

# LATIN PLAYGROUND TEACHING GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION:

**Latin Playground** introduces children to a fiesta of upbeat music from Spanish-speaking countries and territories in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean. While listening to songs from Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Argentina, Puerto Rico and Easter Island\*, you'll become familiar with the engaging traditional rhythms of Latin music, such as *bomba* and *cumbia*. You will hear typical percussion instruments (güiro, guasa, shekere, bomba drums, marimba) and listen to selections that range from funny songs about imaginary creatures to a tribute to an Ecuadorian who worked hard to achieve freedom for the Ecuadorian people. This guide provides cultural information, musical terms and a variety of music and art activities to engage children in exploring the lively world of Latin music.

## TRACK LISTING:

1. Omara Portuondo • Guantanamera
2. Pink Martini • Anna (El Negro Zumbón)
3. Colibrí • Cielito Lindo
4. Botafogo • El Reino del Revés
5. Los 50 de Joselito • La Araña Picua
6. Margarita Laso • Viva Vargas Torres
7. Ska Cubano • Chispa Tren
8. Cubanismo • Mardi Gras Mambo
9. Matato'a • Fusión Natural
10. Lila Downs • Hanal Weech
11. José González y Banda Criolla • Bomba Le Le



## ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- #1) Scratch that Güiro!  #2) A Rhythm Like Tropical Fire  #3) History in Song 

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

### Students will:

- Experience the distinctive rhythms of Latin music.
- Learn about percussion and be introduced to Latin percussion instruments.
- Learn about the culture and geography of Latin America.
- Notice the relationships between music and emotion.
- Discuss the meaning of freedom.

\* Easter Island is an island, also called Rapa Nui, in the South Pacific that is a special possession of Chile.

## CULTURE & HISTORY

Latin America is a huge area encompassing countries in North, South and Central America and the Caribbean. Long ago, many groups of indigenous people inhabited the lands of Latin America. Some—like the Inca, Aztec and Maya—had very advanced civilizations. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were conquered and colonized by Spaniards (and Portuguese), which is why these languages became the common languages of this area. Several hundred years later (in the 1800s), new independent countries were formed.

These lands came to be called Latin America because their dominant languages are derived from Latin. Spanish is the most common language but, in Brazil, people speak Portuguese and in some Caribbean islands, they speak French. Many other languages are spoken by smaller groups of people in Latin America, including Quechua, Aymara, Guarani, Miskito, Sumo, Rama, Nahuatl, Haitian Creole and dozens of others.

The rich culture of this area comes from the blending of indigenous, European and African traditions. The music of Latin America is known and loved all around the world, especially for its irresistible rhythms like *salsa*, *merengue*, *bomba*, *cueca*, *tango*, *bossa nova* and *cumbia*.



## ACTIVITIES



### #1) Scratch that Güiro! (Colombia)

This cheerful song introduces a popular rhythm called *cumbia* and a percussion instrument called the *güiro*, while telling the story of a made up spider with a tail and sharp teeth!

#### You Will Need:

- CD player
- *La Araña Pícuá* (Track #5)
- Song lyrics (Spanish and English translation on [putumayokids.com](http://putumayokids.com))
- Metal cans with ridges (vegetable, coffee, etc.)
- Pens, pencils, keys, sticks or something to use to scratch on can
- Optional: art supplies (colored paper, pipe cleaners, string, colored tissue paper, markers, cardboard, glue, sparkles, etc.)

#### Activity:

##### Explore the lyrics...

1) Read the lyrics with students. Explain to students that some people are afraid of insects, especially spiders, while others find them fascinating. Ask students about their ideas about bugs in general and spiders in particular. What is interesting about them? What is scary? This song is called “Picua Spider.” Actually, there is no such spider. “Picua” is another name for the barracuda, a fish with very sharp teeth. Why might someone call a spider a “picua”?

2) Have students draw pictures to illustrate the story or devise their own imaginary spider/fish or combination of two other animals or insects. Younger students could make spiders out of cardboard, colored paper, pipe cleaners, etc. and hang them from the ceiling.

##### Explore the music...

1) Listen to the track and discuss the instruments that are playing. Can the students identify any of them? (guitar and *güiro*). Explain that the *güiro* is a percussion instrument used in Latin music. Originally *güiros* were made out of gourds that grew in the area. They were hollowed out and played with a *puá*, a scratcher

made of wood. Nowadays, some *güiros*—including the one used by the band Los 50 de Joselito for this song—are made of metal. Ask if students know what a percussion instrument is. Can they give some examples? Explain that sounds are made on percussion instruments by hitting, scraping or shaking them. Some percussion instruments are drums, cymbals, shakers, xylophones and pianos—students may be surprised that pianos are considered percussion. Explain that it is because the strings are hit by hammers inside the piano case.

2) Explain that the song uses the *cumbia* rhythm, which originated in Colombia and is very popular all over Latin America. *Cumbia* began long ago as a combination of African and indigenous music. Ask if any students know what “indigenous” means. Explain that it refers to people or things (plants, animals, for example) that are native to a specific place. While listening to *La Araña Picua*, have students try to catch the *cumbia* rhythm that is played on the *güiro* in this track. It sounds like a rhythmic scratching. Ask students to pat the rhythm on their legs along with the song.

3) Make a *güiro*: have students bring in empty metal cans (coffee, vegetables, soup) that have ridges on them. Have them experiment in making the sounds of the *güiro*, rubbing a pen, pencil, key, stick or other object up and down the ridges. Which scrapers make the loudest, softest, most satisfying sounds? Does the size of the can change the way it sounds? Have students play their *güiros* along with the track. Los 50 de Joselito like to move in time to the music while they play. Invite students to stand and play their *güiros* and dance to *La Araña Picua*.

4) Optional: Listen to track # 6, (*Viva Vargas Torres*) a *cumbia* rhythm from Ecuador, and play along. Use the *güiros* and play along with other songs on the CD or with other favorite songs.

### **Explore the map. . .**

Have students find Colombia on the map. Ask them to identify the countries and bodies of water that border it. Note that Colombia is the only South American country with coasts on both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean. Have students find Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. It is located in the Andes Mountains, which cut across the country from Ecuador to Venezuela. Explain that Colombia is a country of geographic diversity with mountains, rainforest jungles, deserts, volcanoes and savannahs.



## #2) A Rhythm Like Tropical Fire (Puerto Rico)

Rhythm is the heart of Latin music and, in Latin American cultures, dance and music are inseparable. The pulsing rhythms are played on a wide variety of drums and small hand percussion. This song introduces the *bomba* rhythm, which originated in Puerto Rico. It invites the listener to join the joyful dance to this “burning tropical fire.”

### **You Will Need:**

- CD player
- *Bomba Le Le* (Track # 11)
- Song lyrics (Spanish and English translation on [putumayokids.com](http://putumayokids.com))
- Map of the Caribbean
- Room to move around

### **Activity:**

#### **Explore the lyrics. . .**

1) Listen to the track and ask students to concentrate on the mood of the song. Discuss what they hear. Is the song happy? Sad? Energetic? What do they guess it's about? Now read the lyrics and compare their impressions with the words.

2) Explain that *bomba* is one of the main musical forms of Puerto Rico and refers to both a rhythm and a dance. Discuss the imagery of the lyrics—what is *bomba* compared to? (“a burning tropical fire”).

What impression does this give the students? What kind of rhythm would a fire have? What image would they use to describe the rhythm they hear?

3) Explain that the song mentions Africa because *bomba* developed in the communities of African slaves who were brought by the Spanish to work on the sugar plantations during colonial days (1680s). Like in African music, the drummers and dancers communicate with each other through rhythm and movement. Other words the students will hear in the song are “Loiza”, a beach town in the northeastern part of the island where *bomba* is said to have first developed, and “Antillano”, a name for a person who lives in the Antilles or central Caribbean.

#### **Explore the music. . .**

1) Tell students that the *bomba* rhythm is often played on special drums, which were traditionally made from barrels with a goat hide stretched across the top. They look somewhat like *conga* drums but are shorter and wider. Have students listen to the track and focus on the drums. Then ask them to clap the rhythm.

2) Listen to the track again and ask students what instruments (besides drums) they hear in the song. Perhaps they can identify the piano, flute or a shaking sound, not unlike that of a maraca or even a *güiro* (see previous activity). That percussion sound is made by the *shekere*, an African instrument made from a hollowed out gourd covered with beads or shells strung on a net.

3) *Bomba Le Le* is a joyous invitation to dance. Clear a space and invite the students to dance freely to the *bomba* rhythm. What movements does it inspire? Can they dance like a burning fire? Explain that, in *bomba*, the dancers and drummers are having a kind of conversation without words that involves very careful listening, watching and responding to one other. Have students pair up and choose one of them to take the first turn at being the leader. Ask them to stand facing each other, a comfortably close distance apart. Explain that they are going to try a game in which they imagine they are mirror images of each other. Without walking around or moving their feet away from the beginning standing pose—pretend they are standing in front of a mirror and the other person is their reflection—the leader begins to move his or her body slowly, perhaps raising an arm or shrugging a shoulder. The partner watches very carefully and tries to do the same movement at exactly the same time. (That’s why the movement needs to be slow.) Explain that the object of the game is to work together, not to try to trick your partner, so students are succeeding if they can make the movements easy and clear enough for the partner to appear to be the reflection in a mirror. After a short while, change roles and let the other student be the leader. Afterwards, discuss what they found easy or hard in this game. Ask them what it was like to communicate without words. Did anyone begin to sense where the other person was going to move almost before it happened?

#### **Explore the map. . .**

Have students find Puerto Rico on the map and discover which bodies of water surround it. An island in the Caribbean Sea, Puerto Rico is a territory of the USA. Although it is not a state, its residents are U.S. citizens. The central part of Puerto Rico is mountainous and there are sandy beaches around most of the coast. The eastern corner of the island holds a small rainforest where more than 100 billion gallons of rain fall every year. Another part of the island is full of many underground caves, some of which are open to visitors. Arecibo Observatory, the world’s largest radio telescope is located between several small hills in the cave country. There, scientists study the planets, stars and far off galaxies.



### **#3) History in Song (Ecuador)**

Ecuador is a small country that has been ruled by many different peoples during its history. The native cultures first inhabiting the land were conquered by the Inca, another people who came from Peru. Then the Spanish came across the ocean from Europe and conquered the Inca. Ecuador finally became an independent country, but was ruled at times by dictators. Luis Vargas Torres (1855-1887) fought against a dictator who ruled Ecuador. He is considered a hero in his country’s struggle for freedom.

## You Will Need:

- CD player
- *Viva Vargas Torres* (Track # 6)
- Song lyrics (Spanish and English translation on [putumayokids.com](http://putumayokids.com))
- Map of South America
- Optional: cans or plastic containers, uncooked rice, seeds, beans, etc.

## Activity:

### **Explore the lyrics. . .**

- 1) Ask students to reflect upon the freedoms they have. Which do they think are the most important? Are certain freedoms the right of all humans? Can music inspire people to have hope and courage?
- 2) Extension: Discuss freedom struggles in the students' country or other countries. Ask if students can name any other people who worked hard to achieve equality and freedom such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.
- 3) Extension: Research other songs of freedom and struggle.

### **Explore the music. . .**

- 1) Listen to the track. Can the students identify any instruments? The song begins with a solo clarinet, which also plays in between verses. The percussion instrument—which sounds similar to the *shekere* or *güiro*—is a shaker called a *guasá*. It is made of bamboo and filled with seeds. Ask students why the instrument might be made of these substances. (They are naturally found in the environment.) Less easy to hear is the xylophone—like instrument called the marimba. This instrument is very popular in the coastal region of Ecuador (Esmeraldas), which was the home of Luis Vargas Torres.
- 2) Make a shaker with cans or plastic containers filled with uncooked rice, beans, seeds. Shake along with the song. Make up a rhythm that sounds good with the music. Go to [www.putumayokids.com](http://www.putumayokids.com) for directions.
- 3) Have students paint a picture of images—literal or abstract—that come to mind while they listen to the music. This could be a picture that expresses their image of courage and liberty or could be an abstract reaction to the song. If students choose the abstract picture, ask them to explain how the colors and shapes symbolize or express what they hear.

### **Explore the map. . .**

- 1) Have students find Ecuador on the map. Ask if they can guess what Ecuador means in Spanish and why this country was given the name it has. Have students locate the equator on the map. If necessary, explain that Ecuador means equator in Spanish and that the equator is the imaginary line that runs like a belt around the earth, dividing the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Discuss how Ecuador is well named because the equator runs right through it. In fact, there is a museum in a town just north of Quito, the nation's capital, where you can stand with one foot in each hemisphere!
- 2) Explain that Ecuador's geography is very diverse. There's the *Costa* ("coast" in Spanish) along the Pacific Ocean; the *Sierra* ("mountain range") in the center with the Andes Mountains and many volcanoes, and the *Oriente* ("east") which is mostly covered by the Amazonian rainforest. The Galapagos Islands, a string of volcanic islands located in the Pacific Coast 600 miles off the mainland, are also part of Ecuador. Have students locate the Galapagos Islands on the map.



## CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What is the dominant language of Latin America?
- What characterizes the geography of Latin America?
- What is a percussion instrument and what are the names of some used in Latin music?
- What are the some important rhythms of Latin music?
- How can songs inspire people in struggles for freedom?

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