

Bomba Puertorriqueña

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Bomba is a musical genre originated in the island of Puerto Rico by the XVII century (1600 approx.). It is mainly influenced by the contact between indigenous natives from the island, Africans brought through the transatlantic slave trade, and the strong presence and authority of Spanish people. Bomba is the oldest musical expression from Puerto Rico, and it survives these days thank you to oral tradition. This means that bomba has been going from generations thank you to the music making and conversational aspect from practitioners between their families and neighborhood.

Puerto Rico (originally named Borikén by the indigenous Taínos) is the greater of the lesser Antilles from the Caribbean, a subregion of North America. The people from Puerto Rico are lively humans, embedded with music, food, warmth, and generosity; we are known as puertorriqueños.

While navigating these pages you will find fundamental information to understand the basics of *bomba Puertorriquena* and activate exercises to embody this musical experience.

To start this program, you will need...

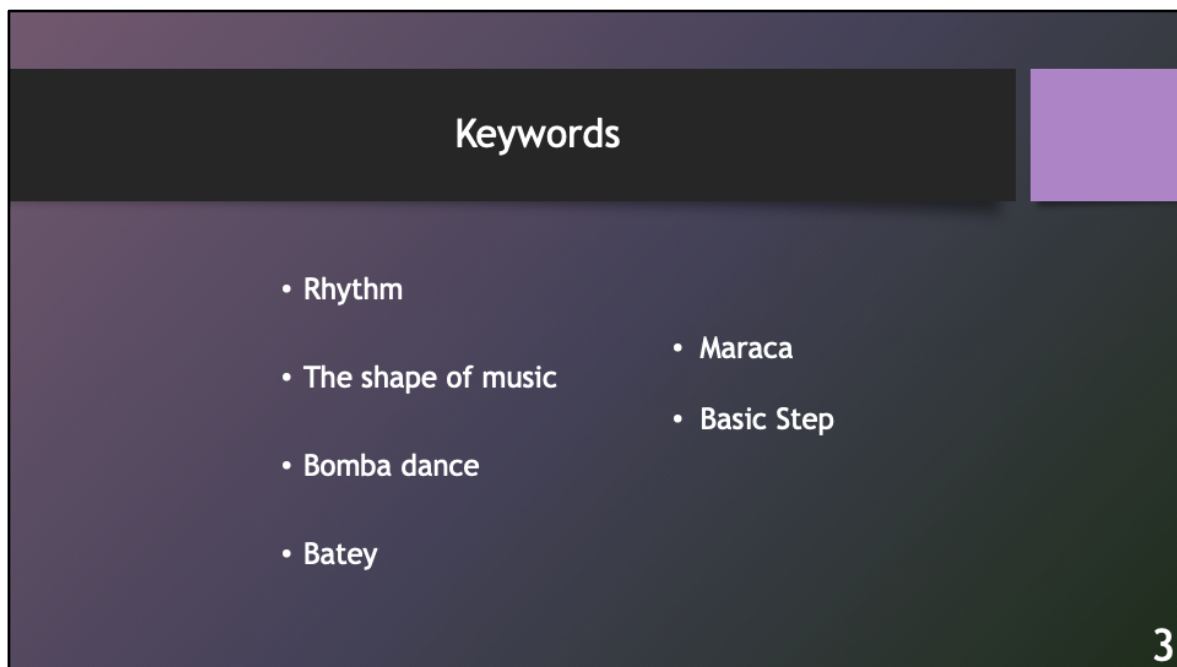


- Your body!
- Listening devices such as headphones and your ears
- Will and disposition to learn

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This program is rich in rhythm and body movement.

To be able to learn from it you need to activate your body, find listening devices, and be willing to learn.



Keywords to keep in mind:

- Rhythm: The rhythms is a strong regular repeated pattern of sounds, words or musical notes.
- The shape of music: The shape of music is the quality of the motion and figure of a music composition. Here is important to pay attention to the music dynamic, pitch direction, and tempo.
- Bomba dance: Bomba dance is a cultural movement expression that lives in a simultaneous relationship with bomba music. The fundamental quality of this dance is to move at the tempo of the rhythm with a basic step, and to create accents with your body that are legible to be played from a drummer named *subidor*. Even if bomba dance has a structure, the most elemental aspect of this

dance experience is to improvise your moves with the drummer. This dance can be understood by two perspectives, the visual dance and the musical dance.

- Batey: The batey is a dance circle (like the Hip Hop cypher) where dancers, singers, and drummers play songs to express themselves in a communal activity. Is important to keep in mind that the batey is mainly a circle or semi-circle because of the importance of making eye contact between practitioners while improvising with the songs. This space is also where the bomba main drum communicates with the solo dancer. The batey is a space full of action!
- Maraca: The maraca is a musical instrument made with a dry fruit named Higuera and filled with seeds. The sound of the maraca is created by the motion of the seeds inside the fruit. In bomba, the maraca is responsible to establish the pulse of the song (the basic time to follow).
- Basic step: The basic step is the dance move that relates to a rhythmical musical intention being played by the drummer. Basic steps in bomba are defined, specific, and divided by rhythms.

You will find these words repeatedly across this topic presentation.

Take a moment!



- Listen
- Find a constant sound in your surroundings
- Imagine the sound as rhythm
- Sing the rhythm out loud

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Take a moment to listen to your environment!

The sounds and intervals of silence around us (near or far) can create a rhythm. Close your eyes and pay attention to your listening experience. Find a rhythm in your surroundings and embody the rhythm.

Can you hear birds chirping in your environment? What about the hum of an air conditioner?

How do I embody a rhythm? One way is to sing it out loud, another way is to dance it. If you repeat this exercise daily, you are making a lifestyle out of this sensorial experience.

Take your time and enjoy!

What is Bomba?

- A musical genre from Puerto Rico
- Instruments to play rhythms
- Gathering that creates levels of participation - batey
- Dance with the basic steps



6th Encuentro de Tambores, Rio Piedras P.R.
Photo by Fernando Montano (FJM)

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Bomba is a musical genre that includes a social dance expression from Puerto Rico African inheritance. This music is played with two *drums*, *cuá*, and one *maraca*; the relationship between the instruments is fundamentally rhythmical. People from the audience, practitioners, and performers gather to sing, play, and dance songs of resistance.

Getting to know the instruments



Open Batey and Still from Giovanna's original audiovisual, *Public Body/Cuerpo Público*
Photos by Alejandra De la Torre

Drums: buleador and subidor

Cua: two wood sticks


Maraca: one maraca made of vegetable fiber, Higuera

Bomberos: people who play and dance bomba as a lifestyle

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The fundamental elements of bomba are the musical instruments. The main instruments in bomba are the drums; the buleador maintains the rhythm while the subidor improvises with the dancer moves. The cua, maraca, voice, and dance are complementary to enhance the social interaction. Bomberos are able to express themselves by recognizing and transmitting the music and moves.

Rhythms



- Sicá
- Cuembé
- Yubá
- Holandé
- Seis Corrido

- Corvé
- Calindá
- Hoyoemula
- Leró

[Link to listen the sicá rhythm](#)[Link to listen the cuembé rhythm](#)

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Because bomba is the oldest musical expression in the island of Puerto Rico, there are dozens of rhythms that practitioners, musicians, anthropologists, and sociologists have recovered mainly through oral tradition.

In this program we are going to sing and play maraca with sicá and cuembé rhythms.

Bomba dance



Bombazo, Ponce P.R. (2013)
Photo by Leo Rios

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Even if Puerto Rico is a small island, you will find that bomba has different ways to be played and danced depending on the region you are at. These variations are what we call regionalisms. For example: In almost every region, the dancer greets the drummer before starting to dance. In the region of Loiza, this is not part of their tradition. In the southern region, it was traditional to have more than one dancer in the batey. Fundamentally and in some region's traditions, bomba is a solo dance where the duet work is between the dancer and drummer. Also, it is documented that drummers of the south played the drums by leaning it on the floor and sitting on top of the wood (body of the drum).

All these differences (we are just mentioning a few here) are what makes bomba so rich as a musical genre. This demonstrates the possibilities and the potential of change that bomba music has.

The Challenges of Puerto Rican Bomba

“Unlike plena and danza, where dancers move to the music independently of the musicians, bomba dancing is integral to the music. Movements of the solo dancer’s body correspond to sounds on the drum that the lead drummer must mark. In this sense, the bomba dancer is also a musician, alike to the way a tap dancer (or an orchestra conductor) may be considered a musician. In bomba dancing, the question is not much how it looks, but how it sounds” (Barton, 2002, p. 190).

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In the essay titled “The Challenges of Puerto Rican Bomba”, the anthropologist Halbert Barton compares bomba dance with two other musical expressions from Puerto Rico (plena and danza). The importance of this quote is to highlight the most characteristic quality of bomba dance, the body correspondence and integrity to music.

Basic step

- In bomba, the basic step is the way to connect directly with the music. When you listen and identify the rhythm, you can apply the basic step that corresponds to the rhythm.



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Read slide.

Sicá rhythm in dance



Intention of strength



CD release of jazz saxophonist Furto Rios, *Standard Bomba* (2015)
Photo by Conrado Pastrano

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Bomba rhythms have their own intentions and specificities.
By having an elegant posture and a firm torso, when people dance the sicá rhythm is to transmit an intention of strength.

Cuembé rhythm in dance

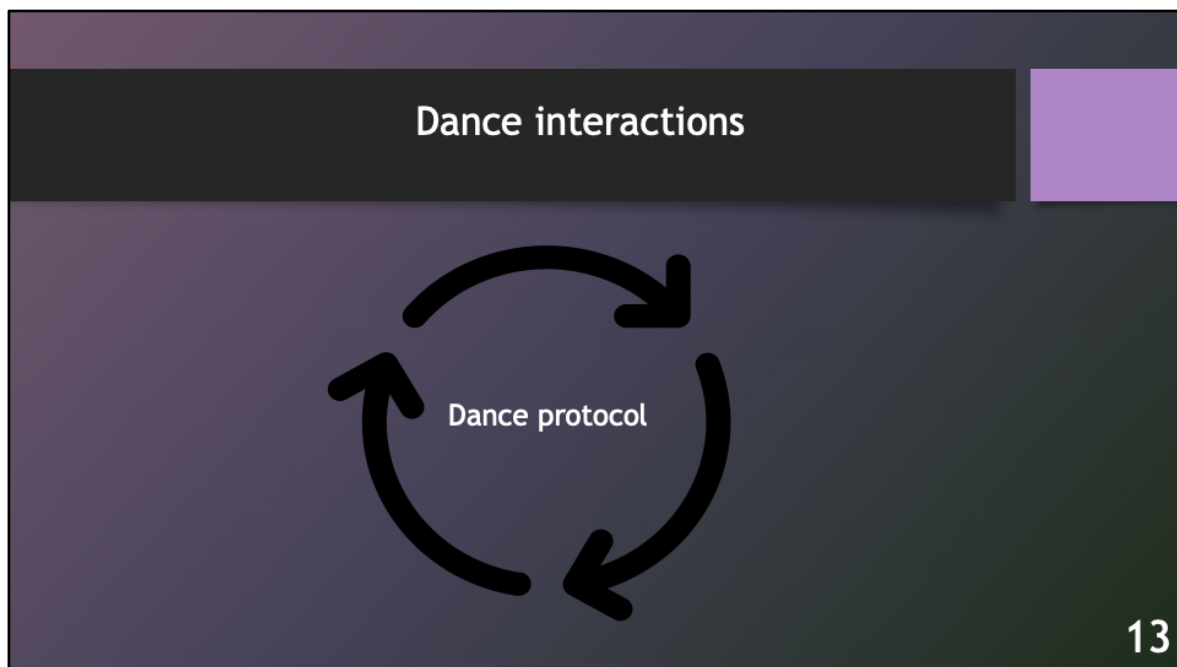


Concert *Con Segreles en un cuarto*, (2019)
Photo by William Vazquez

Intention of continuous
flow and playfulness

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The cuembé rhythm is danced with a fluid, wavy and continuous flow.
That is because the rhythm intention is to be playful.



Bomba dance is fundamentally improvised. However, bomba dance practitioners have a common knowledge and they follow certain specifiers to participate from the musical expression with their movements. Therefore, in order to dance bomba in the batey there are several steps that needs to be follow; this is called the *dance protocol*.

Dance protocol

- The bomba dance protocol is a process that involves different levels of attention and engagement with the musical gathering.
- The protocol is as follows:
 - Identify the rhythm
 - Perform the basic step
 - Paseo
 - Greet the subidor drummer
 - Dance improvisation
 - Greet the subidor drummer again (this time to leave the batey)
 - Paseo

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The dance protocol is a guide or set of instructions that each bomba dancer (or “bailador”, how we call it in Puerto Rico) must follow in order to participate in the gathering.


This protocol starts when the bomba dancer listens and identifies the rhythm in the batey. Once the *bailador* identifies the rhythm, they start to perform a step that follows this rhythm. This is called the basic step. The basic step is performed almost the entire time during a bomba dance. At this point, the bailador should be in tune with the tempo, rhythm, and the basic step. What goes from here is the paseo, that is when the dancer starts to move across the space while performing the basic step. Making the paseo is also a way for the bailador to find the space to perform the following improvised dance.

After the paseo, the *bailador* greets the drummer and starts to dance with a set of accentuated movements that the drummer is going to play; this translates the movements into sound. Once the bailador has developed this improvised dance and is ready to leave the batey, they must greet the drummer again and leave while making another paseo.

This is the process each person should learn in order to enter the batey to dance

bomba (remembering there are regions in which the dance protocol changes).

Hints!



1. Stay in tempo
2. When dancers accentuate the arms and footwork, they are asking to the drum to play their moves

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Suggestions to dance bomba:

1. Always dance to the beat, which is equal to stay in tempo.
2. The upper body create figures and accentuations. These accentuations are the body language the drummer is going to interpret and play.

Bomba dance in the batey

Open Batey in Guayama, P.R.
Bailadora: Giovanna Sosa Santos

*Link to video:

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Is important to mention that bomba is a spontaneous expression and there is not always a sound system or professional cameras around to film the gathering. That is the case in the following video.

Watch this short video to see an example of a bomba dance.
Can you recognize some of the keywords?

For example:

- Can you identify the batey?
- Can you listen the musical instruments?
- Are you able to see a basic step that follows the rhythm?

*The video link takes you to a vimeo page where you can go around and watch materials from the artist, Giovanna Sosa Santos.

All the videos posted in her page are different ways of experimenting with bomba dance in her artistic research process. This can be another way for you to appreciate the possibilities of creative expression in bomba.

Who can dance bomba?

EVERYONE!



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Since 1950, bomba has spread to international recognition. Even if this music and dance expression is from a specific culture located in the Caribbean, bomba can be practiced by everyone. Bomba is a musical genre with a community experience, the only requirements to practice it is to be interested in learning from it.

Benefits!

- Awareness of fundamental movement concepts
- Learning the relationship between rhythm and body movement
- Practice of visualization

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Benefits of understanding and dancing bomba:

- Through time, the history of bomba has demonstrated that this music and dance is used as a tool of communication. To learn bomba is to learn a language, to find another way to express and empower yourself.
- Several basic movement concepts are applied when practicing bomba such as personal and general space, body parts, time (rhythm), and energy. The practice of this movement concepts helps to gain body awareness and movement management.
- Another benefit of bomba is that practitioners create sense of space by their listening experience. This is supported by the experience of learning the relationship between rhythm and body movement.
- In this program you will also make listening activities to work on imagining or visualizing.

Reviewing

1. Keywords: these words will help you to have a better understanding of the program.
2. Short listening exercise: to start getting in tune with your listening experience.
3. Bomba basics: we went through the definition of bomba, its musical instruments, the rhythms, dance specifics (in cuembé and sicá), the dance protocol, and several benefits of dancing bomba.

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After going through this topic presentation, you will be able to have a basic notion of bomba music.

Read slide to review the discussed topics.

This curriculum on Bomba Puertorriqueña also includes a dance demonstration video, a *maraca making* video, a worksheet document to work on *shaping the sound*, and more.

I hope you enjoy the experience of learning a new music genre that opens your relationship to sound as a powerful tool for body communication and empowerment.

Go through the program activities and have fun!

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Read slide and let's get into action!

