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Cartagena, Juan

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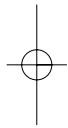
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Barriles de bomba. Artesanos (starting from left): Jesús Cepeda, Eduardo Torres (art Rafael Torres), Juan Cartagena. Photography by Juan Cartagena. Reprinted, by permission, from Juan Cartagena.

Introduction

Tito Cepeda is a *bombero* from New York steeped in the tradition and loved by all who know his mastery of Puerto Rico's drums, his commitment to teaching, and his spirituality. One night in El Barrio his family and friends waited anxiously with expectation at the Julia de Burgos Center. This was a reception for him and a release for us. We were the ones who had shared his pain as diabetes progressed through his body, causing the amputation of several of his fingers. We were the ones who directly understood what this meant to him and to the community of *pleneros* and *bomberos*. So we waited, making quiet conversation.

The night opened with drums—our constant companion in times of need, and in times of plenty. The percussionists, provoked by Tito Matos, finally started the lyrical acrobatic challenges that accompany every *plena*. It was this rhythm from Ponce, reflecting the mastery of *plena* legends such as Bumbún Oppenheimer and Emilio Escobar,¹ who welcomed Tito Cepeda as he finally arrived, dressed to the nines. In no time a new, fresh *plena* was composed by Hugo Asencio to honor the contributions that Tito Cepeda made to our lives. The drums continued, the *abrazos* and whispered words of solidarity to Tito continued as well. But this was all a prelude. The real passion ignited when the *bomba* drums appeared. It was then that Tito Cepeda danced to the drum, danced to the memory of his ancestors, and explicitly called out everyone to the floor. The participatory nature of the music increased immediately and exponentially. Skirts flowed, both real and imaginary. Dancers materialized from the audience, young and old, light and dark, all joining the *baile de bomba*. Ancestors from Loíza, Santurce, and Mayagüez were invoked, and song after song unfolded. This night in El Barrio epitomized the crossroads of *bomba* and *plena* today: *plena* was used to give voice to our collective consciousness, our collective



Barril de bomba. Artesano: Juan Fuentes. Photograph by Juan Cartagena. Reprinted, by permission, from Juan Cartagena.

manifestations at bay but did not completely outlaw its practice (Thompson 2002: 13–4), leading to the preservation of a musical art form that resonates today among Puerto Rican youth who identify with its rebelliousness.

The rhythmic patterns that define *bomba* have centuries of tradition on the island. To the extent that African-derived drumming patterns can be transposed into European musical notations, *bombas* fall into 4/4 or 6/8 meter. What is clear is that *bomba* in one region of the island can be quite different from another region. In terms of basic rhythm patterns (*seis de bomba* or *son de bomba*), the Santurce region is known for its *sicá*, *holandé*, and *yubá*; Loíza, for its *seis corrido* and *corvé* rhythms; Ponce and the south, for *guembé*, *belén*, and *cunyá*, among other rhythms; and Mayagüez, for *holandé*, among other rhythms. In addition, the

style of dance and the overall presentation and protocol associated with the dance in a *baile de bomba*—the traditional, participatory dance which is associated with *bomba* in its truest form—also exhibit significant regional variations.

Regional variations, overlapping terminology, and even idiosyncratic expressions of *bomba* throughout Puerto Rico are indicative of the oral traditions that have preserved *bomba* for over 300 years. This organic expression, with all its colors and manifestations, what some would label “folkloric” expressions, characterizes a major component of *bomba*. The other component, commercialized *bomba* performed by musical groups that cater to market forces, did not develop until the 1950s at the earliest. In this category, despite its richness and complexity, *bomba* was reduced to one form of expression by perhaps its most important artist in the last half of the twentieth century: Rafael Cortijo. An incredible force in the elevation of percus-

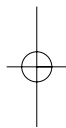
Part of this invisibility is due to the lack of literature on *bomba*, especially in academic circles, as if the genre were unworthy of serious research (Barton 1995: 53; Rodríguez Benítez 2002: 4), and part of the problem is due to the invisibility that accompanies African influences on Puerto Rican culture in general. Even today the number of dissertations, or expanded academic writings, on the richness of *bomba* music is limited (see McCoy 1968; Vega Drouet 1979; Dufrasne González 1985; Barton 1995). This othering of Puerto Rican *bomba* is also a product of race and its legacy.

The Racialization of *Bomba*

The marginalization of *bomba* in Puerto Rico and throughout the diaspora must be viewed through the prism of race. On the one hand, *bomba* music and dance are proudly displayed throughout Puerto Rican communities as the quintessential symbol of their African heritage. Yet, as Barton observes, its exalted status as a symbol of blackness is juxtaposed with its marginalization by the “white-identified elite and society at large” (Barton 1995: 11).

Emanuel Dufrasne González is one of the few writers who have pointedly depicted the anomalies that confront *bomba* as an accepted musical and cultural phenomenon in Puerto Rico. He asserts, plainly and directly, that one simply cannot speak about Puerto Rico’s music without including its African heritage, which influences all the music in the island (Millán 1999). In “Afrofobia,” he notes:

In our country, municipal and regional governmental agencies exist to promote our national culture.... The problem lies in the definition of our national culture. They conceive it only from one musical instrument—the Puerto Rican *cuatro*—when our country has created a diverse form of musical instruments. Why the *cuatro* and not the *pandero* of *plena*? Why not a *bomba* drum? Drums clearly are deemed offensive and repugnant because they evoke memories of our blacks, as if Spain did not have its own drums and other percussive instruments, or as if in the vast continent of Africa there were no stringed instruments like lauds, harps, violins and the like. They suffer from afro-phobia. These agency bureaucrats think of nothing else but Taíno indian petroglyphs, and the *güiro*, and our *décimas* as the prototype of our legacy, disregarding our rich Afro-Puerto Rican legacy. They do not understand that Puerto Rico is a



Spanish and Taíno over and above the African influence. With these examples in mind, it is easy to see why *bomba* has been excluded from the official discourse of the island's patrimony.

In the United States the racialization of *bomba* took on many of the same contours despite the qualitative differences in how the two nations account for race. Puerto Ricans in the United States defy easy racial categorizations owing to their own mixed race: a phenotypical range from black to brown to white (Duany 2002: 244). This results in their othering by "Euromericans," whose perceptions have created a new race for Puerto Ricans (Grosfoguel and Georas 2001). This racial othering creates sets of experiences of discrimination leading Puerto Ricans to resist total assimilation and, instead, fight American racism. Thus, Puerto Ricans in New York repudiate classifications of black or white and prefer being characterized as "other" (Duany 2002: 244). Puerto Rican migrants are fierce defenders of their culture and their traditions despite the toll of distance and time, thus creating space for a reaffirmation of *boricua* identity. And *bomba*, already marginalized by Puerto Ricans, becomes even more racially charged when it is used as an identifiable marker for *boricua* communities in the diaspora. Its manifestations in the historic epicenter of the *boricua* migration, New York City, require, however, a more detailed discussion of its role and its development.

Nuyoricans & Bomba

In 1998, at a panel discussion on Latin rhythms in New York City, the legendary Puerto Rican *conguero* Ray Barretto witnessed a demonstration on *bomba* dance and percussion and then revealed, tellingly, that he would now consider recording a *bomba*—something he had never done before in his career. Barretto does not stand alone in this regard; even the king of Latin music, Tito Puente, recorded only seven *bombas*, all in *sicá* (and only one *plena*) in a career that amassed more than 110 recorded albums (Cartagena 2000).

There is a paucity of research focusing on the presence of *bomba* within the Puerto Rican diaspora. Puerto Rico is noted for having the bulk of its popular music throughout the early 1900s into the 1950s recorded outside its borders—virtually all of it in New York (Díaz Ayala 1998: 52). In light of *bomba's* role as the quintessential African-based cultural expression from the island and the fact that Puerto Ricans in the United States have been racialized in ways that highlight their otherness, the relative absence of *bomba*, while noteworthy, is not surprising, at least not to musical leaders in the heyday of New York City's dominance as the hub of Puerto Rican migration:

In live performances you might get one or two *merengues* in a salsa band. You'll rarely get any *bombas* and *plenas*.

(Barton 1995: 81–2—quoting Frankie Malabe)

it is, instead, characterized more by its ability to freely incorporate various rhythms from the Caribbean (Quintero Rivera 1998a). Musicians like Tommy Olivencia mark the beginning of the salsa era with the *bomba* and *plena* expressions of Rafael Cortijo (Thompson 2002: 115). But the musician credited most with inserting other Caribbean rhythms, including *bomba*, into the Cuban foundation of salsa is Willie Colón (Otero Garabís 2000). By fronting the hottest and youngest band at the beginnings of the salsa era in New York City, Willie Colón was a daring innovator who created the space for Héctor Lavoe to make *jíbaro* music, from the mountains of Puerto Rico, hip in New York (Sosa Dedos 1998) and who later reinvigorated the legendary career of *plenero* Mon Rivera in recordings of both *plenas* and *bombas*. The 1971 song “Ghana’e,” a Colón and Lavoe composition, is one of the earliest, and most popular, *bombas* recorded by them. Willie Colón was, knowingly or not, helping to forge a new Puerto Rican identity for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, who were recognizing the significance of their African roots on different terms than their counterparts in Puerto Rico (see Flores and Yúdice 1990).

All of these developments were part of the backdrop in the City when *bomba* began to flourish. Pioneers in the development of *bomba* in the New York City include Víctor Montañez, founder of Víctor Montañez y Los Pleneros de la 110 in 1966, a group that went on to record *bomba* and *plena* tunes. Sammy Tanco, another veteran of this music, started a *bomba* and *plena* group, El Grupo Loíza, in the Lower East Side in 1967, while Paco Rivera lent his guidance to Los Pleneros de la 21 and to the people at Rincón Criollo in the Bronx. El Barrio also benefited at this early stage from the work of Heny Álvarez and his *bomba* performance group, Mi Grupo y Bomba (Muñoz nd). Eugenia Ramos, an intense and spiritual *bomba* dancer and performer, bridged the *bomba* scene in New York between Heny Álvarez’s group and Los Pleneros de la 21. Félix Romero was another important pioneer in *bomba*, credited with creating one of the first nonprofits that promoted *bomba* and *plena* rhythms and secured funding for these efforts. His work with Teatro Otra Cosa made inroads into breaking down barriers at cultural festivals in Central Park, which ignored *bomba* and *plena*.⁹ Finally, the vision of Carmelo Acosta Lacén was instrumental in giving numerous New York City *bomba* and *plena* groups their first gigs in festivals in the City. He was instrumental, along with Hermanos Fraternos de Loíza Aldea, in organizing the annual Fiesta Tradicionales de Loíza Aldea and produced one of the earliest *bomba* and *plena* festivals in the city, in 1976 at Tompkin Park in Brooklyn. Journalist Aurora Flores covered for *Billboard* magazine an earlier festival of *bomba* in New York City, held at the Beacon Theatre in 1975.¹⁰

The survival of *bomba* in New York City after the pioneering efforts of these veteran musicians and promoters is due in large part to two institutions: the community that congregates at La Casita Rincón Criollo in the Bronx and the seminal El Barrio-based



Lillian Pérez, of *Segunda Quimbamba*, preparing to dance bomba. Union City, NJ, 2002. Photograph by Meriam Lobel. Reprinted, by permission, from Juan Cartagena.

different levels, despite obvious limitations. In the first place it elevates *bomba* as an equal partner with *plena* in the celebration of Puerto Rico's drums; indeed, *bomba* outpaces *plena* in the number of selections presented in both the film and the accompanying CD release. *Raíces* also incorporates genuine *bomberos* and *pleneros* as lead artists in their own songs, not just as accompaniment for the star vocalists who have come to characterize Banco Popular specials. And the film special also does justice to dancers—especially *bomba* dancers, who grace the screen throughout the ninety minutes of prime time television (Cartagena 2001). In all, the film special served both as an educational/documentary tool and as entertainment and has been recognized as providing basic information on the differences between *bomba* and *plena* and on the rudiments of *bomba* to a mass audience (Cartagena 2002, quoting Tito Matos).

Another significant contribution to the recent appreciation of *bomba* is the documentary on the Cepeda family, *Bomba: Dancing the Drum*. Produced by Roberta Singer and directed by Ashley James, this 2000 film excels by having Don Rafael Cepeda and his family narrate the development of *bomba* music and their family's unique contributions to its preservation. By aggressively pursuing film festivals throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean, and receiving artistic recognition throughout, the film has created an exposure to *bomba* music on the international scene.

tradition, to their graves. Accordingly, *bomba's* renaissance is indeed a rebirth of the genre, but one that is limited to the better-known, better-documented modalities.

The question is whether *bomba* is used as a proxy for the past or as a vehicle for expression in the present. The categorization of musical expressions as folklore often reflects a class bias towards the music of the masses, which has been the product of oral traditions and may well serve to segregate those expressions from the preferred tastes of the dominant elites. Folkloric in this sense results in staid, archaic, immutable music. Indeed, even the label “folkloric” has been met with criticism for these and other reasons. Dufrasne González suggests an alternative nomenclature: *popular* (in Spanish), a term that encompasses peoples’ expressions, collectively owned and characterized by anonymous compositions (Milan 1999). There is reason to conclude that *bomba*, as it enters this millennium, is not a proxy for Puerto Rico’s past but, with the increasing acceptance among Puerto Rican youth, is instead a dynamic modality for contemporary expression.

Youth & Bomba: From Hip Hop to Bomba.

Segunda Quimbamba, a Jersey City-based percussion and dance ensemble that performs both *bomba* and *plena*, was back at Montclair State University for a return engagement. This time hip hop was meeting *bomba* in an encounter that was a natural, spontaneous progression from the spoken word and *bomba* rhythms featured in the weekly “Words and Drums” series in Jersey City. That previous encounter allowed the older generation *bomba* drummers to join forces with young bloods from Positive Latino Association, an organization aimed at providing alternatives for Latino youth in the Jersey City/Union City area. That area of metropolitan New York has also had its share of changes. Because of gentrification, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans were being forced out of downtown Jersey City—the historic epicenter of the *Boricua* community—and consequently were moving north to displace Cubans at the edges of Union City. Latinos and Latinas at Montclair State were present in good number as *bomba* set the context for what came next: an accented down beat on the *sicá* rhythm, a *cunyá* from the songbook of Rafael Cepeda, Jersey Devil (Danny Rojas) on the mike rapping extended verses in English to contrast the Spanish coro (“*cunyá, de la peronía, cunyá*”), and a dance off between the younger female dancers of Segunda Quimbamba and Four Worlds, b-boys from PLA, including Rafael Corona. The performance straddled the expanse of tradition and modernity that Rodríguez Juliá attributed to Cortijo’s music (Flores 1993a: 22). And its manifestation in this New Jersey college campus was just one in a series of encounters of reaffirmation and identity between *Boricua* youth and *Boricua* veterans grounded in *bomba*.

Far away, in the heart of Chicago’s Puerto Rican neighborhoods, *bomba* music has had a home for many years in the hearts of *Boricua* youth. Grupo Yubá operating out

young talented performers. The task of extending the world view that *bomba* represents for all Puerto Ricans is one that is willingly assumed by the island's youth, as Rivera notes: "As young people we are concerned about the possibility of losing *bomba* . . . and *plena*. Which is why we coordinated activities that permit the public to develop an affinity for these expressions. We also work to clarify the confusion that exists in many people that does not enable them to differentiate between *bomba* and *plena*" (Sánchez Viera 2000: 26 — author's translation). In the late 1990s Bombazo de Puerto Rico with the Emmanuelli Nater brothers made its way to Brooklyn for the first time and received an enthusiastic response from Nuyoricans, who were very familiar with the participatory, communal form of *bomba*.

But it is in the world of hip hop that *bomba* uniquely speaks the familiar language of resistance and revolution that bridges time and ancestry. Raquel Rivera's important work on the significant New York Puerto Rican contributions to the development of hip hop (Rivera 2003) serves as the perfect complement to Juan Flores' previous recognition of the contributions that the genre has made to the cultural identity of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora (Flores 2000a). Rivera's work also serves to answer Flores' not-so-rhetorical question, What does the hip hop generation of *Boricuas* know about *bomba*? Apparently, much more than before. Actress, rapper, singer, dancer, and poet La Bruja (Caridad de la Luz) fronting YerbaBuena's *bomba* ensemble; rap's interchangeable references to Vieques; *bomba* music and *Santería*; and former members of the Boricua Bomb Squad looking to hook into Dominican *palo* and Puerto Rican *bomba* groups are all part of a continuum that includes the Segunda Quimbamba hip hop and *bomba* encounter at Montclair State University (Rivera 2003: 194, 228). Rivera's account of the wonderful mess/pleasure of the hip hop wedding of Rokafella and Kwikstep, leaders of the Full Circle dance crew, whose wedding march was conducted to the beat of a *bomba yubá*, evidences in multiple ways how New York Ricans are rewriting the rules when it comes to *bomba* and hip hop (Rivera 2003: 235–9).

Conclusion

When it comes to Puerto Rican *bomba* today, the possibilities of growth in new directions are present—*bomba* exists in forms from jazz to hip hop, acquiring a lyrical independence from tradition. Dance expressions are steeped in today's times but danced to centuries-old rhythms, and there are forays of *bomba* with *reggaeton*, as in the expressions of Tego Calderón and his large following. Also, the opportunities to learn *bomba* proper and to fortify *baile de bomba* are increasing.

In sum, *bomba* is growing today, which allows us to conclude that its survival is much more than just a possibility. It is a certainty. Traditionalists may view some of these developments as another form of assimilation. Whether this is true or not,

NOTES

¹ Joselino “Bumbún” Oppenheimer is a legendary *plenero* from Ponce during the first era of *plena* in its infancy; Escobar is a legendary *plenero* who excelled on the *requinto* drum in the Santurce region in the latter half of the twentieth century.

² These are four giants in the development of Puerto Rico’s *bomba*. Rafael Cepeda is known as the patriarch of *bomba* and *plena* for his prolific song composition, his leadership in the Santurce variation of *bomba*, and his family’s commitment to this cause. Castor Ayala, a renowned craftsman, is the founder of Ballet Folklórico Hermanos Ayala in Loíza over forty years ago. Rafael Cortijo led a revolution in the appreciation of *bomba* and *plena* music with his group, Cortijo y Su Combo. William Archeval is the veteran *bombero* and *plenero* who is credited with preserving and teaching the Ponce or southern regional form of *bomba*.

³ Any discussion of the rudiments of *bomba* and its 300 plus years of history should start with the caveat that there is a critical need to further document the full breadth of this art form and fill the “enormous gaps in understanding” that exist within *bomba* (Quintero Rivera 1992: 45—author’s translation).

⁴ Miguel Sierra, a talented *bombero* known primarily in the Bronx, is one of a few performers who still composes *bombas* in the tradition. His compositions are usually succinct and repetitive—while still allowing room for improvisation. His song “María Antonia” (a *bomba balance*) in the Cepeda recording *Dancing the Drum* (2002) is an example of the understatement of *bomba* lyrics. (See Torres 2001.)

⁵ José Manuel Argüelles from New York City is another excellent source on the development and manifestations of *bomba*. His preliminary research, including interviews with Dr. Fu-Kiau in 2000 and with Dr. Arthur Spears in 2002, has documented the references to *bomba* as a spiritual gathering in Bantu languages and to the use of the term “b’len” in Bantu languages to refer generally to activities concerning the dead. In Puerto Rico, Santurce *bomberos* will often play a final song called a *belén* in honor of the dead. The prevalence of this practice, and others rooted in spirituality, in all regions of the island requires more attention.

⁶ Juan Flores’ essay on the controversy engendered by Cortijo’s career also refers to this great musician primarily, if not exclusively, in the context of his success in *plena* with one exception (Flores 1993a: 95, 98–9).

⁷ Rodríguez Juliá (1983: 72, 85). Similarly, in a subsequent essay, Rodríguez Juliá misnames a *bomba bolandé* (“Oí una voz”) as a *plena* (Rodríguez Juliá 2001).

⁸ “Grotesque” appears to be the preferred pejorative description of the white elites in these and other accounts of our culture (see Callejo 1971).

⁹ Author’s interview with Aurora Flores (2003).

¹⁰ Interview with Aurora Flores (2003).

¹¹ Besides Juan Gutiérrez, other members of Los Pleneros de la 21 who have been instrumental in these workshops include Nelly Tanco, Juan Usera, Tito Matos, and Roberto Cepeda.

¹² Author’s interview with Roberto Cepeda (2002).

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