

Chapter 37

Borinquén suelo querido: Puerto Rican Music in Wisconsin

Program 37 Performances

1. Sabor, "Consencias." 2. Trulla Navidena, "Danza." 3. Trulla Navidena, "La banta negrita." 4. Bentetu, "Plena Bentetu." 5. Bentetu, "Bomba Medley." 6. Andando Solo, "En la vida todo es ir." 7. Trulla Navidena, "Cortando cana."

Three Kings' Day

Dominoes were clicking in the basement of Centro de la Comunidad Unida in Milwaukee on the twelfth day after Christmas, Three Kings' Day, the Epiphany. To the initiated, the sound is as evocative of home as the croaking of *coqui*, the Puerto Rican frog. Hundreds of men and women had gathered to celebrate one of their most important holidays with dominoes, a popular game on the island. The room was filled with the aroma of *arroz con gandules*, a dish of rice and unique small beans, and a cascade of voices spoke Spanish with a Caribbean lilt. From one corner came music—the strumming of a guitar, the tremolo of a *cuatro's* strings, and the rhythmic scraping of a *guiro*. Instead of the snow and ice of January in Wisconsin, I could almost imagine that outside was Borinquén, as the celebrants affectionately called their tropical homeland.

The Caribbean island of Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until Americans took it as a U.S. territory early in this century after the Spanish-American War. As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans were free to immigrate and soon did, seeking work in larger mainland cities, especially New York.

Puerto Ricans have diverse origins. The Taino were the indigenous people. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish arrived as colonizers. Later, the Africans arrived, brought as slaves to work on sugar plantations. So the genetic and cultural background of most Puerto Ricans combines two or three of these sources—indigenous, Spanish, and African.

For over fifty years a small but growing population of Puerto Ricans have become established in Wisconsin, primarily Milwaukee. Most arrived after World War II and many of the early arrivals had previously lived in other mainland cities like New York. By the late 1950s more Puerto Ricans, from rural areas or medium-sized towns like Caguas, Ponce, and Mayaguez, came directly to Milwaukee. Manufacturing jobs in the foundries and machine shops were the lure and Puerto Rican neighborhoods soon developed, first in the Holton Street area on the city's northeast side and in Merrill Park on the near west side. Later, an increasing number of Puerto Ricans settled on the south side, often in the same neighborhoods where Mexicans had begun to settle. (An important aside:

Although they are often lumped together by outsiders as “Hispanics,” Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are culturally quite distinct. Their Spanish dialects differ, as do customs, foods, and traditional musics.)

From the Mountains to the Coast

About twenty thousand Puerto Ricans live in Milwaukee. Most come from village or working-class origins, and they tend to prefer the *jibaro* style of traditional music. A few hundred live in Madison, the only other Wisconsin city with a large group of *borinqueños*. Most are middle-class people—university students or faculty or those working permanently in the city. In Madison, a number of young players play in the *bomba y plena* musical style, which originated in the lowland plantations and spread to the urban areas.

Jibaro and *bomba y plena* refer to a major distinction within Puerto Rican musical culture. *La musica jibara*, music originating in the upland rural areas of central Puerto Rico, emphasizes stringed instruments—the guitar and the cuatro, a small Caribbean ten-stringed, guitar-shaped instrument, played melodically with a pick in the manner of a mandolin. *Jibaro* means villager or peasant and carries all the concomitant ambivalence in attitude about ruralites.

In a *jibaro* group, the cuatro is usually the lead melodic voice and is emblematic of *la musica jibara*. Recently, cuatros have become easier to obtain in Milwaukee since instrument maker Miguel Cruz has set up shop making and repairing cuatros. Beginning by scavenging wood from discarded furniture and repairing instruments in his small apartment, Cruz now is turning out solid cuatros in a store front in Walker’s Point.

Bomba y plena, characteristic of coastal areas, has more African musical influence. The emphasis is on call and response singing to the accompaniment of various percussion instruments, for example, congas—large wooden vase-shaped drums, played without drumsticks—and pleneras—smaller hand-held drums, resembling tambourines without the jingles. Like the blues, *bomba* refers to a common type of improvised song, replete with realistic and sometimes wry commentary on life and love.

Instrumentation in *jibaro* and *bomba y plena* overlaps. Congas or guitars may show up in either type of ensemble, and both styles prominently feature the guiro, a percussion instrument of Taino origin made from a small notched gourd which is scraped with a stick or nowadays an Afro comb.

Salsa has become the accepted term in the past twenty years for the most publicized form of Puerto Rican music, the jazz-influenced modern style based on traditional Puerto Rican sounds. In salsa, modern instruments dominate—saxophones, trumpets, and synthesizers—but congas, metal versions of the guiro, and occasionally even a cuatro link salsa instrumentation to Puerto Rican tradition. Relying on *cumbias*, *meringues*, and other tropical rhythms, salsa has become less specifically Puerto Rican and more of a contemporary Latin American sound shared by all Latinos. Cecil Negron and Toty Ramos are prominent exponents of salsa in Milwaukee, and there are always a few excellent salsa bands to play for a range of community events.

In contrast, Wisconsin has no organized *jibaro* ensemble. Dozens of *jibaro* players in Milwaukee come together to jam, particularly during the Christmas season when it is traditional for informal groups to make the rounds (called *parrandas*), dropping in on friends to sing Christmas songs. It was exactly this sort of group, led by Ruben Garcia, that I encountered at the dominoes tournament. To record this evanescent music, I urged the group into a quieter room and with one microphone and a Nagra recorder captured the flavor of their jam session. On



Miguel Cruz with one of his homemade cuatros, Milwaukee, 1990 Photo: Jim Leary

the occasion of being recorded, they decided to name themselves Trulla Navidena (Christmas carollers), but they were essentially an informal aggregation.

Nor does bomba y plena have much in the way of formally organized groups. Orlando Cabrera, a meteorologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and otherwise a member of Sotavento—a pan-Latino ensemble playing improvisatory, contemporary music using some Hispanic traditional instruments—wanted to play and demonstrate specifically Puerto Rican folk music in educational settings. To this end he organized Bentetu, a nascent group composed of some Puerto Rican students in Madison. So far, their main activity has been to hold jam sessions in the multicultural center at the University of Wisconsin's Memorial Union, bringing together a number of musically talented students from Puerto Rico.

In Milwaukee and Madison, Puerto Rico is in the hearts and music of these relatively new Wisconsinites. *Borinquén suelo querido* (Puerto Rico, beloved land) is not just a song title and the name of this "Down Home Dairyland" program, but a deep emotion shared by the borinqueños of Wisconsin.