

# *Benny Moré: the Wild Man of Rhythm*

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Benny Moré is one of Cuba's greatest musicians. His clear voice and innate capacity to write and compose songs have earned him a place as one of the top artists on the island and the world.

Benny Moré, the so called Wyldman of Rhythm, like the words of one of his hits said, could sing a 'mambo,' a 'guaracha' or a 'bolero' like nobody else. But his best was the 'son' – what is considered the best Cuban rhythm and genre. He was loved and admired by whites, blacks, mulattos, the rich and the poor, city dwellers and countrymen and women.

Born in Santa Isabel de las Lajas, a rural community in former central Las Villas province on August 24, 1919, Benny was the eldest son of 19 children. His poor family's ancestor on the paternal side was a tribal king from Congo. He had very little schooling and learned no music; however, Benny had a good ear for music and rhythm and from a very early age, fled home at night to go and sing with 'güajiros' (countrymen) until late at night. At the age of six, he made his first guitar of common wood board and a ball of string. Like most poor boys at the time, Benny did many odd jobs that ranged from selling fruit to sugar cane cutting. In 1940 he went to Havana and started playing for donations at many bars and other facilities with not a very good reputation in the harbor district.

After a couple of tries, he won a radio talent competition and had his first paid singing job. A member of the renowned Trio Matamoros, Ciro Rodríguez, signed him in for the Matamoros band, which backed the

trio. Eventually Benny, as he was called, replaced Miguel Matamoros as the lead singer and went with the group to Mexico. When the band returned to Havana, he decided to stay there and later joined the famous Pérez Prado orchestra, which turned 'mambo' into a very popular music genre.

When he came back to Cuba in 1950, he was already a star and worked with the band of pianist Bebo Valdés. Benny then joined the world famous Aragón Orchestra for a while. After that he established his own band, la Banda Gigante (the Big Band), which he always referred to affectionately as 'la tribu' (the tribe), becoming the most popular singer on the island and in the Spanish speaking world. It was about this time that he was nicknamed El Bárbaro del Ritmo – The Wildman of Rhythm.

Unable to read music, he composed and arranged many tunes, telling the different musicians the notes and tempo he wanted them to play. As a result of alcoholism, he developed liver cancer and died on February 19, 1963 in Havana at the age of 42 years. Benny Moré, the Wild Man of Rhythm, will be remembered as one of Cuba's greatest artists.

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