

DECEMBER 30, 2017 BY [EISLEY CONSTANTINE](#)

Melrose throws a party



Revelers at the parranda in Melrose. Photo: Easley Constantine

Make Music Winter Festival brings Puerto Rican music to local casita

In the small casita in the [El Coquí Community Garden](#) at 924 Melrose Avenue, local resident Ramon Rivera was in high spirits. He and his brother Jose were participating with other musicians, poets, artists, and enthusiasts in a shared tradition: playing plenas from their native Puerto Rico.

The plena is a form of Puerto Rican folk music distinguished by its use of choral harmonies and accompaniment on a variety of traditional instruments, such as the panderos — three or more handheld drums of different sizes/pitches (seguidor, segundo, and requinto), and the guiro — a gourd percussion instrument.

This year marks the seventh annual [Make Music Winter](#) festival, a city-wide celebration of the island's culture. The main event is a classic parranda, a traditional Puerto Rican street party with its origins in the 18th century. On Dec. 21 the parade wound its way through the streets of Melrose as it has done every year since the festival began, to coincide with the winter solstice.

To a passerby, the jubilation could have seemed like a spontaneous event, but to Rivera, 68, the music of the plena and the homes visited along the route evoke a deeper history. He has participated in the festival since its inception and has participated in similar celebrations for more than fifty years.

“My father, he sang folk music for about 70 years and I’ve been singing plena and bomba since I was a little kid,” said Ramon. Young Ramon’s family came to the U.S. in 1965 to care for an ailing grandmother who lived in Melrose. At the time the Puerto Rican population was still growing in the neighborhood. His father taught the sons his craft and, together with Jose, Ramon quickly joined in providing for the family. “We were sailors. My father built and repaired boats.”

This year’s parranda opened with poetry by Jesús “Papoletto” Meléndez, in tribute to the island in the wake of Hurricane Maria. That was followed by the island’s national anthem, “La Borinqueña.” Other featured talent included local musicians Matthew Gonzalez, award-winning percussionist Bobby Sanabria, and Jorge Vázquez.

The program was co-sponsored by the Bronx Music Heritage Center, We Stay/Nos Quedamos Committee, Inc., Asociación Huerto y Cultura, and the BX Collective.

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Tags: [Asociación Huerto y Cultura](#), [Bronx Music Heritage Center](#), [BX Collective](#), [El Coquí Community Garden](#), [Make Music Winter Festival](#), [Nos Quedamos](#), [Puerto Rico](#)

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