

Merengue Music

Dominican Spirit

Many Dominicans consider merengue to be the national music and dance of their country. Merengue is quite old, and has a long history in the Dominican Republic going back almost two hundred years. The complicated beat that forms the foundation of the music is called a **quintillo**. This beat is played on a two-sided drum called a **tambora**. Back in the 1800's, people used to make tamboras out of glass bottles. The **güira** (metal scraper) is also an important part of a traditional merengue band. Back then, merengue music was played only on stringed instruments like the guitar. Later, German traders came to the island, bringing the accordion with them. Now, merengue bands usually have an accordion as well as lots of other instruments, like piano, brass and electric guitar.



This merengue band has all the traditional instruments: the accordion, tambora, and güira, plus a bass guitar!

Country Roots

Merengue tipico is the oldest, most traditional style of merengue music. It comes from an area of the Dominican Republic that had lots of farms, so some people call it the “country music” of DR. The three traditional instruments of a merengue tipico band represent the three cultures that came together. The tambora is African, the güira is believed to be an instrument of the native Taino people, and the accordion is European.

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Three Beats

Merengue songs switch back and forth between three different beats. The first beat is called **derecho**, which means straight-ahead. **Derecho** is very fast. Then, the band might switch to a **pambiche** beat. **Pambiche** is slower. The third beat, **Guinchao**, combines the two. How do the band members know when to change beats? Any musician in the band can give a signal that it's time to change, with a special sound on their instrument. For example, the tambora drum can play a “cow” sound, which sounds just like a “moo!” After hearing the “cow,” the rest of the band gets ready to change the beat.



Dancers move to the merengue beat.



Elvis Crespo is an American merengue singer from New York and Puerto Rico.

Merengue Goes International

Merengue has moved past its country roots, and is now popular all over Latin America. Merengue has mixed with rock and pop, and is usually sung in Spanish. Artists like Juan Luis Guerra, Los Toros Band, Elvis Crespo, and Las Chicas del Can have spread merengue worldwide.