



## CHANCE ENCOUNTER

*Following the trails and  
travails of New York  
impresario Benjamin de  
Menil, whose love for  
Dominican Bachata music  
led to the birth of a new  
independent record label*

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The chance meeting between Benjamin de Menil and Edilio Paredes is the stuff of legends, and the nonchalance in the way de Menil told me the story, earlier this year at a Belgian restaurant called Le Pain Quotidien near his studio in the Upper East Side, seems almost too fatalistic to be true. New Yorker De Menil, the Harvard grad and computer nerd who happens to be the scion of one of America's major philanthropic families, was taking the F train uptown in Manhattan. "When the doors opened at 14th street station I heard an unbelievable voice coming from the platform," he remembers. "It was a Dominican singer I would later work with. I wrote down his name, he said he was called Super Uba. I was a music lover who'd worked with computers and was thinking of recording music in my home studio, so I invited him over. He arrived with a guy called Edilio Paredes. Turns out Edilio was a legendary guitarist in his own right."

De Menil was into music from the Caribbean, having traveled to the region, and he knew of salsa and merengue, but he was not really familiar with the sound of bachata, a popular genre of guitar-based "bitter" music that is said to have originated in the countryside and rural neighborhoods of the Dominican Republic. Sure enough, a relationship developed between the three men and Bachateros Paredes and Super Uba would become the symbolic founding fathers of iAso Records, an independent imprint run out of de Menil's office-turned-recording studio. Along with the singers Eladio Romero Santos and Leonardo Paniagua, Paredes is the main talent – and

guitar force – behind last year's critically-acclaimed "Bachata Roja" album, a compilation of acoustic bachata songs from the so-called "cabaret era."

Paredes, who has been recording various forms of Bachata music for more than 40 years, hails from a small country town called La Galana, and his style of instrumentation is credited with helping to define the gradual transition from the bolero sound of the early twentieth century to modern bachata. A presence on the international circuit, Paredes is known as a mentor to bachateros of the younger generation, virtuosos like the up-and-coming guitarist Joan Soriano and Paredes' own son, bassist Samuel Paredes.

During the TRACE photo shoot, it became obvious that the bond between de Menil and Paredes is now almost paternal, and that their frequent musical collaborations can be said to attest to the strength of their symbiotic relationship. Another feather in their cap is the recently released record "Casita de Campo," by Puerto Plata, the 86 year-old singer and guitarist who is also known as José Manuel Cobles. Puerto Plata, who made his name performing during the years of the repressive Trujillo regime in underground cabaret dance halls located in the red light districts of Santiago, a main city in the northwestern part of the Dominican Republic, is known for fusing the Cuban "guaracha" style with classic bachata phrasing. On this new record, a brilliant reinterpretation of classic love songs and refashioned dance beats which follows 2007's "Mujer de Cabaret" album, de Menil's understated production blends in nicely with Paredes' intricate arrangements, creating an elegant, timeless composition which is the most respectful tribute yet to the pioneering spirit of the old master.