

English language translation of conversation with Jesus Jank Curbelo

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:37

Well, I'm here with Jesus Jank Curbelo, a Cuban journalist who has written for several independent media outlets in Cuba, such as El Toque, Periodismo del Barrio and Magazine AMPM. He is one of the first to report on the reparto and now lives in Texas. Welcome, Jesus.

Jesús Jank Curbelo1:59

thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Rebecca Bodenheimer2:02

Well, I want to start with Taiger's death because he was one of the most important artists of popular music in Cuba today and it was, I think, a very big loss. And we don't have to go into the details of his death, because it's sad, but he was murdered in Miami, where he lived.

Rebecca Bodenheimer2:28

Sure, you can talk about it if you want, but I wanted to

Jesus Jank Curbelo2:31

It's actually still an open investigation, so there aren't, let's say, many, many details publicly available about it. So, I mean, I actually think that speculating about it can be even dangerous for the investigation, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer2:49

Yes, yes, yes. Yes, and that's why I wanted you to talk a little about the meaning of his music and his role in Reggaetón y Reparto.

Jesus Jank Curbelo3:00

What was most striking about him was the way he reinvented himself, artistically, and that it continued to work for him, because he started out as part of the group Los Cuatro, which I said, his cousin, Jorque Junior. And at that time, he was actually called the Prince, and he was, I mean, he started to be known as the Prince. And so, I see that for an artist, once he establishes a brand, suddenly changing that brand can be complicated, right? I mean, it can even lead to losing your audience, and in his case, that didn't happen.

Jesus Jank Curbelo3:45

I mean, he went from being the prince to being the Taiger later on. I mean, he had a career with Los Cuatro, he had a career later in a duo, Los Desiguales, he had a career as a soloist, and, I mean, he never ever lowered his level of popularity, and he never lost his audience, right? Despite changing places, changing names, even changing the way he makes music, because he didn't start out doing reparto. And, well, that's what I'm telling you, that artistically, in that sense, it seems to me that, in fact,

he's probably the only one in Cuba who has been able to do it, right? I mean, change, change, change, change all the time, inventing about himself all the time and staying as popular.

Jesus Jank Curbelo4:35

In fact, he was also one of the first Cubans to sign with major labels. I mean, he was signed to Rottweiler in Puerto Rico, which is Jaime Cosculluela's label. He's the only Cuban who has recorded with Bad Bunny. That hasn't been highlighted, but he didn't know. I mean, Micha recorded with Bad Bunny at some point, but that song has never been released. So, officially the only Cuban who has recorded with Bad Bunny is Taiger. I mean, the song does exist, it is there. And, I mean, it may not seem important, but it is because Bad Bunny has been the most popular artist in the world for several years, at least. The most popular Latin artist is him.

Rebecca Bodenheimer5:25

Yes, yes, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo5:26

And that and that is a point in favor of Taiger because I think that right now for any urban artist recording with Bad Bunny can be like a goal, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer5:36

Yes, yes, of course, of course, of course. Yes, no, it is huge. One of the experiences I have had in the last week or two weeks since all this started, is knowing that this has been a very, very big event in Cuban life, more or less. And then it's like, I compared it to the other day when Biggie and Tupac got killed. It was, it's like that level of importance, but you don't see it here.

Jesus Jank Curbelo6:25

Of course, because maybe, all of a sudden, Taiger's target audience is different, right? I mean, I think his target audience has always been the Cuban public and the Latin public, but more than anything, more than anything, more than anything, the Cuban public. Even though he had peaks of popularity in Spain, but still, I mean, he was always singing in Spanish. He never dared to try to do it in English or change his target audience, right? But, you know, something that I've seen people saying that I don't think is right, is that Taiger is the first Cuban urban artist to die in a violent way.

Rebecca Bodenheimer7:07

Ah, are they saying that?

Jesus Jank Curbelo7:09

It's one of the things they've said and the truth is that it's not right. He's the first Cuban artist, urban, popular, to die in a violent way, but a few months ago a young man was killed in Cuba who was a singer, but he was just starting out, practically nobody knew him.

Jesus Jank Curbelo7:32

I can't remember his name right now, but yes, I mean, he was murdered. So Taiger is not, he's not the first. Suddenly, as I told you, he's the first, I mean, popular, let's say, on a large scale, to die in that way. But, but he's not the first artist, well, well, to die in a violent way.

Rebecca Bodenheimer7:51

And of course, and we also have to say that if not, if he were not living in Miami, I think they would not have even written about him. For example, I had seen some articles about him in English, but that was because he was in Miami.

Jesus Jank Curbelo8:10

Of course. I mean, I don't know to what extent, if he hadn't moved to Miami, he wouldn't have expected his career, because within Cuba, I think he was popular practically from the beginning of his career. In fact, I remember before he was called El Taiger when he was, I don't know if we officially call him the Taiger, but they knew him as "The Most Taiger," I remember seeing on a mountain in Cuba, that is, in a very, very, very remote place, very far away, where I don't know if that has a translation in English, but in the course it is called *timbiriche*, let's say it's like a little stand of a person who sells like anything, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer9:08

Aha.

Jesus Jank Curbelo9:10

In the middle of nowhere, he had a sign saying he was the biggest Taiger. And he was obviously the biggest Taiger, right? I mean, he got to that point of popularity in there.

Rebecca Bodenheimer9:22

Yes, yes, yes. Well, as you said, his music was not, not that I have that much knowledge of their music, but his music was really on that border, not border, that limit between reggaeton and reparto, because the four of them were a group that was like a very timbeado reggaeton, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo9:52

Cuban, that is, is what they call Cubatón.

Rebecca Bodenheimer9:54

Yes, yes, yes, Cubatón and then it was more in that line

Jesus Jank Curbelo10:01

Then with Los Desiguales, yes, he did reggaeton. And then he gradually moved towards reparto, I don't think I'm sure, but I can't say that when the Taiger started reparto already existed as a phenomenon.

Rebecca Bodenheimer10:19

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo10:20

So suddenly he started doing that style.

Rebecca Bodenheimer10:23

Yeah.

Jesus Jank Curbelo10:24

And he did it, in fact, despite his rivalry with Chocolate, who is the founder of the genre, that is, of reparto as a genre and one of its creators. And yet, Taiger took it on, defended it and continued to do it all the time in his own style, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer10:45

Yes, that's also interesting because he, well, no, I don't know what year he came to the United States.

Jesus Jank Curbelo10:53

No, I don't know.

Rebecca Bodenheimer10:55

Yeah. But I find it interesting that he kind of changed for a style that was very identified with the island, right? It's like he wanted to keep playing for audiences on the island. No, no, not just in Miami where, you know, reggaeton is more, you know, Latin, more Puerto Rican.

Jesus Jank Curbelo11:20

Yeah, totally. And in fact, he also made trap, I mean, he didn't just stay there because if I'm not mistaken, the song with Bad Bunny is a trap. And, I mean, while he was working with Rottweiler, he did several trap things. But still, I mean, he always, As they say in Cuba, went toward what was most Cuban. Cubaton first, and reparto later.

Rebecca Bodenheimer11:51

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think I want to look for that, that song with Bad Bunny.

Jesus Jank Curbelo11:57

The song is, it's called Coronamos, I think, and it's Bunny, the Taiger, Cosculluela and Brian Mayer, if I'm not mistaken. Oh,

Rebecca Bodenheimer12:08

And do you know what year it was recorded?

Jesus Jank Curbelo12:11

I don't know, but it's on YouTube. Look, it's El Taiger, Coscuyuela, J Balvin, Bad Bunny and Brian Miles. Coronamos. And it says here that it was uploaded seven years ago. (2017)

Rebecca Bodenheimer15:06

I was interested to see which of the most popular reggaeton artists in the world were going to talk about his death. And I saw that J Balvin was one of them who talked about

Jesus Jank Curbelo15:20

J Balvin put up an IG story too. Yeah. But from then on, the truth is, I didn't see anyone else.

Rebecca Bodenheimer15:28

Yes, yes, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo15:30

It remained pure and simple in the Cuban environment, but it has been, I don't know if it's strange, but it is striking that not only urban artists have spoken out about it.

Rebecca Bodenheimer15:46

No, yes. I've seen that too. All the groups, Los Van Van, Elito Reve. I've seen all that. Even Chucho Valdes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo15:56

Yes, and today I saw a post by David Blanco, who is like David Blanco, really, who is a rocker and is a whole world apart from that. And today I saw a post by him there on Instagram. And in fact, one thing that has happened with Taiger that has caught my attention has been that they spoke out. You know that in Cuba there are two sides, right? There are those who are in favor of the government and those who are against it, and both sides, that is, both sides have suddenly agreed to speak out about him. They published something in Cuba Debate, if I'm not mistaken, on the national newscast on Cuban television as well, let's say that officially, the Cuban government spoke out about the death of Taiger, and in fact they were even paying attention to him before he died.

Rebecca Bodenheimer16:51

Yeah.

Jesus Jank Curbelo16:51

And also the exile and the opposition have spoken out. So it has been like

Rebecca Bodenheimer16:58

No, that's it. And I wanted to ask you about that. He had many enemies, the exiled community, precisely because

Jesus Jank Curbelo17:13

he was going to Cuba,

Rebecca Bodenheimer17:14

He was going to Cuba and that is one of the things that I understand the least about their attitude, that he has like four children there.

Jesus Jank Curbelo17:26

Yes, of course.

Rebecca Bodenheimer17:27

And then, if he didn't go to Cuba, if, if he forgot about his family in Cuba, what would they say about him then?

Jesus Jank Curbelo17:35

Also, but that's a little more complicated.

Rebecca Bodenheimer17:37

Or they criticized him going to Cuba, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo17:40

But that is a bit more complicated, because there are people who are not allowed to enter Cuba. I mean, there are people outside of Cuba who are not allowed to pass, not even get on the flight, right? Right now I can't tell you specifically about urban artists who could be in that case. But if activists, if people, let's say, openly political, right, openly opposed to the government, they are not allowed in. Or, perhaps, if they do manage to get in, they are not allowed to live normally inside, right? And in his case, yes. So, let's say that the criticism was because it may seem suspicious that they let him in, or it may seem to some people that it is suspicious that they let him in and out and in and out, because there are people who are not allowed to do so, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer18:43

Yes. But, for example, even Chocolate, who was much more critical of the government, right? He has gone, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo18:53

No, no, no.

Rebecca Bodenheimer18:53

I remember, I remember one thing, an argument with Otaola, who said that he was working with the Cubans at a festival or something, I don't know.

Jesus Jank Curbelo19:01

But no, Chocolate has not gone. Ah, well. I know that he was in danger of being deported, but but no, no, I mean, as such he has not gone to Cuba. So of the people who were allowed to come and go, I just remember El Micha and El Taiger.

Jesus Jank Curbelo19:22

In the case of Micha, Micha does have a song, let's say, of protest against the Cuban government. But despite that, well, he goes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo19:33

Oh, Yulien does that too. But Yulien lives there. Yulien comes and goes, but he lives in Cuba. But Taiger, I'm almost convinced that he doesn't have any songs like openly oppositional. So, I think that's where the criticisms came from, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer19:55

Oh, yeah.

Jesus Jank Curbelo19:56

That is, he never put himself on either of the two sides.

Rebecca Bodenheimer20:03

Yeah, yeah. Well, he recorded a lot of music and did a lot of collaborations as well. Is there one song you like in particular?

Jesus Jank Curbelo20:15

The one I've always liked the most is the one called El hilito rojo. Because for me, when I heard that song for the first time, I felt that it was like the song of the new style of Taiger, that is, once again he had changed style, once again he had changed. But I felt when I heard that song, that it was like the style, right, and it was the style that he kept after that song until now. So, well, that one, the one I like most is that one, El Hilito Rojo. He has a phrase that I remembered when he passed away: that the gift they gave you is so that you can change your destiny, but it's also a path made of bad things. And it seemed to me like this was very appropriate.

Rebecca Bodenheimer21:14

Yes, yes. So

Jesus Jank Curbelo21:16

That is, if you are going to play one, play that one. Maybe, maybe, maybe it is not even the most popular one.

Rebecca Bodenheimer21:23

Yeah, yeah, no, I figured, I figured you were going to pick something a little more

Jesus Jank Curbelo21:28

No, that's the one that seems to me, from the lyrics it seems personal and sincere and from what I told you also about the style. Also, you don't see personal and sincere lyrics very much in reparto.

Rebecca Bodenheimer21:43

No.

Jesus Jank Curbelo21:46

And that's also why I chose that one.

Rebecca Bodenheimer21:48

And do you know what year it was?

Jesus Jank Curbelo21:50

It was five years ago.

Rebecca Bodenheimer21:53

2019.

Rebecca Bodenheimer24:28

Ok, now let's go back to AAA your career, to your team in Cuba as an independent journalist. Can you talk a little bit about how you got into that career and if you always focused on music or if you also wrote about other things?

Jesus Jank Curbelo24:41

Well, I started in journalism because I wanted to be a rapper. So, I always, I mean, I always, I always had music there, like, inside, right? Going around, going around in my head. And, I mean, let's say, well, I started writing because I wanted to do it, but no, I mean, I started writing songs and I was transforming that in the end until I was just writing and without any rapping. I wasn't very talented, whatever, but I kept writing and suddenly my first social concerns and such, which in the end always led me to journalism, came from there, right? I was like looking for themes to write my songs about, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer25:35

And where exactly are you from Havana?

Jesus Jank Curbelo25:38

Yes, yes. I was born in a neighborhood called Fontanar, which belongs to the municipality of Bolleros and is like a small country town. And, I mean, I lived between Fontanar and Playa. Yeah. I mean, they were like my two places of residence. But I was always in Havana. I never, I mean, let's say, in the

beginning, after graduating, I never wrote about music. I always, always did social issues, social reporting on vulnerable communities. It's always been what has caught my attention the most, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo26:21

The saddest stories, the sadder they are, the more I like to tell them and the more I like to get inside those stories. But at the same time, I'll tell you, I always liked urban music in general. And since I met a lot of people because, I mean, I came from rap and that same circle, well, the same people I was related to, suddenly had went on to make reggaeton or became artists, right? And then, I met a lot of people and I started to, well, investigate, I don't know, and write about those people I knew and write about music too. I mean, I started professionally at Gramma's newspaper.

Rebecca Bodenheimer27:11

Ah, okay.

Jesus Jank Curbelo27:12

In Cuba, I mean, I did my social service there. And right there in the newspaper Gramma

Rebecca Bodenheimer27:16

Ah, I didn't know you could do community service there. Ok.

Jesus Jank Curbelo27:20

Yes. And the newspaper was, let's say, the one that gave me the first opportunity to write about music, even though it was in the area of national information. They sent me to do some work on EGREM and, well, that's where I got in, right? I started doing music work for the cultural page with Michel Hernandez, who was in charge of that section, that is, the music section of the cultural pages of the newspaper. Yeah. And he's my friend and I work with him right now. So, I started doing music, in parallel to my work as an investigative reporter on national issues.

Jesus Jank Curbelo28:11

And then, when I left El Granma and became an independent journalist, I started working at Periodismo del Barrio, also reporting on national issues. In other words, it was like the place where I could do the kind of journalism I wanted to do. But I couldn't do it anyway, I mean, there was no space to do anything about music. So I started doing it independently.

Rebecca Bodenheimer28:41

Yeah. I'm curious, well, there are two things. I want to know more about your experience as a freelance journalist. I'll leave that aside for a moment. Well, you were actually doing journalism at the time when this new style of reparto was emerging, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo29:04

Completely.

Rebecca Bodenheimer29:05

So I don't know what that experience was like. Were they all young kids and in what scenes? Were there some who were more connected to rap or some who were more connected to reggaeton?

Jesus Jank Curbelo29:22

In reality, I mean, I personally, nobody, from the point of view of research or journalism, nobody had mentioned reparto, it was like starting as a movement and such, and I realized, I remember with the song "Reebok y Nike" from Lobo King Dowa, I started listening to it because I liked it and as I listened to it, I listened to it, I listened to it and I myself said like, dude, this is not, this is not reggaeton. I mean, it wasn't like I just realized, right? And I started to analyze the sounds and it wasn't reggaeton. And then, like I started to look for more songs, more songs by Lobo King Dowa and his friends, right? And then I realized that there was something going on there that wasn't being talked about, right? I mean, it was precisely a completely different sound, but derived from reggaeton. And that sound was already becoming a movement, it was becoming a lot of people doing it, experimenting with it. It wasn't just musical, I mean, the ways of dancing, the ways of dressing, the ways of expression.

Jesus Jank Curbelo30:46

I mean, that's why I say it was like a movement, it wasn't specifically a style of making music, a way of making music, but it came with more things around it, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer30:57

Ah, yes, yes, yes, the dancing is something a little different too, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo31:01

I mean, the ways of dancing are different from those of normal reggaeton, the vocabulary, I mean, the structures of the songs, I mean, reparto has a specific structure of the songs. But let's say that up until that point nobody had looked at it in a serious way, right? And I started on my own, to see what it was, to investigate, to talk to people I suddenly knew so they could connect me with other people, and that was it, I mean, that's where I met Harrison, King Dowa himself, like the exponents, Chocolate was already here [in the U.S.]. I've never spoken to Chocolate, honestly.

Jesus Jank Curbelo31:48

And one thing also happened. That is, my work as a social journalist led me to meet a person who opened many doors for me in the world of reparto and who got me inside, who is Clara Cabrera, Clarita the Magnificent, currently the arch-rival of Otaola.

Rebecca Bodenheimer32:10

And who is she? Because I've never heard of her.

Jesus Jank Curbelo32:13

She is an influencer, she makes podcasts. She was actually a promoter for Taiger when she worked with Los Desiguales. She has been a representative for a few artists, here, in fact, in reparto. She organized the first reparto festival in Miami. In other words, she is a person who was always very involved in that, and I didn't know her working in that field. I mean, I met her because when the tornado occurred in Havana, I don't remember exactly what year, but it was a tornado as devastating as that one. They started sending aid from here. Yes. From, well, from Miami they collected aid and sent it.

Rebecca Bodenheimer32:56

Yes, yes, yes,

Jesus Jank Curbelo32:57

Yes. And I met her, well, in that process of distributing aid and I don't know what. We became friends and suddenly, I mean, I obviously didn't know who she was, but I told her like, you know what? I'm working on reparto stuff, well, as a comment, and it turns out that she suddenly had all the doors open in that world. And from her, I mean, for example, I was able to meet Taiger himself or something like that, or have telephones, go to places with a recommendation, as she knew everyone. Because I don't think that's a world that, that they allow you to enter just because. So, suddenly, either you earn it or it comes recommended by whoever introduces you. And that's how I was able to get in, right? I mean, through her, she suddenly became my production company to, to have access to, to, to the world of reparto. And from there I was able to, well, start to investigate in depth and I published that text called "El Reggaeton de los Pobres."

Jesus Jank Curbelo34:06

That was the first thing I published about it, I think. And then I did some artist profiles and also album reviews and such for Magazine AM/PM. I don't know, it was totally empirical, but I wanted to start investigating. I mean, I looked crazy in there, I went to the studios, I went to the concerts, and since I knew everyone, I got in for free everywhere. Let's say I was going to try to look from the outside and from the inside at the same time, right? To understand what was happening. But not to, I mean, I was going to work, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer34:42

Yes, yes, yes, of course. And try to maintain a little objectivity. And where did those take place? At someone's house or?

Jesus Jank Curbelo35:02

No, no, I mean, it was like in places like outdoors. Or in small clubs, because they gave them space. Right? To the artists, but the, I mean, the amount of people that went to those places was impressive. Yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo35:26

For example, I remember I was in one at the Palacio de la Rumba.

Rebecca Bodenheimer35:30

I remember that place. They closed it.

Jesus Jank Curbelo35:32

There in Centro Habana. I don't know, I don't know right now.

Rebecca Bodenheimer35:36

The last time I saw that it was closed and when I saw it it was a MYPIME (private business). I remember that because when I did my doctoral research on rumba back then, it didn't exist when I started, when I was doing most of my research. The Palacio de Rumba didn't exist and then it opened, but I saw that what they played the least was rumba. I went to see, no, no, I don't remember what kind of group, a dance group, I don't know, but it didn't play much rumba.

Jesus Jank Curbelo36:22

It was places like that are even a bit underground, right? I mean, like some club that I remember being Palacio de la Rumba, I remember in 1830, which is like a, well, I don't know if it's like a discotheque, but it's not that big either.

Rebecca Bodenheimer36:46

Well, I don't remember where it is, but I have heard it.

Jesus Jank Curbelo36:49

It is like by the sea, on the Malecón, but near the tunnel that divides Vedado and Playa.

Rebecca Bodenheimer36:56

Ah, yeah, okay.

Jesus Jank Curbelo36:57

Like over there, in that area. And on the other side of the tunnel there's another little place called El Johnny, which was also like a little club, I'm telling you, it's underground, it's for those kind of events, but it's state-run, right? And there, for example, Poppy La Moda, when they were together they had a regular performance there. I don't remember if it was weekly or what, but there too. And like in the open air, I know, or that square in Guanabacoa, I don't remember the exact name, others in La Lisa. So, those were like bigger places, but they were always full.

Rebecca Bodenheimer37:38

Yeah, and all of them young, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo37:39

They were all young people. Of course. And, in fact, there were even, I mean, I even saw some violent episodes, right? With arguments and fights and ugly things there.

Rebecca Bodenheimer37:53

I can imagine.

Jesus Jank Curbelo37:54

Well, I don't know if they are normal, but it seemed to me that they were, right? But also, I mean, obviously, as I said, since I went, let's say, as a journalist, I suddenly saw these kinds of things, but I was always like behind the stage or in a little corner on the stage itself or, you know, where the artists were, not in the audience as such, although sometimes yes, I was in the audience too. But hey, since I was in the audience, the truth is that I never experienced any violent episodes, thank God.

Rebecca Bodenheimer38:27

And and then the dancing was all like, I'm trying to kind of imagine, everyone's dancing like.

Jesus Jank Curbelo38:34

At that time, let's say there were artists or songs that had their own dances, right? I mean, their own ways of dancing. So, for example, I remember there was a song by someone called Bun Bun Ye, that song was danced in a specific way, then he did another one, that is, the singers launched the package, that is, the song and the way in which this song was going to be danced.

Rebecca Bodenheimer39:15

So, it's not just a way of dancing reparto. Like, for example, it is thought that, I don't know, in Guachineo, yes, it is a very popular song, but it's not just that.

Jesus Jank Curbelo39:26

That's it. No, I mean, there are some things that are basic, like this foot movement like that at the time of the cue, which I think is just for reparto. Maybe later a DJ called Lucky, who was very popular at one time, I don't know now, explained to me that many of those movements came from the Yoruba dances, from the dances of the Abakuá, from those types of dances that are typical, traditional and ritual. I mean, they took a lot from there, let's say, the base, right? The base of the movements and then they converted them into other things. But that's also why it's so Cuban, right? And it's because they're nourished by things that I don't know if they're exactly indigenous, but they are very strong influences within Cuba, I mean.

Rebecca Bodenheimer40:22

Yes, yes, yes, yes. And well, in my limited knowledge of reparto, I have also seen a lot of language that comes from Abakuá, from Yoruba, Afro-Cuban religion seems to be very important.

Jesus Jank Curbelo40:42

What happened, what happened with regard to language is that reparto took on the language, that is, the slang of the marginal sectors of Cuba, and turned it into art, right? That is, that slang, suddenly, stayed there. In the way that people spoke it in those places, but it didn't come out, that is, it wasn't reflected in a cultural way, not even in reggaeton. Or maybe some phrases, some, but not like, this is the language that I assume, right? And reparto did just that. I mean, from the point of view of

language, using it like that. I mean, the way that people really speak in Cuban neighborhoods, in a simple and understandable way, but with many words and sayings and specific ways of speaking. Maybe that is one of the things that has prevented reparto from becoming more international, and it is because

Rebecca Bodenheimer41:49

Yes, even with other Latinos, because

Jesus Jank Curbelo41:51

And it's because suddenly what they say is difficult to understand, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer41:55

Yes, yes, yes, yes. It's interesting because I think there are parallel paths with reparto and that's something that contemporary rumba has done for many years. I mean, putting in phrases from Yoruba, Abakuá, there's clearly always been a very strong connection between Abakuá and rumba. But in the dance, in the songs and everything, it's a bit like parallel movements.

Jesus Jank Curbelo42:31

I think so. A little bit.

Rebecca Bodenheimer42:32

And also, of course, they come from both, they are marginalized genres. Rumba has never become a genre accepted by all Cubans. Even when the national discourse says, oh, rumba, the root of our culture, I don't know what, but it has never been really accepted

Jesus Jank Curbelo42:55

Massively popular, I don't think it has ever been.

Rebecca Bodenheimer42:58

No, no, no. Not massively popular, but also not accepted by all Cubans either, because when I was doing my research, I remember, a friend told me, but why is an educated woman studying such a low, vulgar tradition? You understand me?

Jesus Jank Curbelo43:24

Yes, that was it

Rebecca Bodenheimer43:24

And he was Cuban, right? The parallels are very interesting, I say. Apart from the fact that reparto also takes from rumba, they are also doing similar things.

Jesus Jank Curbelo43:39

I think so. In fact, even in the clave, right? I mean, remember that reperto uses the key tag, tag, tag, tag, tag [clave rhythm] and that clave, if I'm not mistaken, is called the Cuban clave

Rebecca Bodenheimer43:55

In English it's called the rumba clave and the son clave, because there's a slight difference. There are two claves. Or no, there are more. There are actually more claves. I did an episode about claves and there are many claves, but but but yes, there is a slight difference between those two most popular claves. One that is heard in son and one that is heard in rumba. Actually, sometimes both are used in both genres. But well, yes, there is a small rhythmic difference. And the rumba clave is what is used in reperto.

Jesus Jank Curbelo44:37

In the reperto, of course. What happens is that reperto, I think that at the base of reperto, if one day Chocolate writes the musical base for reperto or someone, that clave is done with handclaps. I mean, it started to be done, it started to be done with handclaps.

Rebecca Bodenheimer44:54

And digital handclaps right? programmed.

Jesus Jank Curbelo45:00

But it's with the sound of the handclaps. Yes. And that also at the time of the live performances and I don't know what, it turns it like poof, because people can copy, I mean, it allows people to copy the music with their body, right? I mean, and then you see people like clapping without being told to clap and that.

Rebecca Bodenheimer45:25

it's great.

Jesus Jank Curbelo45:26

But, I mean, they are the idiots making the key, the key that tag tag tag tag and then the other thing they use is the shekere, if I'm not mistaken, like the typical highhat, they change it for the sound of the

Rebecca Bodenheimer45:46

Yes, yes, from the shekere

Jesus Jank Curbelo45:48

And the timba bass drum, that is, a bass drum that is played against the beat of the, of the handclaps, which is what they call pedal. Those are like the three, I don't know, the three.

Rebecca Bodenheimer45:58

Features, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo45:59

I don't know if they are, oh, I don't know, but the percussion of reparto

Rebecca Bodenheimer46:04

Yes, yes, yes, that makes it, yes, that makes it unique and different, for example, from reggaeton, it differentiates it like that.

Jesus Jank Curbelo46:12

I mean, even though it can be mixed, even though they have been mixed, even though dembow from reggaeton is added and they go more in songs that are playing at the same time or suddenly they start in one way and suddenly they jump to another even though the rhythms are different. But, for example, in, I mean, at that time when I was researching that in Cuba, the reparteros, I mean, those who were already doing one hundred percent reparto, told me that it was very difficult for them to sing over traditional reggaeton. And vice versa.

Rebecca Bodenheimer46:49

Interesting.

Jesus Jank Curbelo46:49

I mean, they are so different. The same exponents have a hard time adapting to one and the other.

Rebecca Bodenheimer47:03

Wow. Yes, all this is super interesting. I want to change the subject a little and talk a little about the repression of journalists in recent years. Let's say, of course, that there have been many waves of repression in the last sixty years. But let's talk about the period since Díaz Canel assumed power, right? Also because well, that coincides with the moment when you left the island.

Jesus Jank Curbelo47:33

Yes, I mean, I've been here for two years now, I mean, this month I'll be celebrating two years. So, I mean, for example, now I know that there was or I was witnessing a strong wave of repression, that is, I no longer experienced it, or I am not experiencing it, or I am no longer directly experiencing it.

Rebecca Bodenheimer47:51

But, for example, it was like this for July 11th, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo47:55

Yes. On July 11, November 27, January 27, when the entrenchment in San Isidro took place, I was in Cuba, that is, at that stage I was there.

Rebecca Bodenheimer48:16

Can you talk a little about the San Isidro movement for those who don't know?

Jesus Jank Curbelo48:23

I couldn't tell you whether or not, whatever, no, I don't know, I don't form part of it, no, but it is a cultural movement led by Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, a Cuban visual artist who is currently in prison, as is Michael Osorbo, because he was the other leader of the San Isidro movement and who is also in prison. And it was a movement, let's say, cultural and political at the same time, right? Right now, I don't know if it still exists as a movement, but in any case, the two main figures of the San Isidro movement are imprisoned in Cuba and other members have had to leave Cuba.

Rebecca Bodenheimer49:08

Yes. I have seen a lot of journalists, no, just journalists, a lot of Cubans. I mean, the migration is huge, practically the largest in the history of the island, right? We are talking about at least a million and possibly more.

Jesus Jank Curbelo49:26

And possibly more.

Rebecca Bodenheimer49:27

Yes, I have heard from five to ten percent of the population. It's huge. Of course, that's because of a deep economic crisis that is an inflation that people here can't imagine. People here suffer from inflation, but it really doesn't compare, it doesn't compare.

Jesus Jank Curbelo49:52

I mean, it's inflation and scarcity at the same time, right? Because, for example, I remember during the pandemic, for example, in Cuba or at the beginning of the pandemic you could have money and you didn't have anything to buy with that money. Because there was nothing anywhere. And that's what I'm telling you, I mean, having money and still not being able to solve your problem, I think it's two problems at the same time, right?

Rebecca Bodenheimer50:19

Yes, yes, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo50:20

And so, I mean, right now, according to what they tell me, it's even worse than when I left. So the truth is, no, I don't know, since I'm not there, I don't think I'm even capable of imagining it. Right? What am I saying? Maybe you don't know things if you're not inside. I mean, I don't know, you can get an idea or a notion, but it's always based on what they tell you. And what I, from what they tell me, the truth is that right now the country is not doing well at all.

Rebecca Bodenheimer50:55

Yes. Speaking of journalists in particular, do you think that, for example, this wave of immigration has been, I imagine, a combination of economic conditions and repression?

Jesus Jank Curbelo51:16

And absolutely. The crisis is general. I don't believe that there is a single area of life in Cuba that is not in crisis. Yes. And so, I think that people also have no hope of getting out of this crisis, right? Because the government is constantly making changes and saying now yes, now yes, now yes we improve, now yes, and everything always tends to get worse. So, I think the only solution that people find is to be realistic is to leave. Because that's what I'm telling you, that there comes a point where even having money can't solve your problems. So, I'm leaving, right? And also obviously the fact that they intelligently opened Nicaragua as an escape valve, as an escape route right at a time

Rebecca Bodenheimer52:13

that you can go to Nicaragua without a visa, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo52:16

Without a visa, exactly. And so Nicaragua became the starting point, right? I go up to Nicaragua, because people still want to get here. The United States is supposed to be the best country in the world, right? People have that idea in their head. They've been sold it all their lives or whatever, and people really believe that it's the best country in the world. And then everyone has the idea of coming here and

Rebecca Bodenheimer52:47

Yes of course.

Jesus Jank Curbelo52:48

It just so happened that Nicaragua was opened, that the border with the United States was also, let's say, open, because they were letting people through. And then the mass number of people started leaving there and arriving here was incredible. And then it also seems to me that people didn't know or they were always waiting for the ok Nicaragua opened today, but tomorrow they can say that Nicaragua closed because in Cuba things are like that, right? Today yes, and tomorrow you wake up and it's different. People started trying to leave quickly, right? Quick, quick, quick, quick. It was like practically everyone at the same time. I mean, everyone who had the possibility or could somehow find the money to undertake the trip, I think they did it at the same time.

Jesus Jank Curbelo53:44

So, the country is practically empty, right? And that is very sad. That is very sad, and even now, every day there is someone who leaves or who wants to leave or who is looking for how to do so. And in fact, there were also many people who left by sea, as, in fact, I lost a friend at sea.

Rebecca Bodenheimer54:10

Oh, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo54:12

And that's very sad.

Rebecca Bodenheimer54:16

My husband too, I'm married to a man from Santiago who came here about sixteen years ago, I think, and he's here. But yes, he also lost. No, he didn't come by sea but through a fiance visa. But he has a friend that he lost at sea like ten years ago, something like that, like a friend of his. Phew.

Jesus Jank Curbelo54:43

I mean, my friend, the last thing we heard about him was that he left, right? And then, I mean, And

Rebecca Bodenheimer54:49

was never heard from again.

Jesus Jank Curbelo54:50

Nothing more was ever heard and, well, let's say that one assumes that they died in a bad way, but it is even sadder not even to be sure and I can't imagine, that is, if he was my friend and such, but for his family, because they don't even have a body to bury and they don't even know how exactly he died. Because the last thing I heard was that he left, and you won't know about it anymore, because you won't find him in the sea either. So, I mean, they are like super sad phenomena associated with migration, which in the end is the product of people's desperation. Yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo55:39

I don't know, it makes me sad to talk about Cuba.

Rebecca Bodenheimer55:41

Oh, I'm sorry.

Jesus Jank Curbelo55:44

No, no, no, no, no problem, but

Rebecca Bodenheimer55:47

Well, I was interested in what you said a little while ago about the image that Cubans have of the United States.

Jesus Jank Curbelo

I think it's general.

Rebecca Bodenheimer56:12

No, yes, yes, yes, of course. Yes, it's general. And Cubans who live here always tend to not want their families to worry. So, they tend to present their life like I'm doing very well and I don't know what, yes.

But I know that it is an experience that you become disillusioned little by little or very quickly. I don't know how it has been for you, but how has it been? I mean,

Jesus Jank Curbelo56:34

Actually, I was never really excited about it. Yeah. I don't know if I told you, but I had been here before coming to live here. I had come as a journalist to some events and I don't know what in 2019. I mean, when you come as a tourist, right. In the end, you come as a tourist, and all you see is beautiful, right? But even so, I mean, having seen the beautiful things from the tourist's perspective, I never wanted to stay here. I mean, I never wanted to leave Cuba. Aha. No, that wasn't in my plans, it was never in my plans. I'm not excited about it, I like my country, I like the people in my country, I, I mean, I miss my country and I can't tell you exactly what it is that I miss, because still, I mean, many of the people I care about are no longer there. And they're not here either, so

Rebecca Bodenheimer57:40

They are in Europe or they are in several places.

Jesus Jank Curbelo57:43

Or they are in the United States. For example, I have, I have a friend in El Paso, in Texas and I have been here for about a year or so, a year and a half, something like that. And one would say that going to El Paso is very easy. I mean, I have not been able to see my friend and we are in the same state.

Rebecca Bodenheimer58:04

Yes. Where in Texas are you?

Jesus Jank Curbelo58:06

I live in Dallas.

Rebecca Bodenheimer58:07

Ah, okay.

Jesus Jank Curbelo58:09

And, I mean, El Paso is eight hours away from home.

Rebecca Bodenheimer58:13

No, Texas is a very big state, like California.

Jesus Jank Curbelo58:17

And then, I mean, I haven't been able to see it, because you don't have enough time or life in general is passing you by in a horrible way. And that has been hard work for me, because my temperament, let's say, is more chilling, more of a peaceful way of taking time. I don't know, and here it is like living with a kind of desperation, right? For example, the clock, I said it in a piece I wrote, the clock is my enemy right now. I mean, I hate the clock deeply.

Rebecca Bodenheimer59:00

because that piece was very very nice. I'm going to put a link so people can read it because it's also in English. You wrote it, it wasn't translated. You wrote it in

Jesus Jank Curbelo59:12

English. Yes. And in fact now, I don't know exactly when, but my second text written in English should be coming out. I'm kind of struggling with the language as well. Yes. But, I mean, beyond the language, I don't know if it's the culture or the way people live here, but that's a hard thing for me. Because I've always been one to have my own time, to organize my time, to do things my way, as they say in Cuba. And here you have to be watching the clock, I mean, right now it's 2:25, and so you have to be okay, from one to two I have time to, but, I mean, I have to, because I'm not used to it and I don't like it, but I say, I have to time myself until when I'm going to watch a series, right?

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:00:12

That is, from 2 to 2:30 I have time to watch an episode on Friday.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:00:17

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:00:18

And that bothers me a lot.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:00:21

Yes, life is like that here.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:00:23

And I tell you maybe

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:00:24

It is not very good for your health.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:00:27

Suddenly you're used to life being like this, right? Yes. But that's been a lot of work for me because I hate timing things or having x amount of time to do x amount of things. It's not just about work, right? I mean, it's like, I have to go to sleep at this time and I have to go to sleep at this time. Why do I have to sleep so many hours to be able to get up at a specific time? Uh-huh.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:00:57

I don't know. It's a big adjustment. The concept of time in Cuba is very different. It's the same, for example, as with social things. Cubans say from one day to the next, look, we're going to go there, we're going to have a party, I don't know, or on the same day, but no, here everything is planned.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:01:18

And well, when You have kids, here you are always planning this and that is the other. And yes, that is not a natural thing for my husband. You have to plan everything and

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:01:37

I could live 100 years here, I mean, I think nobody ever gets used to it unless you were born with it, right? And another thing that I hate very, very, very, very much is the way money is handled. I hate it. I mean, being like this, I have to make so much to be able to pay so much.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:01:59

Ah,

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:01:59

Yes. And that is whew! But let's say that it's also more due to my personality. No, I don't think, I don't think that in Cuba it's completely different, even though in Cuba there is no, I don't know, credit or anything, and the banks aren't there, but it's as if they weren't there, I don't know what, and I don't use a credit card. When I left trying to pay with a credit card in Cuba was crazy, right now I don't know. But also, I mean, I'm telling you, it's because of my character. I've never been one to like counting. I hate counting time and money and everything that's going to be counted, I hate it. And since

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:02:39

that is always counting. Well, yes, then I imagine it is quite a shock because everything here is counting.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:02:51

Yes Everything, everything, everything. It's hard, it's hard work for me. Yeah. I have a hard time knowing that I have to do it.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:02:59

Yeah.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:02:59

But, it is what it is. And I have to adapt. I was going to tell you that that is just the culture shock. But still, I mean, the adaptation in my work life has also been like, ugh, horrible.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:03:18

Apart from the fact that you have a career that, I can tell you from experience, because, well, I didn't start out as a journalist, I started out as an academic and, well, the story is long. But, but the industry now, the media, the industry of all that is in tremendous crisis and so apart from the cultural shock and apart from the language barriers that you may have, the press industry, the media is in tremendous crisis.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:03:53

Yes, I know.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:03:54

It's hard for those who were born here, speak English perfectly, nobody can make a living just as a writer and you have to have a name or one of those jobs in the media the legacy outlets, the media like the New York Times and The Atlantic, because all the others from one day to the next you can be fired, because the owner is already a guy from Silicon Valley, he already decided that

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:04:32

Or because he wants to be profitable

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:04:33

He doesn't want to spend any more money on that outlet that he bought. Well, it's a disaster.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:04:41

Being profitable in the media, suddenly they lose budgets and I don't know what. Yes, it is difficult. In fact, I have journalist friends here who have given up journalism completely.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:04:57

It's very difficult.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:04:59

And I, I mean, I don't see myself giving up either. I want to do it and I've tried, right? Because I like to do it.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:05:08

Aha. And you can do it, but it cannot be your only income.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:05:16

Exactly. And that too, I mean, that has also been a bit of a shock to me, because I was used to living off my work, right? Even though in Cuba no one lives off their work either. But let's say that my greatest efforts were always oriented towards journalism, and not here, because here the greatest effort has to be oriented towards what brings you the most money. Or that's how I see it now, maybe it will change later. And so, it's like the love for my career on one hand and the obligation of money on the other, I mean, I still don't know how to manage my time and manage both things. But I have to do it too.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:06:11

Yes. Well, I suggest that everyone....I'm going to put a link to the pieces that you have on The Texas Observer. thank you so much for talking to me and telling us all about your experiences.

Jesus Jank Curbelo1:06:28

No, I thank you, really. I'm happy that you invited me and happy that you mentioned me in your piece too.

Rebecca Bodenheimer1:06:36

No, of course. Of course, no, no, I like to give credit, that's important.