

Artist Profile: Luis Gabriel Núñez

By: Stephanie Belk Prats

Plena music is in Luis Gabriel Núñez's blood. "I've been involved with bomba and plena since I was four or five years old," Luis said. His father, Gary Núñez, founded the seminal plena troupe, Plena Libre. The band boasts a formidable 24-year career and four Grammy nominations. "I've been a part of it ever since," he said, with a wry smile. It's an enviably sunny spring day in New York and the city throngs with life. LuisGa orders a light beer and leans back into the leather chair, exposing two muscular arms, toned from smacking the leather of the plena drums at festivals all over the country. He has the unassuming, laid back demeanor of someone who understands how fickle success can be for a young Puerto Rican artist so he might as well enjoy the ride. He's weathered storms before, and he's confident about where he's going. He should be.

Luis Gabriel, or LuisGa, as he is known in his hometown of San Juan, Puerto Rico, is the founder of [The Núñez Project](#), a six person ensemble which incorporates modern jazz with Puerto Rico's vibrant, dazzling musical traditions. The band blends autochthonous Puerto Rican rhythms of bomba and plena, fused with elements from hip hop, jazz, salsa and songo. The composer and bassist's first solo-produced album, *Historias desde otros Lares*, is a powerfully earnest, sweeping ride through Núñez's psyche. At times a joyful romp through the verdant hills of the Puerto Rican countryside, at others a sensual exploration of love gone wrong, the album sizzles with sophistication and a playful, invigorating, and oftentimes self-assured candor. Núñez brought on world-class musicianship for this album, including trumpeter/composer Mike Rodríguez and trombonist/composer Alan Ferber.

Luis initiated his foray into music through percussion. By twelve, he had moved onto guitar lessons. He was accepted into the prestigious Escuela Libre de Música the following year (2001), under the guidance of Fulbright Scholar and master virtuoso, fellow Puerto Rican Ivan Rijos, one of classical guitar's most extraordinary improvisers. Núñez's skills as a musician flourished under Rijos's tutelage, and by his early teens, he was giving searing performances all over the country.

Núñez made his official debut as Plena Libre's singer and percussionist during Festival Claridad at the age of sixteen in May 2005. He was the youngest member of the fourteen person ensemble by two decades. "Imagine a seventeen year old kid hanging out with thirty-eight, forty-five year old men," he chuckled. "I had to mature a lot sooner, a lot faster," he said. A young and unusually talented LuisGa found an unorthodox kind of mentorship with his older bandmates. "(Plena Libre) was my school. Not just musically. Being a part of the band shaped me as a musician, as a person, as a man," he said. "At sixteen, I was touring all over the world," Núñez said. "I was exposed to some experiences most people don't have at that age," he affirmed.

Núñez enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico after graduation. Increasingly frustrated by the university's fare hikes, insufficient classroom materials, and general lack of resources, he began organizing with fellow students to reform the drastically outdated music

curriculum. He played plena and bomba during the endless campus strikes to keep morale afloat. “For me, music is political. There are no protests without plena (music). There are no protests without bomba,” Núñez said. Núñez graduated from Universidad de Puerto Rico with a BA in Music and a minor in History of Latin America.

He went on to found The Núñez Project in 2014. The band has performed in prestigious music festivals and landmark venues like the Heineken Jazz Fest, Ventana al Mar, Universidad de Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico’s Conservatorio de Música. Núñez relocated to New York City in 2017 to attend NYU Steinhardt and received his Master’s in Jazz in 2019. He will be teaching a masterclass with Plena Libre at the University of Chicago in 2019

Núñez has played for world-renowned locales, such as NYC’s iconic Blue Note jazz club, New York’s premier jazz radio station UBGO, and numerous prestigious festivals, including Festival International de Jazz de Montréal and the Playboy Jazz Festival. Their performance at the Playboy Jazz Festival even caught the eye of the *LA Times*, who lauded their “sizzling Latin jazz and salsa grooves.” Núñez said the experience was a dream come true. “Opening for Herbie Hancock and right there, on the same billing as Chris Porter and John Patitucci, Plena Libre.”

HISTORIAS DESDE OTROS LARES

“*Historias desde otros Lares* is very Puerto Rican” he said, “a mix of bomba, plena, infused with Latin jazz and American jazz.” His voice suddenly grew heavy with emotion. “The roots of where I’m from, who I am, what I want to do, they’re all there. This is me,” he said. Núñez cites the incomparable Bill Evans and jazz legend Miles Davis, as well as the brilliant Puerto Rican bassist Eddie Gomez, as invaluable sources of inspiration. He also names Latin jazz heavy hitters, like composer/jazz pianist Armando Anthony “Chick” Corea and pianist Eddie Palmieri, as well as fellow boricuas Miguel Zenón and David Sanchez, as having a major influence to his sound.

Recorded over one afternoon at a NYU studio, there is a naked soulfulness underlying Núñez’s lush sound and stylistically nimble compositions. “The feeling of camaraderie, of family, was crucial to the success of the album,” Núñez claimed.

The stellar production features world-renowned musicians, like Mike Rodríguez (who has played with legends Chick Corea and Dafnis Prieto), Alan Ferber, Camilo Molina (Eddie Palmieri), Janice Maisonet (Emina), Jonathan Montes (All 4 One), Marcos López (Lila Downs, Plena Libre), Julito Alvarado, Angel Luis Pacheco and Furito Ríos.

“The album is composed of seven songs. Each song encapsulates its own identity, showcases its own story,” Núñez said. *Historias desde otros Lares* opens with “Luis Gabriel,” a boisterous, exuberant, and agile composition with tropical flair and a sophisticated sensibility. The song was written by Gary Núñez when LuisGa was born. The tribute comes full circle as his son, now an accomplished musician in his own right, brings the song to life.

The vibrant interpretation is a masterful and heartfelt homage to his father's journey and legacy.

"'Una de Azúcar' is a love story," LuisGa said. "Inspired by the coffee and the mountains of Puerto Rico, along with everything the center of the island has to offer." The explosion of the sensuous, velvety horn gives way to an incandescent trumpet solo by Mike Rodríguez, showcasing the extraordinary musicianship of The Núñez Project.

"Olandera," written by his father, plays with hip-hop, funk, soul, bomba sica. It's an eloquent, festive piece that revels in its own ferocity of spirit, with an inventive, rapturous rhythm that dares you to resist the overwhelming urge to dance.

"23 de Mayo" puts the star-studded collective of The Núñez Project on full display. Composed by LuisGa, the piece charts the lifespan of an intoxicating, but ultimately doomed love story. The song incorporates the rhythms of bomba, quembe y yuba and features trombonist Alan Ferber, saxophonist Furito Ríos, and Geraldo Pomales. The song opens up beautifully, gliding along like a new romance while the rhythm continues to gather momentum, exploding into a passionate, powerful performance. The end is punctuated by aggressive melodies that mark the demise and ultimate rupture of the relationship.

"Lares" is a song in the style of Oriza and plena. The rendition pays homage to the Puerto Rican town of Lares, the site of the Lares Uprising. The political elements embedded in this colorful and textured piece imbue this song with great personal significance to LuisGa. "Artists have a responsibility and a duty to highlight and call out injustices and the political," Núñez said.

"Esperando por Oscar" was written by LuisGa's father before the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar López Rivera in May 17, 2017. Written in the rhythm of bomba yuba, it's an achingly beautiful piece, profound and joyful, full of yearning and awash in nostalgia. "It's one I hold very dear to my heart. It was Christmas time. We were exchanging presents at home. My father told me, 'If I was a painter, I'd give you art, but since I am a musician, I'll give you the gift of music,' and he handed me the score," Núñez said. "The song is dedicated, not just to Oscar López Rivera, but to everyone that's sacrificed their life, their health, and their freedom, which is the most precious thing we have: *nuestra independencia*." Our freedom.

The last song on the album is "Calle Lena," LuisGa's own composition. The scorching piece of Latin jazz is a wildly rhythmic ride, with percussion propulsing the exhilarating trumpet solo throughout. The song is named after LuisGa's childhood street, where he had resided up until his relocation to New York City. It's the Latin jazz of New York, but it's also a nod to the neighborhood pleneros and the streetside rumba that nurtured his creative growth.

It's apparent that the various inspirational father figures, from his band members to the titans of the genre, are as present in LuisGa's mind as they are in his sound. Deeply

rooted in legacy with a hopeful eye cast toward the polished skyscrapers of New York, the album is both homage and aspiration, an ode to the band's past and the journey it's forging for itself.

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