Making Music and Politics in Puerto Rico:
Performative Praxis and Subjectivation in Musical Activism

Teófilo Espada-Brignoni

Profesor Psicología social
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras
teofilo.espadabrignoni@upr.edu
ORCID ID 0000-0002-5295-9497

Abstract. Musicians have played important roles in social movements and different forms of political action. As a social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon, the relationships between music, musicians, and politics are embedded in singular processes that warrant studying how musicians engage in political actions and make sense of their musical performances and roles in activism. In this article I describe and analyze the experience of six musicians related to their performances supporting activists and social movements. I conducted six semi-structured interviews through phone calls and video conferencing and analyzed the transcripts by focusing on the forms of subjectivations they described when remembering their interactions with activists and organizers. My main focus is how these musicians used music to support protests, fostered a sense of collective identity, and coordinated their music with activists and organizers.

Keywords. Music, Musicians, Activism, Puerto Rico, Qualitative research.

Haciendo Música y Política en Puerto Rico:
Praxis performativa y subjetivación en el activismo musical

Resumen: Los músicos han jugado un papel importante en los movimientos sociales y en diferentes formas de acción política. Como fenómeno social, cultural y psicológico, las relaciones entre la música, los músicos y la política están incrustadas en procesos singulares que justifican estudiar cómo los músicos se involucran en acciones políticas y dan sentido a sus actuaciones musicales y roles en el activismo. En este artículo describo y analizo la experiencia de seis músicos relacionados con sus actuaciones de apoyo a activistas y movimientos sociales. Realicé seis entrevistas semiestructuradas a través de llamadas telefónicas y videoconferencias y analicé las transcripciones centrándome en las formas de subjetivación que describían al recordar sus interacciones con activistas y organizadores. Mi enfoque principal es cómo estos músicos usaron la música para apoyar protestas, fomentaron un sentido de identidad colectiva y coordinaron su música con activistas y organizadores.

Palabras clave: Música, Músicos, Activismo, Puerto Rico, Investigación cualitativa.

Introduction

The mysterious blend of sound, silences, and beats we often call music is embedded in many dimensions of human life. From using personal devices filled with music while we walk[1] to marveling at accounts of brain surgery while the patient sings or plays an instrument,[2] we can attach music to a wide range of activities, from the mundane to the marvelous. Direct political action is not an exception, as the art form can embody and communicate an account of the state of affairs, calls to action, and a sense of collective identity[3]. While the role of music in sociopolitical processes has been documented, the perspective and experiences of the musicians whose songs, lyrics, and performances support these processes have been underrepresented in scholarly literature. This is even more so for politically engaged musicians not associated with major record labels.

Music is an inherently historical and sociocultural phenomenon[4]. The complex relationships between music and political activity are not universal but embedded in the singular contexts that give rise to forms of what Christopher Small (1998) called musicking. As Small wrote, musicking refers to *"tak[ing] part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing"* [emphasis in the original] (1998, p. 9). In the context of political action, musicking also involves musical actions that support the movement and activists' support of musicians.

In this article I'm interested in how Puerto Rican musicians think about the musical encounters that supported activists in protests and social movements in Puerto Rico and the dynamics between activists and musicians. Throughout the interviews, participants described their experiences and relationships with activists and organizers. I organized their statements on these encounters through five major threads: music as intrinsic to protesting in Puerto Rico, outreach and leadership, support, unity, and relationships with organizers.

Performative Praxis and Subjectivation

In their work on social movements, Eyerman and Jamison use the notion of cognitive praxis to underscore the historical, cultural, and psychological resources that members of a social movement share, which in turn is deeply embedded in how

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[1] Heye & Lamont, 2010.
[2] Scerrati et al., 2020.
[3] Almeida & González Márquez, 2023; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Street, 2012; Trier-Bieniek, 2012.
[4] Finkelstein, 1970; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Street, 2012; Turino, 2008.

members of a movement act collectively[5]. Their notion of cognitive praxis refers simultaneously to a social movement's cosmovision and how it enacts and embodies ways of being in the world through direct action[6]. Drawing from the study of subjectivations and Foucauldian discourse analysis[7], I use the notion of performative praxis to analyze how musicians negotiate ways to collaborate with social movements. "Performative praxis" refers to the sociopsychological frames and actions they articulate and strategically negotiate in interactions with others as complementary members of protests and social movements. Furthermore, this performative praxis also reveals the subjectivations[8] through which musicians see themselves, their potential roles in social movements, and the ethics of political musicking. As several authors have noted, Foucault's last works (on "ethics") allows us to re-envision the study of speech and text as hybrid performances agency, subjectivity, multi-layered and multi-level power relations[9]. In other words, the focus on subjectivation can be useful to think about ways of thinking about the self, social dynamics, power relations in fields of relationships that are closer to "the ground" (such as group and community-level dynamics) rather than institutional power structures.

Following ideas developed by authors and frameworks such as Erving Goffman (1959), Judith Butler (2020; 2015a), Foucault and discourse analysis[10], and Enrique Pichón-Rivière (1985) the notion of performative praxis can be used to analyze how individuals seek to represent themselves and their communities in social interaction in ways that actualizes and construct social realities and subjective ethical positions among groups and identities. Furthermore, as Butler argues[11], one's presence in a public space can be used to problematize political power and create alliances among actors and communities. These alliances can, in turn, be associated with subjectivations[12] or ways in which individuals, groups, and communities define an aspect of their action through ethical collective norms which might differ from other social and cultural norms[13]. At the same time, these subjective processes and their associated direct actions are embedded in ways of thinking and negotiating collective identities[14]. Political musicking can play an important role in social movements' social and psychological processes.

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[5] Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998.
[6] Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998.
[7] Parker, 2005; Hanna, 2014; Khan & MacEachen, 2021.
[8] Foucault, 1990.
[9] Lemke, 2019; Hannah, 2014; Besley & Peters, 2007.
[10] Foucault, 1990; Hanna, 2014; Khan & MacEachen, 2021.
[11] Butler, 2015a.
[12] Foucault, 1990.
[13] Butler, 2020; Butler, 2015a; Butler, 2015b Butler, 2005; Foucault, 1990.
[14] Neville & Reicher, 2011; Reicher, 2011.

Music can serve interrelated functions such as education, recruitment, mobilization, and activities that support an existing movement and protestors[15]. Another important aspect of making music is how community members perceive the performer-audience relationship, which in turn promotes psychological and social bonds[16]. Musical forms in which both performers and audiences share music-making roles (such as the audience joining as singers, chanting the chorus, and clapping to the beat) can foster solidarity and construct meaning together[17].

The musicians I interviewed have participated in are relatively recent (from the past 24 years to the present). Recent social movements, according to several scholars[18], tend to be skeptical towards traditional leadership styles. These changes may allow for the strategic use of music to steer movements and call on more individuals and communities to strike. The musicians mention several local movements in their interviews, including protesting the US Navy between 1999 and 2003 in Vieques[19], student protests in the 2010s against tuition increases[20], and the 2019 protests to oust then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló[21], among others.[22,23]

Methodology
Overview
My original goal was to explore the experiences and motivations of Puerto Rican musicians who perform in protests from a qualitative perspective through the lens of Foucauldian discourse analysis. During the project, participants provided detailed descriptions of their relationships with activists, which were fundamental to their musical performances. In this article I report on these experiences as they provide a much-needed background to understand the relations between artists and social movements. The flexibility of qualitative inquiry[24], introduced in this study in the data analysis phase, allows me to focus on the actions they described as supporting local social movements. At the same time, this change in focus allowed the author to reconsider and integrate more deeply the music scholarship he has been revising as

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[15] Rosenthal & Flacks, 2012.

[16] Pichón-Rivière, 1985.

[17] Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Turino, 2008; Rosenthal & Flacks, 2012.

[18] Castells, 2015; Hard & Negri, 2017.

[19] McCaffrey, 2018.

[20] Atiles-Osoria, 2013; Vargas, 2019.

[21] Cotto Morales, 2020; Espada-Brignoni, 2023.

[22] The cited references provide a historical overview of these movements.

[23] It should be noted that one of the participants was present at these protests while being very young. While a reader questioned this commenting it was not plausible for someone being 12 years old to be an activist, it should be noted that the Puerto Rican government has attempted to pass laws criminalizing under-age activism by seeking to penalize parents who bring young children to protests. Furthermore, as I took part of several protests before turning 18, I have no reason to doubt the interviewees timeline.

[24] Denzin, 2010.

part of his current research projects. The protocol for this study was approved by the IRB of the [removed for peer review].

The Researcher
Due to the political nature of the project, I decided to conduct and analyze the interviews alone. As a [name of field] psychologist, a college professor at the [removed for peer-review], and a musician, I was perceived with some legitimacy. In other words, for some participants, I was not only a researcher but also someone somewhat involved in music and protests. I believe this allowed me to engage in deeper conversations with some of the musicians as we could perceive each other not as outsiders but as members of adjacent communities. Furthermore, my own experiences as a musician and my musical (and non-musical) participation in protests likely played a role in the conversations I had with the participants and my interpretations of their narratives.

Recruitment and Participants
During the summer of 2022, I recruited participants for this study through a flyer distributed on social media platforms and direct approaches to musicians who have played music during protests. The recruitment criteria were to be a legal adult in Puerto Rico (21 years old) and to have played music in at least one protest in Puerto Rico. As the musical communities to which these musicians belong are tight knit, their personal details will be described generically and vaguely to protect their privacy. Six responses (see Table 1) came from individuals with different musical and professional backgrounds who met the recruitment requirements. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 36. Two of them identified as female and four as male. Only two of them are full-time musicians. Only one of the participants no longer plays music.

Table 1. Participants demographics and music experience

Participant	Demographic factors				Music experience			
	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Years playing music	Main Genre	Still musically active	Full-time musician
1	23	F	Undergraduate	Graduate student	5	Puerto Rican Afro-Caribbean music	Yes	No
2	26	M	Graduate	Musician	16	Classical music	Yes	Yes
3	36	M	Undergraduate	Musician	24	Puerto Rican Afro-Caribbean music	Yes	Yes
4	36	M	Graduate	Educator	32	Popular music	Yes	No
5	25	F	Graduate	Advertising or similar job	9	Band music	No	No
6	33	M	Undergraduate	Advertising or similar job	23	Puerto Rican folk music	Yes	No

The Process

Five interviews were conducted through video conferencing and one by phone. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. At the time, our IRB preferred research activities to be conducted online as a measure to keep COVID-19 infections to a minimum. I conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide[25]. The interview involved asking questions and following up on topics such as their experiences with musical activism and their perceptions of the protests. I used MAXQDA, a qualitative data-management software, to manually transcribe the interviews. During the coding stage, I also used MAXQDA as it allows to assign codes to the transcribed text, retrieve, combine, and re-organize codes using the same interface[26].

For the analysis, I used a modified version of discourse analysis that focused on the notion of subjectivation[27]. As Hanna (2014) notes, this differs from mainstream Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as. I coded participants' narratives, specifically, the portions of the interviews using short phrases to synthesize their descriptions of their relationships with activists and other musicians as they related to organizing and sustaining specific protests and musicians. The coding procedure could be described as eclectic, as it relied on different kinds of short phrases that summarized participants' descriptions of their actions, worldviews, perspectives, and other relevant aspects of their experience[28].

In a second cycle[29], the codes generated in the first part of the analysis were then grouped in within broader categories according to their discursive and performative functions. The codes were transformed from phrases into theoretically significant statements in the second cycle. This second cycle led to the development of the article's main themes[30]. Within each main theme, I grouped the codes according to the specific subject or performance they described. I then proceeded to interpret, through the literature review, other participant's comments, participants biographical statements (provided in the first part of the interview), how they made sense of their role and the roles of others in their interactions with activists and organizers[31]. These themes were then interpreted through Foucault's notion of subjectivation as well as my reinterpretation of Eyerman and Jamison's[32] cognitive praxis.

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[25] Seidman, 2019; Coleman, 2012.

[26] Gibbs, 2018.

[27] In a previous work, I have applied these ideas to text (see Espada-Brignoni, 2022). In this article I have somewhat modified the procedure and adapted it to transcribed interviews.

[28] Saldaña, 2021.

[29] Saldaña, 2021.

[30] Hannah, 2014; Schreier, 2012.

[31] Parker, 2005; Hannah, 2014.

[32] Jamison, 1998, 1991.

The interviews and the coding processes took place in Spanish, the native language of the researcher and the musicians. For this paper, I translated participant's voice as closely as I could to English.

Outcome
Five major themes emerged when these musicians described their relationship with activists. These include music as intrinsic to protesting in Puerto Rico, outreach and leadership, support, unity, and relationships with organizers. In this section I will describe participant's views on these themes by focusing on what they said during the interviews.

Music as Intrinsic to Protests in Puerto Rico
Half of the participants (1, 2, and 3) described music as a fundamental aspect of how protests are organized in Puerto Rico. The second interviewee said, "In every protest I've been to, there's always music." He mentioned that during the time he lived in the US, he went to protests where he marched, "but music? Maybe once I saw a band, but that was it. It lacked a communal feeling. People seemed too serious. I think it could be a cultural thing". From his experience protesting both in Puerto Rico and the US, he argued that Puerto Rican protests are organized more artistically. The first participant added that while other art forms are used in protests, music is the preferred craft. She mentioned that "It's not the same to do an open mic to rap or read poetry in a protest, and it is beautiful, but playing a drum it's just something else, there are other meanings behind it." In addition to the communal feeling described by the first participant, once there is music in a protest "you can relax, have a drink, you dance and it becomes a festival, you know."

Outreach and Leadership
Five participants also described how music and musicians have a role in outreach and helping steer protestors during an event. As the third participant described historical changes in the forms of leadership in social movements in Puerto Rico and the increasing role of music in recent social movements, the author asked him if music was somehow taking on some of that leadership role, to which he replied:

> Well, that's interesting. I would say not a full leadership role, but it has been very important. I protested in Vieques when they were doing civil disobedience. We wanted to play music for the people camping there, and most welcomed us. But in one of the camps, this supposed leader didn't want us there. I think he wasn't really staying there.

The fourth participant described something similar in his account of the 2019 protests to oust then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló. He mentioned, "musicians were a main voice during that process like we have never seen before. Famous popular music artists were there, and the magnitude of the protests was partly due to their involvement". The second participant also described how when students at a local

university were protesting, some well-known musicians showed up, causing people to go to the protests to hear their music. The sixth participant echoed these ideas but expressed some concern as the "magnetic effect" and potential outreach of musicians can significantly influence how people think despite musicians not necessarily being the "most qualified" people on political matters.

In addition to a more general role of leadership and outreach, the first and the third participants highlighted how musicians are both asked to lead protests and thrust into the front of the picket line or march. According to the first participant, "I would feel shy sometimes, especially if it was a big event, because they ask us (musicians) to be in the front, because music usually is in the front along the people who chant, it's like leading the protest." In turn, organizers and protestors sometimes found ways to support these musical activities by providing water, alcoholic drinks, and snacks.

Support

Four musicians also described different ways in which they think music and musicians support protest and social movements. Three participants described their initiative to play music during specific protests as a way of bringing joy to the activists. In their examples, the activists or organizers did not convoke artists; musicians showed up voluntarily and without previous coordination with protestors. The third participant's goal during the aforementioned protests in Vieques was to bring happiness to the activists occupying the US Navy installations. According to the fifth participant, "Many of my friends went to a teacher's strike, and the point was to bring them some joy in the context of all the injustice we are living in." The sixth participant remembered how, while he was in college, he and other musicians decided to visit the student protestors' camp. He remembers they were already playing music and decided to visit the protestors camping at the university at night.

> We showed up in like six or five cars. We got there, and they (the protestors) got up kind of scared because we arrived very late at night, and they probably thought we were going to harm them or something. But when they saw that we were there to play music they got very happy. Their leader even told me they were thinking of stopping the protest but that we gave them the energy they needed to continue. I think they lasted one more month or more after that, and we were part of that catalyst.

Their explicit goal was not to motivate the protestors to continue their activism (as they could not have known how the organizers felt) but to provide emotional support through music using the *parranda*[33] tradition.

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[33] The parranda is a local tradition associated with the holidays in Puerto Rico, where groups of people and musicians show up, often unannounced, to sing and celebrate (see Tapia Martínez, 2017).

Participants 6 and 3 also provide different accounts of how well-known popular artists in Puerto Rico contributed or failed to cooperate with protests. According to the sixth participant, many musicians have offered their talents free of charge, particularly during the protests against the US Navy, by recording songs to support the movement. Conversely, the third participant argued that many popular salsa and merengue bands were largely absent from social justice movements. More specifically, he argued that Puerto Rican plena music is the genre most associated with musicians providing actual musical (in-person) support to protests and protestors.

Unity

Three participants stressed the role of music in fostering unity in the protests through several means. According to the fourth participant, "music can group people together, organize them; you start playing and people align or synchronize with what you are doing." According to the third interviewee, signing together allows people to feel as if they are not alone, at least during the protest. In addition to music as a mechanism to coordinate behaviors, the second participant argued that music can model unity to protestors. He remembered a speech by one of the organizers of protests against Rosselló, made up of several choruses, telling protestors that they all came from different musical ensembles to show they were one people and that we must be united. The interviewee added, "The point was to show the importance of how we come from different places, but we were here together now." This information was relevant for protestors to model unity effectively; the organizer was explicit that many of these singers did not know each other at the time but would still sing together.

Relationships With Organizers

Relationships with organizers were described as positive by the first, second, and sixth musicians and somewhat contentious by the first and third musicians. According to the first and second interviewees, protestors supported the musicians by letting them go first and ensuring they had enough space to play comfortably. Both organizers and activists would also use umbrellas to shade musicians from the sun and give them water, snacks, and alcohol. The sixth musician added that while such support might not occur in every protest, such gestures towards musicians do not typically occur in private events.

The third participant described several festival-like events by political organizations in which they expected plena groups to perform free of charge while other popular orchestras were likely charging a significant fee. As I had been in a similar situation, we joked that the tokens they used to "pay" musicians who were not part of the large orchestras could only be used to buy a can and a half of beer at the event. The first participant and the musicians she played with at an event to support LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) rights, on the other hand, had to deal with the organizers' attempt to censure their chants as they used terms that are

deemed by some as derogatory. However, she and the other musicians had reclaimed such terms and used them in their speech and decided to fight the organizers' censure by improvising chants with all the terms they could think of and asking, in their singing, which terms the organizers objected to.

Discussion

The performative praxis of using one's presence and musical knowledge in a public space for a musical performance that engages in direct political action is an embodied discursive practice that problematizes and questions social and political discourses and policies that interfere with people's lives and well-being. As Butler wrote, "The way we gather on the street, sing or chant, or even maintain our silence, is part of the performative dimension of politics, situating speech as one bodily act among others"[34] which requires the coordination, negotiation, and sometimes confrontation of different cosmovisions[35] on how to come together politically against threats to collective well-being.

Musicians have ontologized music as an integral and fundamental element of protests in Puerto Rico. By doing so, the construct a discourse that places music, and the roles of musicians as integral in political demonstration. Furthermore, music is placed higher in an imaged hierarchy of political art for it participants description highlight not only the aesthetic (i.e., beautiful) dimensions of music, but its perceived ability, beyond other arts, to create community-like bonds during protests. At the same time, there is a recognition and assertion that this process is cultural as it refers to how musicians perceive the Puerto Rican/Caribbean identity as one embedded in the arts of sounds and rhythm. Political musickings can make protests more palatable to musicians and others by helping create a joyous, non-violent atmosphere. As a performative praxis, music also draws from local traditions through which these practices are understood and shared[36]. By talking about the cultural and communal aspects of music, they also construct the use of Puerto Rican social movements as inviting and appealing.

As scholars have noted, many recent social movements are constituted through more flexible processes than the previous model of the strong leader[37]. As music is seen as a source of collective identity and unity, the use of music and musicians allows organizers and activists to adopt outreach and steering strategies (in terms of protestors' actions during a strike) that can conflict with traditional forms of leadership. This includes musicians' overt critique of the leader of a political group who refused musicians entrance to their camp, opposition to censorship, and comments on the exploitation of musicians in festivals where some are underpaid. The critique of the leader who needed to rest and therefore had no interest in music

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34 Butler, 2015a, p. 207.
35 Pichón-Rivière, 1985.
36 Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Martínez Tapia, 2017; Rosenthal & Flacks, 2012.
37 Casttells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012.

is quite telling for the interviewee even calls into question his presence as in the praxis of the social movement, it made no sense to him that activist-musicians would be turned away by them. Here we can see an underlying subjectivation grounded on the implicit recognition of a bond and expected relationship between musicians, activists, and organizers.

Similarly, when the sixth participant described popular artists as if they also had taken a more traditional leadership role, he questioned the legitimacy of their political discourse. This does not mean that all interviewees reject traditional leadership or popular artists who protest, but they critically address how one role (political leader or artist) can obscure the other (political discourse or music). If we take participant's account as complementary, they construct a subjectivation through which musicians have a legitimate leadership-like on-the-ground role that should be acknowledged by others while at the same time problematizing what could be perceived as more traditional top-bottom leadership styles.

When the issue of leadership was brought up in situations in which the musicians played, it is constructed in a slightly different yet complementary manner. For example, to the first participant, being in front of the protest is almost a responsibility, generating feelings of shyness. The leader-like steering of musicians, who might help move the picket line along a specified path, seems to be reciprocated and reinforced by protestors who, using the general codes of familial gatherings, take care of the performers by bringing them tokens of appreciation in the form of shade, water, snacks, and alcoholic drinks, particularly by other protestors. This showcases the intersubjective elements of subjectivation as shade and water (and even alcoholic drinks) serve to reinforce the bond among musicians and protestors. Through these small on-the-spot gestures, there is a performative recognition of a form of leadership, or at least of the significance of the musician's roles, that seems acceptable to the protestors by protecting the musicians' well-being. From a sociopsychological perspective, the relationship between flexible notions of leadership and representing social identities is quite significant, as successful musical groups tend to have democratic leaders[38]. At the same time, flexible leadership styles seem to be preferred by recent social movements[39]. Furthermore, their shyness and reluctance to fully adjudicate a leadership role to their performances, points to a mode of subjectivation whereby they are part of the protests and the movement, but not above or beneath it.

While musicians' relationships with activists are described favorably, their relationships with organizers are, on the other hand, were not always described as positive. Here the agency of musicians, regarding what to chant, and the sense they were being exploited, led them to resist (either by refusing to play for free or double-

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[38] Davidson, 1997; Murningham & Conlon, 1991.
[39] Casttells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012.

down on their chants), organizers. In a way, these organizers, while criticizing the government and public policy, attempted reproduce exploitative practices (not uncommon in the music industry) and censure. In the examples mentioned earlier, they assert themselves, their creative practices, and problematize top-down logics of using music in protests. By doing so, they construct an ethics of musicking that seeks to move beyond exploitation and censure that would have made the musicians subservient to the organizers and position musicians at the periphery of the protest.

Musician's discourse on unity also positions music (and themselves) as embodying and promoting unity. This again supports an on-the-ground, perhaps, meso-level leader-like subjectivations where musicians take on (and are expected to take) a role in building, supporting, and steering the protest. As Eyerman & Jamison argue: "As cognitive praxis, music helps to constitute a collective actor by actualizing and articulating preexisting forms of social solidarity"[40]. A musician's performative praxis, as described by the fourth interviewee, also intends to embody a collective identity they expect to model to protestors. In doing so, their musical performance is meant partly to promote the relational and affective patterns of the crowd[41]. Just as musicians received unexpected support from protestors, musicians showed up unannounced to strikes and protests. It is worth noting that spontaneous gatherings among musicians played an important role in the history of Puerto Rican music, as some important bands got their start through such encounters many decades ago[42].

The performance of solidarity through music in these cases is, in part, constructed as an element of deep cultural ties in which genres not associated with the same historical significance are cast as outsiders. These ties and the musician's relationships with activists and organizers negotiate an ethics where music is an integral feature of the protests and their maintenance through ethical leadership-like practices that expect a reciprocated sense of care with activists and the assertion of their agency in conflicts with organizers seeking to censure or exploit them.

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