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Music: The weapon of choice

In the summer of 2019, history was made in Puerto Rico. With little more than creativity and equipped with every instrument possible, a corrupt government official and many of his closest allies were overthrown with no casualties and minor property damage. I was working on my MLS and research in Urban music genres in Puerto Rico, but could not keep my mind off of the situation back home. Even more so when I paid attention to the music surrounding it.

From bomba puertorriqueña to salsa to plena to pop to folk music and even reggaetón, music represented the primary method of protest against an oppressive government. In Puerto Rico, protest music is not a particular style or genre, but a musical expression across all genres and socio-economic boundaries. This presentation will explore and recap all the different ways in which music is used in Puerto Rican protests, with specific attention to the historic 2019 #RickyRenuncia manifestations.

Music has always been a part of protest. This is not a new revelation. There have been countless articles and papers over time. There have even been presentations at NEMLA surrounding this. I will now present some examples of how music has been used as a form of resistance in Puerto Rico.

First we have Plena. Plena is the one genre that is consistent throughout most protests. This is because of its instrumentation: 3 panderos (handheld drums tuned to different notes), sometimes a güiro (scrape gourd) accompanies it. It is a sung newspaper heavy on satire. It was popular among the lower and working classes. Here we have Estrella Sola, Lone Star, a plena that expresses Nationalist sentiments. Quick note that Borinquen is another name for Puerto Rico, it is what our indigenous people, the Taínos, called the islands *Borikén*. This next plena talks about classism in the Islands (Puerto Rico is an archipelago, not a lone island) and the superiority complex that comes from being from the Metro Area vs “The Island”. Here the singer is questioning, aren’t we all from the island? We are a single country, no?

Next up we have salsa, the genre not the food. Salsa’s origins are Afro-Cuban with influences from other Latin American genres as well as Jazz, R&B, Boogaloo, and others. It was mostly developed and popularized in New York by Puerto Rican and Nuyoricano artists. Salsa has always been full of deep social commentary and became a sort of sung newspaper as well. This song talks about racial inequality in Latin America.

Now we move on to rap. This song is called Dear FBI and it talks about the murder of a Puerto Rican Nationalist leader. This song, as well as his activism, led René Pérez Joglar (alias Residente) to be blacklisted in Puerto Rican radio stations and venues. Only recently has he become more accepted by the music industry and he has since rapped “they love me more in other countries than in my own home”.

Reggaetón is another urban genre that only recently has become socially acceptable. In its (predominantly Afro-Caribbean) beginnings, reggaetón artists, producers, venues, and cassette shops were targeted, raided, and unjustly criminalized. This song is about the criminalization of the urban genre (urban genre is an umbrella term that encompasses reggaetón, rap in Spanish, etc.).

Pop music has also been used to convey resistance. Admittedly, this particular song leans more on the plena genre. However, iLe is known for her indie pop music. She draws heavily from the genres of our past generations and blends them with modern genres for her own sound. This song is about political corruption in PR. Many people comment that this was a prophetic song as it closely mirrored what happened during #RickyRenuncia. Speaking of Indie music, this Computer music piece is called Colonised and it expresses the frustrations that result from colonialism and the appointment of the Federal Control Board.

Music has elevated people into power. This is Pedro Rosselló, Ricardo Rosselló's father. During and after his political campaign he would often dance to the Macarena. The Rosselló name will forever be associated with the Macarena. He is infamous for being one of the most corrupt governors in PR's history. One of the many things he is remembered for is for criminalizing reggaetón. And this is his son, dancing to the very music his dad criminalized.

Now, about #RickyRenuncia. Like I said, it was the summer of 2019. Private telegram chats were made public by the Puerto Rico Center for Investigative Journalism. These messages expressed sexist and homophobic sentiments. They mocked Puerto Ricans who were trying to recover after the Hurricane María. The aftermath was worse than the actual hurricane. One particular message that hurt me the most was "the world will be better when there are no Puerto

Ricans”. This led to ~12 days of protests and civic unrest. Today I will be recapping all the genres that were used. Quick disclaimer, that these videos are not high quality as they were mostly taken while the events happened.

First up a minute of silence. Wasn't it Debussy that said “The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between”. Next up we have percussive beats. This is the *Cacerolazo* initiative in which everyone (including the diaspora) could participate. Every night at 8pm you take your *cacerola*, rice pot, and bang it for 10 minutes. It is designed to be annoying and trust me, it is. Now we move on to chanting. You might say, but Adaliz, every protest involves chanting. I'm saying, yes. But this is what I call chanting with a kick...

Bomba is a musical style that comes from our African heritage. It is a conversation between the drums and the dancer. Take a close look, the dancer is leading, the drummer follows the dancers movements. Bomba is usually paired with Plena, which we already talked about. I was at a protest in Boston playing the panderos and was repeatedly asked by people passing by “is this a protest or a party”? Well friends, it is a little bit of both!

While bomba y plena are genres associated with the coasts, where enslaved people worked in sugar cane fields, Décima is a genre associated with the mountains and mountain folk, *jibaritos*. The singer usually does not know what the verses are going to be. They are provided with a rhyme, *pie forzado*, and they have to make it up on the spot. Here the crowd is singing what the string ensemble would usually play. This is Victoria Sanabria, a well known singer in the Décima community. If you pay close attention, you'll see the sign language interpreter in the background!

Moving up to the higher classes, Danza is what we call Puerto Rican classical music. It is associated with high society and ballrooms. There is even a language of the fan for high society ladies. The Puerto Rican national anthem is actually a danza. Here we have the most notable PR artists singing the original national anthem, the one that was watered down because it was too “revolutionary” for a territory.

Next we have traditional/folk music. This song was written by a deployed soldier during WWII. It’s very sentimental and causes every member of the diaspora to tear up when hearing it. Someone in the crowd yells, “this is for all the people who were forced to leave”. Following that, we have bolero which is more of a Latin American genre. It originated in Cuba and can be easily explained by being slow ballads. This particular song is the “unofficial national anthem” and talks about patriotism and autonomistic ideals.

A massive choral protest was convened and many choirs from around the island united. This is Pearl of the Caribbean, another danza. Lso, salsa, which we also talked about earlier, couldn’t be excluded! Now we arrive in the parody music genre, my favorite. Los Rivera Destino are a group of friends who parody popular reggaetón and Latin trap songs set to more “classic” or older genres. Some examples are Te Boté set to Bolero, Dura by Daddy Yankee set to Cha Cha Cha, and Viajo Sin Ver by Jon Z sung to a Pasodoble track.

This next song is what I call the soundtrack of the protests. Residente, iLe, and Bad Bunny wrote, recorded, and produced this track in 24 hours. They were all in different parts of the world and it was released to YouTube only. This song definitely ignited the spark and the people learned the lyrics to this song in record breaking time.

Last, but certainly not least, was the Perreo Combativo. This was the name of the event and was by far the most controversial protest. Why? Because perreo is how you dance to reggaetón and it is most commonly associated with the lower classes, Black people, and the queer community. To top it all off, it was held in front of a famous church landmark. This was also the last day of the protests as the next day, Mr. Rosselló resigned. Coincidence? Maybe, maybe not.

Many songs have since come out about the event, but it wasn't just music. David Begnaud, CBS news journalist who is notable for covering Puerto Rican events, [tweeted](#) that these have been one of the most creative he's ever seen. We held dance protests, bodyart, protest in national dress, social media takeovers, memes, bedtime stories (my favorite), kayak protest, motorcycles, scuba diving, acrobats, horseback riding, coffee art, yoga, and even a bride on her wedding day took the time to protest.

In conclusion, many have pointed to the fact that Puerto Rico changed. We finally realized that we're stronger than we think and they are not as strong as they make themselves out to be. Smaller protests have since been held and we are gearing up for *El Verano Combativo 2020*, combative summer 2020. We also saw a rise in Latin American solidarity.