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# EL GRAN COMBO, CORTIJO, AND THE MUSICAL GEOGRAPHY OF CANGREJOS/SANTURCE, PUERTO RICO

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*Marisol Berríos-Miranda*  
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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on oral histories, musical examples, newspapers accounts, and scholarship, this article draws connections between El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico's transnational audiences, and the transnational history of Cangrejos, which is known today as Santurce. El Gran Combo's parent band, Cortijo y su Combo (which drew most of its members from the Santurce neighborhood of *la Parada 21*) helped forge diasporic connections between diverse black communities in the Caribbean and Latin America in the 1950s. El Gran Combo has continued and expanded that legacy over almost five decades, through a strong community ethic. We argue that the transnational reach of these musicians is due in part to: 1) centuries of immigration from other islands that created a hybrid and inclusive musical culture in Cangrejos; and 2) 20<sup>th</sup> century economic developments that positioned Santurce at the crossroads of international entertainment, media, and labor migration. These flows of people and music constitute a "musical geography" that connects local neighborhoods and musicians in Santurce to transnational networks, and that locates Puerto Rico in Latin America as much as in the United States. In the last section we analyze how Santurce's transnational culture contributed to the international reach of *salsa* music in the 1960s and 70s, and make some concluding observations about music's role in building community across national boundaries.

**Keywords:** Gran Combo, Cortijo, Puerto Rico, Santurce, *salsa*, transnationalism

## RESUMEN

Basado en historias orales, ejemplos musicales, resúmenes de periódicos, e investigación, este artículo traza conexiones entre las audiencias transnacionales de El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico y la historia transnacional de Cangrejos, también conocido como Santurce. Cortijo y su Combo, madre banda de El Gran Combo, que muchos de sus músicos son de la vecindad de la Parada 21 en Santurce, ayudó a forjar conexiones diaspóricas entre una diversidad de comunidades negras en el Caribe y América Latina en los años 50. El Gran Combo ha continuado y extendido esa herencia por casi cinco décadas, debido a una fuerte ética de comunidad. Aquí proponemos que el alcance trans-

nacional de estos músicos se debe en parte a: 1) siglos de inmigración de otras islas del Caribe, lo cual creó una música híbrida e incluyente en Cangrejos; y 2) desarrollos económicos del siglo XX los cuales ubicaron a Santurce en las intersecciones del entretenimiento, los medios de comunicación y la migración laboral. Este fluir de gente y música constituye una “geografía musical” que conecta vecindarios locales y músicos en Santurce con redes internacionales, y sitúa a Puerto Rico tanto en América Latina como en Estados Unidos. En la sección final analizamos cómo la cultura transnacional de Santurce contribuyó al alcance internacional de la salsa en los años 60 y 70, y también presentamos algunas conclusiones sobre el rol de la música en construir comunidades a través de fronteras nacionales.

**Palabras clave:** Gran Combo, Cortijo, Puerto Rico, Santurce, salsa, transnacionalismo

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'appuie sur des récits, des exemples musicaux, des articles de journaux et des écrits scientifiques pour établir des liens entre le public transnational du Gran Combo de Porto Rico et l'histoire transnationale de Cangrejos, appelé aujourd'hui Santurce. L'orchestre qui a donné naissance au Gran Combo, Cortijo y su Combo (dont la plupart des membres viennent du quartier dit de l'arrêt de bus n° 21 à Santurce), a aidé à créer des connections diasporiques entre plusieurs communautés noires de la Caraïbe et d'Amérique Latine dans les années 1950. Pendant cinq décennies El Gran Combo a poursuivi dans cette voie et l'a étendue en restant fidèle à une éthique communautaire forte. Pour nous la portée transnationale de ces musiciens résulte en partie, premièrement des siècles d'immigration vers Porto Rico en provenance des autres îles ce qui a donné naissance à Cangrejos à une culture musicale hybride et inclusive, et deuxièmement des développements économiques du XXe siècle qui ont placé Santurce au carrefour des divertissements internationaux, des media, et des migrations de travailleurs. Ces flux de personnes et de musique forment une “géographie musicale” qui relie les quartiers de Santurce et leurs musiciens aux réseaux transnationaux et qui place Porto Rico à la fois en Amérique Latine et aux États-Unis. La dernière section de notre papier examine la façon dont la culture transnationale de Santurce a contribué à conférer une portée internationale à la *salsa* dans les années 1960 et 70. Nous concluons par quelques observations sur le rôle de la musique dans la construction de communautés qui s'étendent pardelà les frontières nationales.

**Mots-clés:** Gran Combo, Cortijo, Porto Rico, Santurce, *salsa*, transnationalisme

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In May of 2008, at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, the University of Washington hosted a concert by El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico to celebrate the museum exhibition, "American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Music." Flags waved in the audience, and a roar of cheering voices sounded each time the MC named another country in his role call: Puerto Rico! Panamá! Perú! Cuba! Colombia! El Salvador! Ecuador! Venezuela! Mexico! República Dominicanaaa! Then the music started, and national boundaries dissolved as people pressed the stage to sing along. Others swung with their dance partners, gracefully and happily. At the end of the night even the museum staff who stayed to close up seemed as happy as the customers. 5,000 miles away from their home, and further still from the homes of many fans who came to see them, El Gran Combo helped us share a beautiful night together.

What is it about music that creates such a strong sense of community between people of different nations? The power of El Gran Combo's music to build community among diverse audiences is something one might argue is generally true of salsa music. As a style and as a commercial genre, salsa began in New York, which for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the international capital of Latin music production. Salsa also has important roots in Cuba, and in the worldwide dissemination of Cuban records beginning in the 1920s, which spread Caribbean rhythms to listeners and dancers throughout Latin America and the world. In the



*Figure 1 - El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, with leader and pianist Rafael Ithier seated between saxophonist Eddie Pérez (left) and singer Charlie Aponte.*

last analysis, though, El Gran Combo and their music come from Puerto Rico, an island with its own rich history of transnational migration and cultural exchange.

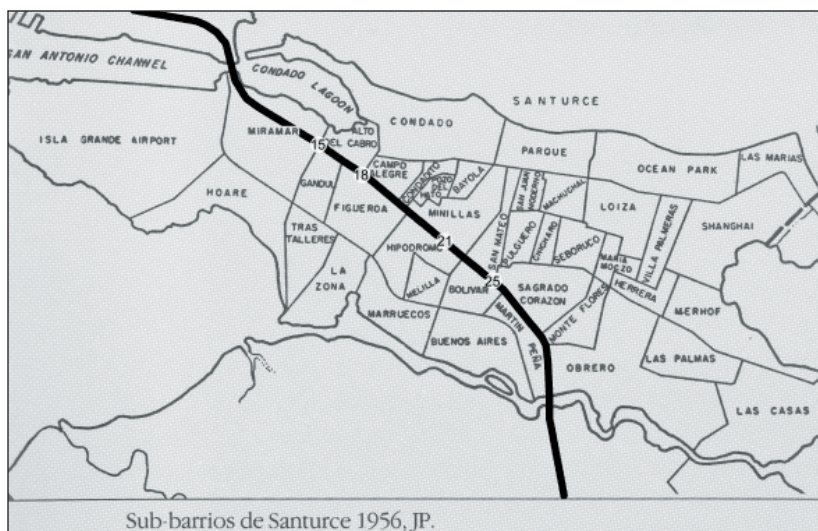
In this article we explore that history through a “musical geography” of Santurce, and the larger and older community called Cangrejos of which it is a part. While other places in Puerto Rico also have rich musical histories (Ponce alone has given the world *La Sonora Ponceña*, Cheo Feliciano, and Héctor Lavoe), Cangrejos has played an especially important role in connecting Puerto Rico to the world. The music of Cangrejos links people through time and space—along paths created by escaped slaves and migrant laborers, traveling musicians, records and radio, and the internet—to many other communities. Through these transnational pathways, El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico has become a part of people’s lives all over the Caribbean and Latin America. And by these same pathways Puerto Ricans have for centuries transcended their colonial identity, whether with Spain or the United States, to participate in a larger American community.

We will begin in this article by considering the diverse audiences that were linked with one another by Cortijo y su Combo in the 1950s, and then explain how El Gran Combo (most of whose original members came from Cortijo’s band) built upon that legacy. Next we will step backwards in history to sketch the transnational flows of people and music that paved the way for the music of both these groups, examining Cangrejos’ long history of immigration from other islands, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century economic developments that positioned Santurce at the crossroads of professional entertainment and media. In the last section we will analyze how Santurce’s transnational culture contributed to the international reach of salsa music in the 1960s and 70s, and make some concluding observations about music’s role in building community across national boundaries.

This study is inspired and informed especially by Marisol’s mother, Juanita Miranda de Berríos. Juanita entertained some of the musicians we mention here in her own home, and her vivid memories of Santurce’s musical life in the 1940s and 50s have helped give life to the story we tell. We also are thankful to others who shared their time and their memories with us, especially Pedro Clemente, Rafael Viera, Andy Montañez, and Rafael Ithier. Thanks also to Ángel Quintero-Rivera for generously sharing his research materials.

### **Cortijo y su Combo**

El Gran Combo has its roots in Santurce, a collection of dense urban neighborhoods immediately to the east of the Old City of San



**Figure 2 - Santurce neighborhoods in 1956, with Avenida Ponce de León and selected *paradas* (bus stops) highlighted. (Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico; also published in Sepúlveda and Carbonell 1987).**

Juan, where, in the early 1950s, a group of young black musicians led by percussionist Rafael Cortijo<sup>1</sup> formed a *conjunto* in the fashion that was commercially popular then, with piano, bass, horns, percussion, and singer. They billed themselves as Cortijo y su Combo,<sup>2</sup> and many of the musicians lived in the same neighborhood, which was described (like other neighborhoods in Santurce) by the number of their bus stop: *La Parada 21*. They had played together on street corners and at community events, and several of them also had professional music experience. In 1954 Cortijo landed them a steady gig at the Riviera, a nightclub and bordello in Puerta de Tierra, that catered to locals as well as sailors from the nearby naval docks. At the Riviera they performed six nights a week from 10:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m.,<sup>3</sup> playing R&B songs as well as Cuban dance styles like *guaracha*, *son montuno*, and mambo to cater to their diverse audience (Ayala 2003). The songs that really began to catch people's attention, though, were those that combined the rhythms of Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena* with modern *conjunto* instrumentation. On their first album, *Cortijo y su Conjunto Invites you to Dance* (recorded on the New York-based Seeco label in 1955), locally flavored songs, including "El Bombón de Elena," "Máquino Landera," and "Calypso Bomba y Plena" created a sensation.

In addition to its innovative instrumentation and arrangements, the band was propelled by the brilliant improvising of singer Ismael



Rivera. Rivera, a resident of Calle Calma in Villa Palmeras, had honed his improvising skills singing *bomba*, *plena*, and rumba in *rumbones de esquina* (street corner gatherings for drumming, dancing and singing) in Villa Palmeras and other Santurce neighborhoods. His prodigious talent earned him a job singing with the *Orquesta Panamericana*, the house band at the exclusive Escambrón hotel and nightclub in San Juan (the site of the present day Normandie hotel). Rivera began to sit in with Cortijo as well, after Cortijo's Combo left the Riviera for the more prestigious Black Magic nightclub in Miramar. In 1955 Rivera took time off from the *Orquesta Panamericana* to join Cortijo's Combo on a trip to New York. When they returned, he told *Orquesta Panamericana* director Lito Peña that he was leaving to join Cortijo permanently. According to Sammy Ayala, another of Cortijo's singers, Rivera told Lito Peña, "Es que yo me siento bien con los negritos" (I just feel at home with the black guys) (Ayala quoted in Quintero Rivera 2009).

Backed by musicians who shared the rhythmic feel and swing of his working class Santurce upbringing, Rivera's improvisational genius revelled in the call and response grooves of Cortijo's arrangements. Even in the verse and chorus forms of *plenas* like "Déjalo que suba"<sup>4</sup> Rivera sang extended improvisations over the verse section, taking the art of the *sonero* (vocal improviser) to heights not heard in recordings of Afro-Caribbean music. When the legendary Cuban singer Benny Moré heard him sing one evening at a rehearsal at the Escambrón he swept off his hat and exclaimed, "A sus pies, *sonero mayor!*" (Ithier 2003), a nickname that stuck with Ismael Rivera for the rest of his life.

Both in their sound and their appearance Cortijo y su Combo were adamantly Afro-Caribbean. Their interpretations of *bomba* and *plena* were a revelation to many Puerto Ricans. *Plenas* had been recorded as early as the 1930s by Canario (Manuel Jiménez) (Glasser 1995:169-190), and dance bands like those of César Concepción also popularized ballroom versions of *bomba* and *plena* in the early 1950s. Cortijo's musicians, though, had grown up participating in *bomba* and *plena* in their communities and had a more compelling understanding of the rhythms, phrasing, and songs. Their *coros* (repeated refrains that alternate with the lead singer's improvising) were distinguished by the high-pitched vocals of Eddie Pérez, for example, which imitated the sound of women singing in neighborhood *bomba* performances (Quintero Rivera 2009). They were the first all-black band to reach a broad audience, at a time when Puerto Rico was still openly racist (less than a decade earlier the trend-setting Escambrón hotel and nightclub, for example, still did not admit black guests (Juanita and Sylvia Miranda 1999)). With the exception of trumpet player and arranger Quito Vélez, all the members of Cortijo's band had dark skin and African features. The band's first

album cover (Figure 3) played it safe, featuring a pretty blonde prom queen holding the hand of a slightly darker-skinned dance partner. After the success of that record, however, subsequent album covers featured photos of the full band (Figure 4).



*Figure 3 - 1955 album cover.*

Ismael Rivera was deeply conscious of how important their music and image was to the growing international consciousness of black pride:

Parece que era el hambre....yo te dije hambre porque sonaba como con una rabia, una fuerza, loco por salir del arrabal, inconscientemente.... Todo fue una cosa del pueblo, del negro, era como que si nos estaba abriendo una jaula, y había rabia y Clemente empezó a repartir palos y nosotros entramos ahí, tú sabes, con nuestra música (quoted in Figueroa Hernández 1993:17).

I guess it was the hunger... I say hunger because it sounded angry, with a strength, desperate to escape the ghetto, unconsciously... It was all





*Figure 4 - 1958 album cover. Standing, from left, Rafael Cortijo in white, Roy Delgado, Eddie Pérez with sax, Rafael Ithier, Ismael Rivera, Miguel Cruz with bass, Quito Vélez with trumpet, Ray Santos with sax. Seated, from left, Sammy Ayala, Martín Quiñones with congas.*

a people's thing, of the blacks, it was like they were opening our cages, and there was anger, and Clemente<sup>5</sup> began to rack up the hits and we came in there, you know, with our music.

Cortijo's sound and image caught the attention not only of Puerto Ricans, but of African descent people all over the Americas, for whom Cortijo's integration of Afro-Caribbean rhythms and aesthetics into a modern *conjunto* format resonated powerfully. Their first booking outside of Puerto Rico, in 1955, was in the Dutch Caribbean islands of Curaçao and Aruba, where singer Sammy Ayala remembers they heard their own music on the radio for the first time (Ayala 2003). In Venezuela their bookings were not only in urban venues in Caracas, but also in community centers in Barlovento, a much less affluent coastal community nearby with a predominantly black population (Berríos-

Miranda 1999:81). In Perú, Roberto Arguedas recounted to us how he and other Afro-Peruvian musicians made the 10-mile trip from Lima to the port of El Callao to buy Cortijo's records whenever they came in by ship (Arguedas 2008). Singer Andy Montañez remembers that on his first trip to Panamá with El Gran Combo in the early 1960s he was intimidated by the overwhelming reverence for Ismael Rivera (the singer he was effectively replacing), whose picture was prominently displayed in many venues where they played (Montañez 2007). And Lise Waxer notes that in Cali, Colombia's salsa music capital, Cortijo y su Combo is to this day one of "the two most-loved *música antillana* ensembles," along with *La Sonora Matancera* from Cuba (2002:52).

Cortijo y su Combo's international reputation was created through informal networks of musical sharing among African-descent people who could *hear* diasporic connections in this music. Deborah Pacini-Hernández' research on *picó* sound systems in Cartagena, Colombia, gives insight into how such networks function. Before salsa music was promoted by the Colombian media and recording industry, salsa records were disseminated by sailors in coastal black communities in the 1960s and played at sound system dances. In the 1970s and 80s this sound system culture broadened to include styles as diverse as *soukous*, *Afro-pop*, *zouk*, *compas*, *reggae*, and *soca*, all of which were referred to as "*música africana*"—a term by which "black Cartageneros tacitly acknowledged the existence of and their participation in an African diasporic community, whose boundaries transcended national borders" (Pacini-Hernández 1996:440). A similar diasporic recognition can be seen in the impact of Caribbean records in Africa, where Cuban records provided a model for modern Congolese pop music as early as the 1930s, and Trinidadian calypso was a model for Ghanaian highlife in the 1950s and 1960s.

Cortijo y su Combo provided another influential model for this reconnecting and modernizing of the African diaspora through music. Not only were they black in appearance, they were also more obviously hybrid than other bands—adapting their neighborhood styles to a modern *conjunto* ensemble, and proclaiming their African identity through innovative rhythms like *oriza*.<sup>6</sup> Citing the influence of Cortijo on Venezuelan bands like *Grupo Madera* and *Guaco*, Berrios-Miranda writes, "Cortijo and Ismael's inclusion of *bombas* and *plenas* with Cuban genres was not only compelling stylistically; for Venezuelans it also served as a model for the inclusion of Afro-Venezuelan music in their own salsa repertoire" (Berrios-Miranda 1999:60). In addition to projecting Afro-Puerto Rican culture abroad, therefore, Cortijo's integration of *bomba* and *plena* into an international commercial format helped people in other places to imagine their local style as modern and transnational.

Cortijo y su Combo hit a snag in 1962, when Rafael Cortijo and

Ismael Rivera were arrested and sentenced to jail for drug possession. They resumed their musical careers a few years later and continued to have an important impact, but not as Cortijo y su Combo. Under the leadership of pianist Rafael Ithier, however, most of Cortijo's musicians regrouped as El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico,<sup>7</sup> and recruited singers Pellín Rodríguez and Andy Montañez to front the new band. They continued to perform abroad and expanded their fan base all over Latin America. El Gran Combo also continued Cortijo's legacy of musical eclecticism, integrating a variety of rhythms into a Latin Caribbean dance band format. For Ithier, this musical inclusiveness was not simply a strategy for innovation, but a way to connect to his audiences: "Yo voy a los sitios y que me digan cuál es la música autóctona de ese sitio. Entonces es la forma de hacerle como un homenaje a la música a la manera de nosotros. Y ha resultado" [I go places and ask them to tell me what is the indigenous music. So that's the way to do a sort of homage to that music in our way. And it has worked] (Ithier 2003).<sup>8</sup> In general, El Gran Combo has made it a consistent priority over five decades to engage a broad public by choosing songs that are accessible and fun, favoring singing over instrumental solos, and playing with a polish and swing that gets the dancers on their feet.

Just as important to their success is the business acumen and management style of Rafael Ithier. The band's policies include equal division of earnings (with an extra share for Ithier as leader); assignment of responsibilities like treasurer, care of uniforms, travel arrangements, etc., to individual band members; and strict codes of behavior that include a zero tolerance policy for illegal drugs. Strict though they are, these business policies also reflect a communal sensibility that has kept the band together for 47 years and counting, in part by resisting the music industry's pressure to create instant hits and stars.

In the late 1960s, for example, when El Gran Combo was struggling financially, Tito Rodríguez helped to arrange a contract for them with United Artists. At a meeting in New York, UA president Mike Clifton offered Ithier a check made out for \$90,000—but only for Ithier and his singers, Pellín Rodríguez and Andy Montañez. Ithier asked for time to speak with Guillermo Álvarez Guedes, the owner of GEMA records, with whom El Gran Combo was legally contracted for two more years. When Álvarez Guedes told Ithier that GEMA could not afford to invest much in promoting El Gran Combo's record, Ithier asked him to release El Gran Combo from their contract. Álvarez Guedes agreed, and the two men had a drink together and parted as friends. At that point Andy and Pellín were eager to collect the check from UA, but Ithier told them:

Yo sé que hay un cheque de noventa mil billetes. Pero fíjate que ése es un americano, que no creo que sea muy socio de nosotros. Pero fíjate

lo que nos acaba de hacer este señor [Guillermo Álvarez Guedes] allí arriba. Y tú sabes que esta gente estaba en un momento difícil de su vida, que la GEMA se había caído, y recuperaron pa'trás con El Gran Combo, y mira lo que nos acaban de hacer allí arriba. O sea, ¿cómo tú quieres que yo le voy a meter esto en las manos de un americano? (2003)

I know there's a check for ninety thousand dollars. But look, that guy's an American and I don't think he's a real friend to us. On the other hand, look what this man [Guillermo Álvarez Guedes] just did for us. And you know that those people were in a difficult moment, that GEMA was down on their luck and El Gran Combo helped them to come back, and look what he did for us. So how can you ask me to put this in the hands of an American?

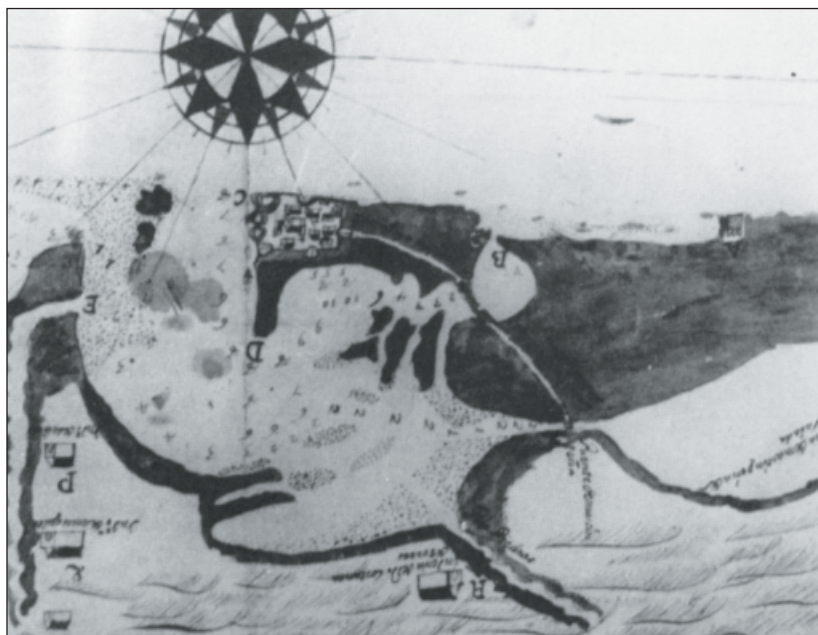
Rodríguez and Montañez still wanted the UA contract, and Ithier told them that they were free to do what they needed to. He returned to Puerto Rico by himself with no recording contract at all, but with a euphoric sense of freedom: "Y allí fue que yo ... pude palpar como sentía Don Pedro Albizu Campos, porque yo lo sentía en mi interior, yo me sentí libre, pero libre, pero como un pájaro libre!" (ibid.) (And that's when I could feel what Pedro Albizu Campos must have felt, because I felt it deep inside, I felt free, but free, like a free bird!). This story is first and foremost a testament to Rafael Ithier's leadership, but his fierce sense of independence and his evocation of Pedro Albizu Campos—a black man and an uncompromising fighter for Puerto Rican independence<sup>9</sup>—also point back to the history of the place where El Gran Combo had its roots.

### San Mateo de Cangrejos

Long before Rafael Cortijo formed his combo, another Cortijo played an important role in putting Santurce on the map. In 1773 a local militia captain named Pedro Cortijo led a successful effort to establish the area as a municipality of its own, separate from the town of Río Piedras to the south (Aponte Torres 1985:15,30). The name of this municipality was San Mateo de Cangrejos, so-called for the recently built church and for the land crabs (*cangrejos*) that teemed throughout the mangrove swamps and lagoons to the east of San Juan. Like most other residents of Cangrejos, Pedro Cortijo was black, and he was a free man.

The free black community of Cangrejos dates to the 1600s. In 1663 the Spanish Crown issued a royal *cédula* decreeing that slaves who escaped from English, Dutch, and Danish Caribbean islands would be given asylum in Puerto Rico and granted land outside the walled city of San Juan. While the *cédula* was meant in part to cause trouble in enemy

colonies, it also had practical benefits for Puerto Rico. Residents of the fortified city of San Juan were separated at the time by two bridges and five miles of road from Río Piedras, the nearest settlement that could supply them with food (Aponte Torres 1985:10-12). With the arrival of farmers and fishermen in Cangrejos, San Juan acquired a closer source of food supplies, and a supply of labor for bridge-building, killing stray dogs, and other tasks that the San Juan residents were unable or unwilling to do (ibid:42-43). Cangrejos also played an important role in the island's defense, particularly during the English attack of 1797. In that year General Abercromby landed English troops to the east of San Juan and marched west to attack the city from inland. Two militia companies of cangrejeros resisted his advance long enough that militias from the island's interior were able to join the battle and force the British out (ibid:30-31). As Cangrejos musician and community organizer Pedro Clemente notes, "If we speak Spanish today in Puerto Rico, it's thanks to the free blacks of Cangrejos" (Clemente 2007).



**Figure 5—1660 map of San Juan and surrounding area. The dark part is land. A white road leads east from the fortified city of San Juan, bends south across a bridge to pass through Cangrejos, and over another bridge towards Río Piedras. Today that road is the Avenida Ponce de León. (Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla; also published in Sepúlveda and Carbonell 1987)**



If Spanish was the imperial language of Puerto Rico, though, it was only one of many languages spoken by the immigrants who arrived there from other Caribbean islands during four centuries of Spanish rule. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the pattern of marronnage that helped establish the community of Cangrejos became viewed as a problem, as evidenced by a variety of measures taken to catch escaped slaves, and treaties to repatriate them (Chinae 2005:37-41, Aponte Torres 1987:27). Immigration surged again, though, with the outbreak of slave rebellion in St. Domingue, which supplied new labor populations just as Puerto Rico's economy was shifting to the cultivation of sugar and coffee for export. Following the precedent established in Trinidad three decades earlier,<sup>10</sup> the Spanish crown in 1815 issued a *Cédula de Gracias* for Puerto Rico, "designed to attract foreigners with capital, agricultural implements, slaves, and plantation-applicable skills by offering them tax exemptions, free land, and the prospects of obtaining Spanish citizenship" (Chinae 2005:10). This relocation of slave labor brought a tide of shame and suffering to Puerto Rico, but there was also a significant influx of free blacks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Historian Jorge Luis Chinae's research into the origins of 1,421 free West Indian immigrants who arrived in Puerto Rico between 1800 and 1850 indicates that approximately 40 percent were from the French islands (though if slaves are included the French proportion of immigrants must increase considerably). 260 of these immigrants, or 18 percent, also came from Curaçao which, along with other Dutch islands, had long been connected to Puerto Rico through illegal trading networks (Chinae 2005:77); another 328 were from nearby Danish colonies of St. Thomas and St. Croix; and there were immigrants from a variety of British islands. These immigrants settled principally in coastal cities of Puerto Rico, with roughly equal numbers going to San Juan, Ponce, Guayama, and Mayagüez (ibid:91). They worked not only as agricultural laborers, but also as artisans (various kinds of building, metal-working, textiles, milling, and other trades) (ibid:94-95). Most of them were coloreds, a testament to the relative scarcity of whites in the Caribbean before 1850, especially in the artisan class.

One place where the musical traces of this West Indian immigration can be seen clearly is in the complex of Puerto Rican drum dances known as "bomba." The fat barrel-shaped drums of Puerto Rican *bomba*, Guadeloupean *gwoka*, and Martiniquan *bèlè* (which was introduced by Martiniquen immigrants to Trinidad, where it is also called *belaire*), as well as Cuban *tumba francesa*, are similar in appearance and construction. Performance practices in these places are also strikingly similar, as dancers take individual turns challenging the lead drummer to follow their movements and gestures. The Puerto Rican *bomba* rhythm called



*leró* corresponds to the Guadeloupean rhythm *lewoz*, a term that also refers in Guadeloupe to the overall dance drumming event. Supporting drums in Puerto Rico and Guadeloupe are also called by similar names: *buleador* and *boula*, respectively. While the evidence pointing to French Caribbean origins is most abundant, other foreign influences can be seen in the names of *bomba* styles such as *holandés*<sup>11</sup> (Dutch), and *danuë* (Danish) (Barton 2002).

In Puerto Rico these mixtures took different forms in different places, but the travelling of musicians and dancers between regions also sustained a shared Afro-Puerto Rican musical culture. When Pedro Clemente recruited forgotten musicians from all over the island for the *Festival de Bomba y Plena* in 1974, he witnessed reunions between musicians from Ponce and San Juan who had played together 40 years earlier, before the construction of the highway that connected these cities across the center of the island. His own father also told him of walking 20 miles from Santurce to Loíza to attend *bomba* gatherings in the early 1900s, and other musicians told him stories of long journeys that brought together *bomba* musicians from different towns and regions (Clemente 2007). The music called *plena*, which is thought to have been pioneered in Ponce around 1900 by immigrants from British islands (Flores 1992), was popularized as early as the 1930s through recordings (Glasser 1995:169-190), but took root even earlier in Santurce and other black communities through networks of community music-making (Clemente 2007<sup>12</sup>). These networks of exchange within the island, combined with four centuries of diverse immigration from beyond Puerto Rico's shores, are the foundation for a musical culture in Cangrejos that is inclusive, flexible, and attuned to the wider Caribbean.

### Modern Santurce

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the culture of Cangrejos had increasing contact with the colonial culture of San Juan, as a growing number of well-to-do whites moved outside the old city's walls into the open spaces of Cangrejos. In 1861 (12 years before the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico) free blacks still outnumbered whites in Cangrejos by ten to one,<sup>13</sup> but white settlement and economic investment had grown to the point where the municipal government saw fit to annex a large portion of Cangrejos into San Juan in 1862. An especially energetic promoter of development in Cangrejos at this time was an aristocratic businessman named Pablo Ubarri. In 1880 Ubarri completed construction of a steam engine railroad along the main road of Cangrejos (this was later converted to an electric trolley, along what is now Avenida Ponce de León). In recognition of his contributions, the developed portion of Cangrejos

was renamed for Ubarri's hereditary Spanish title, *el Conde de Santurce* (Sepúlveda and Carbonell 1987:17-18, Aponte Torres 1985:35, 45).

As late as 1910 black and mulatto residents were still a majority in Santurce (Damiani 1997:344), but immigration from other parts of the island was creating rapid demographic change. The increasingly monocultural agricultural economy of Puerto Rico in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, focused on sugar production, displaced rural farmers (Sepúlveda and Carbonell 1987:29). The U.S. occupation that began with the 1898 Spanish American war also accelerated Puerto Rico's transition to a more urban economy. Between 1899 and 1930 the population of Santurce increased from 5,840 to 81,960 (ibid:29) and the growth of housing and businesses was similarly rapid. The 1917 Jones Act, which granted citizenship to Puerto Ricans, inaugurated a period of extensive emigration to New York and other U.S. cities, and made Santurce a way station for people en route to the U.S.

From the 1930s through the 1950s the dizzying rate of turnover in Santurce's neighborhoods, as new residents arrived and others departed for the U.S., points to an experience of massive displacement and instability. Quintero Rivera cites a 1939 survey in which 43% of Santurce residents surveyed had lived in their current residence for less than one year (2009). In the 1940s and 1950s the U.S. also launched "Operation Bootstrap," a program of investment in the tourist industry, pharmaceuticals, banking, and other businesses in Puerto Rico, which helped to make Santurce the financial capital of the island. By the 1950s Santurce was a magnet for people from all over Puerto Rico who dreamed of new opportunities, whether in Santurce itself or in the U.S.

With this great migration from around the island, the Afro-Puerto Rican music of Santurce was thrown together with the music of mountain farmers or *jíbaros*.<sup>14</sup> Juanita Miranda's uncle and *padrino*, Carmelo Miranda, was born in Barceloneta in 1911 and moved to Santurce as a young man, seeking work as a builder. Miranda, who was white, lived for several months in the house of a black man who was an acquaintance of his father's. He remembers parties in *la Parada 24* where musicians played guitars and drums, and neighbors danced both *bomba* and *seis* (the dance style that predominates in the *jibaro* repertoire). He also remembers a mason named Ismael Rivera who often worked on his crew building houses in Villa Palmeras, and who entertained co-workers with jokes and songs (Carmelo Miranda 2007). Santurce school girls in the 1940s, like Juanita Miranda, learned to dance the mazurka and quadrille ("de la corte francesa," as Juanita joked).

Musical and cultural mixing was evident in Santurce's carnival, too, though in the early 1940s this was clearly an Afro-Puerto Rican festival still. Organized by members of the *Club de los Artesanos*, a brotherhood

of primarily black masons, carpenters, and other artisans, the carnival featured African masking, and *bomba* and *plena* music; but also *vales* and *danzas*.<sup>15</sup> The *Reina de Carnaval* was chosen not only for her beauty and grace, but for her black skin, a tradition that continued until the Santurce carnival merged with the San Juan carnival in the early 1940s (Juanita and Sylvia Miranda 1999). Juanita Miranda told us that in her view the tradition of the black *carnaval* queen “Era como una protesta,” a defiance of the racism that kept blacks out of many of the exclusive clubs and cultural venues, and a pointed contrast with the rich white *carnaval* queens of San Juan (Juanita Miranda 2008).

Other important occasions for Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance performance in Santurce during the 1940s and 50s included the *Fiestas de Cruz de Mayo* and the festival of San Juan in June, as well as private weddings, baptisms, and wakes. Recreational *rumbones de esquina* with drumming and dancing formed in bars, street corners, houses and open spaces throughout the year. In *la parada 21 abajo*, for example (also known as Los Corozos, on the other side of Ave. Ponce de León from where Cortijo lived), the Cepeda family hosted *bomba* dancing. Public spaces where *rumbones* formed in the 1940s and 1950s included the park in *la Parada 24*, the *Plaza del Mercado* in *la Parada 19*, and other open spaces in working class neighborhoods.

### Radio, Television, and Theaters

Cangrejos’ diverse and vibrant local culture was brought into conversation with international music trends as Santurce became the financial and media capital of the island at mid-century. Local radio began in 1922 with the transmissions of WKAQ, the fifth radio broadcasting station in the world,<sup>16</sup> from its studio in Calle Tanca in San Juan (Torregrosa 1991:37). WKAQ’s inaugural day of programming was dominated by highbrow music, including performances by Soprano Isabel Soria, and by the *orquesta* of Joaquín Burset, who became the station’s artistic director (ibid: 55). As more homes in Puerto Rico acquired radios, though, the programming diversified and popular music groups were featured, especially during the noon hour when workers could listen during their lunch break. One such show was *Industrias Nativas*, which broadcasted live music performances by prominent artists, many of whom were from Santurce. Santurce composer and guitarist Don Felo (Felipe Rosario Goyco) and his *Conjunto Aurora* were regulars on *Industrias Nativas* in the 1920s and 1930s, as were the *Septeto Puerto Rico*, most of whose members lived in Santurce and Puerta de Tierra. Singer Johnny Rodríguez (older brother of the 1950s bandleader Tito Rodríguez), from Barrio Obrero, parlayed his trio’s success on WKAQ into a record contract with

RCA in the 1930s (Glasser 1995:153-154), and appeared on television in New York (Juanita and Sylvia Miranda 1999). As the radio projected local musicians to wider audiences, listeners in Santurce basked in the glamour of their international recognition.

*Industrias Nativas* became part of the Saturday schedule for thousands of working class Santurce women, as Juanita Miranda recounts:

El sábado, en todas las casas en Puerto Rico, ese día era de limpiar. Limpiar pisos, limpiar las ollas, sacar tizne porque se cocinaba con leña y carbón. El *Septeto Puerto Rico* empezaba a tocar a las 12:00, y ya nosotros habíamos limpiado por lo menos la mitad de casa, limpiado la cocina y eso. Y entonces poníamos el radio, que era un radio Motorola chiquito... Se salía todo el mundo a bailar a la sala... íbamos haciendo nuestros deberes en los anuncios. Cuando venían los anuncios nosotros parábamos de bailar. Pero se bailaba son, se bailaba guaracha, danza, se bailaba vals. (Juanita and Sylvia Miranda 1999)

Saturday was the day for cleaning in all the houses in Puerto Rico. Clean the floors, the pots, clean out the soot, because people cooked with firewood and charcoal. The *Septeto Puerto Rico* began playing at 12:00, and by that time we had already cleaned at least half the house, the kitchen and whatnot. So then we turned on the radio, which was a little Motorola radio... Everyone came into the living room to dance... we kept doing our chores during the commercials. When the commercials came we stopped dancing. But we danced *son*, we danced *guaracha*, *danza*, we danced waltz.

Juanita's husband, Pedro "Pellín" Berrios, went to the WKAQ studio every Sunday to watch the show and to socialize with the musicians, especially when famous overseas groups like *Trío Matamoros* were visiting. When Juanita worked in Old San Juan she went to WKAQ studios regularly on her weekday lunch break to listen live to *Cuarteto Mayarí*, for whom Tito Rodríguez was the lead singer in the mid-1940s (Juanita and Sylvia Miranda 1999). This kind of engagement with the radio, both over the air waves and live in the studio, created an enthusiastic audience for local musicians. It also brought them—along with their friends, neighbors, and other fans—into the same world of fame and glamour as prominent Cuban, Mexican, or Argentinian musicians who also made appearances on the radio when they performed in Puerto Rico.

Another radio show that played an important role in bringing local talent to a wider audience was the *Concurso de Aficionados* (amateur competition) on WNEL, which began broadcasting in San Juan in 1934, and moved to *la parada 17* in Santurce in the late 1940s (Miranda 2008). Hosted by Rafael Quiñones Vidal, the show featured performances by hopeful contestants every day from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and held the final selection rounds on the weekends. The winners won a quarter, but

if they were lucky they could parlay their win into other opportunities. Bobby Capó, Andy Montañez, Danny Rivera, and many other singers made their radio debuts on this show and went on to have successful professional careers. Many of these singers lived in Santurce (e.g. Montañez and Rivera), and those who didn't often moved there to further their careers.

The great variety of music that came into Santurce homes over the radio in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s included local dance orchestras ranging from classical groups like the *Orquesta Sinfónica de Puerto Rico* or Rafael Alers' *orquesta*, to dance bands that played more popular styles like *Orquesta Muñoz*, *César Concepción*, or *Orquesta Panamericana*. While most large *orquestas* performed only on the island, smaller ensembles could aspire to international careers. Especially popular in Puerto Rico were the *cuartetos*, with two guitars, trumpet, and voices, the most famous of which were *Cuarteto Mayarí* and *Cuarteto Marciano*. In the 1940s guitar trios grew in popularity because of the international success of *Trío Los Panchos*, who first met and recorded in New York in 1944 and who featured Santurce singer Hernando Avilés along with Mexicans Alfredo Gil and Chucho Navarro. The glamour of *Los Panchos* and other trios inspired countless amateur groups, and live trio music was common at working class social gatherings in Santurce in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>17</sup> The increasing importance of radio and the commercialization of local music therefore did not diminish community music-making in Santurce, but rather stimulated it.

When television broadcasts began in Santurce they too became a part of the daily social/musical experience in thousands of Santurce homes. "La Taberna India" on Channel 2 gave Cortijo y su Combo their first television exposure in 1956. It was in the Channel 2 studio that Cortijo first saw a young dancer from *la Parada 22* named Roberto Roena<sup>18</sup> who so impressed him that he hired him for his combo. Roena had little experience as a musician, but Cortijo taught him to play bongos (Roena 2007). Roena's dancing and choreography provided visual appeal for television, and the trio of singers dancing in stylish choreography in front of the band gave Cortijo's Combo its signature look. That choreography continued to develop with El Gran Combo, for whom television was especially important. El Gran Combo's first gig was a daily appearance on *El Show del Medio Día* (where Cortijo's Combo had also appeared regularly). The band earned \$150 per week, of which 10% went towards uniforms and other band expenses, so each musician got about \$10 (Ithier 2003). But through daily television broadcasts the music of El Gran Combo became a soundtrack for the lives of tens of thousands of people in Puerto Rico. The concentration of radio and television studios in and near Santurce from the 1930s through the 1960s thus projected

Santurce's local culture on a national stage, and attracted talented musicians from all over the island.

Radio and television also broadcasted live performances by international stars, but the magnet that brought international performers in the first place was the variety of live performance venues in San Juan and Santurce. Visits to the island by big name performers were most often sponsored by exclusive hotels and clubs like the Escambrón or Hotel Condado, who booked artists on their way to or from New York. After an opening weekend at one of these expensive nightclubs, foreign artists would typically spend another week or two doing shows in the movie theaters in Santurce, most of them located along the main street of Ponce de León. These included the Metropolitan (*Parada 18*), Paramount (*Parada 19*), Riviera (*Parada 20*), Broadway (*Parada 22*), Matienzo (*Parada 23*), and others. With fixed seating and no dance floor, these theaters packed in big crowds for ticket prices that working class people could afford.<sup>19</sup> In this way people from all over Santurce had the chance to see stars like Carlos Gardel<sup>20</sup> and Libertad Lamarque from Argentina; Jorge Negrete and María Antonieta Pons from Mexico; Billos Caracas Boys from Venezuela; Joséito Mateo and Johnny Ventura from the Dominican Republic; and the many great Cuban artists: *Sonora Matancera*, *Trío Matamoros*, Benny Moré, *Orquesta Aragón*, Vicentico Valdéz, *Orquesta Casino de la Playa*, Olga Guillot, and others. Through the performances of these international artists (live, radio, and TV), and their mingling with locals in studios, bars and after hours clubs, Santurce residents participated in a cultural world that went beyond the borders of their island.

### The New York-Puerto Rico Connection

From the 1920s on, many Puerto Rican musicians looked to New York as the place to launch their careers. Some of the earliest Puerto Rican musicians to pursue careers in New York were former members of the military band of the 369<sup>th</sup> infantry, an all-negro U.S. army brigade also known as the "Hellfighters" (Glasser 1995:52-83). Musical director James Reese Europe recruited 17 Puerto Rican musicians for the Hellfighters band, some of whom went on to record and perform with Europe's Clef Club dance band after the war, and with Clef Club alumni Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, who directed the all-black Broadway show "Shuffle Along" in the early 1920s (Glasser 1995:67). Trombonist Juan Tizól, who came to New York after the war, played with Duke Ellington and composed one of Ellington's signature tunes, "Caravan." In addition to their participation in African American jazz bands, Puerto Rican musicians were also active in the Latin music scene. Machito and



**¡¡DEBUT!!**  
**HOY SABADO**  
 en el  
**TEATRO RIVIERA**  
 de Santurce  
**DE LA REINA DE LA CANCION**  
**ARGENTINA**



**LIBERTAD LAMARQUE**  
Artista Extranjera de VIENTE BLANCO Y CIA  
 Proclamada por los Criticos Teatrales  
 de Cuba como: "La Novia de América"  
 La acompañará el maestro pianista y compositor  
**ALFREDO MALERBA**  
 Con la actuación de la Orquesta que dirige  
**Rafael González Peña**  
(Orchestra del ENCAMBRON BEACH CLUB)  
 Además el Debut de los Afamados Bailarines Internacionales  
**GUSTAVO & GISELLE**  
 Las Entradas para las Funciones de Matinée y Noche de Mañana Do-  
 mingo Estarán a la Venta Hoy Sábado a la 1:00 P. M. en el Teatro  
 RIVIERA.

*Figure 6: Ad for Libertad Lamarque in Teatro Riviera, from El Imparcial newspaper, February.23, 1946, p. 28. (Colección Puertorriqueña, Sistema de Bibliotecas, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras).*

his Afrocubans, for example, who created a sensation in the 1940s with their fusion of jazz and Latin Caribbean dance music, were not all Cubans. Puerto Ricans in the band during the late 1940s included saxophonist José Madera, trumpet player Paquito Dávila, and, at the heart of the rhythm section, timbalero Ubaldo Nieto and bongo player José Mangual Sr., from Santurce (Madera 2008).

If Santurce was a stepping stone to New York, New York was a stepping stone to an international career. Puerto Rico's most famed composer, Rafael Hernández, played in James Reese Europe's Hellfighters band and formed the *Trío Borinquen* and *Cuarteto Victoria* in New York after the war; but he also worked in Cuba, and eventually settled in Mexico City, writing songs that were recorded and performed by musicians from all over Latin America (Glasser 1995). Singer Daniel Santos was born in the Santurce neighborhood of *Tras Talleres* (Parada 15), but moved to New York as a child in the 1920s, where he became an internationally famous interpreter of boleros, performing and recording with *La Sonora Matancera* and other groups. Hernando Avilés, the first lead singer of the internationally famous *Trío Los Panchos*, was also from

*Tras Talleres*. He was succeeded in 1952 by another singer from Santurce, Julito Rodríguez; and later by Johnny Albino, from Guayama, who sang with *Los Panchos* from 1958 through 1968.

By the 1950s a generation of New York-born Puerto Ricans (“Nuyoricans”), including Tito Puente and later Eddie Palmieri, began to take charge of the internationally influential Latin music scene in New York. But fresh musicians and ideas continued to come from the island. Puente’s arch rival at the Palladium Ballroom in the 1950s, for example, was singer, *timbalero*, and bandleader Tito Rodríguez, who grew up in the Santurce neighborhood of *Barrio Obrero*.

By the 1960s the huge numbers of Puerto Ricans in New York (many of whom had at least passed through Santurce on their way) constituted a core audience for the new music called “salsa,” but salsa was also strongly connected to Puerto Rico, and to Santurce. In Puerto Rico, the local distributor for FANIA records, the premier salsa label, was Rafael Viera. Born in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, Viera moved to Santurce at the age of 12 to find work, and found his way to New York in the 1950s, where he worked in a clothing store. Viera sold suits to many professional musicians, and soon got involved as a sort of producer for radio and recordings. In 1963 he returned to Santurce to work for two Argentinian brothers who had a record distribution business. When FANIA started in 1964, Viera worked closely with owner Jerry Masucci to distribute records in Puerto Rico, driving to radio stations and record stores all over the island. Viera argues that salsa’s commercial success began in Puerto Rico, where some of salsa’s early hit records—including Ricardo Ray’s first album, “Ricardo Ray Arrives,” Bobby Valentín’s “El Mensajero,” and Tommy Olivencia’s “Trucutú”—first achieved significant sales (Viera 2007). In 1982 Rafael Viera started his own record store in Santurce, which moved to its present location in *la Parada 15* in 1997. Located next door to several other record stores and to the radio station, Viera Discos today is the meeting place for an international community of musicians, collectors, and fans of salsa music.<sup>21</sup>

Salsa music connected New York and Puerto Rico not only through its marketing, but also through its integration of diverse musical elements. Cortijo’s music in the 1950s was an inspiration to a new generation of Nuyorican musicians during the 1960s era of civil rights and black pride (Berríos-Miranda 2004). Both Cortijo and Ismael Rivera spent some years in New York, where Rivera’s group “Los Cachimbos,” especially, continued to break new ground and to inspire other salsa musicians to explore their Afro-Caribbean musical heritage. Salsa musicians’ appetite for new rhythms and ideas also went beyond *bomba* and *plena*. Echoing the Santurce house parties recalled by Carmelo Miranda, Willie Colón’s integration of salsa with *jíbaro* styles such as *seis* and *aguinaldo* on the

1972 record *Asalto Navideño* made it one of the best-selling salsa albums ever.<sup>22</sup> Colón looked beyond Puerto Rico for new ideas, too. On the same *Asalto Navideño* album he integrated Panamanian parade rhythms into “La Murga.” The pan-Latino and pan-ethnic appeal of salsa music was due not only to FANIA’s savvy marketing, therefore, but also to the diversity of styles that it integrated. As Colón himself explains, “Salsa is a music of inclusion” (Colón 2007).

A song that illustrates this well is “Che Che Colé,” from Colón’s 1972 album *Cosa Nuestra*. The song’s lyrics announce its “estilo africano,” and it makes both musical and textual references to *bomba*, but the rhythm sounds like calypso more than anything else. Calypso, from Trinidad, was the dominant commercial song form in the English Caribbean before reggae emerged in the 1970s. In Puerto Rico, though, calypso was popularized less by records than by steelbands in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Many of the steelbands that made an impact in Puerto Rico had roots in the neighboring U.S. Virgin Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John.<sup>23</sup> For example, Pedro Altieri, a Puerto Rican born in St. Croix, led a steelband that was especially popular in Puerto Rico in the 1960s. Steelbands played regularly at the Riviera nightclub where Cortijo got his start, and indeed the bell-heavy rhythm sections of Cortijo and the early Gran Combo sometimes echo the steelbands’ clanging irons.<sup>24</sup> In the same way, the bells and calypso feel of “Che Che Colé” echo a history of Caribbean musical exchange. In this perspective Willie Colón’s observation that “salsa is a music of inclusion” can be read as a reference not only to the crossroads of his South Bronx neighborhood<sup>25</sup> or New York City, but to a much older pattern of musical sharing and inclusion in Cangrejos, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean.

## The Local as Transnational

The music of Cortijo y su Combo wove together two stories about the same place, the free black community of Cangrejos and the international commercial center of Santurce:

*Cortijo y su combo* combinó, como ningún conjunto en ese momento, la expresión barrial comunal con la sonoridad societal de una música comercial para espectáculos. Santurce no sólo incluía barrios de fuerte tradición musical de esquinas, sino era también para 1950 el centro del mundo del espectáculo en Puerto Rico. (Quintero Rivera 2009)

*Cortijo y su combo* combined, like no other group of their time, a community and neighborhood sensibility with the “society” sound of commercial music shows. Santurce included not only neighborhoods with a strong tradition of community music, but by 1950 it was also Puerto Rico’s show business center.

Like Cortijo y su Combo, the musicians of El Gran Combo are *of* the people, as one can see when they mingle with the crowd before and after shows, chatting with friends and posing for pictures with fans. At the same time, they have the professional discipline, versatility, and stage presentation to play in the great concert halls of the world. It is this enduring nexus between the communal and the commercial, the local and the transnational, that Puerto Ricans proudly refer to when they say, “El Gran Combo es una institución” (El Gran Combo is an institution).

As a musical institution, El Gran Combo forges a sense of community that transcends the boundaries and exclusions people experience in their daily lives. Cortijo y su Combo inspired people throughout the Caribbean to take pride in their African heritage, at a time when the institutions of government, media, and business could not have imagined such a change in racial attitudes. El Gran Combo has moved that project forward, helping Puerto Ricans of all colors to feel proud of their own Afro-Caribbean culture, and through that culture to feel connected to other Latin American communities. This kind of transnational affiliation empowers some Puerto Ricans to resist the institutions that pull them politically and culturally into the United States, providing what Marisol Berrios-Miranda calls “expressive liberation” from colonial humiliation and displacement (2004). In this sense El Gran Combo’s music, like salsa generally, is a music of resistance as well as a music of inclusion. It is music through which people resist hegemonic portrayals of their positions as “low and outside”<sup>26</sup> by participating musically in a community where they feel included and valued.

Such communities are built through the work of imagination, through “negotiation between sites of agency (‘individuals’) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1990:5). Music helps in this work because its meanings are less rigorously prescribed, and more deeply felt, than those of language.<sup>27</sup> Through the active participation of singing and dancing, people connect to the music and the people with whom they share it, creating their own meanings that are empowering to them.<sup>28</sup> In the performances of El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, a band that has been blessed with the discipline and leadership to stay together for 47 years (performing several times a week during most of that time), such meanings acquire ever greater depth with time. The musicians’ own “afinque” (in sync-ness, locked togetherness) also radiates in the sound and in the intricate choreography of the singers, and their deep understanding of community-making is evident in their craft: songs that speak to common pleasures and sorrows, rich grooves and exciting breaks that inspire the dancers, engaging *coros* that the public sings to accompany the improvising *sonero*. El Gran Combo’s incorporation of sounds and

rhythms from the many places where they play also helps diverse audiences hear themselves in the band's performances. All of this they do in a coherent style that is their own ("a la manera de nosotros"), but just as surely shaped by a "musical geography" that connects Santurce through time and space to transnational networks, and that locates Puerto Rico in Latin America as much as in the United States.

### Cangrejos Today

While the music of Cortijo y su Combo and El Gran Combo connects Cangrejos to national and international communities, Cangrejos also continues to develop as a community and a culture unto itself. Staged concerts have not replaced the *rumbones de esquina*. The *rumbón* has stubbornly persisted, not disappearing but moving and adapting to the changing landscape and culture. For example, *la marginal*, an open area at the edge of the lagoon in Miramar, is one of the first places that Pedro "Capitol" Clemente remembers drumming and singing with other Santurce musicians in the 1960s. As more luxury apartments went up across the road, though, rich white people made fearful complaints to the police. "No querían esos negros tocando allí" (Clemente 2007). In the early 1970s the *rumbón* moved to *la Bayola*, in *la Parada 21* (Cortijo's neighborhood) where it continued for several years until that land was used to build the Centro Minillas government buildings. At that point the *rumbón* moved to the plaza in *la Parada 23*. And so it continued (Clemente 2007).

In July of 2007 we caught up with the migrating *rumbón* in Piñones, the eastern extension, historically, of the black community of Cangrejos. Piñones community activists were still celebrating their victory over foreign developers who had long sought to build a resort on their coast. The developers had finally agreed in March to sell the land to the government, clearing the way for local residents to keep their homes, to develop the local economy through coconut farming and ecotourism, and to promote their culture through initiatives like COPI (Corporación Piñones se Integra). The most public face of COPI is its community center where they rent bicycles and host *bomba* and *plena* workshops and performances. It was there that we met Pablo Luis Rivera, a musician who invited us to see some of his students perform at a bar further up the coast.

We pulled up at about 8 p.m. on a Sunday night to a modest building with a bar, a pool table, and an open air patio with a roof. A vendor was selling fried *alcapurrias* and *bacalaitos* from a mobile cart on the street. Tables had been moved to make room for dancers on the patio, and drummers and singers were playing along the back wall. We stood

at the edge of the dancing area and watched several young girls step in to take their turns. Each girl waved her long colorful skirt to accentuate her movements and cue the drummer's accents. Pablo and his drummers played energetically, the call and response singing was strong (amplified with microphones), and the dancing was fun to watch, although it seemed a little folkloric. Our 10-year-old son lost interest after a while and wandered over to the pool table, attracted by a group of teenage boys dressed in basketball shoes, Yankee caps, and knee-length shorts. They looked anything but folkloric, and did not seem to be interested in the dancing as they shot pool. Probably they, like our son, would rather have been listening to hip hop or *reggaetón*. After a while we decided to sit down for a drink and a rest ourselves, while the dancing continued.

Almost as soon as we sat, though, a chorus of screaming young girls brought us back to our feet. We hurried over to the dancing circle to look in, and there in the middle was one of the boys who had been shooting pool. All eyes were on his bright white basketball shoes, as they twisted and skipped in intricate rhythms that Pablo followed and sounded out on the drum. The dancer's movements were fast, aggressive, and flashy, sometimes more hip hop than *bomba*, and the crowd loved it, especially the girls. When he made a final cadence in front of the drummer and shuffled sideways out of the circle, another dancer entered. This one also danced with energy, but with some moves of his own that brought a new round of cheers from the crowd. Another young man burst into the circle as soon as he had finished. The *rumbón* was on, *encendido*, in Cangrejos tonight.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cortijo was best-known as a *conguero*, but played *timbales* in the combo to make room for his friend Martín Quiñones on congas.
- <sup>2</sup> The name on the album cover of their first record is "Cortijo y su Conjunto," while on the back side it is written as "Cortijo y su Combo." The latter is the name they kept.
- <sup>3</sup> After finishing at the Riviera, they went to another club where they began playing at 4:00 a.m. (Ithier 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> On the album *Baile con Cortijo y su Combo*.
- <sup>5</sup> Black Puerto Rican baseball star Roberto Clemente, who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1955 to 1972.
- <sup>6</sup> The song "Oriza" was recorded on the album "Fiesta Boricua"; it was composed by Cuban percussionist Silvestre Méndez (thanks to



one of our pre-publication reviewers for the composer's name).

- <sup>7</sup> At the time of this writing, Rafael Ithier and saxophonist Eddie Pérez are the two remaining members of El Gran Combo who played with Cortijo.
- <sup>8</sup> Ithier mentioned several songs that had a *vallenato* feel, specifically, including "Don Goyo" and "Julia." A more recent example is the song "Mi gorda bonita," in Mexican banda style, on the 2004 album "Aquí estamos y... ¡De verdad!"
- <sup>9</sup> Born in Ponce, Pedro Albizu Campos was educated in the United States, where he obtained a law degree from Harvard and made connections with independence leaders from around the colonial world. In 1930 he became the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist party, in which capacity he led labor protests and opposed the U.S. occupation. He was jailed for seditious activities from 1937-1946, and again from 1951 to 1964, and died in 1965.
- <sup>10</sup> The 1783 *Cédula de Población* in Trinidad granted land to Catholics who would settle in the island (mainly intended for French planters) (China 2005:51,76).
- <sup>11</sup> Gabri Stomp notes the historic influence of the Curaçao music called *tambu* in Puerto Rico, and also points out that a well-known recording of *bomba Holandés* published by Puerto Rican ethnomusicologist José Dufrasne-González was actually recorded by a group from Curaçao playing *tambu* with *bomba* instruments (2002:299). In another 20th century echo of the long relationship between Puerto Rico and the Dutch Caribbean, the first overseas booking for Cortijo y su Combo was in Curaçao and Aruba in 1955 (Ayala).
- <sup>12</sup> Pedro "Capitol" Clemente, who comes from a family of musicians in Santurce and who has been one of the primary organizers of the *Festival de Bomba y Plena* since the early 1970s, has had many conversations with older musicians from Santurce and elsewhere that suggest that *plena* was originally played in Santurce on long drums, and that the innovation that was introduced from Ponce was the use of the *pandereta* frame drums.
- <sup>13</sup> Sepúlveda and Carbonell cite the following population statistics from 1861: 130 *blancos*, 174 *mulatos*, 1353 *negros libertos*, 89 *esclavos* (1987:15).
- <sup>14</sup> This is not to say that *jíbaro* music did not also have African influences. Ángel Quintero Rivera, with musical analysis by Luis Manuel Álvarez, has argued that many of the *seis* melodies that are played

on the Puerto Rican *cuatro* use rhythms that are shared by Afro-Caribbean styles such as *bomba* and *merengue*. The bongo drums, the percussive timekeeping of the *güiro*, and the rhythmic phrasings are examples of African influences in the *jíbaro* repertoire—influences that took root in inland communities of Puerto Rico because of African-descent people who lived there, and through musical recordings in recent times (1992:201-252).

- <sup>15</sup> Ángel Quintero Rivera has demonstrated that the *danza* itself was shaped by the contributions of mulatto musicians in Ponce in the 19th century, who introduced African syncopations into this European-derived dance music (1992). This is also true of the Cuban *danzón*, a near relative of the Puerto Rican *danza*.
- <sup>16</sup> Station PWX in Havana, Cuba, began transmitting four months earlier. The first radio station was KDKA in Pittsburgh, founded in 1920. Puerto Rico's second radio station, WNEL, began in San Juan 1934, and soon after this radio broadcasting began in other parts of the island: in Ponce WPRP (1946) and WPAB (1940), and in Mayagüez WPRA (1937) (Torregrosa 1991).
- <sup>17</sup> Ruth Glasser portrays a similar culture of professional and amateur ensembles in Puerto Rican communities in New York (1995:86-92).
- <sup>18</sup> Born in Mayagüez, Roena moved to Santurce at the age of seven (Quintero Rivera 2009).
- <sup>19</sup> Juanita Miranda remembers paying \$3.50 to see *Los Panchos* in the 1940s (compared to five cents for a movie, \$1.00 for a 78 rpm record) at a time when she made \$20 a week keeping the books at Plaza Provision. Her willingness to spend 5% of her monthly income on one concert illustrates the special enthusiasm that working class Santurce residents had for music.
- <sup>20</sup> Gardel was so revered in Puerto Rico that when he visited the island in 1935 WKAQ radio broadcast not only his concerts, but even the arrival of his ship at the dock in San Juan (Torregrosa 1991:257).
- <sup>21</sup> For the last ten years or so, there has been an international salsa congress held in Puerto Rico in June. During the 2007 event we witnessed French, German, Italian, and other foreign salsa enthusiasts flocking to Viera Discos, a store that is normally far off the beaten path for tourists.
- <sup>22</sup> *Jíbaro* music elements on this record include Yomo Toro's *cuatro* playing, and Héctor Lavoe's *jíbaro*-inflected singing style. The song

“Esta Navidad,” in particular, features Lavoe singing in the *décima* form popular in the *jíbaro* repertoire.

- <sup>23</sup> I am grateful to John Hodge, the leader of Rising Stars steelband in St. Thomas, who hosted me in April of 2007 and introduced me to older players who knew the local history of the steelband. These men explained to me that locals learned to build and play the steel pan from Trinidadian musicians who came to St. Thomas in the early 1950s. Charlie Sochuk, who played percussion with the “Boomerang” steelband founded by immigrants from St. Kitts in the mid-1960s, remembers that it was Pedro Altieri that started the steelband craze in Puerto Rico 1959 (2007). The U.S. Navy Steelband, which was founded in San Juan two years earlier and went on the Ed Sullivan show in 1958, played an important role popularizing the steelband in the U.S. (Martin 2008); but they seem not to have been the favorite steelband for working class Puerto Ricans.
- <sup>24</sup> Cortijo’s “Oriza” rhythm, for example, has a strong resemblance to calypso rhythm. Other Puerto Rican salsa bands also used the calypso rhythm a lot in the 1960s, especially the *orquesta* of Tony Olivencia, from Villa Palmeras in Santurce.
- <sup>25</sup> While reminiscing with Marisol about their childhood neighborhood, *la parada 24* in Santurce, singer Danny Rivera observed, “Toda esa gente vive hoy día en el Bronx” (all those people live in the Bronx now) (Rivera 2007).
- <sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall writes, “The role of the ‘popular’ in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside” (1998, emphasis ours).
- <sup>27</sup> Tom Turino cites the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce to argue that music communicates through indexical signs (signs of co-occurrence, like the association between a song and a first date) and iconic signs (signs of resemblance, like kettle drums signifying thunder), which induce emotional and physical responses that are less meditated, and for that reason more direct and powerful than our rational response to the symbolic signs (words) of language. Music, along with other arts, is “a type of framed activity where it is expected that the imagination and new possibilities will be given special license” (2008:17-18).
- <sup>28</sup> Frances Aparicio, for example, shows how latina salsa fans in Detroit

resignify the lyrics of songs that she (Aparicio) had considered misogynist, including "Así son las mujeres," by El Gran Combo; as these women sing and dance with the music they feel empowered by the meanings that they give the lyrics, and not worried about other people's definitions of what the songs "really" mean (1997:219-238).

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