

NUESTRA MÚSICA: MUSIC IN LATINO CULTURE

Building Community

DANIEL SHEEHY

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What is the meaning of music? One person's music might be another person's noise, devoid of significance. On the other hand, a simple melody might tap into a deep vein of emotion, call up a cherished memory, deepen spiritual devotion, make the body move, or spur social action.

When people endow music with meanings, associations, and values, they lend it power—power to communicate, to move us, to transform our frame of mind and our emotions. A common musical grounding can be used to strengthen social connectedness, to bring people together in common cause, or to create symbols of identity for public representation.

What, then, is the meaning of *música latina*—Latino music? The title of the *Nuestra Música*—“Our Music”—program conveys two meanings. One is the feeling of closeness that Latinos who share life experiences, values, and perhaps language feel when they say, “This is *our* music.” The other meaning, underscored by the symbol-charged setting of the National Mall in the nation's capital around the Independence Day holiday, is that *música latina* is a defining piece of our nation's living cultural heritage. The storyline of the 2005 *Nuestra Música* program is “Music Builds Community”—how Latinos have used music to persevere as *mexicanos*, *Chicanos*, *puertorriqueños*, *New Yorkers*, *cubanos*, *salvadoreños*, *centroamericanos*, *dominicanos*, *colombianos*, *Latinos*, or another self-proclaimed label, in the mass-media-driven, multicultural society of the United States. In elaborating this theme, our greater purposes over the four years of this project (2004–2007) are to spotlight grassroots *música latina*'s beauty, texture, and centrality to our nation's cultural core and to explore the many shades of meaning that Latinos give music. Our special focus in the 2005 program is how Latinos use music and the values it carries

For Nellie Tanco, veteran member of Los Pleneros de la 21, the performance of Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* in New York City builds a strong sense of Puerto Rican identity.



to build a coherent, positive sense of community among people of specific cultural backgrounds and among the Latino population as a whole.

Why is music important to the well-being of Latino culture? How do Latinos use music to build community? We can find part of the answer in the success story of how centuries-old Puerto Rican musical traditions were put to use to strengthen contemporary Puerto Rican identity and community cohesion. When Puerto Rican *jíbaro* people from the rural island hinterlands flocked to the material mecca of New York City in the middle decades of the 20th century seeking a brighter economic future, they abandoned more than their *bohíos* (traditional country houses). They left their music to languish at the margins of modernity. Their sung poetry and home-grown stringed instruments were at the core of their Spanish heritage, introduced to the island beginning in the first decades of the 16th century. These centuries-old traditions were thought to be music of yesterday, not of tomorrow.

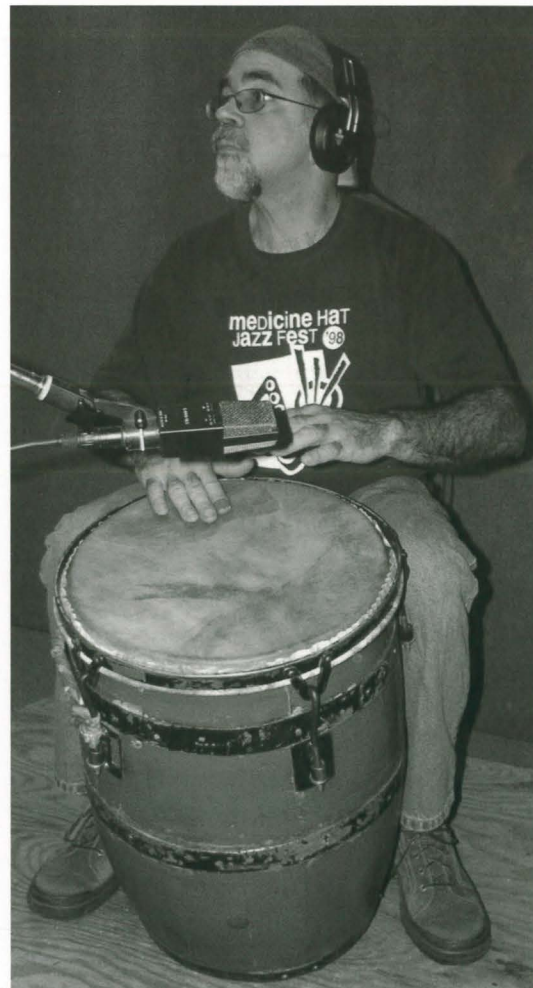
Countercurrents to this trend, however, gathered momentum to form a riptide that would pull Puerto Ricans back to their musical roots. The empty materialism and social alienation of city life left a cultural vacuum in which music that connected people to the familiar sounds of their past was welcome. Into this vacuum strode “innovative traditionalists” such as Estanislao Martínez, known as “Ladí,” who helped set the standard for the modern *conjunto jíbaro* “*jíbaro* ensemble,” creating the sound of two *cuatros* playing in harmony, six-stringed guitar, *güiro* (a gourd rasp), and bongos. Ladí’s upscale *jíbaro* sound played well to Puerto Ricans both in the United States and at home on the island, and other

Juan “Juango” Gutiérrez listens attentively to his fellow musicians as he lays down the beat on his *barriles* drum for Los Pleneros de la 21’s Smithsonian Folkways recording, *Para Todos Ustedes*.

jíbaro groups such as Ecos de Borinquen, led by Miguel Santiago Díaz, have continued the *jíbaro* legacy of creating music that speaks to grassroots tradition and community solidarity.

When fellow Puerto Rican musician Juan Gutiérrez relocated from the island to New York City to work as a percussionist in Broadway theater orchestras, he found the antidote for his feelings of urban alienation in the music of Afro-Puerto Rican musicians in the New York barrio. He brought together some of the best “street corner” percussionists and founded the group Los Pleneros de la 21, creating a sound that interwove traditional African-derived *bomba* and *plena* music with contemporary sounds that appealed to New Yorkers. Los Pleneros de la 21 became one of the most influential and celebrated touchstones of Puerto Rican identity and sparked an explosion of similar *bomba* and

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plena groups throughout the Northeast and beyond. In addition to bringing a refreshed sound of deep tradition to urban listeners, the group created new compositions that brought Puerto Ricans together around current social issues. One example is the piece “*Isla Nena*” with its refrain “*Isla nena, perla cautiva; tu pueblo te liberó de la marina*” (Little girl island, pearl in captivity; your people liberated you from the navy) that celebrates the successful protests leading the U.S. Navy to abandon use of the island of Vieques as a firing range.

A fundamental cornerstone of community is the family. Family, in turn, is often fundamental to passing on musical traditions, and music making can be an important way of keeping family ties strong and music a lively, integrated, and relevant part of community life. In the cattle country of the northeastern Mexican state of San Luis Potosí, for example, the members of the trio Los Camperos de Valles, all acclaimed representatives of the Mexican *son huasteco* musical tradition, recall the importance of family connections to having taken up their music. Violinist Joel Monroy’s grandfather Mateo was a violinist, and an uncle of his mother’s played guitar, especially at *velorios*, wakes. At the age of twelve, Monroy started following his relatives and their musician friends around to parties at neighboring ranches and towns, learning bits and pieces of how to play the traditional Huastecan instruments, the *jarana* and *huapanguera* (small and large rhythm guitars). Similarly, his colleague Gregorio “Goyo” Solano started learning *jarana* from his father at the age of ten. He followed his violinist father to local community fiestas, birthday parties, and baptism celebrations, where he was hired to play in Huastecan trios. “I got involved in the musical scene, just listening at first. My father showed me little by little the finger positions, and I became part of the trio after having learned a little,” he recalls. Likewise, group leader Marcos Hernández started playing the *huapanguera* professionally with his uncle Fortino at the age of fifteen. None of these outstanding musicians had formal training;



The author interviews Los Camperos de Valles in Ciudad Valles, San Luis Potosí, Mexico, for the context-providing liner notes as vital to the record-making process as the music itself.

they were first inspired and trained by their family, the “conservatory of traditional music.” If it were not for their strong family ties, this masterful group of traditional musicians would likely not exist. In the Huastecan region, the *son huasteco* not only communicates a sense of identity with the region’s shared lifeways but, for the musicians, carries strong associations with family and with the “extended family” of professional Huastecan-style musicians.

Another example of how music builds community is found in El Salvador’s mountainous, agricultural Oriente (eastern) region. There, where small villages dot the rugged landscape, the centerpiece of many town and family fiestas is the music of a spirited, uniquely Salvadoran musical ensemble called *chanchona*. *Chanchona* literally means big sow, the local name given to the large stringed bass that provides the harmonic foundation for the group. The *chanchona* emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, borrowing repertoire from popular music from Mexico and other countries in Central America. Over time a standard instrumentation of six or more members emerged, including *chanchona*, two violins, guitar, *tumba* (conga drum), and other percussion. Its grass-roots sound focuses on the popular *cumbia* dance rhythm, fast-paced *canción ranchera* “country

song,” and slower, romantic *bolero*. When the *chanchona* strikes up its catchy dance rhythms and the singers launch into lyrics laced with local sentiment, it pulls people out of their normal routine and marks an emotional sense of special occasion. In the rest of El Salvador, the *chanchona* marks the Oriente region as a distinct place, with its associations of country life and rural poverty. As millions of Salvadorans migrated to the United States during and after the civil strife of the 1970s and 1980s—today about one out of four Salvadorans lives outside El Salvador—the music came to take on added meaning. Just as Salvadorans uprooted from their homeland lost their self-grounding sense of place as they relocated to U.S. cities such as Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C., in their newly adopted homes music took on a more intense sense of “home.” Indeed, for many Salvadorans, especially those from Oriente, only a few seconds of the *chanchona*’s music evoke a feeling of “being home” nearly as well as taking a several-thousand-mile plane ride back to El Salvador. In Washington, D.C., home to over a hundred thousand Salvadorans mainly from Oriente, the *chanchona* has emerged as a prominent symbol of Salvadoran presence.

The group Eliseo y su Chanchona Melódica Oriental has performed every Friday and Saturday night since 2001 at Judy’s Restaurant in Washington, D.C. The group’s leader, Eliseo Gutiérrez, took up the music of the *chanchona* in his hometown of San Alejo, La Unión, El Salvador, learning mainly from his father and brothers. At Judy’s, his seven-member group performs a range of music that appeals to clientele from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. When they play for local Salvadoran weddings, birthday parties, and other celebrations, focus is on the *cumbia* and *canción ranchera* repertoire favored among Salvadorans.

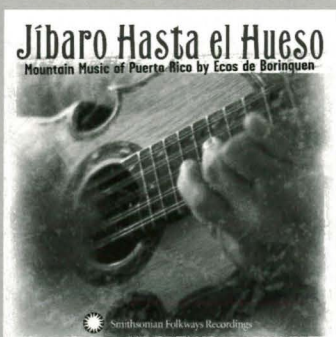
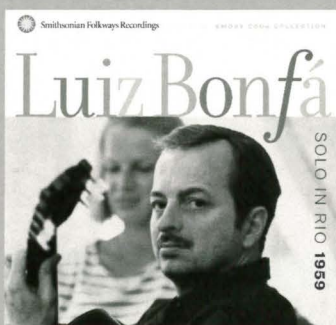
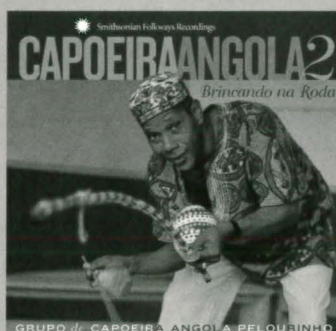
While in many Latino communities music is a magnet that pulls people together around familiar ideas of shared values and experiences, it is also used to construct new, forward-looking ideas of community and mutuality of purpose. In Chicago, the group Sones de México takes threads from many distinctive regional styles of Mexican music, weaves them into contemporary sounds and fresh compositions, and creates a new musical fabric that is at once tradi-

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Karol Aurora de Jesús Reyes sings with her mentor Miguel Santiago Díaz during a recording session for the Grammy-nominated *Jibaro Hasta el Hueso: Mountain Music of Puerto Rico* by Ecos de Borinquen.



NUESTRA MÚSICA LAUNCHES NEW SERIES

In 2002, the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage conceived the *Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture* project, a multi-year effort to document and to make accessible grassroots musical expressions of the living cultural heritage of Latino communities in the United States. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the national museum's nonprofit record label, sparked *Nuestra Música* by launching a series of 25 new recordings of Latino music reflecting the diversity of Latino cultures and their generations-old musical creations. These CDs in the series have been released to date:

Capoeira Angola 2:

Brincando na Roda

SFW CD 40488

El ave de mi soñar:

*Mexican Sones Huastecos by
Los Camperos de Valles*

SFW CD 40512

Havana, Cuba, ca. 1957:

Rhythms and Songs of the Orishas

SFW CD 40489

Havana & Matanzas, Cuba,

*ca. 1957; Batá, Bembé,
and Palo Songs*

SFW CD 40434

Heroes & Horses: Corridos from the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands

SFW CD 40465

Jíbaro Hasta el Hueso:

*Mountain Music of Puerto
Rico by Ecos de Borinquen*

SFW CD 40506

La Bamba: Sones Jarocho

*from Veracruz. Featuring José
Gutiérrez & Los Hermanos Ochoa*

SFW CD 40505

Latin Jazz: La Combinación Perfecta

SFW CD 40802

¡Llegaron Los Camperos!

Concert Favorites of Nati Cano's

Mariachi Los Camperos

SFW CD 40517

Luiz Bonfá: Solo in Rio 1959

SFW CD 40483

Matanzas Cuba, ca. 1957:

*Afro-Cuban Sacred Music
from the Countryside*

SFW CD 40490

Quisqueya en el Hudson:

Dominican Music in New York City

SFW CD 40495

Raíces Latinas: Smithsonian Folkways Latino Roots Collection

SFW CD 40470

Si, Soy Llanero: Joropo Music from the Orinoco Plains of Colombia

SFW CD 40515

Viento de Agua Unplugged:

Materia Prima

SFW CD 40513

¡Viva el Mariachi!: Nati Cano's

Mariachi Los Camperos

SFW CD 40459

For more information
and other selections, visit
www.folkways.si.edu.



tional and contemporary, rural and urban, old and new. In Chicago, recent immigrants from many regions of Mexico live alongside young and old Mexican Americans from families rooted in Chicago for the past hundred years. The enthusiastic reception of *Sones de México's* music in Chicago reflects their success at both capturing the essence of Chicagoan Mexican identity and painting a positive musical picture of how the contributions of *mexicanos* from different backgrounds and age groups are all valuable and mutually supporting cultural assets.

Folk-rooted, popular dance music plays a special role in forging a pan-Latino sense of community. When nation-specific differences in heritage—Mexican, Puerto Rican, Salvadoran, Colombian, and so forth—soften as new generations of Latinos emerge and find common ground in American society, labels like “Latino” take on greater relevance. Music stores advertise recordings of *música latina*, and nightclubs offer dance music appealing to many Latino backgrounds and interests. Especially in cities such as Washington, D.C., where people of many Latino nationalities share similar social footing, dance promoters, club owners, and dance bands provide dance music that appeals to a range of Latinos. While the members of Washington’s JCY Band specialize in Dominican *merengue*, for example, they might also play salsa, *cumbia*, *reggaetón*,

and other popular styles. This meeting place of rhythms is also a pan-Latino commons that builds a sense of shared cultural and social life.

Through these and other musical “windows on culture” that the *Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture* program presents and explores, we can find the fullest meaning of music. This meaning goes far beyond mere sounds; it goes to the heart of personal and social identity, to issues of survival for immigrant communities adjusting to alien social environments, to constructing a new spirit of community in an ever-evolving world. Music carries knowledge, meaning, affect, and spirit because people have endowed it with these assets, because they consider it essential to envisioning and living a normal life in which they are genuinely themselves. Creative musicians and communities constantly construct new meanings for music, meaning that serves a social purpose as well as an aesthetic one. *Nuestra Música* offers visitors to this “living exhibition” on the National Mall the opportunity to meet the musicians and to learn more about the world of meaning behind the sounds, as well as to sing the songs, to dance to the rhythms, and to experience the panorama of diverse expressions we call *música latina*. The 2005 installment of *Nuestra Música* presents a series of evening concerts showcasing a variety of Latino musical styles and cultures and exploring the theme “Music Builds Community.”

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SUGGESTED READING

Olsen, Dale A., and Daniel Edward Sheehy, eds. 2000. *The Garland Handbook of Latin American Music*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Schechter, John M. 1999. *Music in Latin American Culture: Regional Traditions*. New York: Schirmer Books.

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