Flores, Aurora

¡Ecuá Jeí! Ismael Rivera, El Sonero Mayor (A Personal Recollection)


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Top left, in New York at the Loíza Festival. Middle right, on Venezuelan television, circa mid 1970s. Top and bottom photographs courtesy of Izzy Sanabria. Reprinted, by permission, from Izzy Sanabria. Middle right photograph courtesy of Aurora Flores. Reprinted, by permission, from Aurora Flores.
He walked the path of pain and suffering singing joyful, soulful, rhythmic songs that touched hearts and inspired minds. A five-foot-ten, caramel-colored, Puerto Rican prophet of Boricua soul, fondly called “Maelo” by his friends and El Sonero Mayor (the “Master Singer”) by his contemporaries, Ismael Rivera was a natural.

Maelo began to sing once he reached “the age of reason,” and reason made his voice fly, dodging in and around the clave with a facility that could only have been a gift from God. But reality also told him he was born in one of the poorest sectors of San Juan, one of five surviving siblings life that was infectious, a priceless potion of release and cleansing of the soul from the daily pain of existence.

One day, six-year-old Maelo announced to his mother, Margarita (Doña Margó), that he would learn a skill to support his family. He ran off to play rhythms—banging on paint cans while shaking baby bottles filled with beans. He made good on his promise. He shined shoes after school and ran errands before becoming a skilled bricklayer and master carpenter.

Rivera explored finger-poppin’ claves through the snap of his fingers while his hands labored over bricks and mortar;
Witinila...uye, uye: breaking cultural chains

During an interview in the summer of 1976, Cortijo once said he took the rhythm of Boricua blood, dressed her up in her Sunday best and paraded her around the world for everyone to see. He loved her, and you could feel it. When he was about to record his first album, Cortijo made a point of recording his beloved bombas and plenas first, at a time in Puerto Rico when the Afro-Cuban conjunto sound was the big seller.

Bomba and plena were seen as an exclusive, insular rhythmic mystery steeped in an unmentionable black religious ritual of music and dance, protected by folklorists and academics who analyzed the music to the exclusion of the pueblo. The older folklorists were entertaining audiences at the highest levels of professional musical acumen. Cortijo’s replacement of barilles for congas had less to do with authenticity than with recorded coherence. Clearly the tauter skin over the narrower circumference of the conga drum carried the rhythmic patterns farther than the wider skin needed to fit the head of the larger barril. The pandero rhythms were swapped by the congas as well with the requinto-talking pandero played out on the quinto drum. As far as Cortijo was concerned, it is the skill and precision of the indio and not the choice of arrow that hits the target. The bomba was now needed for a newer insurrection, a cultural one inclusive of both black pride and Boricua identity unifying the lighter-skinned jíbaro with his black coastal cousin.

They hit the bullseye. Not only was Cortijo y su Combo a hit from its first recording on, their daily appearances on television, radio, festivals, dances, and concerts were testament to a popularity unprecedented at that time. Cortijo’s band played bomba, plena, mambo, guaracha, cha-cha, oriza, calypso, mozambique, merengue, samba, and bolero within a context of Puerto Rican pride and rhythmic creativity not duplicated since. Their themes went beyond conformist lyrics of living large and embraced local island perspective with urban...
hands, and buy groceries for the sick and elderly. I once asked him why he would throw his money away on someone who was just going to get high with it. “If you’re going to give—don’t look at where it’s going—just give it away and don’t look back. That’s what it’s about.” That’s what Maelo was about.

searching for cultural answers while digging for roots, and Maelo became my mentor and maestro. He lived up to the challenge, digging out old recordings while introducing me to key musicians like Don Rafa himself. He invited me to sing coro in his and Cortijo’s band. We’d discuss music, myth, history, and Puerto Rico, explaining rituals, defining terms and ceremonies. He and Cortijo would work a lot on the surrounding islands, alternating with calypso groups. He sang in English back then, and he laughed when he told me that they didn’t like his accent in English.

Maelo would school me on the bands that toured Puerto Rico, all of them wanting to perform wherever Cortijo was playing. The bands included La Sonora Matancera who, being on the same label, performed with Maelo’s group around 1958. We were going through old photographs of his when he pulled out an 8x10 black-and-white photograph of a very young Celia Cruz with Maelo’s arm around her. They both looked very young and were dressed elegantly, cozying up to one another. Wide-eyed, I asked, “Maelo, did you date her?” With a sly look on his face he answered, “We dated for a little while, but she told me she was a serious girl and wanted marriage, and you know,”
Maelo, Cortijo, and some of the other band members were indeed carrying, but Maelo stepped forward and took the rap for everyone, asserting that all the drugs were his. He was arrested, handcuffed, and paraded for all the media and the public to see. Owing to the large quantity of drugs found, he was charged with trafficking, trying to smuggle drugs into the Island.

Maelo served some time in San Juan’s notorious Oso Blanco jail. After that, things were never the same. Since it was a federal offense he was taken to and tried in the States. His lawyer was an American whom he didn’t even understand. Maelo was sentenced and sent to a penitentiary in Lexington, Kentucky.

While in prison, Maelo formed a band with other prisoners who were into music. He composed, sang, and played, reflecting on his life on the Island while observing the life of a black man in the South at the start of the civil rights movement in America. Most of all, he missed his friend, Cortijo.

Back on the Island, the Cortijo Combo floundered. Puerto Rico was outraged at the nerve of these negros, condemning their bon vivant lifestyle at the height of their success. According to Cortijo and Maelo, pianist Rafael Ithier bolted first, organizing El Gran Combo. Later, former members of the band went their separate ways, starting their own combos.
who called him “Papa Maelo.”
His apartment, was always filled with
children. I once watched him counsel 
a troubled teen who was self-destructing. Maelo was emphatic about the boy
to return home, finishing school,
and getting a job. For dramatic affect he pulled out an old shoe shine box from the closet and showed him how he used to shine shoes when he was his age, emphasizing humility as nothing to be ashamed of. He had decorated the foyer of his apartment with wood paneling and maple banquitos where he and the boy were sitting and talking. Maelo was proud of his carpentry skills, and talked of them to the young man, telling him how he
escorted to the hotel in the capital city of Colón and treated to sumptuous dinner parties at the homes of top officials. Maelo was truly loved there.

Despite the fanfare, Maelo was itching to get on with the spiritual tradition. He went into detail as to how the ritual would take place as he showed off the beautiful lilac with gold trim robe he wore for the event. “We walk 17 kilometers to get to Porto Belo. There are no cement roads and everyone travels into the small coastal town by foot. I wear the robe while walking and think about how el negrito will help me. I think of his words of love for everyone and about forgiveness for all the evil in the world.

Maelo walked the earth today, Maelo would be forgotten. Maelo quoted from scriptures

De todas maneras
from Cuba to Spain (that remains unrecogn-ized today)—Cortijo would no longer be seen at the race tracks or clubs of New York and Puerto Rico. He would no longer be seen at his timbales with his bottom bumba pouting in concern. Cortijo was gone.

The Island was shocked. Maelo was devastated. He went to Puerto Rico to mourn his brother and say goodbye. Tears flowed as he spoke to his compadre in what seemed to be a secret language of Spanish, English, and African. He carried his buddy’s coffin as he carried El Nazareno but this time, in pain and penance through the streets of San Juan to the cemetery. Once there, he knelt, made the sign of the cross and prayed before the masses at the San José cemetery in Villas Palmeras. He returned to New York destroyed, his spirit broken. He abandoned the words of El Nazareno and began to dance with Satan once more. His voice was never the same.

**El Incomprendido**

Two tumultuous New York years passed, with Maelo literally lost in the streets of El Barrio. He went barefoot; he was crazed and confused. The once mighty warrior of Puerto Rican soul was seen picking from garbage, looking for quarters in phone booths, and searching for solace in a lonely basement. I ran into his timbaleró, Rigo during this time. I was a mother by now, but I still was looking for my mentor. Rigo took me to the basement where Maelo was staying, but as I waited outside I had a sinking feeling that I would not get to see him again. A few slow minutes went by before Rigo came out to tell me that Maelo did not want me to see him the way he was. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I went home.

After several dark incidences, Maelo ran into a preacher friend who took him to his farm in Connecticut, where Maelo found the words of El Nazareno once more.
Roena, and many others played tribute to El Sonero. Inside, the Center was brimming with people, family, women and children. He always told me not to be afraid when I walked with him and so I walked alone and made my way through the humid heat and crowd.

I approached the coffin, kneeled and talked to my teacher and mentor who taught me so much about life. I remembered walking in Panama through El Chorillo with him. I asked him why the women's arms had eruptions as if the skin were bursting through. “Ay bendito Aurorita,” he answered. “Those women are prostitutes, and if they don't make enough money, their pimps cut up their arms. They never go to hospitals.” He explained that many of those women had no formal education, and this was the only way they knew to support their children and families. He told me I should never judge the plight of another human being. At that point, a dusty old man with no teeth yelled out, “¡Salsa!” Maelo and I stopped. The skinny old Black man hugged and kissed him. Maelo introduced me as his niece. The old man began to snap his fingers in clave and to sing a coro. Maelo harmonized with the coro lifting his voice in full song, finishing the tune with improvised phrases. He told the old man he would use it in his next recording.

I remembered jogging around Central Park's reservoir with him. I was young and lazy and he would push me to finish around the track shaming me into running by saying, “You're only 26, I'm 49 — if I can do it so can you.” Then he'd break into song, jam with him. Maelo never refused. But when the rumba was over, he'd play a bomba, a plena, and tell them they had to know their roots first. They had to preserve the music that held the life source of the people of the earth. They had to conserve it, maintain it, and never forget it.

I cried as I knelt and prayed over him. He had made millions throughout his career, and he gave it all away just as he gave everything to his public and to his music. As the casket was closed, I spotted Sammy Ayala. I asked him to let me carry the coffin with the other men. Being a Nuyorican, I was aware that this was a traditional guy thing and that he might get offended, but I didn't care. I was there for Maelo, but I really didn't know which side of the place I belonged since there were the women from Puerto Rico on one side and the women from outside of Puerto Rico on the other side. He moved over and gave me a little space and said, “Seguro Aurorita si tu eres familia.” We carried him outside to where the crowd and the hearse waited.

We never made it to the hearse. The throngs of people and pleneros took him on their shoulders, parading him the same way he carried El Nazareno. Even the governor of Puerto Rico showed up in a guayabera and took his turn carrying Maelo to the cemetery. Thousands gathered and I could barely see the final rites when I spotted Kako coming through the crowd of colors, ages, races, nations, and professions that packed the burial grounds. It was all a blur to me. I just wanted to say my last farewell to a man who treated me with more respect and equality than any corporate president, lawyer,