

## Song inspires bio on Benny Moré, the 'Wildman of Rhythm'

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John Radanovich is obsessive about jazz, so much so that he moved from one great jazz town to another, just to immerse himself in it. Chicago. New York. New Orleans. He ventured into each place the way a jazzman might take on a vintage melody - focused on its essence, open to improvisation, ready to connect the outlying dots.

But for all the great jazz he found, Radanovich was most inspired by a tune he overheard one night in 1993, at a dinner party in New Orleans. It was a sound he had never heard before, a rhythmic swirl of horns over Afro-Cuban beats and a brash, swinging chorus. And the lead voice. What a voice!

Radanovich, a music writer who moved to West Palm Beach three years ago, will never forget the song that drew him away from the party chatter and into the very heart of Cuban music:

It was the 1957 classic, *Que Bueno Baila Usted*, (How Good You Dance).

And the singer: the legendary bandleader Benny Moré.

In his trademark zoot suit and cane - his conductor's baton - he was Cuba's famed "Wildman of Rhythm." A magnetic figure, he brought together the island's most formative influences - the African, the Spanish, the rural and the urban, the ecstasies and the tragedies.

"Benny is almost other-worldly. You get every song and every feeling he's trying to get across very quickly and very deeply," Radanovich tells me on a recent afternoon.

We're sitting in the kitchen of the 1925 house he shares with his wife, Berrie, and their two young sons in Flamingo Park, chatting about his newly released biography, *Wildman of Rhythm: The Life & Music of Benny Moré* (University Press of Florida). I notice he sometimes slips into the present tense as he describes his subject, and I get it:

Nearly five decades after Moré died of cirrhosis, it seems perfectly appropriate to count him among the breathing. Anyone who's ever slow-danced to *Como Fue* (How Was It) or chased the radical turns of *Mi Amor Fugaz* (My Fleeting Love), from mambo to ballad, can testify to the singer's eternal qualities. And 16 years after he heard that first golden blast of Benny's band, Radanovich is never too far from the music.

"I never get tired of his music," he says. "I listen to it in my car all the time."

I've just met the writer, but as he rattles off his favorite Benny tunes, he speaks in a language that makes him instant kin. Yes, he was raised in Milwaukee - a city I've never been to - and his Spanish leans more Mexican than Cuban accentually, but he knows the boleros to which my parents fell in love, the same ones I still play over and over again just to hear Moré's honey voice glide between the notes.

Born the same year El Benny died, 46 years ago, Radanovich followed his fascination with the bandleader to Cuba twice to research the book. He met some of Moré's relatives, friends and former band members who offered their best memories and anecdotes. But Radanovich came to realize that there would always be more questions about Moré's life and death than there would be answers.

"Because he died behind the Mango Curtain, there are things about Benny we'll never know," he says.

Despite the bandleader's icon status - among Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits - there is little archival data about him. The questions persist in a fog:

How exactly did Bartolomé Maximiliano Moré, a direct descendant of a tribal Congo king, become Benny Moré? And did he spell Benny with one N or two? (Early recordings spell it "Beny," but surviving relatives say he took his nickname in honor of Benny Goodman.)

"People will get into fist fights over the 'Ns' in his name," says Radanovich. "People get all emotional when they talk about Benny. Taxi drivers in Miami, Havana, New York - they feel they know him. Everyone has a personal story."

It is Radanovich's own personal story that nudged him to take on the biographical journey. He gets up to show me a framed, black-and-white 1944 photograph hung on the wall. It depicts his great-uncle Pete on the day he was liberated from a World War II prison camp in Germany. There he was on a German street, with the cigarette, the bottle of whiskey and the bevy of smiling women.

"Just like Benny," he says, nodding at the photo. "They were magnetic, happy drinkers."

And just like El Benny, great-uncle Pete drank himself to death at 44. The photo, snapped for a *Stars and Stripes* news story, transports the imagination. But it doesn't summon the present tense. Not the way Benny's music does.

It carries Radanovich along the leafy streets of his neighborhood, across traffic-choked highways, through the intermittent showers of South Florida afternoons. In that capsule of Benny, it's always live. It's always kickin'. It's always today.