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Benny Moré, the musician¹

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There is a commonplace expression that really bothers me whenever I read an article on Benny Moré, and it's the assertion that Benny was a "natural genius," in spite of the fact that he "didn't know" or "could not read" music. This kind of praise is, to say the least, dubious and conceals a clearly paternalistic approach towards one of the main icons of Cuban popular culture.

Whether totally true or not, the fact that a great popular singer and bandleader could not read a musical score is not really important from the point of view of oral traditions, essential to popular and traditional musics around the world. Following these cultural patterns, we can easily prove that Benny Moré was a well trained musician, although he may have been a self-taught or non-academic musician if we approach him from a Western "classical" viewpoint.

Benny Moré's case is not unique in Cuba, where many accomplished and famous musicians such as Chano Pozo, as well as songwriters such as Osvaldo Farrés and others, pianists and bandleaders like Felipe Dulzoides and Luis Santí, or the great majority of troubadours—creators of the Cuban bolero—who composed, sang, and accompanied themselves with a guitar, and often sang in duets, were self-taught. The greatest among them was

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Sindo Garay, and his case would be incredible if we were to judge it only through academic standards. His guitar parts were so complex that it took years for classical guitarist Jesús Ortega to transcribe them, only to confirm that Sindo always played them identically and was capable of detecting any mistake in the transcriptions. Similar examples can be found by the dozen in American pop, rock, and jazz, including such greats as Frank Sinatra and pianist Errol Gardner.

In a different context, nobody can deny the musicianship of batá drum players, whose virtuosity comes from an apprenticeship that begins in childhood, and whose musical language is almost impossible to master by an academic musician unless he or she follows the adequate training required in Yoruban oral traditions, which passes directly from master to pupil. Only when we become aware of these facts about oral traditions, particularly those of Cuban popular music, can we seriously face the musical background of Benny Moré by leaving behind paternalistic attitudes. We must point out the fact that the musical knowledge predominantly based on reading a particular notation, i.e., that of Western culture, should instead be called “academic training.” Only then could musicologists correctly state that Benny “had no academic training.” But you would be absolutely wrong if you said that Benny lacked a thorough musical training.

Since childhood, Benny actively took part in the festivities of the Congo (Bantú) and Lucumí (Yoruba) societies known as “cabildos,” in his hometown of Santa Isabel de las Lajas. He probably learned not only the chants, dances and rhythmic patterns of these musics, but also how to play some percussive instruments. I believe he did, for I personally saw him indicating to his band’s percussionists how to do this or that. Through his early apprenticeship, Benny acquired a strong Afro-Cuban oral tradition, which would later help him to master all rhythmic aspects of our popular music, and also the vocal inflexions and dance steps that would be central in forging his image as an icon in the world of show business.

Later, Benny learned how to play the guitar as an instrument with more harmonic possibilities, and wrote his first songs. Soon he started as a troubadour and sang in duets, following the above mentioned tradition. He

was equally brilliant and efficient singing the lead or the second voice, as we can confirm today thanks to his recordings with Mexican Pedro Vargas and Venezuelan Alfredo Sadel, two Latin American idols and outstanding singers. This duet tradition of the Cuban “trova” is quite a demanding art, with Hispanic as well as African roots: the voices usually sing in 3rds and 6ths and occasionally build a counterpoint, sometimes even with two different, yet complementary lyrics, over the same harmonic progression.

According to ethnomusicologists, there are two distinct vocal traditions in West Africa, one based on intervals of 3rd and 6th, and the other employing 5ths, 4ths, and octaves. Both traditions survive in Cuba. The first one is related to the trova, son and bolero and the second one to rumba and guaguancó. One aspect of Benny’s versatility comes precisely from the fact that he mastered both traditions like no one else before.

On the other hand, if the experience of singing gives you a practical mastery of melodic intervals, guitar playing gives you an empirical knowledge of chords, that is, harmonic intervals, and also a training of the ear in the perception of chord relations. The Cuban son, for instance, is based mostly on two or three chords: Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant (I, V, IV), while the bolero is richer harmonically and also employs major and minor modes. We all know that Benny was familiar with both genres, and composed his own sones and boleros with the help of his guitar, both a harmonic and polyphonic instrument.

Besides that, Benny had another excellent schooling while singing in different sextets or “conjuntos” like the Sexteto Fígaro, Conjunto Cauto and the great Conjunto Matamoros. With Miguel Matamoros, the Dean of Cuban soneros, Benny certainly learned all the secrets of the “percussive style” of the guitar accompaniment, as well as the two-guitar playing originally conceived precisely by the Matamoros Trio. The polyrhythmic patterns and the all-around sound of these groups’ format were not unlike the all-percussion groups he had known as a child. But from this *conjunto* format there emerged in the early 1940s a larger type of conjunto, which added conga drums and two or more trumpets, while substituting the guitar for the piano. And it was the old rhythmic-harmonic guitar which was transformed by the pianists into the modern “montunos,” “guajeos,”

and “mambos.” Pianists were also responsible for most of the modern arrangements that gave way to the mambo innovations, writing montunos and other typical Cuban riffs and patterns for the saxophone and brass sections.

Benny Moré’s career evolved through all these historical stages in dance music, but he also worked with the best pianists and arrangers who created a Cuban jazz band style; musicians like Dámaso Pérez Prado, Peruchín Jústiz, and Bebo Valdés. And Benny certainly understood the significance of all these innovations and knew how to make the best of it, incorporating them to his own musical ideas.

In México, Benny worked mostly with jazz bands like those of Arturo Núñez, Rafael de Paz and, of course, Dámaso Pérez Prado. Back in Cuba, he sang with the big bands of Mariano Mercerón, Bebo Valdés, and Ernesto Duarte, before organizing his own band. His collaboration with Pérez Prado, however, was especially significant, not only in terms of the internal fame it brought him, but also, from our point of view, in terms of musical training and knowledge. We must remember that: 1) Benny already knew about Prado’s work as a pianist and arranger of the Casino de la Playa orchestra; 2) In Mexico, Prado arranged and recorded some of Benny’s numbers, which became his first hits as an author, namely, “Locas por el mambo,” “Bonito y Sabroso,” “Dolor Carabalí,” and others, plus “Guajiro,” with Pérez Prado as co-author; 3) It was Pérez Prado who introduced the most advanced dissonances in our popular dance music, including clusters in the piano improvisations, not unlike what Thelonious Monk did for jazz.

When Benny returned to Havana, it was none other than Bebo Valdés who encouraged him to form his own band. Bebo felt that this extraordinary singer was capable enough as a musician to lead a band successfully, and he was right. Since then, Benny started working directly with outstanding arrangers Eduardo Cabrera, Peruchín Jústiz, and Generoso Jiménez, to create the band’s repertoire. And when we listen to the band’s dozens of records, we find it has a distinct, recognizable style, no matter who wrote the arrangement. From the harmonic and orchestral point of view, Benny’s orchestra resembles that of Bebo Valdés, rather than Pérez Prado, but from the rhythmic angle it is different from both. This can

only mean that Benny knew what he wanted and had the necessary wisdom and musical knowledge to make his band sound as he wished. Whoever saw him working with his arrangers, making suggestions, or humming and dictating the desired melodic lines, montunos or riffs for the sax or the brass section, will never accept that he was not a trained musician.

Those who saw him day after day leading the band understand this. Personally, I had the opportunity to play in the saxophone section of at least a dozen bands under the direction of musicians who were noted arrangers, such as Julio Gutiérrez, Rey Díaz Calvet, Armando Romeu, Rafael Somavilla, Jr., Chico O'Farrill and Venezuelan Aldemaro Romero. I also happened to play with the band of Benny Moré. And the least I can say is that he was always in perfect command of his orchestra, even in the most frantic ballroom dances. He also knew how to get the best out of the band and every musician in it. He could take the band from a pianissimo to a fortissimo or viceversa, accelerate or slow down the tempo, doble the rhythm section's speed, mark when you had a solo, or when any of the sections had to play a montuno or mambo riff, and even warn someone before he went out of the "clave." So many seemingly small details, but which are something that many academic directors were and are unable to do.

There is no doubt that Benny had memorized all of his band's arrangements. And why not, considering that oral tradition is based on memory? Even a classical concert virtuoso must memorize very complex pieces, and a few symphonic conductors are able to memorize whole scores. A popular musician often possesses an incredible memory, and Benny Moré was certainly among them. I've always surmised that he actually knew at least the basics of music reading, which by the way, is not so difficult. But even without it, we can assert that Benny Moré, blessed with extraordinary musical gifts, attained a very solid training and knowledge in everything concerning popular music and especially Afro-Cuban musical traditions.