

# Bittersweet

WORDS NED SUBLETTE • PHOTOS (UNLESS STATED) NED SUBLETTE AND BENJAMIN DE MENIL



**Suppressed and marginalised for years, Dominican *bachata* music counters bitter stories with the sweetest of melodies**

Joan Soriano, 'El Duque de la Bachata' (the Duke of Bachata) is not a rich man. That's how he prefers to explain it, anyway. His house in Villa Mella, the historic black district to the north of Santo Domingo, has no running water or indoor plumbing. His roof is a slope of corrugated tin that doesn't join the top of the walls but sits over them on beams. He gives you the neighbour's phone number because he doesn't have one. At night the bumpy, pitted streets have no lights except from the houses. The electricity goes out a lot. When it rains it's a mess.

Still, 36-year-old Joan (pronounced 'yo-an') Soriano doesn't call himself poor, though he will tell you that he grew up poor. The seventh of 15 children, he's doing better than his parents did. He makes his living singing and playing *bachata*, the most popular music in the Dominican Republic.

"I barely had a childhood," he says. "I never had time to play, because when I finished working in the *conuco* [family farm plot] with my *papá* I had to go sell things so I could buy my clothes. I started out as a bootblack. I sold peanuts in the street and lottery tickets." Leaving school in the sixth grade, he migrated from the country to Villa Mella by himself, staying with an uncle. He lasted four days working in a car wash before deciding definitively to devote himself to *bachata*, chopping chords instead of weeds and singing songs of *amargue* (bitterness) instead of feeling bitter.

It's a story as old as the guitar, which has been played by black people in Santo Domingo since before the guitar had six strings.



Benjamin de Menil has other options in life. He doesn't have to be here sleeping under a mosquito net in Soriano's front room for three weeks, bathing out back with a bucket and a cup, humping water from the cistern when the barrel goes empty. But he's going with the Villa Mella flow, not for the first time, while he produces Soriano's record.

At a time when it seems to make no commercial sense to start a record company, de Menil started iASO Records. iASO's latest release, *Bachata Roja* (reviewed in #51), is a certifiable five-star classic – a compilation of landmark *bachata* 45s from the 60s, 70s and 80s. These low-fi sides cost only a few pesos each to make, but they all passed the jukebox test of immortality.

De Menil, 33, lives in New York and has been working with Dominican music for eight years. "I think I'm starting to understand the nuances," he says modestly. He can't wave a magic wand and give Soriano a better life. It doesn't work like that. But he can put a record out, bring Soriano to an international stage, and try to get people to hear him. Right now, de Menil's and Soriano's missions coincide.



With his guitar slung around his shoulders, sporting jet-black hair with a white shock in front, Edilio Paredes flashes a charismatic grin as he kicks off the band at 27 de Febrero, a Dominican restaurant in upper Manhattan, New York.

Now 63, Edilio's at the height of his powers. More than anyone else, he was responsible for establishing *bachata*'s lead guitar style (known as *requinto*), plus he's a hell of an accordionist. When he started out, 45 years ago, his guitar was strung with nylon fishing line. On the 60s records, the bass was homemade.

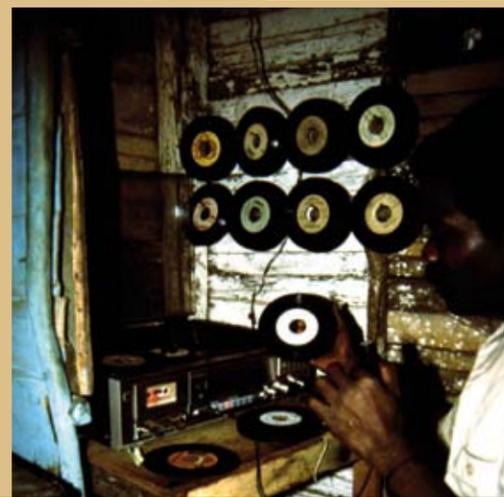
Edilio lives in New York, but he's often in Villa Mella, at his son David's place. Audio Twins, David's recording studio (named for Edilio's two impossibly adorable identical nine-year-old computer-savvy grandsons), is the heart of the spacious complex where David lives with his family. There's a huge-screen TV, internet connection and a fully equipped kitchen – all of it behind tall iron gates with a 24-hour watchman. It's a short drive from Soriano's house.

Bachata is a way to get from where Joan Soriano is to where David Paredes is. »





This page: Ramón Cabrera, aka 'El Chivo Sin Ley' – The Lawless Goat. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Joan Soriano, Ramón Cordero and Edilio Paredes; Soriano in the studio; a bachata jukebox; record store; a güira (metal scraper)



It's no coincidence that the bachata movement began in 1962, the year after Trujillo was assassinated. Trujillo was quite possibly the worst Latin American dictator of the 20th century

In the Audio Twins control room, David Paredes plays us a new track by his father's longtime colleague Ramón Cabrera, better known as 'El Chivo Sin Ley' (The Lawless Goat). In his characteristic country llanto (nasal cry), 'The Goat' sings a darkly comic song about a man who realises to his dismay that his new girlfriend is the recent ex-mujer of a guardia (the ex of a policeman). No one needs to decode it here, but this song obviously goes back to the regime of Rafael Trujillo, when you could be tortured and killed for less.

It's no coincidence that the bachata movement began in 1962, the year after Trujillo was assassinated. Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961 (with US support) was, despite serious competition for the title, quite possibly the worst Latin American dictator of the 20th century – in Dominican-American novelist Junot Díaz's words: 'the dictatingest dictator who ever dictated.' Trujillo was, however, a merengue fan. Renaming Luis Alberti's group the Orquesta Generalísimo Trujillo, he effectively established a musical monoculture of merengue in the country – moreover, one style of merengue, from the Cibao region, preferably with high-class jazz band instrumentation, or with the traditional accordion. But not with guitars. Meanwhile, his regime pretty much prevented any kind of record industry from developing, so

'The dictatingest dictator who ever dictated' – Junot Díaz's description of Rafael Trujillo, from his Pulitzer prize winning novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao



Dominicans got a late start in the music business. The 1965 invasion of the country by the US further complicated things. When the guitar troubadours at last began to be heard, their music was most often simply called música de guitarra and it owed much to the bolero, the pan-Latin romantic ballad. The only radio station that played it was La Guarachita, established in 1965 by the miserly Rhadamés Aracena, who recorded the singers in his studio at home and sold the records in his own store, paying artists a very small flat fee per side. Soriano was a studio musician in Aracena's later years, and he recalls that no matter how many hours you spent in there, you would never get anything to eat. Musicians would play while almost fainting from hunger. The decadence, as Edilio Paredes called it, of the Dominican media's attitude towards música de guitarra began in the early 70s, after a denunciation of the music by an influential TV host. By then bachata – a word that meant a lower-class party – was being applied to this style of guitar music, but not in a complimentary way. "Better they called you a thief than a bachatero!" recalls Paredes, still wincing at the memory. For many years bachata was simply prohibited as a matter of programming policy by radio and TV and even record stores refused to carry that low-class stuff. But the style grew anyway. "Because the music was completely being

censored from the media," says de Menil, "the music itself became completely uncensored." Bachata lyrics, often dealing bluntly with drunkenness and sexual pleasure, as well as romantic themes, expressed the frustrations of a class of shantytown dwellers who had been forced to move from a hopeless life in the country to a difficult life in the city. The essential quality of bachata is amargue – literally, bitterness, but it can be a nostalgic, melancholic pain that makes you feel better, like the blues (though the music is very different), or what the Portuguese call saudade. The use of the word 'amargue' in bachata goes back at least to 1982, when Edilio and his brother Nelson, along with El Chivo Sin Ley, the piercing-voiced Ramón Cordero, and others started a revue on their night off from playing in the classy Ciudad Nueva district. Hoping to put a new face on this underdog movement, they called it 'Lunes de Amargue' (Monday Night Bitterness) and it took off. The bachata movement underwent a series of transformations in the 80s, most notably when singer Blas Durán added an electric guitarist to his group and brought in the güira (metal scraper) from merengue. But the watershed moment for worldwide awareness of bachata wasn't from a career bachatero at all: Juan Luis Guerra's sugary 1991 Bachata Rosa shifted five million units worldwide in two years. That album (whose >>



Dancing bachata-style at Sabor Latino

title, meaning 'pink bachata', is parodied by de Menil's soundalike title *Bachata Roja* – red bachata) had little or nothing to do with life in Villa Mella, and, for this listener at least, Guerra's lovely, literate songs lacked amargue. Still, the album's unprecedented success forced the Dominican media to acknowledge that bachata was the most popular music in the country. By then, the big guns of bachata were already booming, and though they haven't a fraction of Guerra's international visibility, Luis Vargas, Anthony Santos, Raulín Rodríguez, Joe Veras, Zacarías Ferreira, Frank Reyes and many others are doing well today. The bachata movement shows no signs of slowing down.

Now, 26 years after *Lunes de Amargue*, if everything happens like it's supposed to, Edilio Paredes, El Chivo Sin Ley, Ramón Cordero, and Joan Soriano are going to perform before big audiences in the US. De Menil is lining up a *Bachata Roja* concert tour for the summer festival circuit. The *yanquis* are about to get a taste of beautiful bitterness. Soriano's record has got to be ready.



Bachata is heard in every colmado (convenience store) – and colmados are everywhere



Above: Sugary sweet early 90s bachata from multi-Grammy winner Juan Luis Guerra  
Left: bachata patio jams of yore



DEBORAH PACINI HERNÁNDEZ

They are often made in unlovely places. Like Audio Proceso. Located on an industrial street in Santo Domingo, it used to be an important

studio, but the former owner died and it's semi-abandoned, though the gear still works. No secretary sits at the desk. In the bathroom, I have to lift the back of the toilet off and work the stopcock manually to flush. The ghosts of cigarettes smoked in 1998 linger still. The lights, recessed into the low ceiling, are dim. It's like being in a brown-and-beige cave. But it's big enough for a bachata group to record playing together, instead of overdubbing one at a time.

Soriano is recording a tune by July Mateo, better known as Rasputín. It moves like a radio single should, and I can't help singing along with the super-catchy chorus:

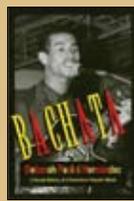
*'Para cuando vuelvas/Tengo la tarde y la mañana/Tengo la noche y su madrugada/Tengo guardado su lado de cama'*

*(For when you come back/I have the afternoon and the morning/I have the night and its dawn/I have kept your side of the bed for you)*

I find myself envisioning the lyrics, feeling homesick, putting my wife's face on it, and I start to get a little lachrymose even as I do a dance step. I realise what I'm feeling is precisely amargue. Everyone bumps fists at

## READ

**Deborah Pacini Hernández**  
– *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music* (Temple, 1995)  
The definitive history of the twists and turns of the genre, through the early 90s.



## LISTEN TO

**Various Artists** – *Bachata Roja* (IASO Records, 2007)  
A compilation of landmark *bachata* 45s from the 60s, 70s and 80s. Reviewed in *Songlines* #51.

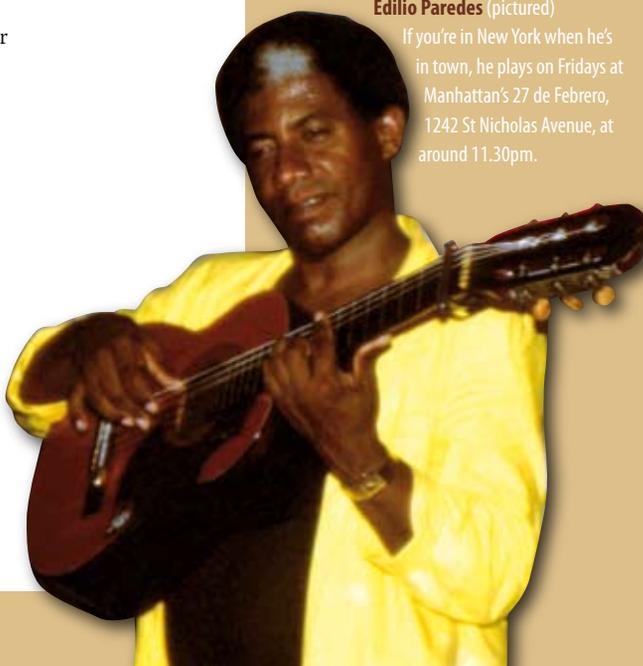


**Various Artists** – *Bachata* (World Music Network, 2006)  
An excellent introduction featuring *bachata* stars like Luis Vargas and Frank Reyes.



## WATCH

**Edilio Paredes** (pictured)  
If you're in New York when he's in town, he plays on Fridays at Manhattan's 27 de Febrero, 1242 St Nicholas Avenue, at around 11.30pm.



the final playback. Well, everything always sounds great in the studio. But it needs the *colmado* (bodega or convenience store) test.

We're out in the country at night, visiting Soriano's parents. The power's out, and the inside of their house flickers with the light of a single large candle. A full moon silhouettes the palm trees. The roadside *colmado* next door has juice from a generator: one dim fluorescent coil throws its greenish-white light out front and another is inside. The *colmado* is operated by one of Soriano's sisters and her husband, who work from behind a wrought-iron cage, handing purchases to customers through the grill.

Soriano takes out the rough-mix CD of the two songs he recorded yesterday and his sister plays it through the *colmado's* speakers, good and loud. I harmonise along with El Duque's friends and family: *'Para cuando vuelvas/Tengo la tarde y la mañana'*. He plays his two new songs again, and again, and again. The record may or may not become a hit, but it's good enough to be one.

In the moonlight by the side of the narrow back-country highway, El Duque de la Bachata's aged father is dancing a spry bachata to the sound of his son's voice. So is his mother, who is lively and strong and has borne 15 children.

We get into Soriano's rattling Toyota and pull on a bottle of white rum as we drive off into the night. ●

**Ned Sublette's latest book *The World That Made New Orleans* (Lawrence Hill Books) is reviewed on p97**

Listen to an excerpt from *Bachata Roja* on this issue's interactive sampler at [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/052](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/052)