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Hi everyone, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps families explore the wonderful world of music together. I'm Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're here today.

Today we are kicking off one of my very favorite series that we do here on the podcast — our Around the World with Busy Kids Love Music summer tour! Every summer, we pack our bags (metaphorically speaking, of course), stamp our musical passports, and travel to five different destinations around the world to explore the folk music of each place. And this summer, we have some really incredible stops planned.

If you're new here and this is your first time joining us for the world tour — welcome! I am so glad you found us. And if you've been along for previous tours, you already know how fun this is. Either way, I think you're going to love where we're headed this summer.

Before we take off on our first stop, I want to take just a moment to explain what folk music actually is — because it's a word we use a lot in this series, and it's worth understanding what makes it special.

Folk music is the music of everyday people.

It's not usually written by a famous composer and performed in a concert hall. Instead, folk music grows out of the daily life, stories, history, and traditions of a community. It gets passed down from generation to generation — sometimes written down, but often just shared by ear, the way a grandmother teaches a grandchild a song she learned from her own grandmother. Folk music might tell the story of a community's history, celebrate a harvest or a holiday, accompany a dance, or express something that words alone can't quite capture.

Every culture in the world has folk music. And while the instruments and rhythms and melodies are all different depending on where you are, the purpose is the same: folk music connects people to each other and to the places they come from.

Which brings us to our very first stop on this summer's tour.

We are heading to the beautiful island of Puerto Rico!

Now, if you've been paying attention to music news lately, you might have heard a lot about Puerto Rico recently — and one artist in particular: Bad Bunny. Bad Bunny performed at the Super Bowl earlier this year, and it was a full-on celebration of Puerto Rican culture, music, and pride. Whether or not you watched the Super Bowl, there's a very good chance you've heard his music somewhere.

Bad Bunny makes music in a style called reggaeton, which is a genre influenced by hip-hop, Caribbean rhythms, and Jamaican dancehall. It's incredibly popular all around the world right now. And while reggaeton isn't the folk music we're going to focus on today, here's the thing that's so fascinating — reggaeton has deep roots in the very same cultural soil as Puerto Rico's folk traditions. The rhythms, the call and response, the way music is woven into community life — all of that goes back centuries. So when you hear reggaeton, you're actually hearing something that has been building and evolving for a very long time.

Today we're going to travel back to the beginning of that story.

Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island about 1,000 miles southeast of Florida's coast. It's been home to people for thousands of years, and the music of Puerto Rico reflects every layer of that long, complex history.

The first people to live on the island were the Taíno, an indigenous people who had lived throughout the Caribbean for centuries before European contact. The Taíno had their own musical traditions, including a range of ceremonial songs and dances called areyto. The areyto was more than entertainment — it was how the Taíno preserved their history, honored their ancestors, and celebrated important events in community life. People would gather together, and a leader would sing the beginning of a song or story, with the group responding and

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repeating. Music, memory, and community were completely inseparable.

When Spanish colonizers arrived in the early 1500s, life for the Taíno changed devastatingly and irreversibly. Many Taíno people died from disease and the violence of colonization, and their population was decimated within just a few generations. It's important to acknowledge that loss, because the Taíno people and their cultural contributions deserve to be remembered with respect and care.

At the same time, Spanish settlers brought their own musical traditions, and over the following centuries, enslaved Africans were brought to the island, bringing with them rich and vibrant musical cultures from across the African continent. Puerto Rico's folk music traditions grew out of the blending – and also the tension – of all of these influences together.

Two of the most important Puerto Rican folk music traditions are bomba and plena, and I want to tell you about both of them because they're quite different from each other, even though they're often mentioned together.

Bomba is the older of the two traditions, and it has deep roots in the music and culture of enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico. It developed on the sugar cane plantations of the island, where enslaved people created music as a way to maintain connection, express resistance, and preserve community. At the heart of bomba is a conversation between a drummer and a dancer. The drummer doesn't lead the dancer – the dancer leads the drummer. Whatever the dancer does with their body, the drummer follows and responds. It's a musical dialogue, and it's unlike almost anything else in the folk music world.

The primary instrument in bomba is a barrel drum, also called a barril de bomba. These drums were often made from whatever materials were available, including barrels used for storing rum or salt cod. The music

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is rhythmically complex and incredibly energetic, and a bomba performance is a joyful, communal event where the line between performer and audience often disappears completely.

Plena is a bit younger than bomba, developing in the early 1900s in the city of Ponce, on Puerto Rico's southern coast. Where bomba is about rhythm and movement, plena is often described as the "sung newspaper" of Puerto Rico — because plena songs told stories about real events happening in communities. A fire in the neighborhood, a famous crime, a political scandal, a storm — these were the kinds of things plena singers wrote about. It was a living, breathing news report set to music, and it gave ordinary people a way to comment on and process the world around them.

The most recognizable instrument in plena is the pandereta, a handheld frame drum that looks something like a tambourine without the metal jingles. Plena ensembles typically use several panderetas of different sizes playing interlocking rhythmic patterns together, which gives the music its distinctive layered sound.

Can you hear the difference between bomba and plena? Both are incredibly rhythmic, but plena has that lighter, tambourine-like sound from the panderetas, while bomba has the deeper, more resonant sound of the barrel drums.

Another beloved Puerto Rican folk tradition is the music of the jíbaro (HEE-bah-ro)— the rural mountain farmers of Puerto Rico's interior. Jíbaro music is sometimes called *música jíbara*, and it features the cuatro, a small guitar-like instrument that is Puerto Rico's national instrument. The cuatro has ten strings arranged in five pairs, and in the hands of a skilled player, it can produce some incredibly beautiful and intricate melodies.

Música jíbara is often associated with a song form called the **décima**, which is a type of improvised poetry sung to music. A *décima* follows a very specific structure of ten lines with a particular rhyme scheme, and

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skilled performers can improvise décimas on the spot — creating new verses in response to a topic, a challenge from another singer, or just the mood of the moment. It takes real musical intelligence and creativity, and watching a skilled décima performer is genuinely impressive, even if you don't speak Spanish.

The cuatro sound is so closely tied to Puerto Rican identity that even contemporary artists sometimes incorporate it into their music as a way of honoring their roots. It's a reminder that folk instruments don't have to stay frozen in the past — they can carry tradition right into the present.

Folk music isn't something that belongs only to the past. In Puerto Rico, it's alive, it's evolving, and it's being protected and celebrated by people who understand just how precious it is.

Today we got to stamp our passport with our first stop on this summer's world tour — the island of Puerto Rico, with its layers of Taíno history, Spanish and African influences, and the vibrant traditions of bomba, plena, and música jíbara. You can find your downloadable passport and your first stamp to print at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/177

I've also put together a curated playlist of Puerto Rican folk music examples so you can continue exploring after this episode, and see some of the instruments and dances we learned about today.

And before I let you go — if you're enjoying Busy Kids Love Music, would you do me a huge favor and take just a minute to rate and review the podcast? It truly makes such a difference in helping other families find the show. The more reviews we have, the easier it is for new listeners to discover us, and that means more kids getting to experience all of this amazing music from around the world. You can leave a review right in your podcast app, and it takes less than two minutes. I would be so grateful.

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We have four more incredible stops on this summer's tour still ahead of us, so be sure to come back in two weeks for our next destination. Until then — keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music. Thanks so much for being here!

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