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# Raquel Z. Rivera:

# Portrait of a Puerto Rican Artist and Scholar

**INTRODUCTION AND INTERVIEW BY EILEEN CONDON**

*What follows is a portrait of an important Puerto Rican traditional artist in New York City, Raquel Z. Rivera, told in her own words—through a conversational interview with folklorist Eileen Condon and through excerpts from Raquel's creative and scholarly writing, as well.*

*Raquel was born and raised in Puerto Rico and left the island in 1988, at 16 years old, right after high school to complete a bachelor's degree in Development Studies at Brown University in Rhode Island. She returned to Puerto Rico in 1992, to obtain a master's in Puerto Rican Studies, and then moved to New York City in 1994 to enter a doctoral program in Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. "My intention was to return to Puerto Rico, but by the time I finished my PhD, I had fallen hopelessly in love with New York," Raquel explains. It was here, in New York City's many and varied Puerto Rican and Caribbean musical scenes, that Raquel matured further as an artist and a scholar in her own traditions, integrating the music of her youth with her present and future musical aspirations.*

*In the interview that follows, Raquel Z. Rivera describes in rich detail her development as a singer and a songwriter—as well as a scholar—within the musical genres of her heritage, which live on in New York City. Accompanying the interview here are selections from Raquel's creative and scholarly writings to create a rounded portrait of a woman who commands enormous respect among her peers in Latin music in New York City, both as a participating artist and as a scholarly analyst/interpreter.*

**Raquel Z. Rivera (RZR):** I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, but I have a lot of family history in NYC. My mother, Amalia Domínguez, came to Bushwick, Brooklyn, with her extended family when she was seven and lived here until she was 25, when she married my father. She was born in Oriente, Cuba, from Cuban-born parents, but with maternal grandparents that were Puerto Rican-born and Dominican Republic-raised. My father, Jorge Rivera, was born and raised in Naranjito, Puerto Rico; at 14, he came to live in the Bronx with my grandfather. As soon as my parents married in NYC in 1969, they moved to Puerto Rico, where I was born in 1972. I moved to New York in 1994, but I presently "commute" between East Harlem and Albuquerque, New Mexico. I'm an author and singer-songwriter. I've written one book titled, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, edited another titled *Reggaeton*, and published many articles in books, journals, magazines, and newspapers. Most of my articles deal with New York and Caribbean Latino popular music and culture. I also write fiction, poetry, and songs. I've sung my songs with roots music groups like Yaya and Alma Moyó, but for the past few years, I've been mostly singing with my band, Raquel Z. Rivera & Ojos de Sofía.

**Eileen Condon (EC):** Can you share your beginnings with traditional Puerto Rican/Dominican/Caribbean musical forms?

**RZR:** My father was a musician. He played *música jíbara, boleros, danzas,* and other Caribbean genres on accordion, piano, and guitar. He was trained in Western classical music, but he loved traditional Caribbean music. Family gatherings on my paternal side always involved my father, uncle, aunt, sister, brother, cousins, and other family members making music together. They especially loved playing boleros together. They all have beautiful, rich voices for boleros.

But—more importantly for the development of my own vocal style and musical taste—I also remember them playing *seises, aguinaldos,* and *trullas* while my grandmother Carmen and my great-uncle Quique sang with their beautiful, nasal, jíbaro voices. I also remember in the late 1980s, Papi recorded and played a lot with Taller Boricua, Andrés Jiménez, and other well-known jíbaro musicians. My sister, my brother, and I would go watch him play. I was in my early teens, and I felt proud of him, but I didn't care for jíbaro music back then. It bored me. I was a Menudo and pop fan in my early teens. In my mid-teens, I became a fan of heavy metal music. But all that early exposure to jíbaro music definitely had an impact on the music

Raquel Z. Rivera. Photo by Jorge Vazquez.

that I would eventually gravitate towards as a singer-songwriter.

When I moved to New York in 1994, I was deep into my hip-hop phase—hip-hop was the subject of the doctoral dissertation that I would eventually publish as *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* in 2003. My favorite aspect of hip-hop was b-boy and b-girl "cyphers" (or dance circles) set to the sounds of a DJ playing breakbeats. That was around the same time I developed a taste for rumba and *bomba* "cyphers." The energy and intent I felt at hip-hop cyphers and more traditional Caribbean music cyphers was very similar. It was bomba that most caught my attention. While the street rumba scene I got to know in NYC was extremely male-dominated and "testosterone-y," the street bomba scene that I started to get to know was family friendly, full of women and children. By then it was the late 1990s, and I started hanging out a lot at La Casita de Chema (Rincón Criollo) in the South Bronx. There were many of us in our twenties, very eager to learn from the elders. Back then, I wasn't a musician, just a lover of music; I would sing *coro* under my breath and dance in the sidelines. At the same time, I would go to clubs or more formal events where *plena* and bomba were protagonists, like Los Pleneros de la 21 presentations and Viento de Agua's weekly show downtown at González y González. And I would also go to religious ceremonies where music was central: *promesas de aguinaldo* and *toques de palo* in homes, 21 *división* ceremonies in *botánicas*, *fiestas de cruz* on church steps and community centers, *mesa blanca* ceremonies at an *espiritista templo*. I started imitating the high-pitched and nasal female voices that sang coro an octave above the male voices. Initially, I would "hide" my voice beneath the other women's (especially Dominican singer Nina Paulino, with whom I went to many of these places). But, eventually, I became more confident and started to sing coro without feeling like I had to hide beneath anyone else's voice.

Those years (late 1990s and early 2000s) were intensely filled with music for me. Most young folks around me, like me, were obsessed with learning about traditional Caribbean music and religions. It eventually got too intense. I was especially turned off by all the arguing about the "correct" way to carry on the musical and spiritual traditions that we were invested in. So I cut down dramatically on my hanging out and started concentrating on developing a music project of my own where I could process and filter what I had learned, but that at the same time would reflect my own truths. That music eventually became the CD I released in 2010 titled *Las 7 Salves de La Magdalena / 7 Songs of Praise for The Magdalene*.

Raquel Z. Rivera & Ojos de Sofía performing at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture. Foreground, left to right: Catarina dos Santos, Raquel Z. Rivera, and Kaila Paulino. Background, left to right: Camilo Molina-Gaetán and Donald Nicks. Photo by Marisol Díaz.

**EC:** Please describe your present repertoire, your work with recomposing/reinterpreting *décima, salves,* and other traditional genres. What inspires you to do this? How is music a part of your life now?

**RZR:** Composing music is a mystery to me. It doesn't feel like it's under my control (even if it is). I haven't been able (yet) to write a good song intentionally. Unexpectedly, I hear the basic melody and/or lyrics in my head. It always happens when I'm taking a shower or washing dishes. Then I run to record it before I forget. And then I spend days, sometimes weeks, fleshing out the song. That part does feel intentional. The few times I've tried to write a song intentionally from scratch, I haven't really liked the results. I've got those songs "in the drawer," so to speak. Maybe someday I'll figure out how to make a good song out of them.

The one genre I can be intentional in is jíbaro music's décimas, since the melody is already pre-established. So in that case, I can intentionally write décimas to go with the traditional seises or aguinaldos.

I write most of my songs as décimas, aguinaldos, bombas, salves and palos, probably because those are the genres I know and love best. But now that I've been spending a lot of time in Albuquerque, I've been experimenting with Mexican *alabanzas* and *son jarocho.* I've even taken a stab at country-folk… but that's one of those songs I've tried writing intentionally that hasn't quite worked out.

Making music, along with writing (whether lyrics, fiction, or academic work), are the ways in which I process what's inside of me. Often, it's the way I understand what I think and feel, and how I come to terms with ideas or feelings that trouble me.

Many of my songs are dedicated to ancestors or spirits. Though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, in the process of writing those songs, I have processed traditional beliefs and developed my own. The process has been extremely healing, especially in the case of my songs to Mary Magdalene. Through those songs, I figured out ways in which I could stop being angry about the stifling aspects of religions and spiritual beliefs. Those songs are my way of being able to participate in my family's and my larger community's religious/spiritual rituals, without feeling stifled. In retrospect, it dawned on me that the term "liberation mythologies," that I had been using in my academic work to describe the social justice impulses underlying the work of many roots musicians in New York City, was a term that was also very appropriate in the case of my own creative work.

For me, the character of Mary Magdalene points toward "liberation" for many reasons. Her story questions the male-dominated history and theology of Christianity. I also offer her up as a "spirit" or "muse" or "metaphor" that can give us strength or clarity or whatever we need. She can be whatever we need her to be. That is why my Magdalenic collaborator, painter Tanya Torres, and I have named her Our Lady of Lexington. We needed a muse that would give us strength and courage in that East Harlem stretch of Lexington Avenue where we have lived and

created; so we made Our Lady into what we needed her to be. But my devotion to Our Lady is not literal; it's poetic. That feels *liberatory* to me, too. Our Lady of Lexington is my favorite myth; the one that gives me the most strength, the one that best helps me understand life, and the one that makes me feel the freest.

The songs that I'm working on now I'm calling my "*décimas del amargue*." They are heartbreak songs from a female perspective, where pain is processed through humor. This to me is liberatory, too. The lyrics question our sexist society. They vent anger, but their purpose is to filter pain through humor, so that pain goes away. Also, in my lyrics, all men are not made to pay for the sins of the heartbreaker; I don't like gender polarization. To me, my "décima del amargue" lyrics are also my liberation from nationalist dogma, according to which *jíbaro décimas* equal "love of nation," narrowly defined. I love the Dominican Republic as I love Puerto Rico. I love Dominican salves and *bachata* as I love Puerto Rican jíbaro music, plena and bomba. Dominican bachata and Puerto Rican jíbaro music owe a lot to each other; I am highlighting that in this project. National boundaries don't speak to my heart anymore. It's the intersections between nations that interest me. This is a project I'm working on closely with our band's musical director and guitarist, Bryan Vargas.

**EC:** What challenges have you faced as a musician/composer/performer over the years? How have you overcome obstacles that have appeared before you?

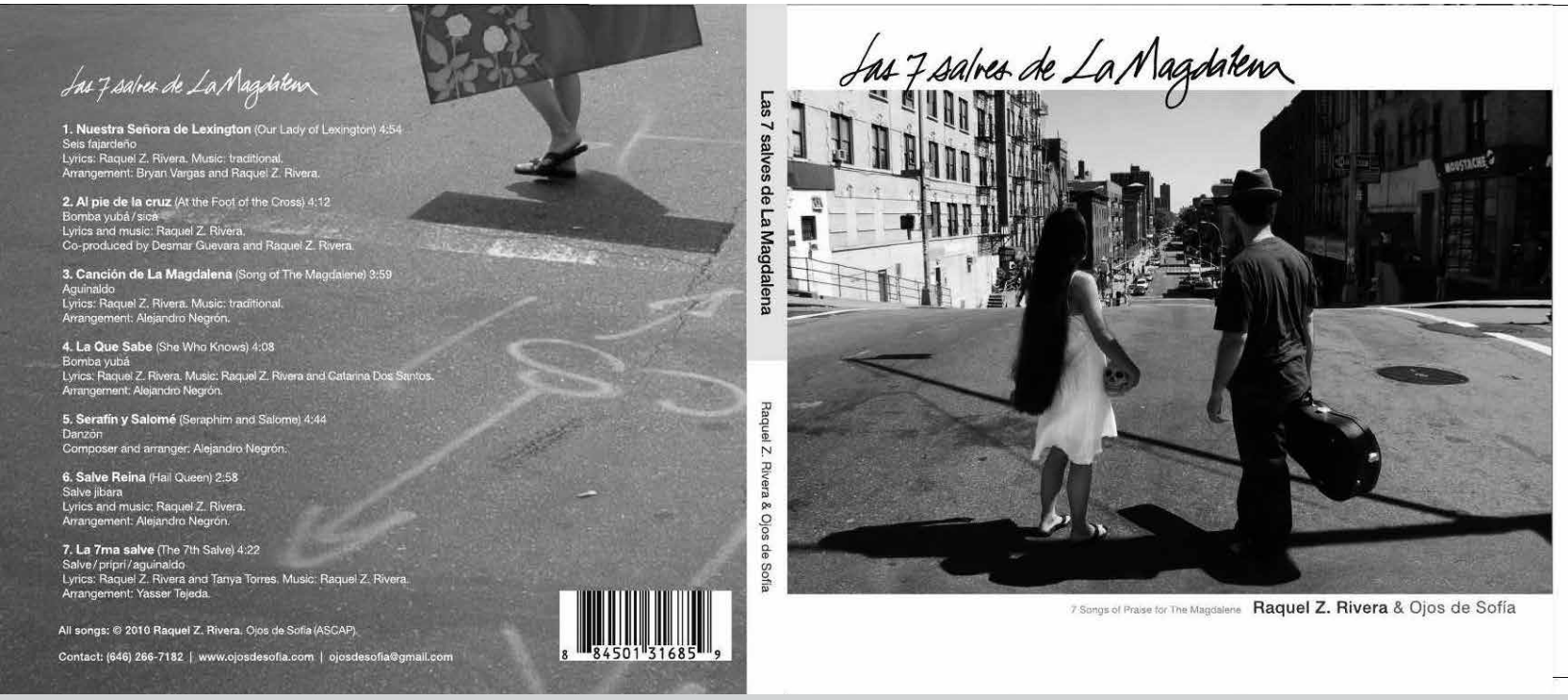
**RZR:** Challenge number one was coming to terms with the fact that I wasn't content to be just a lover of music, that I wanted to be also a maker of music. So I took the scary step to sing coro openly. Challenge number two was coming to terms with the fact that I wasn't content to do coro, that I wanted to sing lead, write songs, and learn percussion.

There were many women of my generation who experienced something similar. So we came together in the early 2000s to encourage each other to learn how to do all these things. We would meet away from the public eye: in homes, at Tanya Torres' Mixta Gallery (with the storefront gate closed) in East Harlem, at the furthest corner of the Harlem Meer in Central Park, on the rocks by the river shore on Wards Island. We jokingly called ourselves "The Femme Cypher." We invited a few select among our male peers, like Jorge Vázquez and Alexander Lasalle; they were patient and nurturing teachers and they agreed it was necessary for us women to do more that just dance and sing coro. Right after the first time we dared sing publicly at the weekly "Julia's Jam" in East Harlem, master percussionist Alberto "Tito" Cepeda offered to teach us percussion. He became our mentor. Eventually, some among that group of women plus others co-founded the all-female group, Yaya.

I don't think I would have overcome that second challenge had it not been for that group of women and encouraging men.

Challenge number three—I was hungry to learn about traditional music and spirituality. And I did. But in the process I lost myself. I felt stifled. I was swallowed up by other people's logic and beliefs. I was too much of a coward (or perhaps a diplomat) to challenge folks directly; so I hid myself away, surrounded myself by nurturing, like-minded folks, and eventually distilled my love and my hope and my fears and my anger into the songs in our CD *Las 7 Salves de La Magdalena.*

**EC:** Are you involved in transmitting these musical forms to younger people?




Front and back covers of 2010 CD, Las 7 Salves de La Magdalena / 7 Songs of Praise for The Magdalene by Raquel Z. Rivera & Ojos de Sofia.

**RZR:** All the times I have taught as a university professor (Hunter College, Tufts University, Columbia University), I have spent considerable time covering these music genres. My academic and journalistic writing devoted to these genres are also my ways of sparking interest in these genres among all people, but especially young people. In fact, my book on hip-hop explored hip-hop's connections to traditional music forms of the Caribbean. Also, I am regularly a guest lecturer at universities throughout the country, and I constantly stress the links between contemporary commercial popular music and traditional music forms.

As a member of the groups Pa' lo Monte, Yerbabuena, Yaya and Alma Moyó, I have also participated in numerous workshops and educational presentations for university students, high schoolers, middle school and elementary school children, as well as community members at large.

**EC:** Please tell us about the other groups you have founded, and the musicians/singers/drummers you are working with. How are these groups different in their approaches and performance? Do you feel you are a kind of pioneer? What are you doing in your music that has never (or rarely) been done before?

**RZR:** Over a decade ago (1999), I was one of the founding members of Yerbabuena, a NYC group that focuses on Puerto Rican roots music, especially plena, música jíbara, and bomba. A few years later (2002), I was one of the founding members of Alma Moyó, a group that focuses on bomba. In 2010, we released our first CD, titled *No hay sábado sin sol.*

Yerbabuena's music features not only traditional plena and bomba percussion instruments; it also features *cuatro,* guitar, drum kit, and bass. Alma Moyó does traditional percussion-only bomba. Both groups perform traditional and original songs, and both groups emphasize Puerto Rican roots music as living tradition, not stuck in time. Both groups share a distaste for the choreography and costumes that have for decades dominated stage renditions of Puerto Rican traditional music. Both groups emphasize the spiritual dimension of Puerto Rican roots music.

In 2002, I was one of the co-founders of Yaya. What began as a drumming circle, eventually became a performing and teaching collective. Yaya was different from Yerbabuena and Alma Moyó, in that it was a women-only collective where decisions were made by consensus. We wanted to nurture women's musicianship, leadership, and teaching skills, so we decided this was the best way to make it happen. Yaya's music, like Alma Moyó's, was percussion-only. But different from both Alma Moyó and Yerbabuena, we decided to focus not on a genre or genres associated with one particular nationality/ethnicity: we decided to cultivate both Puerto Rican bomba and Dominican salves. ¡Retumba! is an all-female Caribbean music ensemble that has been around for over 20 years, so we definitely weren't the first ones to have a women-only, percussion-focused Caribbean music group. But, at that moment we founded Yaya, we decided to come together to fill what we felt was a void. It felt like the chain of women's participation and leadership had been broken. So part of our work was actually to educate ourselves on the women that had come before us and try to piece that history back together and share it with others. It seems like other women were inspired by our work, because other women-only or women-led music projects began soon after Yaya's in New York, Puerto Rico, California, and Chicago.

Each of those groups [that] I have been a founding member of has been crucial in my development as an artist. I wouldn't be where I am if I hadn't gone through each one of them.

A few years ago, I left Yaya so that I could focus on my CD and my own band. It was difficult trying to juggle my academic career, my novel-in-progress, and the various music projects I was a part of.

**EC:** Tell us about some of the best moments of your career so far.

**RZR:** The process of recording *Las 7 Salves de La Magdalena* was one of the scariest and most exciting and satisfying projects I have ever undertaken. Each step was completely new to me. And there was a musician friend at each step to guide me along. It all began with pianist and recording engineer Desmar Guevara, who through much prodding finally convinced me that it was a worthwhile effort to record my series of songs of praise for Mary Magdalene. Then, arranger, *cuatrista* and guitarist Alejandro Negrón took the first set of songs to a new level by arranging them and composing one of them. Then, vocalists Sandra García Rivera and Catarina dos Santos lent their gorgeous voices and ideas to the recording project. Meanwhile, two amazing percussionists joined the team: one was talented, young percussionist Obanilú Iré Allende and the other was Juan Gutiérrez (director of Los Pleneros de la 21), who blessed us with his experience, support, guidance, and amazing bomba drumming skills. Then I worked with two other arrangers on two songs: guitarists Yasser Tejeda and Bryan Vargas, each lending a very specific flavor I was craving for the project. Yasser achieved the fusion of salves and jíbaro styles that I was dreaming of—particularly because his Luis Días influence is very marked … and, being a Luis Días fan, it sounded just perfect to me. Bryan is into being creative but privileging simplicity; I love the arrangement he made for *"Nuestra Señora de Lexington* (Our Lady of Lexington)." He became the group's musical director, and most recently we've been co-arranging my "décimas del amargue" and other new songs. For our live performances, we have also had the privilege of working with percussionists Camilo Molina-Gaetán (one of the youngest members of Los Pleneros de la 21, he's in his early 20s) and Jonathan Troncoso (Palo en Cuero, Ilú Ayé), vocalists and percussionists Magic Mejía and Tito Matos (Viento de Agua), vocalists Pedro Raposo (La 21 División / KumbaCarey) and Kaila Paulino (she's also in her early 20s), and bass players Itaiguara Brandão and Donald Nicks (Los Pleneros de la 21). For our most recent concert, we worked with vocalist Anabellie

Raquel Z. Rivera. Photo by Erika Morillo.

Rivera, an amazing boleros singer who also happens to be my sister.

I feel extremely happy to be working with some of the best young and veteran Puerto Rican and Dominican roots musicians of the NYC/DR/PR circuit.

Singing backup for Luis Días, Xiomara Fortuna, Nito Méndez, Alfonso Vélez, and Los Pleneros de la 21 have been other highlights of my music-making career. Also, the first time I sang *Las 7 Salves de La Magdalena* live at St. Mark's Church in September of 2010, it seemed like a dream that all these wonderful musicians were playing the songs I composed for Mary Magdalene. Another highlight was our CD release in Puerto Rico at the Fundación Nacional para la Cultura Popular. It was an intimate space and an extremely enthusiastic crowd. They were singing the coro all throughout, like it was a promesa de aguinaldo; and they gave us a wonderful standing ovation at the end. It was also very moving for me to see the camaraderie and the fusion of Puerto Rican and Dominican percussion styles that we achieved, thanks to the collaboration of Tito Matos and Magic Mejía. To me, that fusion and that collaboration is important to see, because we are two very alike communities that unfortunately also have a lot of static between us, especially in Puerto Rico.

**EC:** What musicians presently inspire you, and what about their skills or their lives inspires you?

**RZR:** The late Luis Días is one of my musical heroes. His lyrics are gorgeous, very deep, and at the same time, simple. I love how he spliced together traditional Dominican music, rock, and other musical influences.

For similar reasons, I love the music of two young Dominican musicians that have been influenced by Días' music: Yasser Tejeda and Rita Indiana. Rita Indiana is not only a singer-songwriter but also a well-known fiction writer; I love her boldness and her writing skills.

Spanish singer Concha Buika is one of the rawest, most intense performers I have ever heard. Her voice speaks to my heart. So do traditional Dominican *bachateros* like Edilio Paredes, Ramón Cordero, and El Chivo Sin Ley.

Portuguese singer Catarina dos Santos writes simple, beautiful, and deep songs, mixing Portuguese, Cape Verdian, Angolan, and Brazilian traditions. I love the fusion.

Los Pleneros de la 21 and Viento de Agua are also favorites of mine. I love that each

has developed such a distinctive sound out of the same raw materials.

I am inspired by and borderline obsessed with older women with nasal, high-pitched voices. I love to be in contexts where they are singing. That's why I love going to promesas de aguinaldo, fiestas de cruz, and homes and churches where women are singing songs to the Virgin and the saints.

**EC:** What keeps you involved in the music over the long term? Where do you want to be, musically, in the future?

**RZR:** The intense pleasure of composing and recording my music is what keeps me making music. I'm hoping to figure out a way to weave my music and fiction writing together. My (as of yet unpublished) novel *Beba* has much to do with bomba and palos music in NYC, so I'm hoping that when I publish the novel, I get to release also an accompanying CD. Another one of my hopes for my music is to have other singers perform my music—performers I love like Concha Buika, Rita Indiana, Julieta Venegas, Catarina dos Santos, Choco Orta, Ileana Cabra, and Anabellie Rivera.

**EC:** Is your website (*www.ojosdesofia.com*) the best way to keep up with your performance schedule?

**RZR:** Yes. Our website is the best way to keep up with our performance schedule.

**EC:** Can you share some selections of your creative, journalistic, and scholarly writing that connect with your musical work?

**RZR:** I am so happy to do that. It is so rarely that I get to wear my fiction writer,

## Excerpt from *Beba: A Fake Memoir*, a novel by Raquel Z. Rivera

*Chapter 3: La Casita*

I saw Josué's hands before I saw his face. Well, just one of his hands. His left. It was at a Los Pleneros de la 21 show at La Casita de Chema in the South Bronx.

Los Pleneros were just going into the first notes of their opening song, when I rounded the corner of Third Avenue and 158th Street. Thick vines and rose bushes crisscrossed over almost every inch of the chicken wire fence that blocked off the wooden house and community garden from the street. A few treetops rose above the fence, the tallest waving a shiny load of green apples. I pushed open the squeaky entrance gate just as the lead singer was hitting the second verse, his long goatee flapping, a silvery brushstroke against his dark, cinnamon skin.

The drummers and singers were set up in a semicircle, right next to the formica tables holding up a long row of heated aluminum serving trays. The keyboardist, guitarist, and *cuatro* player were set up a step higher, on the *casita*'s mint green porch. Bunches of Concord grapes dangled over the awning, bees all around their purple stickiness. A crew of gap-toothed kids played catch in between the dancing legs, their grimy knees and blue Icee mustaches often sliding over the weather-beaten mismatched rugs that covered all the walking and dancing spaces.

The guy I went there to hit on was looking even more gorgeous than I remembered. I had met Manny a few weeks earlier at Central Park's Sunday *rumba*. He was in his early twenties and the youngest among Los Pleneros de la 21. The other *pleneros* wore fitted clothes, Panama hats, and short cropped hair, but Manny's white *guayabera* was oversized, his wide pants balanced on meaty butt cheeks, and his shoulder-length dreadlocks hidden underneath a white Rasta tam. He crouched a bit lower than the rest of the drummers, rocking back and forth on his feet, the heavy frame drum he held on his left hand jumping off every time he hit it with his right.

Los Pleneros had barely finished that first song, and Manny's *guayabera* was already sticking to his chest and arms in dark sweaty patches. That was when I noticed a lot of other women looking at him with greedy eyes. Back then, I had no problem with being aggressive in going for a man. But if there was no quick and clear interest from him, then I moved on. I hated competing, and it looked like getting to the young *plenero* would take some elbowing that I wasn't up for. Extremely handsome men like him are usually nothing but trouble anyway. The music was too good to spend on man-related scheming, so I decided to forget Manny and dance by myself, getting lost in the crowd that was mostly made up of older couples.

Warm, slender fingers grabbed a hold of mine. I opened wide my partly closed eyes and first noticed the creamy skin, the perfect half-moon nails. Then the gray eyes with gold flecks. The dark brown eyebrows with a few unruly sprigs of red and blond. And the chipped-tooth smile.

He wore his dreadlocked hair in two thick braids. A coppery cloud of stray naps made a halo around his head. My own hair was also done in two fat braids—except mine was not locked and dark brown. His neck and wrists were piled with beads, most of them shells and seeds—same gray *camándulas*, brown *flamboyán* seeds, and black and red *peronías* that also hung over my chest. He was decked out in a plain, white T-shirt, olive green army pants and shelltop Adidas. So was I.

Weird.

We danced together the rest of that first set. He wasn't exactly good at it. Or maybe he was. I couldn't decide. He had an old-school hip-hop toprock. His moves were jagged and hard to follow. His fingers insisted on staying locked on mine while our arms pulled in different directions, and he glided his feet, arms slicing the air, with a logic all his own.

scholar, journalist, and singer-songwriter hats all at the same time.

The first selection I want to share is Chapter 3 from my (not yet published) novel *Beba: A Fake Memoir*. The novel narrates the journey of self-discovery of a young Puerto Rican woman who works as a university professor (and hates it) but longs to be a singer. I have set the story within the musical and spiritual traditions that inform my work as a singer-songwriter. This excerpt is titled "La Casita," and it is set in La Casita de Chema—the place I mentioned earlier where my generation of musicians learned so much about our roots musical traditions.

The second selection is the English translation of a series of short articles originally published in Puerto Rico's *Claridad* weekly newspaper. I felt compelled to write those articles as a way to counter the idea that the musical traditions that Puerto Ricans cultivate in New York are somehow not as "pure" or "authentic" as those in Puerto Rico.

*For further reading, see the selected bibliography that accompanies this article, including, "New York Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Dominican Roots Music: Liberation Mythologies and Overlapping Diasporas," published in 2012 by the* Black Music Research Journal *32(2): 3–24.*

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"Josué," he introduced himself once the music stopped, in a voice as perfectly wide and round as his nose. He shook my hand and pulled me into a kiss on the cheek.

"Beba," I said, my hand still in his. "You look so familiar. Haven't we met?"

"I think maybe we were twins in a different life," he said, with another flash of his chipped tooth. He let go of my hand, took a small step back, and opened his arms. "Or maybe we were one of those married couples that end up looking like each other. What's up with this?" he asked, looking down at his clothes and gesturing to mine.

Three of the blue mustached little kids parted the crowd shouting, '*scuse me, 'scuse me, lechón coming through*, trilling their *r*'s. Right behind them, two fridge-shaped old men hurried by with a huge metal tray holding a crispy, dripping, roasted pig. Folks hurried to get a good place on the growing food line that was already winding around the back of the casita.

I followed Josué away from the crowd to the back garden, past the shade of the apple tree, and to the tunnel-shaped walkway completely covered by vines. He pointed to the baby gourds starting to peek through the vines. He said if I came back a month later, I could help him carve out some of them to turn them into *maracas* and *shékeres*. I said I would love to. I noticed Manny standing on the casita porch, smiling at me over his plate of food. So he did remember me!

"Want one?" Josué asked, pointing at the grape bunches hanging down from the leafy tunnel's ceiling.

"Of course," I said, flashing Manny a quick peace sign.

Josué climbed a small stepladder, and I held it steady while he plucked two grape bunches. He washed them off with a nearby hose. They were acidy and sweet like tamarinds. I ate those two bunches and then a few more, until the roof of my mouth was stinging. For the next hour or so, we walked up and down the rows of raised beds packed with tomatoes, peppers, cilantro, spearmint, eggplants, and long stalks of corn. Every so often, Josué would pull out a satiny red handkerchief from his pocket, and I would catch a strong whiff of cinnamon as he dried the sweat dripping from his forehead and running down into his thin, scruffy beard. The bright red cloth soon turned a damp maroon that matched the darker red stitching along its edges.

I asked him how long he had been hanging out at La Casita. He said since the summer before, when his mom was going through chemo. Like me, he'd also met Manny at the Central Park *rumba*; and it was also Manny who first told him about the oasis that the old-timers had coaxed into blooming out of South Bronx ashes. From that first visit, Josué started spending hours and hours—often whole days—at La Casita, learning how to play *plena* and *bomba* and also how to garden. He got really into weeding. It was like therapy. There was something about pulling those little suckers up, about hearing the little roots cracking. He said it was like pulling answers out of the ground.

As we rounded the corner, past the latrine and the chicken coop, I was startled by an old woman's voice:

"Don't let him fool you into thinking he's the only one with the keys to the garden. Or to the promised land."

I looked around, confused, until I saw a dark blue headscarf move away from us on the other side of a thick fence of ivy, trailing behind giggles that sounded like sneezing kittens.

"That was Titi Yaya," Josué said, with a resigned flick of the shoulder, as if meddlesome old *titis* had unrestricted license to step on his toes in that garden of wonders. "She loves to be all up on other people's business."

# In Praise of New York Bomba: A Three-Part Series

By Raquel Z. Rivera

[Note: Originally published in *Claridad* newspaper between October–December 2004 as "Elogio de la bomba de Nueva York." This English version was translated from the Spanish by Juan Cartagena and published in *Güiro y Maraca* magazine (2005).]

## In Praise of New York *Bomba*: Part I

***One***

I first encountered New York *bomba* in a *casita* and garden on 4th Street called La Yarda de Loisaida. Juan Usera, already a master dancer and member of Los Pleneros de la 21 and still in his twenties, introduced me to this bomba. It was markedly different from the bomba I saw on the folkloric stages of our island. And it resembled little of the testosterone-laden, street rumba scene that I knew in New York.

***Two***

The Festival of the Holy Cross, sponsored by Los Pleneros de la 21, is going on its second decade. Every year in El Barrio scores of people, sometimes hundreds of them, gather to commune and to pay homage to the cross.

Sammy and Nelly Tanco, dressed entirely in white, lead the choral responses. Just looking at them gives you goose bumps. Brother and sister—strong, svelte, and graying handsomely—they have voices that transport you. Their elderly mother sits across from them, first row, to complete a triangle of energy, with mannerisms and facial expressions that evidence her devotion.

Under the direction of Juango Gutierrez, Los Pleneros have created a sacred space that fuses Catholicism, non-denominational spirituality, and intense joy.

Year after year, an enormous group of neighbors, friends, and acquaintances gather for the festival. And every year new arrivals come, get hooked, and assiduously return for more.

The last night of the festival always ends with a musical jam of bomba and *plena* rhythms where the labor of over 20 years of commitment by Los Pleneros comes to fruition. The number of youngsters and children that participates is impressive. Some were actual students of Los Pleneros; others informally acquired the knowledge through observation.

Raquel Z. Rivera & Ojos de Sofía. From left to right: Yasser Tejeda, Bryan Vargas, Raquel Z. Rivera, and Anabellie Rivera. Photo by Erika Morillo.

At the end of the Festival of the Holy Cross at the Julia de Burgos Center, the party moves elsewhere. This year it moved to a local bar that featured the group Yerbabuena. Packed to the hilt with people of all ages, it was the 30-something and under-30 crowd that carried the music and dance. Tato Torres sang a *yubá;* Flaco Navaja and Sandra Garcia Rivera added a heavenly chorus; Obanilú Iré Allende played the *primo*; and Georgie Vázquez, Nico Laboy, and Camilo Molina-Gaetán played the *buleadores*. Indira Córdova had just finished dancing, and Liana was waiting, revving up her motor. I was standing by the door when Juango and his wife, Luci, walked by. They looked exhausted but smiled nonetheless. "We can't stay because we're dead tired." And with the satisfaction that comes with knowing that his mission was accomplished, Juango added: "Let's let you young ones keep the party going."

***Three***

Her seasoned gaze crosses that of the adolescent young man who converts her movements into music on the drum. Her left knee anchors the slender arch that her sinewy and supple body creates. With subtlety and precision, she rotates various joints of her limbs in multiple directions, thus creating delightful, complex dance moves for the drummer to transform into sound. Her feet, ankles, wrists, thighs, hips, fingers, waist, shoulders, and elbows speak of salt, of sugar. I've only seen her use a skirt to dance when she's on stage. Without the fabric as medium, the black contortions of her body speak profoundly and honestly. Camilo Molina-Gaetán translates into music what she speaks in dance.

Alexandra Vasallo was born in Cataño but raised in New York. She says that our ancestors speak through our movement, which is why for her, dance technique is meaningless if it lacks a communication line to the invisible world.

Years ago, she once saw me at the outskirts of the bomba circle. "So why haven't you danced?" she asked. "I don't know how to dance," I answered. "Why not? Anyone who moves, can dance," and with these words she gave me the license to do what I had never dared to try, because I lacked "credentials."

Alexandra would later explain that, of course, bomba has a body language that everyone must learn. But it is always better to dance it, even badly, than not to dance it all.

***Four***

Bomba in New York has its own particular trajectory. It has grown and spread, thanks to the passion and commitment of numerous people. It has its key families, key locations. Families like that of Toña and Beatriz, one a lead singer, the other a percussionist. Like the family of Mickey Sierra, Josie, and their kids. Like the family of Mercedes Molina, of Nilsa, and Benny Ayala, of Luci Rivera, and Juan Gutierrez, the Tancos and the Flores.

Chema's casita is one of bomba's key spaces. This was confirmed once again with the spontaneous *bombazo* / *plenazo* jam that developed on the Friday after the Hostos Community College concert by Los Pleneros de la 21 and Los Pleneros de la 23 Abajo. There at nightfall, in the communal space of the casita, bomba and plena was sung, danced and played until Chema announced, gently but firmly, "People, it's now two in the morning . . . "

There were people there from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Philadelphia, Puerto Rico, and a large contingent from Chicago. Those who had previously visited the casita were happy to return. Those who hadn't looked in awe at their surroundings: the handsome wooden casita painted in intense greens with shuttered windows, the apple tree, the enormous *shekeres* hanging aloft from the imposing and gigantic beams, the plants growing wildly and abundantly like *yerba buena*, mint, rue, cilantro, basil, and oregano . . . and all of this in the middle of the South Bronx?

If that Friday night was intense, then Sunday was glorious. The streets were blocked from oncoming traffic and instead, a stage was built. It provided the space for presentations from La Familia Alduén, Los Pleneros de la 23 Abajo, and many more groups. The street was packed and on fire. After several hours of on-stage presentations, the music moved down to the property of the casita. Under the apple tree came hours and hours of straight bomba. On the patio of the casita, plena was performed. Indeed, at one point, a third nucleus of pleneros performed at the back of the casita.

Bomba in New York has its own history, its own form. It navigates the boundaries of the sacred and the profane. In unique fashion it converges with plena, *jíbaro* music, *rumba*, hip-hop, and Dominican *palos*. It really takes root at the community level. It is tradition reclaimed, culture on the move. And it has its own magic.

## In Praise of New York Bomba Part II: The Diaspora Strikes Back

I confess. In the first segment of this article I dared not say what I truly wanted to say. Silly me.

Oh, I definitely celebrated the history of bomba, its practitioners, and its manifestations in New York. But I never explained the real concern that inspired my ponderings.

I censured myself thinking: Who am I to get into this? I've barely started to learn about these traditions. I have green eyes and light skin, and no bomba pedigree. I am a relative newcomer when it comes to these matters.

But what I held back from saying is now an annoyingly sharp pebble in my winter boots. So I'm putting aside my insecurities. I, too, have opinions and insights.

What I'm about to say should ideally go without saying. But recent (and not so recent) events require that it be stated plainly:

BOMBA, AS IT IS PLAYED AND LIVED IN NEW YORK, IS NOT INFERIOR TO THE BOMBA IN PUERTO RICO. It is neither less legitimate, less masterful, less raw, less lively, nor less ingenious.

It is neither better, nor inferior. It is simply distinctive in certain respects. And that merits respect.

The same can be said about other places in the United States. What Ramón López has documented about Chicago is a good example.

What constitutes the elements of "true" bomba has always been debated in Puerto Rico. There are people on the southern coast who say that the bomba of Santurce and Loíza lacks the elegance and decorum of "real" bomba. There are others that claim that the booty shakes of Loíza's bomba is a tasteless modernism outside of what they consider "true" bomba. And others note that

the "typical dress" of bomba is really made up, not "typical" at all.

We have barely begun to engage in a collective dialogue about the variety of bomba over time and over regions. The First National Bomba Congress at the beginning of 2004 and the documentary *Raíces* are notable first attempts to recognize the many faces of bomba. But the prep work, so to speak, didn't just start recently. That groundbreaking work was done by groups like Paracumbé and Bambalué, who for years have been presenting the southern style of bomba; by families and communities in diverse towns who have perpetuated bomba far from the public eye; by research and education projects like C.I.C.R.E. (Centro de Investigación y Cultura "Raíces Eternas") and Restauración Cultural,not to mention the numerous musicians and researchers who have repeatedly affirmed the diversity of bomba.

Healthy and necessary, this debate continues. Is bomba in its "essential" form, Puerto Rican? Does the fact that so many of its songs and rhythms carry words outside the Spanish language make bomba any less Puerto Rican? If a dancer "mixes" steps associated with different regions of the island, does it adulterate bomba? Is today's bomba merely a reduction in simplified form, of yesteryear's more complex rhythmic patterns? Does bomba have spiritual / religious dimensions?

These debates are rendered with the same passion in the United States as they are in Puerto Rico. And on both sides of the ocean, there is wide array of opinions.

Both locations have masters, both male and female, and serious researchers. Both have their share of impostors and troublemakers. In the United States, just like in Puerto Rico, there are some who take poetic/musical/dance license to compose new songs, innovate dance moves, and thereby integrate their subjective take on this collective expression.

There are veterans, both young and old, who are bomba masters both in and outside the island. Their perspectives and lived experiences all deserve respect.

The families and groups, on both sides of the ocean, that have distinguished themselves internationally by cultivating these traditions, merit our respect and recognition. The same is true for the families, groups, and persons who do the same within the borders of their own neighborhoods. Indeed, all who invest their commitment, passion, and dedication to continuing to show the many faces that have always characterized bomba, deserve our respect.

***The Diaspora Strikes Back***

I borrow this notion of a diaspora that strikes back from Juan Flores, who in a recent article challenged the myth, which claims that what is authentically Puerto Rican can only originate and reside in Puerto Rico. Flores notes that diasporic communities should see themselves as sources of cultural innovations and not just as repositories or extensions of the traditions of the island of Puerto Rico. And he warns us that these new diasporic perspectives often challenge traditional definitions of what is, or is not, Puerto Rican.

***Coda: New York Rican Polyphony***

Warning: This sampling of voice is absolutely subjective, fragmented, and non-representative!

Voice 1: "In New York, bomba is excessively mixed in with rumba and hip hop."

Voice 2: "You know, body movements are, to a certain point, involuntary. If people, especially our youth, are mixing in bomba with rumba and hip hop, it's because these are often the maternal language, the principal language, that their bodies speak."

Voice 3: "And so what if they mix it with rumba and hip hop? Over in Puerto Rico, there are people who mix it with flamenco and ballet."

Voice 4: "Is it a bombazo if it also includes Dominican palo?"

Voice 5: "Who cares? Why do you have to label it? If they want to play bomba for a while, then palo for a while, what's the problem?" answers a Dominican speaking with a Puerto Rican accent.

Voice 6: "Is it a bombazo if only bomba is played, but half of those who play and dance it are Dominican?"

Voice 7: "*Of cooooourse*," replies a Puerto Rican speaking with a Dominican accent.

Voice 8: "Please, stop inventing so many things and just take a few classes in bomba."

Voice 9: "In New York there's more freedom to dance," observes a young dancer. "In Puerto Rico, the people who dance are more likely to have taken classes."

Voice 10: "Bomba classes? What's that? Girl, you don't learn this in class!" says a veteran female Bronx dancer.

As Julia L. Gutiérrez-Rivera, another young dancer, concludes: "In New York, dancing connects you to your roots, it reaffirms what it is to be Puerto Rican."

## In Praise of New York Bomba Part III: Tradition? What Can You Eat That With?

Defining "tradition," be it in bomba or in other cultural expressions, is a complicated task. Reaching consensus on what is, or is not, "traditional" is frequently impossible. What some consider traditional, others consider innovative and enriching, or useless and dangerous.

It is productive to engage in dialogue regarding the complexities of the concept of tradition and to encourage more research and debates about history. Conversely, it is highly counterproductive for us to attack or silence one another by brandishing the mythical sword of tradition and shouting that my opinion is the only thing that counts. It is one thing to say, "I don't like what you do," and quite another to say, "what you do has no value," or "what you do is disrespectful."

I am far from being the only one who proposes these things. I present below a number of diverse voices from the trenches that inspire, challenge, and nurture my own.

***Hector "Tito" Matos***

This master percussionist, singer, composer, and director of Viento de Agua says: "If you look closely, the real studious and learned ones are humble and will avoid putting roadblocks to the development of the tradition. You know that I am one who always supports creativity; and it's important to learn (to the extent we still can) the forms and elements of the genre, not just to show others that we know them, but to prove to ourselves that we have the

Raquel Z. Rivera & Ojos de Sofía. From left to right: Bryan Vargas, Raquel Z. Rivera, Anabellie Rivera, Camilo Molina-Gaetán, and Jonathan Troncoso. Photo by Erika Morillo.

necessary tools to construct and deconstruct the traditions we've inherited."

***Awilda Sterling Duprey***

This dancer, visual artist, performer, and professor says: "To my understanding, the act of dancing, in the case of the popular genres, is an intuitive response of rhythmic/muscular–skeletal associations blended by the idiosyncratic sensory framework that the dancer possesses. Accordingly, it is perfectly acceptable (that is, if one's mind is receptive to the reasoning behind contextual change) that in New York so many stylistic variants are added to the traditional patterns danced in Puerto Rican bomba."

"It seems to me that bomba in New York is an example of constancy in the chain of human survival: the adaptation and appropriation of cultural patterns that converge in a social system and where a specific vocabulary surges from within, contributing to the development and preservation of cultural norms, that are not fixed, but in continuous change. In the case of Puerto Rican bomba who can really vouch for its 'authencity'? And if it were possible, authenticity under what criteria? To paraphrase the biblical passage: 'Let he that is free from sin throw the first stone!'"

***Tato Torres***

The singer-composer and director of the jíbaro music, bomba and plena group Yerbabuena, says: "What is 'traditional'? Simply whatever is repeated over more than two or three generations independently of how 'genuine' it may or may not be. If people continue to do it, it's traditional. Some people confine themselves to their conceptualization of what things are, or are not, and that makes it difficult for them to break from that mold."

"I play the music that I play to commune with my parents, my brothers and sisters, and my grandfather. My goal is to get my family to the table. You can possess all of the cultural by-products (the music, food, dress) but if your family doesn't come to the table, it is not culture. Culture is a living thing. These cultural by-products are tools, but they are not culture. Instead, they adapt and change with time. The dance, dress and songs, that is not culture. It is culture if it serves as a space of cultural expression, like a rite of intensification that reinforces the bonds that exist between certain persons. The magic lies in how to call out those persons and how to preserve those bonds."

***Yerbabuena***

According to Yerbabuena's website, the group started five years ago from a "need for cultural expression, redefinition and re-appropriation of the Puerto Rican musical heritage by a new generation of *Boricuas*. Yerbabuena reclaims the Puerto Rican music branded 'folkloric,' refusing to accept its pack-

aging as frozen-in-time museum pieces, only vaguely connected to contemporary culture."

So how do we translate all of this in concrete terms? Let's visit a local bar–restaurant in El Barrio called Camaradas on a Thursday night: There is Flaco Navaja re-interpreting a *seis mapeyé* recorded by Ramito but appropriated by these young folks in true Bronx style as a new "*seis* Boogie Down." In addition to being a singer, Flaco is a well-known poet in the hip hop world. Just check out his mannerisms; anyone would swear he was rapping. Now erase the visual image from your mind and just listen: don't you hear echoes of Héctor Lavoe? Luis "Bebo" Reyes plays his *cuá* sticks to a rhythm called "down south," which he learned from the kids who play spackle buckets on the subway stations. Bebo is also a producer of house and hip hop music. Hector "Pucho" Alamo, the cuatro player, has his hair in cornrows and is a big fan of *reggaetón*. Nick Laboy and Obanilú Allende, excellent percussionists both, play the barrel drums. The former wears a doo-rag and hat, T-shirt, and baggy jeans. The latter wears a *guayabera,* dress pants, and a hat his grandfather would wear.

That's some gang of 20-something year olds that fronts Yerbabuena! They are a perfect complement to the gorgeously nasal voice and rural aesthetic of Tato Torres which is indebted to the sacred *aguinaldos* and secular jíbaro party music he witnessed growing up in the hills of Guayanilla. Their website doesn't lie when it declares: "Yerbabuena makes gorgeous music that incorporates past and present. Yerbabuena taps right into the core of who we are."

***Tradition and Invention Went to the Mountains One Day . . .***

The only thing left for me to do now is share the following quote from the German architect and painter, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, that Tito Matos brought to my attention: "Tradition inspires innovation, but innovation keeps tradition alive."

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