

PRESS KIT

SANTO DOMINGO BLUES

The Story of Luis Vargas, The Supreme King of Bitterness

Technical Specifications 📄

Duration: 73 min.

Available formats: DigiBeta and 35 mm.

Language: Spanish, with English subtitles.

Director: Alex Wolfe.

Produced by: MAMBO MEDIA.

Synopsis 📄

Santo Domingo Blues is a feature-length documentary that tells the story of the guitar-playing, singer songwriter **Luis Vargas** and **Bachata**, the guitar blues of Santo Domingo.

Born in the bars and brothels of the Dominican Republic, Bachata is now eclipsing rap as the music of choice for Latino youth on the streets of New York and has become an emblem of national pride for Dominican immigrants.

This colourful movie documents why Bachata, known originally as the “**Song Of Bitterness**”, was, and still is, so important to the waves of impoverished immigrants that pour into American cities from the Dominican Republic. It was the anthem of the hard drinking, womanising, down on his luck man, vilified as the entertainment of the brothels, but worshipped by the poor as their authentic music.

Today Bachata is heard on the radio throughout the Americas from New York to Buenos Aires and rivals Merengue and Salsa as the preferred music of the Latin American world.

With exclusive interviews with stars and pioneers of the genre and scenes involving live performances on and off stage, Santo Domingo Blues brings to life the triumph of a poor people’s music over censorship and prejudice and follows

the historical journey of the immigrants that spent their hard earned dollars making this music commercially viable.

The Director 🏠

Director / Producer / Editor: Alex Wolfe has made a number of award-winning documentary and narrative works. Recent television pieces on Latin music include the Emmy-nominated *Keeping the Beat*, *Puerto Rican Soul*, *Trovador*, and *Bachatero!*, all for WNET television in New York. His short films *Crackerjack*, *The Mule*, and *Precious* have shown at many film festivals internationally, including Rotterdam, Cannes (Kodak Prize Showcase), Vienna, Chicago, Sao Paulo, Havana, Hamburg and Melbourne. They have been broadcast on PBS in the U.S., Canal Plus in France, Channel Four in Britain, ZDF in Germany, ORF in Austria and SBS Television in Australia. His work has been awarded the Kodak prize, the grand prize of the Long Island Film Festival, the Mikeldi Prize for Fiction at the Bilbao Film Festival, and the Tisch award for excellence in screenwriting. He also recently completed *Nimbus*, a short film portraying the poetry of a tropical storm in the rain forest. Alex is currently working as a field producer for Oxygen's television series *Women and the Badge*.

Wolfe worked as a Criminal Defense Investigator in San Francisco and on the California-Mexico border in the late eighties. He received a BA in Comparative Literature from the University of California at Berkeley and an MFA in Film and Television from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Alex grew up in the mountains of Central Puerto Rico and has worked extensively in Latin America.

Praise 🏠

After many sold out and exuberant screenings in film festivals worldwide, Santo Domingo Blues has earned high praise from viewers and critics alike:

The best film I've ever seen about Caribbean music.

- Daisann McLane, NEW YORK TIMES.

This film makes 'Buena Vista Social Club' look like 'Mary Poppins'.

- Les Blank, Director of *Burden of Dreams* and *The Blues According to Lightning Hopkins*.

I love your movie bro. I love it love it love it. I am the biggest advocate for immigrant and homeland stories being told, and

you told it so beautifully, with cariño, amor y respeto.

- Danny Hoch, Director and Star of *Jails, Hospitals, Hip Hop*.

I have covered both music and film for almost two decades, and have never been to a premiere as exciting as ‘Santo Domingo Blues’. It’s a rare case that a film screening moves a crowd to the point of frenetic applause normally reserved for rock gods and teen idols.

- Andrian Kreye, New York Correspondent for SUDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG.

Luis Vargas, the Supreme King of Dominican Bachata music, leads a hilarious and soulful parade of “salty crooners” (Village Voice) from the villages and slums of Santo Domingo to the streets of New York, where this underdog style has become the hottest new phenomenon in Latin music since salsa broke in the early seventies. Bachata is the Dominican Blues, and Luis Vargas is its triumphant king.

Santo Domingo Blues is a moving, sexy, often hilarious tribute to the unsung heroes that have transformed Bachata from the vilified music of cabarets and brothels to an emblem of national pride. Santo Domingo Blues is a heart-felt immigrant success story filled with Caribbean humor, hot dancing, and lots of great music.

Production Notes

BY ALEX WOLFE

I live in Brooklyn, in a Dominican neighborhood called Los Sures. It is also known as Southside Williamsburg. At the corner bodega, Nelson, the counter man, was playing a tape of bouncy, vibrant guitar music with plaintive, sweet vocals. He told me it was called Bachata and gave me the tape. I fell in love with the music, went to shows, discovered the beautiful and very simple bachata dance, and bought some CDs. I soon began to hear the distinctive strains of Bachata all over. It animated kitchen workers, bodega clerks and car service drivers throughout the city, and the street vendors selling pirate CDs were mainly pushing Bachata.

The musical range of Bachata runs from slow and medium tempo songs of bitterness and love, to wickedly fast merengues in Bachata style that are almost purely instrumental. Musically, the prominent guitars, which often play percussive rhythms and in recent years have been electrified, characterize Bachata and given an effect the bachateros call “brillo” or shine.

Getting access to these musicians and their shows was complicated. Even today Bachata shows are seldom mentioned in newspapers. In an extension of the

traditional informal dissemination of the music by street vendors in the shantytowns and rural villages of the Dominican Republic, the shows here are publicized by posters and flyers in the streets of the neighborhoods near the clubs. Eventually, I developed the trust of Luis Vargas and some other key bachateros, and got behind-the-scenes access to what is still in many ways an underground musical culture.

Santo Domingo Blues was shot on DVCAM and 16mm in the Dominican Republic and New York City. Twelve concerts were taped with multiple cameras in venues ranging from tiny nightclubs to big open-air stages. Many informal jam sessions on back porches and patios, the essence of roots Bachata, were also documented. In addition to Luis Vargas, known as the Supreme King of Bitterness, featured artists include Teodoro Reyes (the wise little blind man), Raúlín Rodríguez (the chieftain), Ramon Cordero, Eladio Romero Santos, Joan Soriano, Luis Segura and Aridia Ventura, the sole female bachatera in a sea of machismo. Scenes in poor neighborhoods of Santo Domingo and other towns introduce supporting characters to develop some of the themes of what is definitely a music of the people. Sound was recorded on DAT using both stereo arrays and console feeds.

Invariably, when I met a Dominican in New York and mentioned Bachata, the person would blush, simultaneously embarrassed about the ill repute of the music and proud of its newfound acceptance. When I showed footage to Dominicans I got an overwhelmingly positive reaction. The mere concept that someone was taking this music seriously enough to make a documentary about it was riveting to the average Dominican. The people that had listened to Bachata in the seventies, eighties and early nineties were so used to being invisible and underrepresented in the media, except in relation to a drug bust, that the attention to their musical culture was surprising to them. This response made me confident I was on the right track.

More About the Movie

Guitar-playing singer songwriter Luis Vargas makes his mark in the world of Dominican Bachata music with a style all his own, “not too agitated, but not too blue either”, as he puts it. Luis takes us back to his own humble beginnings in the dusty little town of Santa Maria in the Dominican Republic, where his father still lives. *Santo Domingo Blues* does not use a narrator or “experts” but instead relies on musical performances, first person accounts, and character-driven scenes involving Luis and other bachateros, as these musicians are known. Bachata is genuinely a music of the people and the denizens of the bars and bodegas, the street vendors and the car service drivers, all contribute to the telling of the story. Recalling the American blues, bachata was infamous as the anthem of the hard-drinking, womanizing, down-on-his-luck man, vilified as the

entertainment of the brothels and the cabarets, and worshipped by the down-trodden poor as the deepest expression of their feelings. In lyrics heavy with sexual innuendo, double entendres and outright bawdiness, bachateros address themes of the everyman, singing comically exaggerated tales of ruined romances and unrequited love, of barroom camaraderie and maudlin drunken escapades. Bachata was considered vulgar and unsophisticated "ghetto music" by the Dominican elite who controlled the radio stations, recording studios and record manufacturing plants. Bachateros played in back yards and cantinas throughout the countryside, releasing crudely recorded 45 rpm records sold by street vendors in the slums for the corner bar jukebox trade.

New York has had a profound impact on Bachata and the Dominican immigrants to whom the music is so important, and *Santo Domingo Blues* documents the Bachata scene in the Latino neighborhoods of the city. The traditional Bachata clientele comes from precisely those segments of disenfranchised Dominican society that have poured into American cities in recent decades, and the hard won dollars of these new arrivals have made the music commercially viable. Luis Vargas and his contemporaries now come to play in New York and write songs with a urban edge that reflect the experience of the Dominican diaspora. Now. Bachata serves as a bridge across a divided culture--the bachateros arrive in New York for eagerly awaited concerts, bringing literal and lyrical "news from home," their tragic tales of loves gone wrong a metaphor for physical abandonment of the beloved home country. "Santo Domingo Blues" is the story of the triumph of a poor people's music over censorship and prejudice, but the loneliness of the immigrant in the big American City brings new poignancy to the bitter songs of these troubadours.

Today Bachata is heard on the radio throughout the Latin Americas, from New York to Buenos Aires, and the form now rivals Merengue and Salsa as the preferred music of the Latin world. Luis Vargas has had resounding successes in recent years, his crowning achievement the founding of La Suprema, his recording studio and hotel, in which each room is dedicated to one of his hits and decorated in "Luis Vargas style." On Carnival day in what is now his hometown of Santiago the "Supreme King of Bitterness" is crowned the king of the Carnival and in full costume performs for an adoring crowd. A few years ago Luis' prosperity almost came to an abrupt end, however, when he was involved in a serious car accident and presumed dead. The experience led him to question the value of his material success and he comes back at the world with a thundering, life-affirming anthem called "El Accidente," the performance of which comprises the final sequence of the film. "Death comes in the blink of an eye," he sings, "but I have all I could want in this life: the love of my people".

Santo Domingo Blues is the story of Bachata's transformation from a scorned music into an emblem of national pride and should resonate with all immigrant communities. Unfortunately industrialized society is still rife with racism and prejudice against immigrant populations. The documenting of Bachata, a defining

element of Dominican cultural identity, will help to put a face on Dominican immigration.

The Crew

Cinematographer: David Hocs has extensive network shooting experience for CNN, 20/20, 48 Hours and other television news magazine programs. He also works as a documentary sound recordist, frequently with Mark Levin on HBO productions. David is also a talented painter, and he was able to bring both his eye for the poetic moment and his ear for music to the *Santo Domingo Blues* production.

Cinematographer: Ismael Ramirez is an experienced Director of Photography of features, documentaries, and commercials, and has collaborated with Alex Wolfe on previous occasions, including the feature *Hometown*, the documentary *Trovador* and the short *Precious*. He shot the Swiss feature *Three Muslim Women*, and the 35mm short *Are You Cinderella?*, which premiered on HBO.

Sound Designer: Michael Jones is a sound designer and radio producer with broad experience in Latin and African music production, including David Turnley's critically acclaimed *La Tropical* and the upcoming documentary on the Havana Jazz Festival called *Armstrong 2000*. Michael has also been the chief engineer and co-producer of Public Radio International's *Afropop Worldwide* for the past eight years, as well a frequent segment producer for WNYC's program *Studio 360*.

Co-writer and Music Supervisor: Richard Fleming and Alex Wolfe developed *Santo Domingo Blues* together, and Richard supervised the recording of the musical performances and the compilation of the soundtrack selections. Richard has worked as a music journalist for *Paper* and *Spin* magazines, and is currently writing a book about Cuba. He also has extensive experience as a sound recordist for documentaries and musical performances. His focus is on Latin America and the Caribbean, he has worked on such productions as *Haiti: Killing of a Dream* and *Zones for Slavery*, and has recorded many musical performances in Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic.

The Soundtrack

A series of soundtrack albums (*Santo Domingo Blues Volumes I, II, and III*) are in the works.

Volume I is chock full of original live recordings of Luis Vargas and other greats, made for the film. These recordings have the urban, freestylin' jam session edginess that most studio Bachata productions lack. This is precisely what will set it apart and give it crossover appeal to world music and Latin dance music lovers everywhere.

Volume II discovers the treasure trove of Radio Guarachita, the studio that recorded the great players from the early years of Bachata. These old school masters are also featured in **Santo Domingo Blues**, and their beautiful bachatas should strike chords with lovers of the **Buena Vista Social Club**. In this volume early studio recordings complement live recordings made for the film.

Volume III launches **Santo Domingo Blues** featured artist **Yoan Soriano**, the super smooth guitarist/crooner with a distinctly Afro sound. Yoan Soriano has been signed to **Batey Records / Mambo Media**, and his latest production, **I'm Your Man (El Hombre Tuyo Soy Yo)** will be available on that label.

More about MAMBO MEDIA 🏠

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