

PITTSBURGH'S LATINOS:

What Does It Mean to Be Of Color?

by Miguel Sague

Editor's Note: *Miguel Sague was born in Cuba but grew up in the United States. He and his musical group Guaracha perform at many Latin American cultural events and local nightspots. Below are excerpts of a conversation I had with Miguel about Latin culture in Pittsburgh.— LG*

I'M ORIGINALLY FROM Santiago de Cuba but came to the U.S. in 1961 at the age of 11. My family came here not long after the Castro revolution. We lived for a while in Florida, but my father was concerned about the "racial thing" in the South, and wanted to go north.

He contacted an employment agency to find him work outside the South, and so we moved to Erie, Pennsylvania, where he got a job teaching Spanish at Gannon University. He taught at Gannon for 20 years, and I graduated from Gannon. I came to Pittsburgh in 1977, after marrying. My wife is from Santiago, of course — a Santiaguera! In Pittsburgh I taught art in high school, elementary schools, and pre-schools. I formed Guaracha in 1985, partly on a dare. We used to get together and make music, just for fun, and someone asked if I had the courage to take my group to the Latin American Folk Festival [at the University of Pittsburgh]. We were a big success, there and around the city, and I realized I could make a living doing salsa, merengue, etc. Now we've branched out; we do many types of music. You might say we do music and dance by "peoples of color," since Sague Presents Entertainment provides almost any type of music or dancing except European. We either perform ourselves, or we book groups — Mexican, African, steel drum, Hawaiian. We have even booked dancers from the Jain Hindu Temple!

The Latino community here is unusual in Pennsylvania. Most of Pennsylvania has been filling up with Puerto Ricans, especially in the eastern part of the state, even in Erie. But southwestern Pennsylvania is sort of an island, in that it does not have a large Latino presence. Latinos here date back to the 1920s, when Mexicans began coming up to work in agriculture and in the factories. Some of the music, like the "Corrida Pennsylvania," harks back to that era. You can still find a few remnants — a Mexican restaurant and business machine store in Etna, as well as Reyna Foods in Pittsburgh's Strip District. These are run by descendents of those old families. The Mexican influx dried up after the '20s, and not much happened until the '60s, when a small group of Cubans came. They formed their own club, but by the late 1960s had largely left for Florida. Then, in the 1980s came an influx of Latin Americans who came to study at the various universities. Quite a few were Venezuelans who came to study engineering on scholarships supported by their country's "petro-

dollars." Some of them stayed.

In terms of working-class Latinos, there recently has been a return to something like the old pattern of the 1920s. That is, it is Mexicans again — young Mexican men brought up from the border, but now to work not in factories but in oriental restaurants and Japanese steak houses, as waiters and kitchen help. They come with a job waiting for them, and a place to stay. They live crowded in small apartments, five or six in a room. Some are legal, some are not. They get very low pay and no benefits. They're worked very hard.

Latino organizations in Pittsburgh reflect these two types of population. The professionals — doctors, engineers, university professors, and the like — tend to belong to the Spanish Club.

I spoke briefly with Margarita Winikoff, one of the club's former presidents, and learned that the club began in the 1950s with Americans, a number with businesses in Latin America, who wanted a way to maintain their Spanish. They met in each other's homes. Then in the 1960s the club expanded and attracted a number of native Spanish speakers from a variety of countries. The Spanish Club still exists, although now it is made up mainly of older professionals and business people from Central and South America (Argentinians especially). They have monthly lectures and a couple of dances a year.

The other major Latino organization is the Latin American Cultural Union, a social and cultural organization, more mixed in age and background, and not as professional as the Spanish Club. We're lighter, we put more emphasis on fun and music and we work hard to promote Latin culture and music in the larger community. We do dances and musical presentations of our various nationalities. We participate as a major part of the Latin American-Caribbean Folk Festival, organized each year at Pitt.

The Latin intellectual community tries to see a certain unity among all persons of Hispanic language and culture, but in fact at the "gut" level, this breaks down. There are regional identities, such as Caribbean and South America, and there are national identities — Mexicans, Venezuelans, Argentinians, and the like. You ask about color differences. Well, you have to realize that in Latin culture, including the Caribbean, there is some color differentiation but nothing like in the U.S., nothing in our history

that comes close to the lynch mobs and Ku Klux Klan and things like that. But there has been a history of slavery, and the fallout from that, with some discrimination and racial and color prejudice. In the Pittsburgh Latino community there is little racial discrimination, partly because it is simply too small to divide along such lines. Sometimes when you get people talking you can feel a certain attitude in regard to color, to color differences — a certain division — but it's fairly subtle.

The idea of “community of color” might offend some Latinos, but not me. I consider myself a person of color. I am, thank goodness, nicely mixed — of African, Indian [Native-American], and European heritage. Many black Latinos, especially first-generation, do not identify closely with black Americans. They would identify more with white Latinos than they would with black Americans.

Younger black Latinos, those born here or who grew up here, feel closer to black Americans. Part of this is cultural. First-generation black Latinos feel very alienated from black Americans because of cultural differences. The street language of black Americans — the slang — is difficult to understand. So it's hard to communicate. Even the music, such as rap, is very, very hard to understand (the lyrics). Rap is beginning to take hold among young Latinos, because now it is being created in Spanish. It has that good rhythm that Latinos like.

Race and color are very confusing issues for Latinos, especially as those terms are defined by North Americans. What does it mean to be of color? I find that this country is very provincial in the way that it perceives ethnicity and race. A person almost has to be of Anglo-Saxon descent to be considered white or Caucasian here. Now, Spaniards are part of Europe, totally, but here they're not quite considered white, and are called Hispanics. There is no “Hispanic” race, but Americans insist we take on a racial category — that we be black or white, or at least Hispanic, whatever that means. Of course we are a mixture. We are people of African heritage, of European heritage, and the heritage of an enormous indigenous population, Indians. The Latin American population includes all these races, and so we cannot be considered a race; we are an ethnic group with a common [racially] mixed heritage and a language that unites us. Yet North Americans insist on

categorizing us by race or color. As I said, it's a view of the world that is provincial and narrow.

I came to Pittsburgh from Erie largely because I was always conscious of my Indian roots, and there was an Indian center here, the Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center. It is a very important and powerful organization, begun by Russell Sims in the 1960s. Sims is still the driving force behind the Center. I am on the board of directors. In the 1970s we were largely just an office located above Sims' store in Homewood; in 1976 we acquired a tract of land in the North Hills and moved out there, and got more funding from various agencies, including the federal government, to run programs to help people. We have a job training partnership program to help Indians get into the work force. The center has organized some of the most important events here concerning



Miguel Sague and his musical group Guaracha regularly plays in the area. Here, Miguel, on guitar, is accompanied by his son and wife.

Indians. We go into the schools, or, for instance, the Boy Scouts, and present Indian heritage. We have outreach services and work with the federal government in job training and placement programs. We work with the Indian elderly. We have outreach in Erie, in Harrisburg, even in Ohio. We have a speakers bureau. We have a head start and a day care program for the young. Each year we have a large pow-wow in Dorseyville, in northern Allegheny County, that attracts thousands of people. As an urban Indian organization, we include all persons of Indian heritage, whether full-blooded or not. It would be unconscionable for us to be exclusively dedicated to full-blooded Indians. So we have persons of African and European heritage as well, so long as they have some identification with their Indian background. ☀