

## **History of Music in the Dominican Republic and its social impact**

Music, dance, and rhythms have always been an important part of the Dominican Republic's heritage. Political and economic transformations through Dominican history are mirrored in the country's music tradition, which has had a significant role in shaping historical periods and shifts.

Dominicans can only be understood through music since it is the best way to understand their country, life, and traditions. Music and dance have been used in different political contexts related to social and national identity formation and maintenance. It has always been a part of every Dominican's essence.

The fusion of indigenous Taíno, European/Spanish, and West African customs and traditions contributed to the development of the Dominican ethos. (Candelario, 2007) Due to cultural contact between many different people and races from different continents and social classes, the Dominican Republic is a home of musical genres of great diversity, deeply absorbed in people's identity and culture. (Sagás, 2000) The history of the colonial era may clarify how the musical genres have arisen and how they were used to express Dominican culture. Thus, the historical context is necessary to understand Dominican identity and the role music plays in this representation.

The Dominican Republic is widely known for its merengue and bachata musical genre. Both of them are a powerful symbol of the country's national identity and immense cultural significance. Both merengue and bachata have had a long and progressive career, developing from rural folk idiom to transnational mass music

The true origin of merengue will never be known with certainty. All theories witness deep-rooted feelings about Dominican identity since it connects national identity and music in a solid bond, which endured through all merengue's history.

Merengue originated in the mid-nineteenth century in the Dominican Republic. It sustained a regional diversity, varying in an instrument, style, and lyrical content according to the particular geographical region until 1931, when the dictator Rafael Trujillo became president of the country. (Austerlitz, 1997) In the beginning, merengue was rejected by the polite society since it was rooted in low-class culture. The Dominican dictator realized the potential of strengthening his position of power by using music. One of his severe political concerns was to increase merengue popularity among the elite and promote this transformation.

The Trujillo knew that rural expressive guitar-based merengue types could turn into effective symbols of national identity and modernity of his regime and labeled it tradicional. The dictator sophisticated, refined, and "Europeanized" merengue and introduced it in elite ballrooms to an amazed upper class, under the name típico or perico ripiao.

Gradually, merengue started entering the social world of all the social classes, increasing communication across classes throughout the Dominican Republic and symbolizing nationhood. Suppression of African rhythms was evident since the dictator promoted Hispanicism and whiteness.

The people's connection with merengue became so intense and maintained across international boundaries. (Sellers 2004) In the 1960s, after the Trujillo assassination, started mass migration wave from the Dominican Republic. Dominicans have been scattered around the world, carrying their music along. This made merengue influenced by various outside music genres making it widely popular in other countries.

To date, merengue is an important part of every aspect of Dominican life. It is played on births, name-days, weddings, schools, family get-togethers, construction of homes, nights out, and parties, political campaigns — which proves that no-one can resist dancing merengue.

This music attracts people of different social classes, promoting respect and encouraging coexistence among communities, groups, and individuals. That is why in 2016, UNESCO announced merengue as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Another Dominican Republic phenomenon and the core of Dominican everyday life is bachata. Even though it developed a bit later than merengue, it also reflects the same social context. Bachata originated in the early years of the twentieth century and has its specific social significance as well.

Although etymologically the name means 'party' or 'jamboree,' its melancholy lyrics are about nostalgia, heartbreak, and love. In the beginning, it was heard in the bordellos, bars, and the poorest and most marginalized districts of Santo Domingo. Bachata's first practitioners and fans were of African descent. The music was considered for the poorest and least educated people, and the upper and middle-classes initially rejected it. (Pierson, 2009) It took quite a lot of time before bachata entered into Dominican society, since it was prohibited on TV, radio, and the print media for two decades.

In the 1980s and 1990s, bachata's low social profile started changing when nostalgic Dominican immigrants moved it to New York City - where it lost its low-class identity. (Caro-López at al., 2010) Once criticized for its unsophisticated simplicity, bachata became a powerful sonic symbol of the Dominican homeland, a signature asset to the homesick immigrants and the source of its appeal. This musical expression transformed into a cherished symbol of Dominican authenticity. Its popularity eventually surpassed the merengue orchestras perceived as the typical symbol of Dominican-ness for a long time. (Hernandez, 2014)

In December 2019, UNESCO announced bachata as an Intangible World Heritage Asset as an expression of native culture. Bachata is ever-present since childhood in community celebrations, festivals, social and family gatherings.

For generations of Dominican immigrants abroad, merengue and bachata have been offering a powerful way to stay emotionally connected to their ancestral homeland since listening to music from their own country has been helping them maintain their cultura. (Grasmuck at al. 1991) For Dominicans, music plays a vital role in reducing the anxiety of losing culture and ethnic identity by being so firmly related to Dominican nationality.

Merengue and bachata are, without a doubt, genres of Dominican national praise. Socially and through celebrations, they have deeply united Dominican diverse ethnicities. (Pacini, 1089)

Dominican music positively impacts and promotes an orientation and identification with ideas of bounded groups, strengthening traditional and nationalistic concepts of locality and homeland. It is interesting to mention that music itself (particularly merengue) has survived because of the international circulation of migrants. Dominicans are just as strongly 'Dominican' when traveling as when at home.

Their music expresses unbreakable ties to the tierra of the Dominican Republic, nostalgia for home, family, belonging, and the general beauty of the people and its land, declaring the importance of the birthplace and calling upon loyalty to the patria.

Since a Dominican government and economic survival largely depend on migrant remittances, it supports music that evokes the traditional values, ties from birth, and most importantly, family, locales, nation, and people. After all, appeals to 'country' (país) as an idea of place and homeland are celebrated in contemporary merengues. Its lyrics fill the listener's imagination with images of home, which keeps their memories fresh and reinforces connections with their homeland.

Although the country's experienced bitter divisions, revolutions, and dictatorial rule through history, the Dominicans have significantly contributed to the Latin music's most popular and influential styles and musical world globally.

Research by [Taylan Evrenler](#) demonstrates Dominican music is a meeting point for different people from different cultures and countries that opens the door to anyone who wants to sing and dance to this catchy rhythm. Not only that its music is a hallmark of the Dominican Republic, nurturing Dominican roots, but this music reaches everyone, no matter where you come from ... or where you go.

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