain.

While snowbound at St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church in Hyattsville, Md., Diaz Britos had nowhere to go and no one to see, since the Washington area is paralyzed anytime it snows.

During one of the heaviest snows of the season, he began putting together a project that had been floating around in his head for a while: a musical about the life of slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Diaz Britos, a popular Latin American Catholic singer-songwriter who now lives in Spain, said the idea came to him when he organized a retreat for musicians in the Washington area, which he visits a couple of times a year. The 20-somethings of Salvadoran descent who attended the retreat had no idea about Romero, a defender of the poor and disenfranchised, who was fatally wounded by a bullet March 24, 1980, as he celebrated Mass.

"It was painful," he told Catholic News Service. "How could they not know of a man who gave his life, not just for people, but for the church?"

The U.S. Census estimates that the Washington area is home to about 133,000 Salvadoran expatriates, and reports from the Pew Hispanic Center say about 240,000 people in the Washington region are of Salvadoran descent. Some Salvadorans nationals arrived during the country's civil war that lasted from roughly 1979 to 1992. Others left because of a lack of jobs at home or to escape rampant crime.

The United States financially backed the Salvadoran government during the war, even when some members of the military participated in massacres and other human rights violations, including the rape and killing of three women religious and a lay missionary, all from the United States, in December 1980.

The funding of the war and an accusation of U.S. interference in a past election created some tension between El Salvador and the U.S. However, the two countries enjoy bilateral relations. President Barack Obama visited El Salvador in 2011 and Mauricio Funes, the president of El Salvador, visited Washington a year earlier. Funes' party, the Faramundo Marti Liberation Front, or FMLN, was part of the rebel guerrilla fighting the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government in 1980s.

The party once again saw victory recently during contested elections earlier this year as former guerilla fighter Salvador Sanchez Ceren won the presidency. He will assume power in June.

The U.S. and El Salvador remain united through trade, through remittances from expats and through U.S.-born children of Salvadorans.

For Diaz Britos, music, his go-to method to transmit what he feels, what he reads and thinks is important, is the vehicle to teach many of them about the country of their ancestors and what took place, the good and the bad.

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"If I can write a simple song, something that will touch the heart, I could transmit the message," he said.

In the past, he composed songs about a group of Jesuit priests also killed in El Salvador during the war. With his recent project, Diaz Britos said he looked at Romero's homilies and some of his texts, and based the songs for the musical on his words.

"They're tremendous," he said. "And I thought, if I could just put some music around the phrases, it would be magnificent."

As the snow fell, he began arranging music, putting notes and words around some of the phrases he circled, the ones that made the most impact and that held the most poignant messages from the Gospel. He put together 12 songs, which include messages of forgiveness, love, the will of God, and giving one's life for others.

"It's not God's will that some have everything while others have nothing," is one of the verses in "God's Will," one of the songs with verses picked from Romero's Sept. 1978 homily.

Diaz Britos told CNS he has started organizing musicians, dancers, and actors to appear in the musical. He hopes to present the musical in Washington next year, particular to those of Salvadoran descent, in time for the 35th anniversary of Romero's death.

He tried out some of the songs with audiences at this year's events in Washington that celebrated Romero's life. Sandra Perez, of Silver Spring, Md., attended some of the events in which Diaz Britos tried out some of the songs.

"He's very simple and spiritual, so it's no surprise to me that he would write about Romero," Perez said. "I can see how he would identify with him."

The musician has written and produced Spanish-language musicals and CDs in the past honoring notable Catholics, including Blessed Teresa of Kolkata, St. Therese of Lisieux and various Catholic martyrs. He said he doesn't like to shy away from what's important, even when it's hard to talk about it.

"I don't want to be one of those singers who doesn't rankle," Diaz Britos said.

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