

Miguel Cruz

Miguel Cruz was born in 1936 in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico, and is a third generation cuatro maker. His father, Juan Cruz, was a farmer who cut local timber from which to make his cuatros, relying on glue made by boiling the native pinuela plant. The elder Cruz's instruments were sought after by the local Spanish-Indian population for use in musica jibara every Saturday night and especially during the year end holiday season. Miguel recalls his father bartering a cuatro for meat or coffee. He made instruments for the village, por el barrio and was as essential as a blacksmith, carpenter, or any other skilled craftsman. Miguel watched his father at work with a saw, an ax, a hatchet, a file, and chisels; he also learned to play guitar and cuatro while in Puerto Rico.

Cruz came to Wisconsin in 1958 and has done factory work through the years. About 1965, Miguel began to make cuatros out of his desire to keep the tradition alive. Relying on remembrance of his father's techniques and using other instruments as a model, he sought after materials--a daunting task in the concrete landscape of urban Milwaukee. Rather than cutting trees, Cruz used wood from old dressers or chests-of-drawers that were destined for the dump. Although the tops or bottoms of drawers were often comprised of several kinds of wood, Miguel found many with a grain and color appropriate for tops and bottoms. He has used white pine and salvaged mahogany for the sides and necks, and cow bones from a local butcher shop for part of the bridge. He purchases strings, pegs, and gears from a music store. And lacking the pineulo plant, he relies on Elmer's glue. In keeping with the color scheme favored by traditional Puerto Rican cuatro makers, Cruz applies a clear finish to his light colored tops, while coating the backs, sides, and necks with a dark varnish. Lacking access to power tools, he painstakingly makes his instruments with a saw, a wood file, chisels, a hacksaw, and clamps. In addition to making cuatros, Miguel also repairs and revamps older instruments.

Cruz's clientele or audience is the Milwaukee Puerto Rican community and his instruments are sold as fast as he can make them. The cuatro figures, along with the guiro and maracas, in seasonal festivities beginning at Thanksgiving and extending through the Christmas holidays, parandas, through the feast of the Three Kings on January 6. During this period Cruz, a musician himself, joins with a party of serenaders traveling to various homes, to taverns, and to community dances. Typically an opening song is performed; thereafter singers improvise songs "from the heart" relying on the traditional decima verse form.

Beyond making and repairing cuatros and performing, Miguel also makes guiros and maracas. In Puerto Rico people grow the marimbo plant, dry the gourds, then make two holes on one side, scrape the insides clean, and add grooves to the opposite side. A scraper with a wooden handle and wire fingers is drawn across the grooves for percussion. Maracas, of course, are rattles with wooden handles and seed-filled gourds. The necessary gourds do not grow here, but Miguel has ordered such gourds and made the instruments in Milwaukee.

Supporting materials: a taped interview and index.

Availability: Miguel doesn't have a cuatro of his own making and, without power tools, probably could not make one in time for the exhibit. He would, however, be willing to lend a cuatro that he has substantially made over (enlarged sides, new decorated top, new back, new bridge complete with cow bones). He is also

willing to make a guiro with scraper and maracas.

Special Considerations: Cecil Negron [REDACTED] acted as liaison and translator for Cruz. He would be willing, based upon Cruz's suggestion, to translate Miguel's biography into Spanish so that the catalog could reflect some Cruz's own words. I recommend that Cecil be paid for this valuable service.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): December 19, 1989
Interviewee: Miguel Cruz
Address: [REDACTED]
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: TDK D90
Amount Used: Side 1: all
Side 2: blank
General Subject: musical instrument
making
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary

Recording Location: Cruz home
Other People Present: Cecil Negron,
Cruz's wife, Mary

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

The interview was set up with the considerable assistance of Cecil Negron, an acquaintance of Richard March and a Puerto Rican who works for Milwaukee's Social Development Commission. Negron is a salsa musician but knows players in the older jibaro style, among them Miguel Cruz who also makes various instruments. Negron met me outside Cruz's home and led me in, making introductions and offering explanations for my presence. Although Cruz has been in this country since 1958 and can speak and understand English, he felt far more in command of his native Spanish and preferred to answer my questions in that language. Negron provided translations and summaries. The whole session went very well. We sat in Cruz's living room where he had a cuatro as well as a guiro with a scraper. Another cuatro in-the-making rested in the next room on the kitchen table. The interview dealt with Cruz's life, his involvement with jibaro music and its instruments, both in Puerto Rico and Wisconsin, and his instrument making.

TAPE INDEX

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement.
2. Born in Aguas Buenas [Good Water], Puerto Rico, 1936. Came to Milwaukee in 1958. Has done factory work in Wisconsin.
3. Began to make instruments in America. Wants the tradition to go on. Loves the cuatro and the guitar. [DHD?]
4. Heard a lot of musica jibara back home. All over, every Saturday, and especially during the holiday season. Serenading house-to-house during paranda.
5. In Puerto Rico played guitar and some cuatro. Didn't play in a band there, but has here.
6. M's father sang and made cuatros. M learned by observing.
7. Juan Cruz had a farm, would cut a tree, measure it, clean the wood, treat it, and then fabricate the instruments. He would use saw, ax or hatchet, file, chisels, and wire for the frets. The distance between the bridge and the mouth of the sound hole was precise for tuning, as was the distance from the mouth to the mill (the end of the neck).
8. M's father used glue made from the pinuela plant, boiling it to make the glue.
9. The cuatro requires various woods. The top is a light color. The wood must be cut in keeping with the moon's cycle. The peg wood is very hard. A straight grain for the top gives a sweeter, clearer sound.
10. The only decoration might be the bridge inlaid with the same wood as the top, or decorations drawn around the sound hole.
11. M's father, Juan Cruz, learned to make the cuatro from his father. M's mother was Spanish and his father was Indian, a Taeno (sp?). Juan made instruments for the whole community. He would trade for coffee or meat. [after "por el barrio" through "special order" and laughter might be a good quote for radio]
12. M began to make cuatros in America about 1965. [after question about wood, a good quote for DHD follows, through mention of the wood being dura] M looked for old dressers or chests of drawers to use for tops and bottoms, especially if they had a nice grain and color. Sometimes the wood was of three different kinds. The tops must be thin to make a good sound. The sides and neck are generally of white pine (pino blanco) or of mahogany if he can find it. He wouldn't buy it, but would dressers being thrown out on the street.
13. M had other cuatros so he could figure out the pattern. He also remembered watching his father. And he had a musicians knowledge of the tuning. He bought his pegs and gears at a music store, ditto with the metal frets. But part of the bridge and the last fret? at the top of the neck are from cow bones from the local butcher shop. He dried the bones, shaped and cut them, and fit them on

the instrument.

14. Molds or forms are required for making guitars, but M doesn't need it for the cuatro wood he uses.

15. The tools M uses include a saw, wood file, chisel, a hacksaw, and clamps.

16. Has made cuatros for different Puerto Rican musicians and for family members. He also fixes cuatros for the local community.

17. There are different sizes of cuatros with different sounds. Generally grande or pequeno, big or small, wide or narrow. A related instrument is the Cuban tres. Instead of being a ten-stringed instrument, like the cuatro, five sets of double strings, it is nine-stringed with three sets of three strings. The cuatro and the tres are played together in Puerto Rico for the same music.

18. M doesn't know why the cuatro is called cuatro (four).

19. M has a cuatro that he enlarged to give it a prettier and bigger sound.

20. Often he takes a top off an instrument and scrapes it to make the sound just right.

21. M uses regular white Elmer's glue to put his instruments together. He shows me that his instrument has been glued for three years. He applies the glue carefully, insetting pieces like the bridge, and then uses clamps to hold everything together for a day.

22. The made-over cuatro M has has a backing of plywood and there are several ribs inside.

23. M generally uses a dark varnish for the sides and back, but a clear coating for the tops so as to bring out the light shine of the wood. A light colored top with the rest dark is traditional.

24. In Milwaukee the cuatro is generally played at Thanksgiving, during the Christmas holiday season, and at Three Kings Day, January 6.

25. The songs are generally decimas associated with jibaro music. You improvise what you feel. [edited version for DHD?] Certain choruses recur. Cecil describes the paranda event. Typically a particular song is sung outside the place visited, then once inside the decimas are improvised. The peoples for whom the singing is done are sometimes Puerto Ricans or Mexicans or Americans.

26. Singing is done at different homes. It should be done at schools, but it really hasn't. Radio stations play some of the tunes on record. M also plays at bars and dances. The music is lively and can be danced too. M mentions the marumba and secho? reale, guaracha, plena. Salsa can also be danced to it, but that's another generation.

27. M gets his guiro out. The guiro is made from the marimbo plant. The gourds are taken off and dried; when dried two holes are made on one side and the seeds are removed; then grooves are cut with a hacksaw in the other side.

Then M makes a scraper with a wooden handle and wires. Cecil scrapes it while M talks. Put together the cuatro and the guitar and you have musica jibara, musica paranda. [a good quote, with some editing, for DHD]

28. M gets guiros ready-made at Hispanic stores, or must get gourds from Puerto Rico. M has made guiros in Puerto Rico and here. He doesn't have any that he has made, although he made the scraper he has. M can, however, get some gourds from Puerto Rico and can make them here.

29. Not a big ceremony to plan and harvest the marimbo plants and turn them into guiros. There are big doings for a much bigger percussive instrument made from a marimbo gourd. Sometimes whiskey is also drunk from these gourds.

30. M is not willing to play without accompaniment of other musicians.

31. M gives his address: [redacted].

[end of session]