Santo Domingo Blues [2003] Film Review
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Duration: 73 minutes
Language: Spanish, with English subtitles
Director: Alex Wolfe
Produced by: Mambo Media

Deep in the shadow of the popularized merengue, the Dominican Republic has nurtured a musical style called bachata whose history parallels that of the blues for the United States. With style and creativity, filmmaker Alex Wolfe sorts out the many forces that have shaped this style of Dominican music through the sounds and lyrics of Luis Vargas, better known as the “supreme king of bitterness.”

Until the last 20 years or so, bachata was only popular among the rural and urban poor and it was not considered a significant musical form worthy of attention by the Dominican music industry. For many people in the Dominican Republic, bachata was always identified with a man who is hard-working, hard-drinking, and an infamous womanizer. Therefore, many of these songs from the past to the present consist of themes regarding ruined romances, unrequited love, and/or drunken escapes. Because of these stereotypes, bachata was considered to vulgar, unsophisticated, and unpolished by the Dominican elite who controlled the radio stations, recording studios, and record manufacturing plants. In the end, bachata came to represent the music of the poor.

It was not until the internationally successful and well-respected Dominican musician by the name of Juan Luis Guerra and his 1991 Grammy Award winning album entitled “Bachata Rosa,” that bachata became part of the musical mainstream in the Dominican Republic. “Bachata Rosa: became a success in terms of record and concert sales, not only in the Dominican Republic, but throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. As some may argue, large part of Guerra success was due to the popularity he had been identified with in the world music industry. In fact till this day, Guerra continues to make music in the Dominican Republic and is well known throughout the musical industry. Like other Dominican
artists, many of his songs address the social, economic, and political issues that are continuously affecting the Dominican community. Because of the success with “Bachata Rosa” changes had taken place with this particular music and its artists. In fact, today bachata is heard throughout Latin American and United States radio stations. It has become a connection and reminder to many Dominican communities in the United States of the struggles which they encounter everyday.

Like Guerra, singer and songwriter Luis Vargas brings popularity to the music genre and adds a different musical style to bachata. Like bachata predecessor Blas Durán, Vargas modernizes the sound of bachata with his distinct electric guitar playing. Vargas began recording bachata as early as 1982, singing in a sobbing baritone style. Born and raised along the northern Dominican-Haitian frontier region, Vargas was very much influenced the prior musicians of the genre such as Durán, Anthony Santos, and Raulín Rodriguez.

In Wolfe’s Santo Domingo Blues, this particular story of Vargas is told through twelve musical performances and interviews involving Vargas and other bachateros. This story is illustrated with performances that took place in the Dominican Republic and the United States. For many in New York, musical styles such as bachata remind them of the Dominican Republic. It allows them to connect to something that they grew up with and that they are familiar with.

For bachata artists such as Vargas, this environment/lifestyle has allowed for him to create and play bachata music with that urban edge that reflects the experience of the Dominican immigrant, which is similar to what Guerra does with his songs referencing this experience in the Dominican Republic.

In conclusion, it can be stated that bachata serves as a bridge across a divided culture. Santo Domingo Blues illustrates this connection through the triumph of a poor people’s music over censorship and prejudice, however with New York City new poignancy to the bitter songs of these troubadours. The film is the story of bachata's transformation of the forbidden fruit to an emblem of national pride within Dominican and Dominican immigrant communities. Santo Domingo Blues is a story about bachata and one of its most influential artist’s, Luis Vargas. But more importantly, the film illustrates how this particular artist has had on the musical style of this musical genre and it reveals to its viewers that the history of bachata is no longer associated with its negative and unsophisticated stereotypes.

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