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José Gabriel Muñoz - Cuatrista
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[0:11] José Gabriel Muñoz: My name is José Gabriel Muñoz and I play the Puerto Rican cuatro. It's used mostly for the folkloric music of Puerto Rico.

[0:20] I grew up listening to the music in my household. My dad would always play the music. I was born in Puerto Rico so I had those roots of the music and the culture was always in my family. And my dad would always play the music so growing up, I was always listening to it, it was always basically a part of me. [41:00] But when I was about fourteen years old I saw someone play it in front of me for the first time, and it happened to be a young man, my same age, about fourteen-thirteen, fourteen, at the time, and that's when it became palpable and real to me. Up until then it was listening to eight-tracks and cassettes, you know, the old guard of the music, as I would call it. [1:03] And so, many young people, as myself at the time, would interpret that as just music for old people, music of my grandfathers, of my older uncles and such. It wasn't the here and now, hip type music. Up until I watched this young man play, right in front of me, and it became alive to me, and from that moment on is where the interest grew.

[1:32] Nicole Wines: Can you talk a little bit about the instrument itself?

[1:38] JGM: The instrument comes from the lute family, it is my understanding. The particular one that I play is known as the modern cuatro. It sort of evolved in the 1800's, if I'm not mistaken, mid-1800's more or less. It's called the cuatro-obviously, the number four in Spanish-it has four strings. [1:59] The four string cuatro is still used today, although it has evolved, due to preference of either a luthier or a cuatro player from Puerto Rico who might have been experimenting at the time, and added strings to it, it jumped from four to eight and now the ten, which is the one that I play. I fell in love with that ten string cuatro.

[2:22] A particular cuatro player who made the ten string cuatro very famous was Ladislav Martinez through a radio program in Puerto Rico called "Industrías Nativas". And when Ladí, as he was known, was first aired playing this instrument, this ten-string cuatro for the first time on the radio, the entire island got a taste of the evolution cuatro as we know it, and the rest is history, basically.

[2:56] The modern cuatro is the most popular of all the cuatros in Puerto Rico. There is an orchestra of cuatro. You have the tenor, the alto, the baritone, and it's an entire orchestra, but the ten-string modern cuatro, the one I play, is the most popular, is the one that is used, up until today, used for so many different styles and genres of music, aside from, as I mentioned earlier, what it's mostly known for and utilized for which is the folk music.

[3:20] NW: What are the different genres of music that it's used in?

[3:25] JGM: Starting with the main sole purpose of the cuatro as we know it, or like to identify it as, it is the jíbaro music-mountain music of the *campesino*, of the peasant, of the mountains of Puerto Rico. It was used to sing poetry, to sing of political issues or what have you, of love and such. But as time has gone by you come across known legend cuatro players of the old guard, such as a gentleman named Nieves Quintero who started adding jazz to it, started recording albums with a lot of Latin jazz. [4:05] Then you come across a cuatro player known as Yomo Toro who was a living legend also, who became famous with artists such as Hector LaVoe, Willie Colón, Celia Cruz and La Fania All-Stars in the 70's, where he utilized the cuatro only to play salsa music on it. Then you fast forward to modern times where you have cuatro players like Alvin Medina. Alvin Medina is one of the few, not the first, but one of the few that put out an entire album on the Puerto Rican cuatro, only classical music-Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Paganini, things like that. [4:47] Then you have cuatristas like Christian Nieves. If you don't know Christian Nieves, Christian Nieves is the person responsible, is the cuatro player responsible, for the world famous melody of Despacito. The beginning of Despacito you hear a cuatro right at the intro [*DEMONSTRATES MELODY*]. That's Christian Nieves, he's a good friend of mine. [5:10] But it shows how the cuatro has become so universal and it has expanded to so many other genres and styles, and there are so many other cuatristas that have become a part of

the community with taking the cuatro to different parts of the world through music.

[5:29] NW: What is your preference for which genre it gets played in.

[5:35] JGM: I'll be honest. I don't think any musician-I mean, I can obviously speak for myself, but I don't know if any musician actually has a preference. As a musician you receive so many influences. One day, I just want to listen to classical and I'll riff something classical. There's another day where I'm in the mood for hip-hop and I'll grab the cuatro and I'll start jamming to that. There's another day where I'm in the mood for reggae. [6:00] I guess you live and learn from every culture, every genre, every style and maybe you just adapt it to what you play, whatever instrument and culture you're from and you try to apply it to that and evolve and grow as a musician. I don't personally like to stay stuck in the same place when it comes to my music. [6:22] I try to expand and experiment to keep maturing and growing and learning and educating myself and learning more disciplines from other musicians and different styles. So yes, I have experimented with R & B, I have experimented with classical and a whole bunch of different genres, just to continue proving that, although it's a traditional folk instrument, that it is not limited, it can be worldwide just like any other instrument.

[6:47] NW: You said that you were born in Puerto Rico?

[6:50] JGM: Yes, I was born in the town of Utuado. Otuao is its indigenous name, meaning between mountains, it's almost at the center of the island. I was born there, but moved here to New Jersey at the age of about two or three years old. The first time I ever returned back to Puerto Rico I was ten years old. My parents found it imperative that I go back to meet my family and know where I came from and my roots and my culture. So that influence also played a big part of me taking up the instrument.

[7:29] NW: How has growing up in the states versus on the island, how has it impacted your music and on your education on that instrument that isn't played as much in New Jersey as it is in the mountains of Puerto Rico?

[7:47] JGM: I feel, personally, that I would have benefited more, growing up on the island, that's just my personal opinion. I feel growing up on the island, it would have benefited me more to be surrounded more by other

musicians that play this instrument and are surrounded...there are so many cuatro players in Puerto Rico that completely saturated by the music and the culture of the music of the cuatro 24/7. [8:19] And so I felt growing up here I was a bit limited. Especially around the early 90's when I started where YouTube wasn't as big and all these videos and internet access wasn't as big for things like this. I felt a little bit limited in having to find out, or seek out, musicians to sit with and try to learn from. Whereas, once I picked up the instrument and traveled to the island, I was completely surrounded by it, instantly, 24/7. [8:47] At any given moment I could just hook up with any musician, just sit down and start going over stuff, and see how much they have to offer as musicians because again, they are surrounded by the culture of it, 24/7.

[9:01] NW: How did you learn, if you started learning pre-YouTube era. How did you get into beginning?

[9:12] JGM: As I mentioned, I saw this cuatro player, Alvin Medina, he's one of the young greats. Currently Alvin Medina is touring with Romeo Santos, he's Romeo Santos' cuatro player and guitar player. Alvin and I are the same age. When I was 14, I saw him playing somewhere and it completely just took over me-the sound, his ability to play his discipline, his talent. [9:42] And it just so happened that my father and his father knew each other, they were friends, so my dad said, "I'll hook it up for you, for you to start taking lessons." So Alvin lived only about 25 minutes from my house so every weekend my dad would drop me off at his house and I would take lessons Friday to Sunday, religiously and with such discipline. My dad would just drop me off every Friday and he would pick me up every Sunday for an entire year, or a year and a half. [10:10] And it wasn't that type of discipline where we were reading, writing music, it was just sit down and let's jam. To this day I still have some recordings of us at 2 or 3 in the morning at 16 years old, 15, 17 years old just riffing and playing whatever comes to our minds and our hearts with music, and a lot of musicians learn that way, unlike today. [10:35] Now there's so many more opportunities and chances to learn proper education, discipline through schooling. Back then it was just getting together, and like we call it, street musicians, just jamming and that's how I basically picked it up, through Alvin. After that it was a matter of, once my eyes were open to this world of the music and its culture, it was just a matter of meeting other musicians and sitting down and learning.

[11:08] NW: Is there a strong community of followers and/or musicians that play this instrument here in New Jersey.

[11:18] JGM: In New Jersey, no. In New Jersey, I mean, I can possibly count on one hand the musicians in New Jersey that actually play this instrument. Now you go to the island and they're a dime a dozen, literally. You can just throw a rock out the window and hit a cuatro player because it has grown to such great lengths that I'm so proud to say that's something I've always wanted to see. [11:46] Here in New Jersey, and in the states, it's scarce, it's very rare. I feel honored to be one of the very few in New Jersey, to be able to play the instrument and represent Puerto Rico through the instrument and its culture. It's a humbling honor. I always felt it's like a responsibility on my shoulders to represent the island here, and that's why I have kind of disciplined myself, and I've always pushed myself extra hard to try to learn as much as I can on it- to be able to make Puerto Rico proud and my people proud here in New Jersey and the states of representing our culture through the music. [12:19] I wish there were more though because as a musician we always like to get together and continue to learn and grow, and as I said it was always a kind of a challenge to be able to continue learning without being surrounded by it 24/7, and having to seek out musicians and seek out stuff. [12:36] Thank God now we have the World Wide Web and things such as YouTube and such where you can just press a button and boom there's someone playing there, but back then we didn't have that so it was a little bit more challenging. I hope to be able to influence younger generations of cuatro players so that I leave some type of legacy, where here at least in New Jersey it will continue to strive.

[13:03] NW: How is the instrument and the genres of music that you play, how is that received here.

[13:11] JGM: Thankfully it is well received. It is well received because of the fact that it's rare. So when Puerto Ricans who are so proud-I mean Puerto Ricans I noticed, they reverence that instrument. It is the national instrument of Puerto Rico so people such as myself, we reverence that. We see that thing and I just want to kneel down before it because it is the national-it represents us. [13:33] It represents so much. When you see an ensemble of jíbaro, an ensemble of the typical folkloric band, you'll have typically-traditionally, you'll have a guitar, a cuatro, a guïro scratchgourd, and a set of bongos, sometimes a conga is added and a set of bongos

and you have a singer. The guitar represents to me the [13:45] influence from Spain, right? [13:57] Then you have the bongos and the congas for example, represent to me the influence we got from our African ancestors, right? Then you have the guïro that represents our indigenous side, right, the scratchgourd that comes from our indigenous, as we know it, our Taíno ancestors. But where does a cuatro fit in? The cuatro's like, we don't know exactly, we have an idea, we have a concept, but it's not really from either, it's just a mixture. It's so awesome to say that the cuatro, although we know it comes from a European type influence from the lute family, it is 100% born in Borinquen, it is 100% ours from Puerto Rico, and it's something that we cherish, we worship, we love. [14:40] And so I notice that any time I perform with this instrument, I've seen people cry, I've seen people laugh, I've seen people come up to me after performances, you know, in tears because it reminded them of the old island, they haven't been back in 20, 30, 40 years, it reminds them of their grandfather, their uncle. And I can't express, I really can't put into words, how that would make me feel. It does put more pressure on me, I have to say, but it's pressure that I embrace, that I use and I transform into the energy that I need to be a better musician.

[15:13] NW: Have you faced any challenges in practicing a "foreign" tradition here?

[15:20] JGM: As far as challenges are concerned, I have faced a few, specifically just on better learning and expanding as a musician because of the lack thereof, of other musicians in the area and such. Personally, aside from that, there hasn't been great challenges. I've learned to adapt. [15:45] Growing up here in the States and growing up in New Jersey, I've learned to adapt and I've learned that this instrument is not limited. Yes, we have our traditions, our usual traditions, that we honor and love, but it is not limited to that. And throughout several, I would say for the past 10 years the cuatro has grown and expanded throughout the world in such a way where it's being played all over Europe and other parts of the world, in Japan and thing like that, even in Australia, in Germany. [16:14] It's all over the world, and so it kind of makes it a little bit easier on me, and I rest easy knowing that it's already out there. So although my responsibility still stands to take it as far as I can possibly take it, it's kind of worldwide already so I don't face any challenges as far as trying to get it out there, but personally, more so just trying to expand as a musician and trying to meet more cuatro players because it's so rare, especially here in the state

of New Jersey and in the States, trying to seek out other musicians, like minded musicians, where we can learn from each other and grow.

[16:58] Francisco G. Gómez: Why is there a lack of interest here in the cuatro here or you haven't seen that interest in the cuatro here in New Jersey?

[17:08] JGM: The cuatro is not an easy instrument to learn. I will admit, it is not impossible, but a little difficult, and so the challenges the cuatro itself presents as an instrument, sometimes it intimidates people. We as cuatristas, or cuatro players, try to make it as simple as possible, as fun as possible for younger generations to learn so that we can be some type of influence. [17:40] I continue to find that a little challenging, trying to continue to pass it down because-yes you get people that all of a sudden that get bitten by the bug, as we say, and then want to learn, but once they get into it and they realize it's not as easy as playing guitar, it's not just strumming. The cuatro is used for a lot of lead guitar style playing. That kind of intimidates people because then people realize, wait, I have to really put a lot of time into this, I really have to discipline myself, and it kind of intimidates people to want to have to put in the work. [18:15] You have to be overcome, in my personal opinion, you would have to become overcome by the passion of the instrument and everything behind it, and use that to push you, and that's what I feel happened to me. I wasn't just bitten by the bug. I mean, this instrument really just became an extension of my body when I first grabbed it in my hands and started learning. And I made sure, I made it a point that if I was going to do anything else in my life, I was going to be a cuatro player. [18:44] I don't want to just say, hey he can play the cuatro, a couple songs, I want to be known as a cuatrista. To have that kind of title, a responsibility comes with that. So in my younger years, I wanted to make that a point, to become known as a cuatrista and recognized as a cuatrista. Maybe not one of the best, there's a lot of monsters and legends out there that I don't even get to their ankles, and I'm not afraid to say that, but at least to say that I put my little grain in there, and I made a little bit of a difference, whether I can influence someone, then I was content and happy with that.

[19:26] FGG: Now, you have, obviously, two jobs. You have your "fake" job- that's the one that you go to every day, and your real job which is that is that cuatro. Do you see your future, in terms of the cuatro, being that cuatro? Do you see it as something you want to do on a-you're already

doing it professionally-but do you want to take it to the next level and just be able to make your living and make your life the cuatro?

[19:54] JGM: Yeah, absolutely. At some point in my life, when I retire from my "fake" job, I want to be able to really expand on the cuatro. I want to take it to levels and limits that it's never been taken before, meaning... the cuatro has always been, it's sole purpose is mostly, 99.9% of its purpose is to accompany, right? [20:22] You accompany the trovador singer, you accompany the band, Yomo Toro, for example accompanying the salsa band or things like that. But I would like, at least before my time in this world passes, I would love to see-and it doesn't have to be me personally-any cuatrista, any cuatro player on this planet-I would love to see the cuatro be the forefront. [20:45] I would love to see the cuatro be the star of the show, be the lead, and in a way that's never been done before. You see rock bands and the lead singer's up front on the microphone with the guitar, and I would like to see the cuatro doing that. [21:00] It's kind of a funny analogy, but I always use, for example, this Disney movie "Moana". When the movie came out you saw every little kid lose their mind on this planet, rushing to the store to buy a ukulele, everybody wanted to get a ukulele and learn how to play the beautiful music from Hawaii. I would like the cuatro to have that kind of influence, where you see so many young generations fiending for it, wanting to learn because they fell in love with the seduction of its melodies and its strings and its sound. [21:30] That's the kind of influence I want the cuatro to be. It it's me, hey, I'll do it, but any cuatrista- I would die to see that happen, and I'm going to try to make it my goal, at some point in my life, where I can really invest 100% of my time into trying to make that happen with the cuatro.

[21:56] NW: Within the world of cuatristas, d nd there to be levels of hierarchy, or is it just, music is music?

[22:13] JGM: I have to admit, one of the greatest communities I have ever come across is the cuatro community. Cuatristas know who they consider to be an actual "cuatrista", a complete cuatro player. We know who has the real abilities, but no cuatrista is going to sit there and say, "This guy's better than him, you're better than this, I'm better than you, you're better than me." [22:44] Every cuatrista in the cuatro community that I've personally experienced has been more than willing and caring and considerate and loving enough to sit in front of you and say, "Hey, you want to learn this, this is how you do it. Boom boom boom," and just trade

off music. And that's something I'm very proud to say about the cuatro community. I have never really faced a challenge, in that sense. [22:09] Ive been able to meet cuatristas from all over the country and all over Puerto Rico and such and everyone is always is willing to sit and share. And that's a great thing because that's how it's legacy continues for generations to come.

[23:23] NW: What makes a true cuatrista?

[23:26] JGM: What makes a true cuatrista? That's a tough and deep question. I would say when you see the passion in that person for the culture of it's music, that's what makes a true cuatrista. Because that passion will drive that musician, to that person's last dying breath, of wanting to upkeep its culture, its tradition, its influence in the world. [23:57] Not necessarily a cuatrista because he plays this genre or that genre, this genre, that genre. There are cuatristas that are long gone now, such as Ladí-Ladí was from the early 1900's, right? No one really knew who he was until the 1950's more or less, when he came out on the radio for the first time. This is way before reggaeton, this is way before all these other styles of music, and to this very day, in the year 2019 that we are in, Ladí is still one of the biggest influences on cuatristas. [24:32] He sat and composed boleros, guarachas, joropos, masurcas-these are all traditional styles of Puerto Rican music on the cuatro, and to this day he still influences. So I feel that, to answer your question, it was just that passion that Ladí had, to influence everyone else around him. [24:54] Maso Rivera died of old age, natural causes, and never charged a single cent for a cuatro lesson. He would sit and teach for free. He never referred to the kids he was teaching as students, he referred to them as disciples, and that's such a deep meaning, and that to me is a complete cuatrista.

[25:25] NW: What is the impact of gender in the world of cuatro playing? Do you see any disparities or bias in terms of who can play or has that been historical and is changing? What is your experience with that?

[25:41] JGM: I believe it has been changing. Back in the day, in the time of like, what I just said, Maso Rivera, Ladí, Ramito, one of the world's greatest trobador/jíbaro singers in the 1940's/50's/60's, there were female singers, trobadoras, and such, like La Calandria and a few others, but as far as cuatristas, female cuatristas, it has started to grow, and it continues to grow today. [26:11] Nowadays we have some of the world's finest

female cuatristas, that me personally, I do not dare to sit next to them and take my cuatro out of my case. I will sit next to some of these particular females and just absorb everything they have to offer because it's such a great influence. And I want it to continue to grow in that direction. [26:34] There's powerful female cuatristas such as Maribel Delgado-to me personally, probably the best female cuatrista in existence today. Then you have cuatristas like Ema Colón Zayas, sister of the great Edwin Colón Zayas, a living legend cuatro player. Then you have Fabiola Mendez who was the first female in history to get a Bachelor's Degree on the cuatro at Berklee College of Music, and there's so many other cuatristas. [27:08] Thankfully, now, in Puerto Rico is is being offered as a curriculum in schools. Back in the day, for me, it was just looking for someone, sitting down and learning. Now, today, you can go sign up and get a degree in this stuff, and it's mind-boggling, mind-blowing, but such an inspiration to know that. And I hope that it continues to grow, more female cuatristas because that will in turn influence young girls, it will give young girls something to look up to and see that they can take this instrument to another level also.

[27:43] NW: Do you think that female cuatristas face any particular challenges due to their gender or do you think they are generally accepted in the world?

[27:54] JGM: I feel that, to a certain extent, they still face challenges because it's just a historical fact, you know, women were always treated different. So even in modern times they still might face some challenges and be compared to "better men" cuatristas, or what have you, but thank God and thank the Lord above for people, cuatristas like the ones I just named, who are breaking those barriers and proving that it has nothing to do with gender. [28:26] It has everything to do with your passion, and what you put into it, and the dedication to prove what you get out of it. So to a certain extent, yes, I'm more than certain that if I were to sit down with some of my female cuatrista friends, they would express to me some challenges that they may have faced as females. But actions speak louder than words, and what I'm seeing through these female cuatristas is really proving and showing that it's breaking the mold, it's taking it to another level, and in the near future, I see this going global, global with younger female cuatristas really proving and really showing the ability that the cuatro has, you know? [29:17] It's all a mental thing, where you sit down with an instrument and you create and you invent, it has nothing to do with

what gender you are, it's just your passion and your understanding and your mind being open to this instrument and being led by your emotions to create. And I've heard some of the greatest music because of female cuatristas.

[29:40] FGG: Given what you just said, can you state again, at what age you began to play, you first picked up the cuatro?

[29:47] JGM: I first saw it at 14 being played by Alvin Medina. I was about to turn 15, it was near the end of the year, my birthday is in December. I was about to turn 15 and I asked my father for a cuatro for my birthday. I can't express how that made my father feel-my father being such a cultured person. Did we know any cuatro makers in NJ? No. Or in the States? And we'd been away from the island for so long we really didn't know any luthiers or cuatro makers in Puerto Rico either. [30:17] So on my 15th birthday, I'm sitting down watching TV and my father walks in the room with a trash bag, a big old trash bag. And he pulls the trash bag out and there's a cuatro, with a crack on it, on the top. He had bought it off the street from some guy for like $50, and to this very day I have that cuatro. [30:40] And it's my muse, it's my inspiration, and it's a constant reminder of so much more than just my father giving me a cuatro. It's a constant reminder of my responsibility to my culture and my tradition and our people. That's the cuatro that I used to learn, broken and cracked and all, and as I continued progressing, my father would say, "Ok, here's a better one...Ok, here's a better one...Ok, here's a better one," until I was open to the world of luthiers, and the craftsmanship of making cuatros and I was able to do my own research to then choose my own instrument and from whom I wanted it from. And, you know, as you grow, you get a better quality instrument.

[31:19] FGG: And since that time, that you first picked up the cuatro, was there ever another time that you put it down and you said to yourself, "I don't think I'm going to do this."?

[31:32] JGM: I'll be honest with you, there's plenty of times I've gotten frustrated, as a musician. In your mind, you set such high standards sometimes- I'm my worst critic. I can't watch myself or hear myself play, for some reason, I cannot. And so there's plenty of times I get frustrated because I just felt I wasn't maturing as a musician or I wasn't growing as a musician, but quitting, no, I haven't gotten to that extent. [32:02] My

frustration has led me at some point to where I don't play the instrument for like two weeks, three weeks, but after a while, it becomes...it has become such a part of my soul, such a part of my spirit, such a part of my essence that it just calls to me. The craving overcomes me, where I need to play, I need to hear it, I need to feel it in my hands, and I need to do something with it. [32:26] So no, I haven't gotten to the point...the cuatro itself doesn't let me break from it, and from the other part of the room, I can hear it calling me, and I can feel it in my heart, and I'm like, "I need to hear a cuatro, I need to- so I'll sit down and wait for another inspiration to come whether I'm creating a song or I'm playing something.

[32:46] NW: You mentioned the cuatro being played world wide, in Japan and Europe...Is it being played mostly by Puerto Rican musicians that are living in those parts of the world or is it also being picked up by people from other cultures?

[33:04] JGM: Yeah, it's actually being picked up by people of other cultures. There's a Japanese man in Japan who is obsessed with the cuatro, for example. The cuatro became really big in Japan, I mean huge, through a cuatrista known as Prodigio Claudio, Eligio Claudio, but he was know as "Prodigy", Prodigio, because of his ability. He was one of Maso Rivera's students. [33:25] And he began in the 80's and 90's touring Japan, and he became such a huge celebrity. He would show up to the airports and there would be masses and masses with banners. I mean, you would think U2 showed up at the airport, or one of these big celebrities, that's how big it got in Japan, and it started influencing a lot of Japanese people, and nowadays, you can go on YouTube and see people in Germany, Germans playing it, and all types of Europeans playing the cuatro. [33:53] Yes, they have their style of playing, they might not be playing it exactly how we do in Puerto Rico or how we traditionally do, but it's just so cool to see the influence, in different cultures and different parts of the world, that they're utilizing it. [34:09] Some people use it to play as background for poetry, and things like that, as an example. But it's so cool to see that, you see different people from different parts of the world and different cultures taking up this little instrument that just came out of nowhere in the 1800's and early 1900's, and it just influenced so many cultures.

[34:30] NW: And do those people also learn some of the traditional music or are they mostly using it to improvise and make their own music?

[34:38] JGM: I feel it's both. They do, once they pick it up, obviously they do their research on it. What is this instrument? Where is it from? What is it used for? And usually when you do the research on this instrument, 99.9% of the time, you're going to hear jíbaro music, that's what it's mostly known for and it's traditionally used for. [34:56] So you're going to come across a lot of these old guard legends and such, and even the newer generations that play this instrument. And so they pick up some of that stuff, but then they use that and apply and adapt it to whatever their culture is or whatever they want to use it for, and I'm all for it. I mean, just to see it there, it's such a huge influence. [35:14] It was even used in *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, in Part 2. There is a scene where they're all singing in a little room or something, and there's a pirate sitting in the back, holding a Puerto Rican cuatro, strumming the cuatro. I mean, if your mind isn't blown after that, I don't know what would, but that is so cool to see that stuff.

[35:33] NW: What do you see the future of the traditional music of Puerto Rico? What do you see for that traditional music? Do you see it continuing on? Do you see it starting to die out?

[35:47] No, our traditional folk music is timeless. You can hear a record from the 1940's, 1950's of our music, and then put on something that was just recorded last year, traditionally, and it sounds exactly the same. Maybe the quality of sound might be different, because of the equipment used, now we go digital and such, as opposed to the old analog stuff. But, it's timeless. [36:14] It identifies us as a people. It identifies us as an island, as a country, as our culture, and I don't ever see that dying, and as long as I'm alive, it's gonna stay alive. But I do see it continue to evolve. In the past about year, I personally have been recording a fusion of jíbaro music with modern influences. So you'll hear what we know as aguinaldos which is traditional from the folk music of Puerto Rico, but you're going to hear an aguinaldo being sung with maybe a hip-hop beat or some type of techno beat in the background. [36:54] The reason I do this is because since the music is sometimes labeled as "old fashioned", I found it a little bit challenging to continue to reach younger generations, especially young Puerto Ricans like myself that grew up away from the island, away from our culture, away from our traditions and completely saturated and surrounded by the cultures of this country. [37:15] It's not so easy to reach the younger generations, you can show them some of the music, but eventually they go back to what they're used to, what they're familiar with.

So I decided to start fusing, the cuatro music, the traditional stuff with more modern sounds in order to show that it could be universal, in order to show that it doesn't have to be kept in a box, it has no limit, it can be used for whatever you want it to, your culture should always be a part of you no matter what you do in life. [37:44] Thankfully it's being received very well, I have been able to do a couple of performances live, on stage with this new fusion and I've been getting a great response from the younger generation. Now I'm starting to get approached, like "that sounded like Daddy Yankee" or "that sounded like this hip hop band I know or this house band that I know" or what have you, but "what's that instrument? What were you singing? That sounded cool, that was different." Now I got my door open to say "listen, this is your instrument, this is from Puerto Rico, where you're from. [38:13] You, like me, were raised here, but we have our culture, we have our music, we have our instrument, just in case you didn't know." I have met young Boricuas, young Puerto Rican men and women, who had no clue, had no idea that we had a national instrument, had no clue what this instrument was. Thankfully I've been able to utilize this gateway to be able to reach those young Puerto Ricans.

[38:36] FGG: You talked about fusion and everything. Let's go back to some of the traditional music of Puerto Rico which is very ancestral, and it's African based...obviously in Puerto Rico, la bomba and la plena. Bomba more than plena, plena is more modern, but bomba is ancestral. [38:57] In reference to that, how do you see-and again, let me retro here again, because you said you would like to see the cuatro at the forefront, of a production- not that the focus would be on a bomba drum, a primo or seguidor, whatever, you want to see it at the forefront. [39:18] How do you see that coming together with another traditional music, such as bomba and plena, in Puerto Rico? It wouldn't be the first time that it's done, it's been done many times, what is your interpretation of that?

[39:33] JGM: Well, bomba and plena is, to me, is a superstar all on it's own. We adopted this from our African ancestors. It's something we cherish and adore in Puerto Rico, our bomba and plena. That is such a huge part of our DNA, it's not even funny. And the cuatro, sometimes, is used in bomba and plena for carrying melodies and such when they're singing. [39:59] Traditionally, it doesn't require the cuatro, but the cuatro has become the national instrument, so huge and a part of Puerto Rico, that it is used for bomba and plena. And so my goals or intentions, where I

see the cuatro, it would never be to take that part out because bomba and plena cannot be compared to anything. You can play bomba and plena any part of the this world, any part of this planet, and people will know there's some Puerto Ricans in the room. That's Boricua, that's Puerto Rico, and that's something that we're so proud of, I love it. [40:35] And so I want to see the cuatro as a forefront, whether it be with bomba and plena, whether it be with the traditional againaldos and seis. I want it to- in my time, as a cuatro player, you don't have to question bomba and plena. I've never had any person tell me they don't know what that is, they might forget what it's called, but once they play it, they know what that is. [41:06] It's not the same for the cuatro, and sometimes it's sad for me to meet a young Puerto Rican man or woman and they don't know what the cuatro is, they've never heard of it, they've never seen it before, they didn't know it was the national instrument. They could care less, to be honest with you, because they're not from "over there", they don't see it the same and blah, blah, blah, whereas bomba and plena, there's no question about it, once it comes on, they know exactly where that's from. [41:32] And I would love to see the cuatro get that big, that worldwide, that global. Not to bump out bomba and plena because that's part of our DNA such as the cuatro is, but I want to continue, I want to see the cuatro to continue to grow as such and be just as influential being that's it's our national instrument.

[41:52] FGG: And the reason I was questioning you on that is because, again it comes to this idea of race, I think. Really, there is that mentality sometimes, in Puerto Rico...let's face it, racism isn't dead in Puerto Rico.

[42:07] JGM: Correct.

[42:08] FGG: Now, it has that aspect to it, but in Puerto Rico, back in the 60's, with Haciendo Punto, with Moliendo Vidrio, those groups, it seems that the cuatro had more of a calling to that type of music, la nueva trova.

[42:27] JGM: Correct.

[42:28] FGG: And I just wondered if you could speak a little bit to the idea of possible racism impacting on that elevation of the cuatro within that other genre of music, that is in the DNA of Puerto Rico.

[42:45] JGM: Correct, and I believe that that racism is our limitation. One of the greatest ignorances that I've ever seen is racism. And I feel that

humanity, in itself, limits itself because of racism. We have no clue, we have no idea and no clue how far humanity could have gotten in 2019 had racism never existed since the beginning of time. [43:19] We could have been so far evolved and advanced as a species. But specifically, with the musical culture of Puerto Rico, I feel that it has also, obviously, been limited. We could have probably been influencing a lot more than it is. And it's sad to say that because of racism, music like bomba and plena has been limited. [43:49] We cherish it, we love it, to a certain extent. A lot of people don't want to accept it because of where it came from, from our African ancestors. And that, I think, is such...it's so sad to hear, so sad to know because as a musician, personally, I want to continue to grow. It doesn't matter to me what culture you're from or what country you're from or what language you speak or gender or however you identify, if it's no gender, it doesn't matter. It's not about that. It's not the biological aspect of it or your skin color/physical aspect of it, it's about your spirit, your essence, the mentality you have and what you have to offer this world. [44:33] And to me, although I make my people proud, in Puerto Rico, to be a musician, I'm trying to influence the world, I'm trying to influence languages, I'm trying to influence cultures all over the planet, not just my own little island. I want to make my little island proud that I'm influencing the world, and I want that for every musician, regardless of race.

[45:00] FGG: So, let's change a little bit of the topic now. Not on the cuatro, but where the cuatro is going. You mentioned before, I believe it was Nieves or Maso, the one who gave the free lessons?

[45:16] JGM: That was Maso Rivera.

[45:17] FGG: Maso Rivera, one of my favorite cuatristas. Do you see a need, here in New Jersey, for a school? Do you see yourself, at any point, maybe starting a school to teach the cuatro?

[45:32] JGM: I never thought myself of starting a school. I do give private lessons...I'm not a great teacher. I'm horrible at teaching sometimes, because I learned off the street basically, I never learned the proper discipline and education to learn how to pass the teaching part of it down, but I feel that it's a necessity to pass down the traditions, a necessity to pass down our culture. [46:00] And I let that push me and charge me to want to be able to teach because I feel it's important. And that in itself is the necessity, to pass down our traditions and cultures, as any other

culture would. I just feel that that in itself is a necessity. It's so that younger generations can learn about what it is. It's not necessarily that I need to teach someone how to play this song, it's not that, it's bigger, it's a bigger picture to me. [46:31] And so to answer your question, yes, I feel like to a certain extent, yes, that there is necessity, that there should be some type of school, whether I'm the one who starts it, or any other cuatro player, or any person that's disciplined in music that could do it. It doesn't have to be me, but I feel that necessity because there's younger generations coming that need to know, Puerto Rican generations, that need to know what the instrument is and really understand it, where it's coming from. Not just know a song or be familiar with some of it's melodies because of their grandfathers or what have you, but really understand the culture behind it.

[47:05] FGG: I have one more question for you. We spoke a little while ago about Don Tuto Feliciano, a gentleman who is a legend, as you said, you explained to us. You never met him, according to what you said.

[47:21] JGM: Correct.

[47:22] FGG: Can you give us a little idea of how he plays in your mind, in terms of that instrument you see there?

[47:30] JGM: Tuto Feliciano, unfortunately, is not mentioned a lot nowadays, and he should be, he deserves a lot of recognition. Tuto Feliciano is such a huge influence on jíbaro music. He was ahead of his time, I would say. You know, Tuto started at a very young age playing the traditional four string cuatro, he was one of the first in the world to start playing the eight string cuatro, which later became the ten string, which is the one I play. [47:57] And so, even at his time, at an early age, he was already multi-talented, playing the cuatro, playing the requinto as we know, that is used for boleros, in Puerto Rico, playing the tres, the Cuban tres, to be able to play the són and the guaguanco and everything from Cuba. In the 1940's and 50's and 60's and those early times of this music evolving, Tuto was ahead of his time. [48:24] And that's someone that cuatristas I always say, any young cuatrista that wants to learn, go back and look and do your research, and listen to people like Tuto, and Maso Rivera, who we spoke about, two giants of the genre at that time. Tuto was able to record with a lot of known trovadores, recorded plenty of albums. And a lot of his playing should be, and is, standards of what cuatristas

should be listening to nowadays, if you want to to learn. [48:55] Any instrument, any musician will tell you, "You want to learn how to play the trumpet, go listen to Miles Davis, you want to learn how to play this, go listen to so and so from the 1950's or whatever-that's the foundation." So the same rules apply to this instrument, we have our legends, our old guard, from the 1940's, 50's, 60's, 70's, and Tuto is one of the main big ones of that time. To be able to listen to a record and hear him play the cuatro, but then in this album or this song, he's playing a guitar or requinto or on this album he's playing a Cuban tres, and it's like, ok, but it's only 1950-something, this is crazy, you know? It's so influential to be able to listen to people like Tuto.

[49:37] FGG: And, as part of that question, why do you believe that he is not as well known and he didn't get the recognition? Have you heard any, let's call it *bochinche*, that's a good word for it, out there in the world of cuatro playing? Do you have any thoughts on that?

[50:00] JGM: No, not really. To be honest with you, I guess it's one of those things where...I don't know if it's a fad thing, where a society might get stuck or used to listening to just one specific or two specific cuatristas and then constantly use the same ones, and then leave out the other ones. It happens today. You have cuatristas where they kind of utilize the same ones all the time and therefore those are the ones that become popular, but there's a lot of other cuatristas that deserve recognition, that maybe influence those popular cuatristas, you know what I'm trying to say? [50:34] Maybe there was some of that going on at the time with Tuto. I mean, Tuto got his due respect from musicians and stuff like that because musicians knew. There's cuatristas I know nowadays, they don't have a single video on YouTube, on any social media, things like that, but you sit down with them, those are the senseis, you sit down with them and you see their ability, it will blow your mind, you're wondering, "How come this person isn't famous?", you know, there's some musicians like that. [51:04] And it's the same thing with Tuto. Tuto was beyond his time, multi-talented guy that influenced a lot of musicians, and for what he did record, he became popular, he became well respected. But I can't really tell you why he didn't blow up maybe such as Nieve or Maso and other things. I don't know if Tuto limited himself to just the traditional stuff. [51:27] Nieve Quintero, for example started experimenting. Nieve thought to himself, "You know what, I'm going to get out of just the jíbaro and experiment." [51:36] Yomo Toro showed up to the recording studio, right?

That he was going to record an album with Willie Colón for La Fania, a salsa album. He was supposed to record the electric guitar, they wanted to do a rock guitar thing in the background for the salsa music. Yomo Toro shows up at the studio with a cuatro in his hand. Willie Colón looks at him, says "What are you doing? We're not recording jíbaro music, this is a salsa album." Yomo Toro looked at him and said, "I'm a cuatrista, take it or leave it." And the rest is history. [52:04] You cannot see that entire band, Celia Cruz and La Fania without Yomo Toro in it, so it didn't matter then, you know. And so those are great influences, and I feel like Tuto influenced people like Yomo, people like Maso and Nieve Quintero and things like that because his ability was ahead of his time.

[52:24] FGG: I got another question, it just came to mind. I know that you are in the Library of Congress.

[52:30] JGM: Correct.

[52:31] FGG: Can you tell us how that happened to you?

[52:37] JGM: That was one of the greatest honors of my life, to perform at the Library of Congress. I was able to do it twice. Why twice? I don't know, that's a double blessing. But, I received a phone call to come perform for Hispanic Heritage Month at the Library of Congress, to bring a short program. And we went and performed at the Library of Congress, to give a concert of our traditional jíbaro music, which was a great privilege. [53:07] The following year I got a callback from the Library of Congress, wanting us to come do an entire concert, but not only a concert, they wanted to conduct an oral history on me for the archives at the Library of Congress. And I couldn't tell you the fear that struck in my heart, and the only thing that came to my mind was "What? What am I going to be able to say and do to make every cuatro player look and sound good," because I felt such a weight on my shoulders, like there's nothing I can say or do to represent all these amazing cuatro players that exist nowadays...and the legends of the past. And that's the kind of weight I put on my shoulders, this is why I'm my worst critic. [53:50] But we were able to go back the following year and perform at the Library of Congress, take a full concert. And it was my understanding I was one of the first, not the first, but one of the first, because it's only a handful of cuatristas that were able to do it, but one of the first cuatrista soloists to be able to take a concert to the Library of Congress and the Kennedy Center. I was the second cuatrista in history to

take a concert, as a soloist, at the Kennedy Center. [54:17] The first cuatrista was just a year before me, I think it was a year before, was Edwin Colón Zayas, and he's living legend so...He was the first person, it is my understanding, from what I was told, I was the second person in history to do that, which is such a humbling honor, and we were also, as I said, able to do the oral history interview, which was inducted into the Library of Congress archives as part of American history, forever. [54:44] And the one thing that came to my mind, comes to my mind all the time, is- I have a daughter, I have a 15-year old daughter who's my only child- and it's just so humbling to know that years and years and years down the line, when I'm long gone, my daughter can go to the Library of Congress archives and see this interview, and see her dad. And I can say I have some type of legacy to pass down to a younger generation. It might not be that I passed down the music, per se, as a student that learned, but I have that to give to my daughter and that's such a humbling thought, to even think of that. And it's something that I will...one of my greatest accomplishments, something that I will take with me to the day I die is being able to perform at the Library of Congress and have that oral history interview conducted.

[55:29] NW: Can you play some...show us some examples of some of the different styles?

[55:35] Absolutely, absolutely. I will try my best. So speaking on influences and styles we have the aguinaldos that are traditional from Puerto Rico. So we'll have, for example, the aguinaldo costanero which goes…

[56:00][DEMONSTRATES AGUINALDO COSTANERO]

[56:15] But if we talk about Maso Rivera, who is, to me, one of the purest essences of jíbaro music, while the trovador would be singing, Maso wouldn't be really doing all this fancy stuff. Maso would be in the background just going...

[56:28] [DEMONSTRATES STYLE PLAYED BY MASO RIVERA]

[56:43] Real simple, but it's straight to the point and I love to listen to Maso because of that influence. It's one of my go to guys to listen to, to really capture the essence of our folk and traditional music of Puerto Rico. Then you have for example…

[57:04] [PLAYS CUATRO]

[57:21] That's a Seis con Décima, very popular in Puerto Rico for the trovador to sing to and improvise, they usually use the Décima and the Seis Fajardeño which comes from Fajardo. This is another thing, in Puerto Rico, almost every town has its aguinaldo or its seis. The Seis Fajardeño comes from the pueblo, or the town, of Fajardo. And it's one of the most popular ones and it goes...

[57:44] [DEMONSTRATES SEIS FAJARDEÑO]

[58:04] So that's a Seis from Fajardo. Then you go over to Comerío, the town of Comerío and they have their Seis...

[58:11] [DEMONSTRATES SYLE OF SEIS FROM COMERÍO]

[58:16] That's the Seis from Comerío, for example. And so, you go to Orocovis and Orocovis got an aguinaldo that they made world famous known as the Aguinaldo Orocoveño, right? And it goes...

[58:30] [DEMONSTRATES AGUINALDO OROCOVEÑO]

[58:50] So, it's so awesome to see that, in every town and any village, any pueblo in Puerto Rico, you have a cuatrista that, you know, can influence the cuatro and the future of the cuatro. And this is music that's existed since the 1800's, that's still our staple today. And our foundation as cuatro players for our music, you go over to Caguas, in Puerto Rico, and Caguas has it's own aguinaldo that Ramito made famous in the 50's and 60's and everybody knows this melody.

[59:26] [PLAYS CUATRO]

[59:41] So that's from Caguas, you know? And it's so crazy that we listen to this music today and a lot of people don't know, and as a cuatrista personally, I always felt it was important to not just play the melodies, but know where they came from and why, and maybe even try to find out who created them. Maso Rivera invented what's known as the Quinto el Aire, and me personally, since he invented it, it should be from his town, but he named it the Quinto el Aire because the fifth string, right? [COUNTS STRINGS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5] The fifth string is played open [DEMONSTRATES

OPEN STRING], so it's la quinta corda, the fifth string [DEMONSTRATES OPEN STRING AGAIN] al aire, it's open. So he invented this Quinto el Aire, one of the most biggest aguinaldos today...

[1:00:32] [DEMONSTRATES QUINTO EL AIRE]

[1:01:09] It's so beautiful. It's so beautiful. And to think that this was invented in the 50's or 40's by Maso Rivera, this little guy from the mountains in Puerto Rico, and I'm sure he had no clue, no idea, the influence it would make on cuatristas, and musicians even now in 2019, even after his passing, it'll continue because of the influence these people had on us cuatro players.