



Q & A WITH JOHN RADANOVICH

author of

Wildman of Rhythm:

ISBN 978-0-8130-3234-4 | \$29.95 hardcover | 264 pp. | 6 x 9



How did you become interested in Cuban music?
My stepfather was a big jazz fan, and loved Dizzy Gillespie, so I grew up hearing Latin jazz long before I heard salsa. I first learned to love salsa while living in New York. I was disappointed by lame commercial radio airplay of bland salsa and so-called “salsa romantica.” Luckily, in New York there were lots of other ways to hear fantastic salsa and Latin jazz live and on various radio shows, like Awilda Rivera’s “Latin Jazz Cruise” on WBGO and Vicki Sola’s “Que Viva La Musica” on WFDU. I also lived in San Juan, Puerto Rico, for a time and was able to hear authentic salsa on the radio and in clubs. The more I learned, the more I found that all roads in salsa lead back to Cuba, and once you hear Benny, everything else is just practice.

What makes a writer decide to become a biographer? Was there a distinct moment when you decided, “I want to chronicle the life of Benny Moré”?

When I first heard Benny’s “Que Bueno Baila Usted” I was completely knocked out. From then on, I searched for Benny’s tracks everywhere. I told myself that I was only going to write a magazine-length story, but I kept finding his personal story just as addictive as his music. Out of growing frustration with the lack of information on such a fascinating character, I kept thinking that it was time for someone to write his story for an American audience.

Benny Moré is well known in Latin America but never quite caught on in America. Do you attribute this to cultural differences?

Benny’s obscurity in the United States until recently is due to many factors. He never toured widely in America; he was a black man in the 1950’s playing music that wasn’t yet understood widely in the America; he spoke and sang in Spanish. And, mostly, the U.S. embargo and Fidel Castro’s control of the flow of information from Cuba caused Benny to be lost in the cracks of the larger political issues between our two countries.

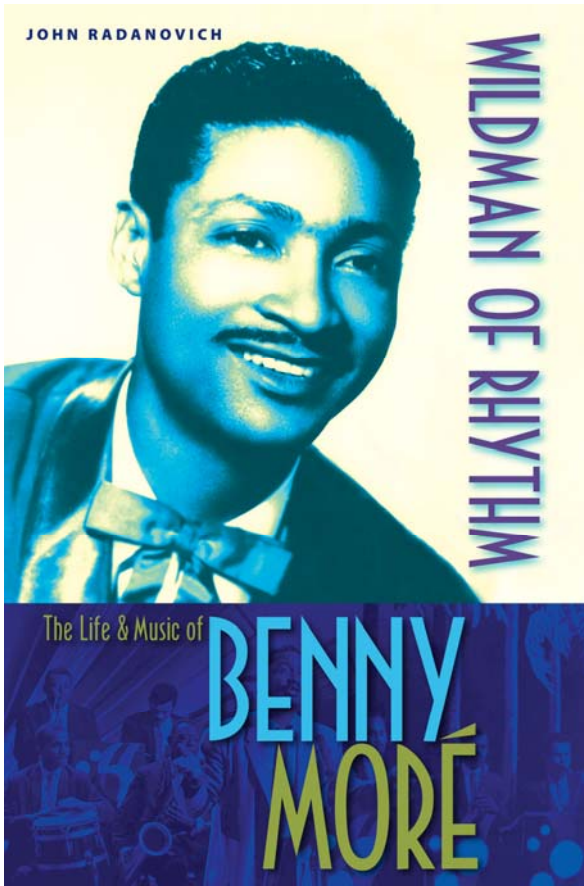


Q & A WITH JOHN RADANOVICH

author of

Wildman of Rhythm:

ISBN 978-0-8130-3234-4 | \$24.95 hardcover | 264 pp. | 6 x 9



Moré refused to leave Cuba after the revolution. How does this speak to his relationship with Cuba?

Although he might have left the country if he weren't dying at the time of the revolution, Benny also said that he could never leave the place of his birth. He could have moved to Mexico or somewhere in South America, but it's hard to imagine him happy or as successful anywhere else but in Cuba. Benny the man and artist belong to a very particular time and place.

On a more personal note, what is your favorite Benny Moré recording and why?

I love all of his standards equally and will never tire of them, but I find "De la Rumba al Cha Cha Cha" to best capture both his African background and incredible skill in any Cuban form he chose. The song contains exciting ritual rumba drumming married to a stunning cha-cha. It is as great a cha-cha as any of the orchestras famous for that style ever recorded. When the rumba drumming ends and Benny starts to sing, you tend to get lightheaded and involuntarily sway to the rhythm.

Do you see Moré's influence still strong in today's music scene, either Latin or American?

Benny's bolero (ballad) style set the standard for all ballads sung in Spanish in the Americas. Even though he didn't invent *son*, he brought a swing and life to his improvisation that came from his Afro-Cuban background and his love of jazz. Not only do many salsa groups still record tributes to him and his songs, but the best singers and groups all know that he was and will always be the king.

From a researcher's point of view, is it difficult to maintain objectivity to a man's life when you are so immersed in its history? Do you feel that objectivity is important to a biographer's craft?

I don't pretend to be objective about Benny's voice and music. His recordings are among the best that any Cuban ever created. As for Benny's drinking and chaotic lifestyle that led to his early death, I came to understand it better once I saw how Cubans live life so fully, and knew what a crazy time he lived in.

I'm a writer who happens to deeply love music. I am drawn to great stories like Benny's. Any music biographer had better feel very strongly about his subject, or the enormous task of historical research would become unbearable. Attempting to conduct research in Cuba has its own interesting challenges.

(continued...)



Q & A WITH JOHN RADANOVICH

author of

Wildman of Rhythm:

ISBN 978-0-8130-3234-4 | \$24.95 hardcover | 264 pp. | 6 x 9



The old joke about lack of food in Havana is that if you want great Cuban food, first fly back to Miami. The same goes for imagining that there are archives to search or tools to use in Cuba. So, ask anyone in Cuba where the nearest photocopier is and they'll tell you "in Hialeah."

Two things gave me a very different perspective on Benny than other writers might have brought to his biography. I spent much of my childhood on my family's farm. My favorite uncle,

who drank himself to death at an early age, was as big a personality and as beloved a character as Benny. Benny raised pigs and chickens and peacocks, and named them after his friends. No one had to tell me that he himself butchered and served these animals to their namesakes for the sake of the joke, as well as the freshness of the meat. I also understood that you can be an alcoholic, and still be an essentially happy person—even though that might seem impossible to us these days.

One strange and memorable thing happened to me on one of my trips to Cuba that made me feel much closer to Benny. It was Valentine's Day, when Cuban men bring home little chocolate cakes and everyone has yet another excuse for a party. All that day I had been at Benny's house talking to his daughter about his terrible last hours, and her words lingered in my mind. That evening while friends were having a great time on the balcony, a nasty virus decided to make its presence known to me. Being sick in a place with very little medicine and only one clinic for foreigners is rather frightening, to put it mildly. And in a half-delirious 48 hours, I couldn't stop thinking of Benny and his suffering, and how he asked to see his young children at the end. Granted, a flu gives you only a glimpse of what liver failure feels like, but for two days and nights all I could think of was Benny dying on the couch in his living room. I thought I saw Benny looking down on my bed on the second night, so I asked him through gritted teeth if he sent me the virus to understand him better. He wouldn't answer. Two days later I was standing in front of his grave in Santa Isabel de Las Lajas.

(continued...)



PAGE 4

Q & A WITH JOHN RADANOVICH

author of

Wildman of Rhythm:

ISBN 978-0-8130-3234-4 | \$24.95 hardcover | 264 pp. | 6 x 9

Interviewing Moré's friends and family must have been a great experience. Tell us more about being able to talk to people who knew the legend.

Any visit to Cuba is quite an adventure. It was incredibly exciting to meet Generoso Jimenez and Enrique Benitez in Havana, and just as exciting to finally see Benny's house in La Cumbre, and the street where he grew up in his native Santa Isabel de Las Lajas. One of his relatives in Miami had asked me to bring a letter to read to Benny and leave at his grave, which made for a moving and emotional visit to his tomb. In every way, searching for Benny in Cuba was the experience of a lifetime.

For more information, please visit

www.upf.com

www.johnradanovich.com

www.wildmanofrhythm.com

or contact

Stephanie Williams, Publicity and Promotions Manager

352-392-1351 ext. 243 | sw@upf.com

to request a review copy, schedule an event or interview.