

# The dominican republic's expression

Countries



## **Abstract**

Merengue is the national music and dance of the Dominican Republic. Both tourists and locals enjoy partying to the sound of the merengue inside the bars and outside in the streets. Two major festivals with a merengue theme are celebrated in a year. This depicts the merengue as a critical part of the lives of the Dominicans. Merengue was even able to reach out overseas and be accepted by other countries like the USA and Puerto Rico.

However, merengue had gone through a lot of trials before it got its distinction. It was initially rejected by the Dominicans because of its link to African music and because of its vulgar lyrics and taboo subjects.

Widespread acceptance occurred only when the Americans came and became a cultural threat and when the dictator Rafael Trujillo declared the merengue as the national symbol. Since then, armed with its traditional instruments, the merengue became the soundtrack of the lives of the Dominicans.

Merengue: The Dominican Republic's Expression

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### Merengue: The Dominican Republic's Expression

People say that music is the universal language of mankind. However, in the case of the people of the Dominican Republic, it is not just a language; it is an expression and a way of life. Walking through their streets, one would notice that music coming from houses, vehicles, stores and restaurants serves as the country's soundtrack. And soon after sunset, the air would be filled with life from the pulsing beats from the clubs that invites both locals and tourists to their dance floors. For the Dominicans, dancing is a practiced art and it is a pleasure for them to share their native dances to those willing to learn (Dominican Republic, 2005 and Hipiola, 2008).

Merengue is Dominican Republic's most popular music and dance and is considered as the country's national dance. The sound of the merengue is a combination of European, African and Eastern Cuban elements. It has a signature beat pattern that easily identifies it and requires the dancers to swing their hips in quick but fluid motion (Hipiola, 2008). The Dominicans celebrate two merengue festivals, namely, the Santo Domingo Merengue Festival which is a seaside musical festival and the Puerto Plata Merengue Festival which is a festival in outdoor bars and in streets (Dominican Republic, 2005).

The arrival of the merengue to the American soils was attributed to the Dominican immigrants to the country. And merengue became a worldwide phenomenon due to the increasing number of countries accepting it. It was even able to outsell salsa in the Latin America. This is the reason why I chose <https://assignbuster.com/the-dominican-republics-expression/>

to write on the topic; I want to explore merengue to know why it has become a worldwide trend.

### Merengue History

The roots of merengue are quite unclear and several theories are proposed. One theory is that a soldier, Tomas Torres, developed the music after the Dominican's victory at the Talanquera battle. Another theory is that it came from upa, a Cuban music, wherein one part was called merengue (Tambora y Güira, 1995). Even the roots of the name are still uncertain. Some say that the name came from the Haitian mereng, which developed from the music of the African slaves.

Some even say that it came from the way the merengue was danced, such that the swirling and rapid crisscrossing steps reminded them of the beating of the eggs in making the meringue dessert (Highbeam Research, Inc., 2008). Wherever merengue came from, one thing is sure, that it evolved from something and became an integral part of the lives of the Dominicans.

Merengue had gone through many problems before it was generally accepted as the national dance of the Dominican Republic. During the early 1900's, the public was reluctant to accept it because of its nature; it has close links to African music and the lyrics were themed on sexual encounters and other socially taboo issues. It was only accepted by the masses after two important events. The first was during the American soldiers' stay at the country from 1916 to 1924; the Dominicans slightly reduced the merengue's tempo to allow the visitors to keep-up with the dance while maintaining their cultural identity.

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The second event was the former president Rafael Trujillo's acceptance of merengue as the national symbol. This was due to the fact that Trujillo was born of a poor family and was prohibited from attending upper-class clubs, thus making merengue the status symbol of their class (Dominican Republic, 2005 and Salsa and Merengue Society, 1999). However, the vulgarity and sexual explicitness of the lyrics still produced oppositions until composer Luis Alberti was able to write a merengue with good lyrics entitled Compadre Pedro Juan which became identified as the merengue's archetype. Since then, merengue has spread overseas through radio broadcasts and music recordings (Highbeam Research, Inc., 2008).

### Merengue Instruments

The traditional merengue is composed of a three-piece band that includes a melodeon, an accordion-like instrument, a guira, a scraped cheese grater-looking percussion, and a tambora, a double-headed drum (Dominican Republic, 2005). The tambora is played by placing it horizontally across the thighs and hitting the right end with a stick and the left end with an open palm (Highbeam Research, Inc., 2008). However, the melodeon is not the initial instrument used for the harmony and melody; Dominican bandurrias, guitars, tres, cuatro and marimba, a wooden box with four to eight metal tongs that are plucked, are the ones initially used since they are the instruments owned by the common people (Tambora y Güira, 1995).

It is only when the Germans began to trade their accordions with the Dominicans' tobacco that the accordion became a part of the merengue (IASO Records, Inc., 2008). It blended naturally with the merengue music and

was helpful in making the sound cope up with the increasing audience size. Nevertheless, the one-row accordions of the Germans were later replaced by the saxophone due to the former's inability to play sufficient major keys. The accordion was only able to come back when the two-row accordions were introduced (Salsa and Merengue Society, 1999). Up to the present, the music continues to evolve and adapt to the changes. Different instruments like trumpets, violin, flute, piano, electric and bass guitars, and bass drums are being used by different merengue musicians (Dominican Republic, 2005).

### Merengue Music

There are several kinds of merengue music formed in the Dominican Republic and they differ only in their instrumentation. The most famous of which is the Merengue Cibaeño, also known as Perico Ripiao and Merengue Tipico. It came from the El Cibao region of the country where merengue was first accepted and it is now considered as the “ The cradle of merengue” (IASO Records, Inc., 2008). The name Perico Ripiao, which literally means ‘ ripped parrot’, was derived from the wild country parties wherein, in the absence of other poultry birds, the parrot serves as the main dish. The local musicians who play at the said parties named their music after the dish (Grupofantasia).

Merengue Cibaeño's musical structure has either two beats (2/4) or four beats (4/4) to the bar and uses the three traditional instruments in a manner wherein the tambora calls and the other two responds. This gives the merengue its signature and characteristic drive (Salsa and Merengue Society, 1999). The songs are normally composed in two sections. The first

part is with a simple rhythm used to introduce the song's lyrical and melodic content wherein the verses are just sung and improvisations are heard just at the end of the song lines. The second part is composed primarily of instrument improvisations wherein they play catchy riffs that help inspire and excite the dancers.

Rhythms of the tipico merengue include the merengue derecho or the straight-ahead merengue which is the fast-paced merengue. The second rhythm is the pambiche or merengue apambichao which is slower and characterized by the dual strike rhythm of the tambora. The third rhythm is the guinchao which is a combination of the first two (IASO Records, Inc, 2008).

### Merengue Dance

The merengue is a very easy dance and anybody, even with little training, could instantly dance it since the steps are made to be less complicated for beginners. Couples dancing the merengue vary from being too close such that only simple steps are done to being far apart such that there is space for turning combinations. It was said that the Dominicans prefer dancing further apart since they like to brag their fancy footwork. In addition, close body contact, for the Dominicans, are considered as pornographic and vulgar dance making them prefer dancing with a distance (Salsa and Merengue Society, 1999).

The merengue dance is divided into three sections. The first is the paseo or promenade wherein couples walk slowly and talk with each other or with nearby couples. The second is the merengue which is first danceable part

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and is comprised of 16 or 32 repeated measures. The last is the jaleo which has four of eight measures and has a refrain that is repeated many times. This is also the last danceable part of the music (Highbeam Research, Inc., 2008).

## Conclusion

Merengue has been an integral part of the lives of the Dominicans. This could be attributed to the struggles of the merengue before it was fully accepted by the people. This made merengue more than their national dance, but also a way of expressing themselves. This attitude towards merengue made it appealing to other countries and enabled it to be accepted by them as another form of music and dance. The addiction with merengue was caught by other countries making merengue an international phenomenon.

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