

Centro Teaching Guide

Plena is Work, Plena is Song is a 29 minute documentary that explores this original Puerto Rican musical form. *Plena* is a music performance in the form of storytelling song. Therefore, to appreciate the full scope and meaning of *plena*, we must engage in a journey to explore its cultural milieu and history. This documentary explores the social and cultural history of *plena*, and deepens our appreciation of this folk expression.

The DVD is available at the Centro store at

Two essential questions guide this teaching guide:

- 1) What role does popular folk music play in survival struggles and the remaking of immigrant, migrant and indigenous people's communities within the U.S.?
- 2) How can folk songs be a source of oral history and a way to learn about a people's history and culture?

This guide contains:

- Discussion Questions
- Activities
- Centro Teaching Resources
- Learning Outcomes and Common Core Standards
- A Historical Essay on Plena
- Audiovisual Learning Resources

Discussion Questions

Grades 3 - 12:

Before Viewing *Plena is Work, Plena is Song*

Create a semantic map based on comments and basic questions students may want to pursue about *plena* to assess students' prior knowledge of *plena*. This will also help to fine tune the activities suggested in this guide.

While Viewing *Plena is Work, Plena is Song*

Close Reading

Conduct a close reading of *Plena is Work, Plena is Song* by watching the documentary in segments. Students will write their commentaries in a **dialectical notebook** that will help students read and respond to complex texts (written and or audiovisual), while creating their own meanings through comments and questions. Make a dialectical notebook by dividing the pages of a notebook into two columns. One column, labeled **Text**, is where they will record chronologically what they think are the most important points of the text, for each segment. The second column will be titled **Response** and will contain students' questions, comments and ideas about parts of the text that have elicited their doubts or curiosity.

1) Write a title in the **Text** section to help focus the main ideas/images within each segment of the documentary.

2) List the specific visual images and words that best summarize what goes on in each segment. Possible questions are:

What is going on in this segment?

Who are the persons involved in the story being told?

When and where do you think the events depicted took place? How is the story being told?

3) Answer the following questions, in order, in the **Response** column. This will facilitate dialogue with the text and allow students to pursue their own interests as well as question previous assumptions:

1) .00:10-01:22

What is a *güiro*? Why is it important in the *Plena* tradition? Is it found in other music traditions?

2) .01:56-02:18

What is a *pandero*? Where does it come from? How is its use in Plena similar or different from other music traditions?

3) 02:20-03:55

What are *plenas*? Where do they come from?

4) 3:55-5:05 and 5:06-6:09

When did *plena* become a music form? Who were the first *plena* musicians?

5) 6:10-7:30 and 7:30-9:39

Why do you think *plena* was not always music to some people's ears?

6) 9:40-14:06

What is the relationship between *Plena* and workers' strikes and protests?

7) 15:06-17:27

Why do you think that *plena* became a commercially successful music?

8) 17:27- 22:07

What is call and response? Why is it important in a form of music like *plena*?

9) 22:07-29:13

Why do *plenas* seem happy even when they sing about sad situations?

Why is the *plena* tradition still alive even though it is almost a hundred years old?

After Viewing *Plena is Work, Plena is Song*

Divide the students in groups and invite them to share some of their text and responses from their dialectical notebooks.

Activities

Grades 3 - 12:

Interview

1 Conduct an interview with someone who has participated in a *plena* event or a song tradition akin to *plena*. If the person falls into the second category, use the material collected as the basis for a comparative analysis of different musical styles and instruments.

2. Interview someone from your community with factory work experience. Explore your interviewee's favorite music and the role it plays in their social and personal life. Interviewees should be persons with migrant or immigrant experience. This exercise can be used to address one of the driving questions behind this teaching guide: What role does popular folk music play in survival struggles and remaking of immigrant, migrant and indigenous people's communities within the U.S.?

Below are on-line references on how to conduct interviews:

[Genealogy.about.com/od/oral_history/tp/great-stories.htm](http://genealogy.about.com/od/oral_history/tp/great-stories.htm)

http://genealogy.about.com/cs/oral_history/a/interview.htm

Plena Songwriting Exercise

1) Have the students brainstorm to identify a personal or community experience to write a *plena* story about.

2) Use call and response and a basic plena rhythmic pattern to create the structure of the song. View the following online basic plena music lessons links:

Talleres de plena on-line in Spanish by Pedro "Único" Noguera add some important dimensions about the subtleties of *plena* rhythms: [http://](http://www.culturaplenera.com/pleneros/unico.htm)

www.culturaplenera.com/pleneros/unico.htm

Master percussionist Obanilu Ire Allende demonstrates *Plena's pandero* rhythms while discussing the importance of learning this tradition through family ties:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpsDOynOKhE>

3) Invite the students to share their songs.

Grades 7 - 12:

Music as Oral History

- 1) Explore the question of “*How can folk songs be a source of oral history and a way to learn about people’s history and culture?*”

- 2) Discuss the sequence in the documentary about the song *Aló quién ñama?*

- 3) Listen and watch the performance of the plena story “Tintorera del mar” at: <http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/voices/musica/plena/further-readings>. The performance of “Tintorera del Mar” is between 13:09 and 21:50 minutes. Conduct a dialectical notebook note-taking exercise based on a close reading of this segment.

- 4) Use the information from the close reading for a group discussion. Then have each student write a 2 to 3 page essay addressing how plenas are source of oral history. An additional reading can be: “*El panderó de Plena: mulato sin Gloria*” by Ramón López <http://bembeteo.com/apop/apop11.pdf>

Centro Teaching Resources

Plena is Work, Plena is Song allows us to study the relationship between social history, culture and working class life in Puerto Rico by listening to and learning about plenas. The combination of old and new generation *pleneros* and the testimonial link between their personal feelings and social experience encourages rich dialogues about these issues.

The Puerto Rican Heritage Poster Series

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/research-education/education/puerto-rican-heritage-poster-series>

Timeline of Puerto Rican History Booklet

The Centro Puerto Rican Heritage Poster Series documents the history of Puerto Rican migration and the experiences and contributions of Puerto Ricans to U.S. society.

centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/events_2015/

Written and edited by Edgardo Díaz Díaz this rich overview of Plena that features an excellent summary of *Plena's* history from its origins through the present, with very emblematic examples of songs and plena groups' performances with high quality video clips. Excellent for classroom use.

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/voices/musica/plena>

La Plena Puertorriqueña: de la expresión popular a la comercialización musical by Jorge Pérez in *Centro Journal*, Vol. II No. 2 (1991):

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/journal/journal-collections/journal-1991>

An insightful sociological and musicological approach to the history of Plena, the working class culture and the commercial appropriation of music forms such as Plena.

Learning Outcomes and Common Core Standards

All the learning activities we have suggested in this guide have been designed in consonance with the New York State common core learning standards. Since our main texts of references contain informational, music performance and oral history dimensions, all the pedagogical benchmark requirements of the Common Core learning outcome Standards are directly applicable to our endeavor.

In this respect, both the dialectical notebook exercises and the follow up activities contained in this guide should help students build learning skills in the following areas:

Key Ideas and Details

1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4) Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

5) Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

6) Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7) Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

8) Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

9) Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10) Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Historical Essay

Plena is a storytelling form of music. As such, although it is a unique Puerto Rican form of music, it has roots in the various strands of cultural life that have fused into Puerto Rican cultural practices since the origins of what we call today the Puerto Rican nation.

Historical records of that musical form that we call *plena* date back to the first decades of the 20th century. Unfortunately, *Plena's* written history of its origins and early performers remains very scanty when compared to older forms of Puerto Rican music such as *Seis* and *Bomba*. Anthropologist and folklorist John Alden Mason, who came to Puerto Rico in 1914, recorded the first rigorous sample of Puerto Rican folktales and music, did not include any recordings of *plenas*. Fernando Callejos, author of the first comprehensive history of Puerto Rican music and musicians that was published in 1915, did not even mention *plena* musicians. *Plena* musicians and music were not acknowledged until the late 1940's when Richard B. Waterman from the American Folk Life Center of the Library of Congress recorded one example of a *plena* entitled "Candela es" led by Francisco Pérez, a musician from Ponce.

Ironically, *plena* owes its first historical recording in 1927 not to folklorists but to R.C.A. (Radio Corporation of America), an emerging but powerful industry, when it recorded Manuel "Canario" Jiménez, a migrant worker and talented musician, in 1927. RCA commercially tapped into Canario's musical talent and his knowledge of anonymous *plena* songs was. Ethnomusicologist and musician, Dr. Jorge Pérez Rolón, illustrated this case when he wrote: "... *las primeras plenas grabadas por Manuel Jiménez en 1927 ("¡Mamita, Llegó el Obispo!", "Santa María", "¡Qué tabaco malo!" y "Cuando las mujeres...") pertenecen a la tradición oral cuyos compositores son anónimos. Este hecho nos enseña que el mercado comercial, aunque se nutra de las expresiones tradicionales, obvia el origen colectivo de estas producciones.*" However, the side effect of this process was the erasure of *plena's* popular history along with a tailor-made commercial version of original *plena* songs for the market, the filtering mediator between a local specific popular expression and a mass consumers' audience. In the words of ethnographer, artisan and musician, Ramón López: "*Canario pasó a la historia como un reparador de plenas según criterios de aceptación comercial: las plenas por él recogidas de la tradición popular fueron expurgadas, cambiadas, adornadas y conformadas para no fomentar discordias discográficas*". According to musicologist Ruth Glasser, author of a study of Puerto Rican music and musicians, *My Music is My Flag*: "Canario's greatest fame lies with the *plena*, but he spent years singing other types of music before he devoted himself to this particular genre. In fact, Canario may well have been the first Puerto Rican singer to record music in New York."

This led to another ironic historical twist when Canario became *Plena's* voice in the official *plena* folklore, although, according to many plena musicians and aficionados, he was not a *plenero*. In 1964, the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture, in an effort to both honor, “preserve” and “polish” the rough edges of the *plena* tradition, contracted Manuel “Canario” Jiménez and his group of talented musicians, including a singer with a powerful voice and a clear diction known as Rafal.

This resulted in a classic album entitled *Plenas: Manuel “Canario” Jiménez y su conjunto típico*. *Plenas* was comprised of the 10 best-known songs, largely from unknown authors, but attributed to Canario's authorship. Canario became Plena's voice in the commercial world of music; but, much of the irony and original roughness of *plena's* stories and its' anonymous performers' rostrum was blurred.

Yet, *Plena's* original impulse and authenticity remained off the corporate business' radar. Plena songs were born and performed in the heartlands of urban proletarian barrios bordering sugar cane fields. Plena musicians were artisans and agricultural wage workers with rudimentary instruments and a “simple” yet sophisticated sense of rhythm, harmony and melody. Because corporate and government-sponsored musicians such as Canario cast a shadow over the collective and anonymous heritage of *pleneros*, it would be decades before *plena* reemerge from the barrios' backyards.

Hence, during the 1950's and 60's, decades of Puerto Rico's intense industrialization, urbanization, and migration, Mon Rivera and Rafael Cortijo, two sons of the proletarian barrios, embarked on a mission to rescue the suppressed form and content of *plena's* bitter sweet melodies, stories and the driving force of its percussive voice. By adding more volume, musical instruments such as the trombone and the congas and more sophisticated arrangements to the original *plena* street corner sound, their “return of the repressed” became a successful commercial renaissance.

Plena's geographical origins and early musical evolution remains fragmented and unclear in the oral popular memory as well as in official history. Its legendary origins are often identified with urban barrios in the southern city of Ponce such as San Antón and La Joya del Castillo. Plena's early forerunners have been described as migrant workers from the English-speaking Caribbean. Yet, what musicians, aficionados and scholars all seem to agree upon is on the fact that *plena* is an autoctonous product of Puerto Rican working class life

experiences, particularly accented in the major coastal cities and towns of the island, notably Ponce, Mayagüez, San Juan, Arecibo, Carolina, Loíza, Fajardo and Humacao. Working class folks, in tune with how major national and local events impact the everyday life in their communities, voiced their ironic views and feelings in the form of *Plena* songs.

Although it has become a cliché to say that Puerto Rican *plena* is a popular newspaper in the form of song, this definition has been qualified and enriched by ethnographer Ramón López. In his insightful and very informative essays, *Los Bembeteos de la Plena*, López has proposed a view that not only challenges dominant musicological and sociological descriptions and interpretations of *plena* but deconstructs the colonial and elitist agendas of many intellectuals, cultural entrepreneurs and officials of the Puerto Rican government establishment. Regarding the notion of *plena* as “a musical newspaper” López argues that such a description is risky because: *“Un periódico es un impreso... Un periódico es un espacio de tiempo delimitado y determinado por la ocurrencia de algún fenómeno que se repite regularmente. Lo regular es lo que está ajustado y conforme a regla y regular algo es medir, ajustar o poner en orden con ciertas reglas... Lo regular es regulado, regularizado, ajustado, medido, arreglado, metódico. Si la plena fuera un periódico sería todo esto: el sueño folclorizado y controlado de la expresión popular sujeta al programa estatal.”* (p.16 *“La Plena es un bembeteo musicalizado”*)

For López, who is also a *plena* musician with a barrio flavor and a researcher’s eye and ear, *Plena* songs are “bembeteos” (gossips) charged with ironic insightful commentary about everyday life events and the mores of the ruling elites. Indeed, the etymology of this colloquial term comes from “bemba” (“big lips”) and “bembé”, a religious festivity of African (Yoruba) origins in which drumming is featured. Thus, *bembeteos* also connote the “negritude” of Puerto Rican and Caribbean African ancestries. López, the wordsmith, explains why *Plena* is a “bembeteo” and not a “musical newspaper” in this way:

“A diferencia del periódico, el bembeteo es irregular, amorfo, asimétrico, deforme, disforme y caprichoso. En vez de ser fijo, el bembeteo es provisional, interino, sustituto, suplente, temporal, accidental, eventual, inestable, provisorio, precario, inseguro, transitorio y pasajero. El bembeteo es híbrido y plural y sus fractales expansiones se niegan a someterse a los encantos de un periódico bien editado.

Desde el punto de vista de la hegemonía colonial, el bembeteo es desorden, confusión, desbarajuste, barullo, desconcierto, caos, debacle, desorganización, dislocación, perturbación, desquiciamiento, trastorno, alteración, convulsión, revuelo, agitación, subversión, anarquía, lío, enredo, embrollo, alboroto, algarabía, desmán, tumulto, pendencia, revuelta, turbulencia, disturbio. El bembeteo musicalizado, gozosamente altisonante, deviene en fuerza democrática popular precisamente por ser desorden fuera del control hegemónico.”

Plena was and still remains a street corner music that, as *plena* teacher and musician “Único” Noguét observed, originally did not require a large radius of amplification. **Panderos**, a Puerto Rican version of handheld, round frame drums with ancient roots in Africa and Asia; **güiro**, a notched hollowed-out gourd that makes a percussive scratching sound, a legacy of Arawak ancestors of Puerto Rico in pre-colonial times and **human voices** that sing in the classical **call-and-response pattern** common in indigenous music throughout the world; these are the essential instruments of a *plena* musicians' ensemble.

Today *plena*'s street corner tradition remains alive thanks to groups such as **Viento de Agua**, **Los Pleneros de la 21**, **Los Amigos de la Plena** and dozens of other groups and street events featuring *Plena* as the energizing force of collective gatherings where people from all walks meet to learn and play old and new *plena* songs. Finally, of course, the heart of *plena* cannot beat without a genuine story, grounded in the live history and experience of its performers. Such a story still expresses the viewpoint of the people where *plena* still comes from: the barrios of the diaspora- in Puerto Rico; New York City; Camden, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Hartford, Connecticut; Springfield, Massachusetts; Orlando, Florida; and in many other U.S. cities and states where the Puerto Rican population already surpasses in demographic numbers that of the original, homeland archipelago.

Learning Resources

1) **The Power of Plena** by Roberta Singer. Written by a musicologist it highlights the contemporary relevance of *Plena* music today.

<http://www.salsacrazy.com/salsaroots/plenatotalpage.htm>

2) **Folk Music of Puerto Rico** gives a description of recordings available at the archive of Folk Song, recorded and edited by Richard A. Waterman in 1947. It includes a 1947 recording of a Puerto Rican Plena. http://www.loc.gov/folklife/LP/PuertoRicoAFS_L18.pdf

3) **Los Bembeteos de la Plena 2008. Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán.** A collection of essays by cultural anthropologist, plena musician and artisan, Ramón López. An iconoclastic, polemical and well-written set of essays dealing with Plena culture, politics and music. For a pdf version of Ramón López's plena and folk culture essays go to <http://bembeteo.com/main.html>

4) *My Music is My Flag: Puerto Rican musicians and their New York communities* University of California Press 1995 by Ruth Glasser. Explores Puerto Rican musicians' struggles to make a living in the context of early commercialization of music in New York City.

5) **Plenazos callejeros 2013.** Produced by Viento de Agua, Inc. and M&S Marketing Graphics, Inc. A key audiovisual document for those who are looking to learn about plena's resilience and current renaissance throughout Puerto Rican urban barrios and major cities. Vibrant performance moments and candid testimonials provide excellent materials for classroom screening and discussion.

Call and Response

For a more information about call and response in plena go to:

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/voices/musica/plena/analyzing-plenas>

Commercial Success of Plena Music

Teachers will find Jorge Pérez's analysis of this question in his essay: **La Plena Puertorriqueña: de la expresión popular a la comercialización musical** Vol II Number 2 (1991)

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/journal/journal-collections/journal-1991>

güiro

See plena musician, Héctor "Tito" Matos, demonstrate how to play the *güiro* for *Plena* rhythm at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA3LUr_fNSA

For a live action demonstration of how a singer can lead his group with a *güiro* go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ONN7XhqNGY>

To learn about how to make a quick home version of a *guiro* follow the instructions in this user-friendly workshop: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06fCltgL8vA>

pandero

For a reading on the subject of the *pandero*, go to:

La circulación del pandero <http://bembeteo.com/ensayos/plena7.pdf> and **El pandero de plena-mulato sin gloria** <http://bembeteo.com/apop/apop11.pdf>

For a brief but fascinating account of Rafael Trinidad, a worker who became a virtuoso *pandereta* artisan, see:

<http://www.casamerica.es/en/contenidoweb/pandero-de-la-plena>

For a visual sampling of his *panderos* go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1zXzdRTqdQ>

For a broader perspective on global significance of the *pandero* folk music throughout the world, visit: <http://www.nscottrobinson.com/framedrums.php>

Plena History

To enrich the discussion of when *plena* became a music form and who were the first *plena* musicians read sections 4 and 5 of Edgardo Díaz Díaz's summary of *Plena's* history: <http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/voices/musica/plena>

To further explore the relationship between social class, culture and music see:

http://www.caribejazz.com/ARTICULOS/Entries/2007/6/20_Breve_y_ajorada_historia_de_la_Plena.html