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The greatness and truth of Benny

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From birth, Bartolomé Maximiliano Moré received what he deserved: the African legacy of his ancestors in the San Isabel de los Lagos neighborhood of Los Congos, the radiant strength of the humble people, the ethics of those who have nothing to lose. He had the good luck to survive, because so many like himself were not lost in a Cuba where being a country boy, Black and poor meant being at the bottom of the deck. He carried music inside; it only needed to be awakened.

Comings and goings across the island to make a living, little schooling, but with his letters and numbers well-learned. Pushing a wheelbarrow in Vertientes, Camagüey, and absorbed practicing the *tres* and the guitar. Making a living with music? He had to try, his little group in Camagüey wasn't going anywhere; Havana, the promised land. Bartolo gave it a try here and there, from one bar to another, lots of diners to quell hunger, and a few groups as fleeting as a love song, until

Mozo Borgellá lent him a hand, and he gave it his all, since his was the best voice in the Cauto Septet. From the Cauto to the Miguel Matamoros Band. And with Matamoros to Mexico. The end of pre-history and the birth of a legend.

June 21, 1945, Benny arrived in Mexico City and stayed in the country until his return to the island in 1951, almost seven years that were critical to his growth. He traveled with Matamoros who had added him to the band in 1944 for a few studio sessions with RCA Victor, at the intersection of Monte and Prado in Havana.

As soon as he reached Mexico City, the doors opened wide. He performed with Matamoros on the XEW radio station in Azcárraga, and lit up the night at the Río Rosa Club. Their contract expired a few months later and the group headed home, but Benny decided to stay.

Matamoros gave him some advice: Make a name for yourself; work hard and respect Mexicans; don't drink too much - which didn't sink in; and don't turn your back on those who help you.

He changed his name, first trying Homero. Bartolomé no, it wasn't catchy; and the diminutive Bartolo, forget it - this is what Mexicans call a donkey. Benny sounded good, like the U.S. jazzman Benny Goodman. He was born again as Benny Moré.

Thus he went about immersing himself in Mexico's musical life. He got a big boost from Humberto Cané, a bassist leading a *son* group. (In Mexico there was talk of

Afro-Antillean rhythms.) It was Cané who introduced Benny to the scene around Mariano Rivera Conde, a RCA Victor agent in Mexico, and architect of his near-at-hand definitive signing with the label, as an exclusive artist.

With the bands of four great Cuban musicians, Benny won over Mexican audiences: those of Mariano Mercerón, Arturo Núñez, Rafael de Paz, and of course, Dámaso Pérez Prado. Although others sang mambos, before and after him, no one ever did it with more sass than Benny.

In Cuba, one date was decisive: August 3, 1953, his first performance with the Banda Gigante on CMQ radio, with Cascabeles Candado. A year had passed since his return, reuniting with Mariano Mercerón in Santiago, at a time when the Aragón was rising. He collaborated with other colleagues, including the immense Bebo Valdés, and on the front line in Ernesto Duarte's band.

With the Banda Gigante, Benny showcased the rhythmic style, timbre, and harmonics that characterized his work, along with his unique performance style and vocal discourse.

Because Benny, a genius and a figure, was a real personality.

This allowed him to connect with popular sensibility, to a degree few artists in the 50s did. And without limiting himself to a narrow formula, always moving forward. A rhythmic structure was enough for him to raise skyscrapers. His works provide the evidence: songs like "Qué bueno baila usted," "Se te cayó el tabaco," and those dedicated to Cuban cities like Cienfuegos, Manzanillo, and Santa Isabel de las Lajas, or taken from other composers like "Maracaibo oriental" (José Castañeda) and "Elige tú, que canto yo" (Joseíto Fernández).

From dance music to pure emotion, he always moved as if in his natural habitat. He was not only the Bárbaro del Ritmo, but one of the most-loved bolero singers anyone had heard. Who could avoid responding to his songs "Mi amor fugaz," "Conocí la paz," or "Dolor y perdón;" "Hoy como ayer," by Pedro Vega; "Oh, vida," by Yáñez and Gómez; "Alma libre," from Juan Bruno Tarrazas; or "Qué te hace pensar," by Ricardito Pérez. Or when he enveloped us in a duet with Pedro Vargas to sing "Solamente una vez," by Agustín Lara.

And so it was until the last day. It is also time to debunk the myth that he didn't know music theory. An authoritative voice, Dr. Jesús Gómez Cairo, stated, "Benny Moré knew and empirically understood, with extraordinary depth and richness, a series of rules, resources, and

procedures used in the area of song, orchestral conducting, sufficient instrumentation elements, harmony, and ways to structure the composition of his pieces, to which can added the great creative intuition with which he was gifted.”

Are more arguments needed to certify his greatness?

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