

Finding the Connection

Juan Gutiérrez-Rodriguez and Julia Gutiérrez-Rivera

Los Pleneros de la 21 (LP21), formed in the South Bronx, New York City, in 1983 by National Heritage Fellow, Juan Gutiérrez-Rodriguez, is a group which has spanned three generations of Puerto Rican musicians, dancers, and artisans dedicated to performance and transmission of bomba and plena, two genres of Puerto Rican music which spring from deeply-rooted African traditions. This intergenerational ensemble provides numerous programs, cultural events and arts education workshops and performances to thousands citywide every year. Amanda Dargan interviewed Juan and Julia in LP21's offices in East Harlem.



Julia Gutiérrez-Rivera teaches her students bomba dance steps at Public School 11 in Queens

Photo by Amanda Dargan

Julia: *Bomba* and *plena* are two different musical and dance traditions from Afro-Puerto Rican culture. They are both manifestations of former enslaved communities in Puerto Rico and their descendants. They include singing, dancing, and percussion. They're very much a part of the urban community, *el legado del pueblo* (small town legacy). *Bomba*, which is more ancient, has been around for about 300 years in Puerto Rico. And *plena* developed at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Puerto Rico, with urbanization.

Juan: *Bomba* and *plena* also have a strong connection with the individual who practices the tradition. It's part of his or her way of life, and the community's way of life. The way the person

expresses his or her traditions is shaped by their views and experiences, as well as those of the community and the family.

Julia: In the same way that hip-hop is a lifestyle, not just a genre, *bomba* and *plena* are musical genres that also capture the life experience of a community, the emotions of the individual, the beliefs of the people who convey and teach them.

They stem from the African slave experience, so the song structure for both is call and response and they both use drums. *Plena* is more contemporary and came with the urbanization of Puerto Rico, so it has more contemporary musical instrumentation, like piano, bass, winds. Their dancing dynamics are also different. In *bomba*, there is a more direct dialogue between the dancer and the drummer, whereas in *plena*, even though

the dancer connects with the drum, it is not a direct conversation.

Amanda: How did you both learn these traditions? Who were your teachers?

Juan: I consider myself a student of these traditions. I hope that I never stop seeking that knowledge of the music. Coming to New York, my goal was to excel in music. Then I realized that I couldn't go any further if I don't know the music traditions of my own people. It was a constant search for me. I found a lot: I met the elders, masters in this tradition. In Puerto Rico, I really was not in contact with this music. I was closer there, but it didn't click. Here, I said, "I need to do this."

Julia: There is a word in Spanish, *af-inque*. It's a type of grounding that this music gives you, your self-expression and your discovery. I was born into this. I am Juango's youngest daughter. He was a musician before I was born and had already started sharing with elders here in New York. I was always surrounded by musicians coming to the house. We would spend countless hours at Rincon Criollo and at the Young Devil's Basement. It was an impactful experience. It was a musty dark basement that you got to by going down these really steep stairs, and I thought, "Oh my god, it's dark and there's a huge hole in the floor. What's going on?" But I was always surrounded by elders like Eugenia Ramos, Paquito, all these other cats, in the *bomba* and *plena* workshops in 1989, when they started. Me, my brother and sister and a couple of other kids were the first kids to join.

But growing up and going through teenage rebellion, I wanted to push back from that, even though it was part of my upbringing. I moved to Puerto Rico to do my undergrad, but even though I was physically closer to what people think of as the hub of *bomba* and *plena*, that was when I least participated in it. That

FEATURED ARTISTS

feeling of *afinque* that I talked about before, I didn't have. I remember going to Camaradas in East Harlem after I came back and that passion and feeling I felt as a kid just woke up again. So it's similar to Juango's experience, being in Puerto Rico and not feeling so much connection, then coming back here.

My first teacher was Eugenia Ramos, the mother of Kako Bastar, a prolific musician of Puerto Rican popular music. She was a powerhouse. Wow. She taught how a lot of the elders taught: You observe, and then she welcomes you in. She looked like an intimidating woman: very elegant, tall, skinny, dark. She was always dressed to the nines. She had a stern face, very serious, and she danced very regal. But she was also a jokester. As a young child, I thought, okay, she's not like the grandmother that gives you warm cookies out of the oven. But when she would come out and dance—my sib-

lings and I would play around on the side of the stage—she would beckon us to come over. In the workshops my teachers were Roberto Cepeda, Tito Cepeda, Jose Rivera and my father, of course. But my contemporaries are also my teachers.

Juan: You asked about my teachers—Marcial Reyes was the man, he was the *plenero* par excellence. He thought like a *plenero* all the time, 24/7. And he made me think like that. Through his stories, I was transported to another era. He was an excellent storyteller, and I just pictured in my mind all that he was saying. He took me to places here and in Puerto Rico, where *plena* was really vibrant and the *pleneros* were the real deal. I thought, "Oh, I've never experienced this in my whole life. I've been studying music, but this is the real deal." It clicked for me. Seeing him play, his approach; it was so logical, so natural, so organic. I really wanted to learn that. I was very fortu-

nate to know a lot of the elders and to learn from them just by watching, not asking questions, just watching. That was incredible.

Amanda: The children you teach in New York City's public schools, come from many cultural backgrounds, may have little or no music or dance experience, and you have only 10 to 14 sessions to work with them. What do you want them to take away from the experience? What is non-negotiable for you in teaching these traditions?

Juan: Sometimes it's not *bomba* and *plena* that we aim to teach them at all. It's the opportunity to connect with them, to give them an opportunity to express themselves.

Julia: When I'm teaching dance, *bomba* dance in particular, the non-negotiable for me is saluting in and saluting out.

Please turn to page 33



Los Pleneros de la 21

Photo by Tom Ehrlich

Finding the Connection

continued from page 18

Saluting in and out in *bomba* dance is basically an action of acknowledgement, because *bomba* when it's danced is really a conversation, a dialogue between drummer and dancer. Before you engage in a dialogue, you want to recognize that you're going to initiate that conversation. When you're done, you want to acknowledge and give thanks. If a *bomba* dancer that knows his or her stuff does not do that, that's a big no-no.

Beyond that, the question of authenticity, especially when teaching in schools, is a hot debate. It's very difficult, because there's not one correct way of practicing this. You validate the experiences and the traditions as you perceive and interpret them. The overarching thing for me is that students get some kind of connection to the music, not necessarily that they understand that *bomba* was developed in this era or the names of the drums and the names of the steps. That comes with time. What you can't teach is passion, and passion starts with a connection. When I go into a classroom, whether it's a classroom with twenty different ethnicities or a classroom of Caribbean students that have closer connections culturally, the most important thing is finding that connection with them as an individual—from teacher to student—and then culture to culture.

Juan: When you teach in public schools, students are not there to become *bomberos* or *pleneros*. So everything is negotiable with them, except your attitude toward this tradition. It has to show, and it will show, of course. The kids have to use what they brought with them, their own expressions, their own tools, and their own resources. Teaching was like a crash course for us. We were writing the book as we were doing it. And everybody has a different book, in a sense. How do you teach playing a pandereta? How do you break it down and keep a little essence of what it is—the tradition? It's a constant search for that.

When kids come up to you and say, "I like you," or, "The music is great," no one tells them

to say that. I have met people in the street that I don't recognize and they come up to me and say, "I loved what you did and I learned so much from you." Once when I was driving down the highway in heavy traffic, an officer in a police van full of cops approached me and honked me. Then he shouted, "Hey, Mr. Gutiérrez, you were my teacher and I loved you!" Oh my God, that was something!

Julia: That experience goes back to the importance of just being able to get that connection. That's what they are going to carry with them for many years: the colors, the impressions, the sounds, and the smells, even if they're not able to pinpoint it directly. Memory is a trigger. Who knows, many years from now, they may see something that reignites that. So it's a very powerful tool.

Juan Gutiérrez is the Founding Director of Los Pleneros de la 21. In addition to a career as a Broadway percussionist and arranger and his work leading the nonprofit organization and performing ensemble LP21, he has taught as a music teacher, then as a teaching artist in NYC public schools for over 30 years. He has a Masters in Music Education from the Manhattan School of Music.

Julia Gutiérrez-Rivera, who was a student in LP21's Children's Workshops pioneer class in 1989, is a member of the new generation of LP21's staff and performing and teaching ensembles. She has Masters in Nonprofit Management from The Milano School for Management and Urban Policy at the New School.



Juan Gutierrez teaches a plena song to students at Public School 11

Photo by Amanda Dargan