



# Juan Luis Guerra

The Dominican music star continues to inform with his high-brow poeticism and merengue with a message. **Charles de Ledesma** examines his impressive career

After studying jazz composition at Berklee in Boston in the early 80s, Juan Luis Guerra's debut release was *Soplando* (1985), a jazz-imbued set of merengue fusions with virtuoso saxophone playing. Rather lost on local ears, he was encouraged to focus solely on merengue proper, which the top star of the time, arranger and trumpeter Wilfrido Vargas, had helped make less insular. Consequently Guerra marshalled influences ranging from the Beatles, to American folk, R&B and traditional Dominican modes, and applied his strong tenor voice and flexible guitar work to develop a new merengue balancing fast tempos and busy backline horn work, with softer, slower traditional song. Guerra's elegant lyricism leads scholar Raymond

Torres-Santos to observe that '[he] created a merengue which he qualifies as music for the feet as much as for the head; that is, a merengue for dancing but also for listening and thinking.' Guerra's first classic *Ojalá Que Llueva Café* (1989) featured fast, merengue típico – full of virtuoso accordion, a scrapping guira, tambora drum and vaulting saxophone – and love ballads, which, although drawing on Cuban bolero and Mexican ranchera, immediately sounded his own. The title-track, which translates as 'Let's Hope it Rains Coffee' is, as Julie Sellers suggests in *Merengue and Dominican Identity*, 'a social criticism of the conditions (in the coffee fields) endured by rural Dominicans.' The lyrics call not just for the weather and soil in these areas to improve but for living conditions to rise as well.

This emphasis on merengue with a message – whether that be cultural, political or emotional – lies at the core of Guerra's 90s work. On *Bachata Rosa*'s 'Reforestame' he makes a foray into environment commentary, while on an earlier tune, 'Guavaberry', as merengue scholar Paul Austerlitz suggests, 'Guerra speaks of the regional customs of cocolos – Dominicans of Anglophone Caribbean descent... who remained on the margins of Dominican-ness... after their arrival in the country in the 19th century.' Then, on the moving 'Visa Para un Sueño' (Visa for a Dream), he portrays the bleak situation of many poor Dominicans who, facing poverty, applied for an exit visa at the capital's US embassy and almost always faced refusal. Guerra's foremost social action statement is *Areito* (1992) – the title referring to rituals performed by the island's now extinct indigenes, the Taíno. The final song 'Naboria Daca Mayanimacana', which some have called the unofficial anthem of the Taíno 'indigenous resurgence', is a true triumph, a blistering lament to the early inhabitants, sung with aching feeling in a dialect that approximates the now fossilised Taíno language.

*Areito* also includes 'El Costo de la Vida' (The Cost of Living), which remains a live set favourite. Over a driving *soukous* guitar hook, accordion flourishes, a nifty *tres* line, blistering horn arpeggios and chorus refrains, Guerra hits out at the period's faltering economy, commonly blamed on corruption and inefficiency, while on 'Si Saliera Petroléo' (If We Struck Oil) he critiques the dependency on corporate oil in a strong vocal shared with the like-minded elder statesman of Latin protest song, the Panamanian Rubén Blades (see Beginner's Guide in #104). The album's anti-colonial and anti-capitalist hits led it to be banned in several countries that worried that it could offend the US.

As the 90s continued, with increasing numbers of Dominicans now managing to emigrate, merengue grew in stature and range, often sweeping the Latin dance floor as an exuberant, hotter alternative to generic salsa and *cumbia*. Guerra's 1994 album *Fogaraté*, with its lighter mood, musical virtuosity and African fusions, captured the zeitgeist perfectly. Co-produced with the Congo's Diblo Dibala, *soukous* guitars and customary baritone ululations worked strikingly well alongside merengue típico tunes like the memorable 'La Cosquillita' (The Little Tickle) with quick-fire accordion from Francisco Ulloa, and a witty, double entendre lyric.

No assessment of Guerra would be complete without mentioning *bachata*, a kind of Dominican blues that privileges virtuoso guitar work and plaintive, often whining

vocals. Indeed Guerra's early album *Bachata Rosa* – his biggest hit with around five million sales – helped shine a much-needed spotlight on a song form that emerged in the 60s as a rivetingly powerful mode and, today, exceeds merengue in popularity.

Guerra's best bachatas from this period – 'Burbujas de Amor' and 'Bachata Rosa' – are in fact less reflective of the emerging mature bachata form illustrated by Luis Vargas, Anthony Santos and Raulín Rodríguez, and have more in common with the generic pan-Latin ballada. However, later attempts such as 'Bachata en Fukuoka' (2010), and 'Tus Besos', a mega-hit from the most recent album *Todo Tiene su Hora* (2014), caught bachata's sensuous power perfectly. 'Tus Besos' has the added charm of a doo-wop style refrain.

Juan Luis Guerra is arguably a quintessential example of a 'creative classicist', bestriding two great modes in Latin music: the crisply arranged, perfectly poised dance track and the emotion-wringing ballad. Twinning a strong knowledge of the Dominican Republic's rather secret and hauntingly sweet ballada tradition with merengue's hot and triumphant Hispanic Caribbean rhythms, Guerra continues to be an artist on a mission – this summer bringing his sweet blend of hits to concert halls in London and Europe. We hope it rains coffee for him. ♦

♦ **DATES** Juan Luis Guerra and 4.40 will play at the O2 Academy Brixton, London on July 14. See Gig Guide for details



## BEST ALBUMS

**Ojalá Que Llueva Café** (Karen, 1990)  
Guerra's fourth release, which catapulted him into a household name in the Dominican Republic, with a perfect title-track, social issues on 'Razones' and a storming *típico* in 'Reina Mia'.

**Bachata Rosa** (Karen, 1990)  
Renowned for helping promote the often maligned but exquisite local style *bachata*, and the one that broke Guerra internationally. 'Burbujas de Amor' is much-loved in the *romantic* camp.

**Areito** (Karen, 1992)  
This is Guerra's classic social action album, which promoted indigenous Taino culture on moving hymns with *palos* drumming balanced by storming dance numbers and the top ballad, 'Frio Frio'. Its anti-colonial and anti-capitalist hits led it to be banned in several countries.

**Fogaraté** (Karen, 1994)  
Invited guests on this album include *soukous* guitarist Diblo Dibala and accordionist Francisco Ulloa who both excel. The latter's 'La Cosquillata' is a perfect demonstration of the Cibao region's merengue típico, where accordion and saxophone duel over a rapid beat.

**A Son de Guerra** (Capital Latin, 2010)  
This is a *tour de force* of a Latin style showcase with salsa, *son*, mambo and *bachata* holding place alongside an excellent orchestra and merengue típicos.

## IF YOU LIKE JUAN LUIS GUERRA, THEN TRY:

**La India Canela**  
**Merengue Típico from the Dominican Republic** (Smithsonian Folkways, 2008)  
La India Canela plays accordion in the classic merengue típico tradition – fast, tight and melodic. She's joined on this exquisite disc by some of the Cibao region's best musicians.