

Parra then commented on the current Chilean students' protest movement, suggesting that the name "penguins"—as the students were referred to in Chilean newspapers—probably came from the fact that this bird with wings too short for flying has to claw its way along to get where it wants to go. He then invited us to walk along the beach. The students were hardly able to keep up with this 91-year-old anti-poet, who, they noted, had nothing about him that suggested his age, no wrinkles, no stooped back. He declared his secret was to take megadoses of vitamin C. His fisherman's hat, sweater, baggy pants, and lace-up boots were, as he has revealed, all secondhand, even though he has won nearly a million dollars in literary prizes. As Parra explained, his only interest is his writing and the artifacts that he creates, including the white plaster statue in his house of a Greek goddess with his ironic sign that reads: "I'm frigid. I'm only moved by profit-making."

Parra is famous for his dislike of cameras, but he allowed himself to be photographed with several students. For me the visit with the anti-poet was the highlight of our trip. It was a dream come true to share with another generation of Texas students the land of the highest mountain range in the Americas and of the grandest tradition of poetry in Latin America, with Parra for my money the most original and brilliant poet in the 21st century.

*Dave Oliphant's latest book, Jazz Mavericks of the Lone Star State, will be published by the University of Texas Press in 2007.*