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Echoes of Familiar Rhythms:
Puerto Rican & Garifuna Drums

BY ELENA MARTÍNEZ

In 2012, Bobby Sanabria and I, Artistic Co-Directors of the Bronx Music Heritage Center (BMHC) attended a Garifuna event at the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture. It was the first time that Bobby had seen drum and dance groups from the Garifuna community, and his drummer's ear (he is a percussionist and jazz drummer) immediately picked up on the rhythms coming from the stage. "That sounds just like our *holandés* (referring to a rhythm from the Puerto Rican *bomba* musical style). A light instantly went on in my mind—the Puerto Rican and Garifuna drum traditions have a lot in common, as well as do the communities themselves—so let's create a program at the BMHC to present them together. That was the seed that became, *Parranda con Paranda: A Puerto Rican & Garifuna Holiday Celebration*, which will celebrate its 4th annual program this coming December.

At first glance, this is not so strange a pairing as it might seem. Many Puerto Ricans jokingly referred to the Bronx as the second largest Puerto Rican city, after San Juan (the capital of the island). The Bronx is currently home to the largest Garifuna community outside of Central America—the Garifuna come from Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The borough shapes both the communities, as they have in turn shaped the Bronx. The Puerto Rican legacy is found in places such as Teatro Puerto Rico, which was the center of the local show business scene for decades, and the traditional music scene has been reinvigorated at Rincón Criollo, one of the oldest Puerto Rican casitas and community gardens in the City. The musicians playing the traditional music of Puerto Rico have

Matthew Gonzalez dancing bomba (2013). *All photos by Elena Martínez.*

gained a lot of their training in groups and venues based in the Bronx—with the center of activity being the casita, which was created by Chema Soto to reclaim a space for his community amid the devastation. Rincón Criollo, or "La casita de Chema," as it has affectionately become known, is the place where traditional Puerto Rican musicians from New York and Puerto Rico go to hear and play this music.

Sadly, the Bronx was also the home to the Happy Land Social Club, where in a fire, which happened on March 25, 1990, 87 people lost their lives. Fifty-nine victims were members of the Honduran community, of which many were Garifuna (many of the Garifunas in the Bronx are from Honduras). The fire was the worst in New York City since the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, and the small park in front of the original site at 1950 Southern Blvd. has become the Plaza of the Eighty-Seven in their memory. Although most people have never realized the connection between Hondurans and Garifunas, within the community, almost everyone had been personally affected. The fire at the social club, actually a small after-hours disco, changed the face of the music scene in New York City, as small social clubs came under scrutiny for better safety regulations in terms of building and fire codes. This affected the immigrant/ethnic communities who rely on social clubs as meeting places, refuges, and centers of information. Various music scenes, such as the salsa circuit, lost neighborhood gigs as the music shifted to more commercial venues.

Musically, Puerto Ricans and the Garifuna also have a lot in common. They both play huge barrel-shaped drums, which have big, powerful sounds. The Puerto Rican *bomba* tradition is the oldest of all of Puerto Rico's Afro-based musical traditions and has roots in West Africa. *Bomba* developed in the context of colonial plantation life when enslaved Africans participated in dances (*bailes*) to celebrate their day off, baptisms, and marriages. The drums used in *bomba* are called *barriles*. A *bomba* group requires at least two or three *barriles*, a *cúa* (a pair of sticks struck upon a hard surface), and a single maraca. The *barriles* that keep the constant rhythm are called the *buleadores*, or *seguidores,* while the drum that interacts with the dancers when they perform their *piquetes* (steps), is called the *primo* or *subidor*. During the dance, the dancer creates a dialogue with the drummer of the *subidor*, by getting the drummer to respond to her dance movements with *repiques* or *toques* (drum strokes).

The Garifuna drums are collectively called *garawoun*. Bronx Garifuna drummer Bodoma says originally they were called *dômbü*. According to James Lovell, a noted Garifuna musician and educator, the individual drums are called *lanigi garawoun* (heart drum), which is used for sacred music; the

Chester Nuñez dancing in Wanaragua regalia (2014).

Andrew Clarke dancing as Pitchy Patchy (2014).

bass drum called *segundo*, which keeps the tempo of the music; and the *primeru*, the smallest drum with a higher pitch. These drums are accompanied by smaller percussion: *sisira* (maracas), *wadabu agei* (conch shell), and *tagei bugudura* (turtle shell). The Puerto Rican and Garifuna percussion instruments have similarities, so it is not surprising that when listening closely to the big barrel-type drums of both groups, you can hear echoes of familiar rhythms that call to both.

Our *Parranda con Paranda* title and theme came from combining elements from both musical styles. The Garifuna have a musical style called "paranda" (with one "r"), which is played using drums and guitar. Both communities have the tradition of the "parranda" (with two "r's")—the holiday procession where neighbors sing Christmas carols from home to home. The *parranda* tradition in Puerto Rico takes place during the holiday season, which begins on Nochebuena (Christmas Eve), climaxes on El Día de los Tres Reyes (Three King's Day or Epiphany) on January 6, and ends with Octava, eight days after Tres Reyes—and if you really want to keep partying there is Octavitas, another eight days! During this time, groups of strolling musicians go from house to house in the *parranda* tradition, also called *trullas navideñas*, and sometimes called *asaltos*, as people join in to surprise and musically "assault" their family and friends. It is customary to give food and drink to the *parranderos* who stop by one's home.

The *paranda* genre of music is thought to have entered the Garifuna musical lexicon during the 19th century when the community settled in Honduras and incorporated Spanish and Latin American musical elements, including the acoustic guitar, into their repertoire. Nowadays, the genre has become quite popular due to modern *paranderos* such as Paul Nabor, Junior Aranda, Andy Palacio, and Aurelio Martínez.

Parranda or *paranda*—they share some similar roots. In the liner notes for the Smithsonian Folkways Records recording, *The Black Caribs of Honduras*, Doris Stone writes, "The Black Caribs [a name for the Garifuna] call this type of song a *parrandatinu*, a word taken from the Spanish *paranda*, which signifies 'spree.'" Other scholars have posited that the roots of the word, "parranda" come from the Arabic, Portuguese, or Basque with meanings that include: "joyful celebration," "noisy feast," or "uproar," and "laugh" or "laughter." Whatever the roots of the word, at the Bronx program all participants feel this annual celebration is truly a joyous occasion.

Each year we have focused on a different aspect of the musical traditions from the two communities. In 2014, we celebrated masquerade traditions from the Christmas season, with reference to the Puerto Rican Festival de Máscaras (Masks) celebrated in the town of Hatillo on December 28, the Day of the Holy Innocents, and a presentation of the Garifuna Wanáragua, which itself is a variation of Jamaican Jonkonnu. We included Jamaican masquerade performers in the program as well. Jonkunnu

and Wanáragua include processions that incorporate African drumming with European and African masked traditions, and in the case of Jonkunnu, English mumming traditions. All three traditions feature masks made out of a wire mesh; Jonkunnu and Wanáragua have stock figures such as the Queen and the Devil, as well as beribboned figures, of which the most well known is probably Pitchy-Patchy from Jamaica.

In 2015, the focus was on women as dancers, vocalists, and as drummers. The Garifuna *abeimahani* songs are semi-sacred, unaccompanied, gestured songs only sung by women, as opposed to another song type, *arumahani*, which are sung *a capella* by men. During the performance of *abeimahani* songs, the vocalists stand alongside each other, clasping pinky fingers to the person next to them. These songs are usually a component of the *Dugu*, a religious ceremony to communicate with ancestors. In various cultures, drumming has traditionally been the purview of men, even though the Yoruba of Nigeria consider the spirit of the drum to be female and call it *aña* (thus, the name of another of the BMHC's series, "The Spirit of Aña," which celebrates women and drums in all their forms). Yet, for the current generation of musicians, these genres have many women as active percussive participants and bandleaders. Young Puerto Rican and Dominican women are forming their own groups, which include Yaya, The Legacy Women Circle, Bámbula, and Ojos de Sofia.

This year our theme will be *Celebración de los Cuernos*—Celebration of Horns. We'll include a tribute to the iconic Puerto Rican masquerade figure, the *vejigante,* of which there are different styles on the island. In the south of the island, in Ponce, *vejigantes* with large papier-mâché masks have many horns of various sizes and march through the Carnival processions prior to Lent. In the northeast, during the Fiesta Patronal de Santiago (Festival of St. James) in July, *vejigantes* with coconut shell masks that usually sport 3–5 thinner horns, dance through the patron saint celebration. Their name comes from a combination of "vejiga," meaning cow bladder, which these tricksters use as balloons to hit people during the celebrations, and "gigante" (giant), as these figures seem larger than life. Around Christmastime, the Garifuna have a "bull dance" that is called *Charikanari* in Belize and *Pia Manadi* in Honduras. A man dons a long, dark coat and face mask, and adds a pair of horns to his forehead to evoke a bull.

Abeihamani performed by Garifuna Women Abeimahani directed by Luz Soliz (2015).

Bomba: Ines Mangual (vocals), drums: Jorge Vazquez, Kya Perez, and Manuela Arcinegas (2015).

Another character, "Hunter Man" carries a gun and chases after the bull—and sometimes, the bull turns the tables, and using its horns, chasing the hunter in return. These antics are accompanied by music (James Lovell, personal communication).

Our mission at the BMHC is to present the musical legacy of the Bronx, looking to its past as the birthplace of hip hop and its Latin music connection—after all, it is "El Condado de la Salsa" (The Borough of Salsa). We also seek to present the thriving contemporary soundscape. Nowadays, Latin music heard in the streets is *bachata* and not salsa, reflecting the growing Dominican community, and the music of the emerging new communities, most notably the many African styles of music from Gambia and Mali and the large Garifuna community in the Bronx.

So this December, come to the Bronx and follow the beat of the drum because *el tambor llama*—the drum calls.

Many thanks to José Francisco Avila and the Garifuna Coalition for their support as our partner in "Parranda Con Paranda: A Puerto Rican & Garifuna Holiday Celebration." Special thanks also go to the musicians who are parranderos with us every year, especially the core organizational group: Lucy Blanco, Bodoma, Alex Colón, James Lovell, Bobby Sanabria, Jorge Vázquez, and Matthew Gonzalez.

Elena Martínez received an MA in Anthropology and an MA in Folklore at the University of Oregon. Since 1997, she has been a folklorist at City Lore and is currently also the co-artistic director for the Bronx Music Heritage Center. She co-produced the documentary, *From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale*, which aired on PBS in September 2006 and won the NCLR's (National Council of La Raza) 2007 ALMA Award for Best TV Documentary. She was also a producer for the documentary *We Like It Like That: The Story of Latin Boogaloo*, which premiered at the SXSW Festival in 2015. She has been a contributor to *Latinas in the United States: An Historical Encyclopedia* by historians Virginia Sánchez Korrol and Vicki L. Ruíz (Indiana University Press, 2006); *Women's Folklore & Folklife: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art* (ABC-CLIO, 2008); and *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (Univ. of Mississippi Press, 2013). She is currently on the Advisory Boards for Casita Maria/Dancing in the Streets' South Bronx Culture Trail, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies Archive at Hunter College, , and Los Pleneros de la 21. She was awarded a 2013 BOROMIX Puerto Rican Heritage Award and Comité Noviembre's *Lo Mejor de Nuestra Comunidad* 2013. Photo by Francisco Molina Reyes, II.

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