



# Hole in the Wall

**CELESTE FRASER DELGADO** | **DECEMBER 28, 2000** | **4:00AM**

All the funky new performance spaces in Little Havana dressed in tatters on Friday, December 15, to honor Saint Lazaro, otherwise known as Babalu Aye, the Afro-Cuban *orisha* of plague and healing. At El Hueco, the makeshift theater inside Ozone Video on SW Seventeenth Avenue, two empty chairs sat ominously alongside a table set for a tarot card reading. One block east at P.S. 742 on SW Sixteenth Avenue, the folklore company Ifé-Ilé danced like old men dying, backs bent and limbs jerking, hands flicking an imaginary whisk in circles across their bodies to clean the sores of leprosy. Further east and to the north, at lab6 on SW Sixth Street and Eleventh Avenue, a skeleton reclined in the middle of the exhibition space, draped in purple and flanked by Saint Lazaro's faithful dog.

Few spectators remained in the lab6 gallery at the midnight hour, even though December 16, not December 15, is truly Babalu Aye's day. Carlos Suarez de Jesus -- instigator of the annual celebrations of the saint by Miami's art-world underground along with his wife and collaborator, Vivian Marthell -- put his hand on the shoulder of a tall man beside the skeleton who might himself have been a messenger of death, dressed in black and wearing dark sunglasses. "I have a guitar," Suarez told Roberto Poveda, "in case you want to sing."

"Oh, I have my own guitar," Poveda assured him, and then went about the business of setting up his instrument and a small amplifier that he keeps in the trunk of his car at all times. Accompanying himself with spare percussive chords, he sang sad songs of lost love in an updated version of Cuban filin', a smoky late-night musical form that combines the courtly sentiment of traditional trova with the jagged instrumentation and anguished wails of the blues. Some of the gallery crawlers at lab6 sang along with Poveda's original lyrics, familiar with his work from his occasional gigs about town or from nights like these when the songwriter sets up a show at the slightest invitation. Intent listeners crouched beneath the painted cadavers that line the walls to hear him better as he scatted and whooped in pain. The 39-year-old troubadour knows a thing or two about symbolic death. On this feast of Saint Lazaro, he was hoping for his own redemption.

During an interview at El Hueco a few days after the feast of Babalu Aye, Poveda tells how he came to Miami three years ago from Colombia, where he had lived since leaving his native

Havana in 1989. "I missed the worst years in Cuba," he says of the brutal "special period" that followed his departure, "but I had other things to live through." Brought to the United States by a U.S. label, the singer now finds himself unsigned and alone. "I remember standing in front of my house with tears in my eyes, thinking I had to leave to have any kind of future as a musician," he recalls bitterly. "Now I'm in exactly the same condition as I was then, but I'm far away from home. I could have stayed there and been a musician just the same as I'm doing here."

Poveda's future looked much brighter in 1996, when a representative of Peer Music took an interest in a demo he recorded in Bogotá. The label provided him with a visa for the United States and a living stipend from 1997 through 1999 but never released any of his music. "It was the same thing that always leads to a breakup," he explains. "Differences of artistic criteria." Still, he feels disillusioned by the process. "If we're going to do a project together," he complains, "if you're going to do a project with me, then let it be my project. And if nothing happens, nothing happens. But I found out it doesn't work that way. They told me: "You can't do what you want to do." After a pause he adds, "I'm grateful for all the help they gave me, but in the end I felt totally abandoned."

For Poveda debate about artistic criteria had been a matter for family and friends. His brother Donato Poveda, well-known as half of the Sony Music duo Donato y Esteban, introduced his apprentice to the rigors of composition and performance. "He is just fourteen months older than me, but he belonged to a group of friends who were very serious about music," the younger brother remembers. "They were all just sixteen, seventeen years old -- the oldest was not over twenty -- and they would meet in a park in our neighborhood called Santo Suarez that has a path running around it. The group would sit on one side of the path while one person would perform his songs on a bench on the other side of the path. Then they would criticize the song, the playing, the lyrics, whatever."

More interested in playing ball and goofing off than he was in music, Poveda nevertheless found himself drawn to a composition featured on the televised promotion for the Castro regime's Youth Festival of 1978. "There was this commercial where they would play a piece called "Te Doy una Canción" ["I Give You a Song"]. Every time I heard it I would run into the house and watch how they played the chords," he says, positioning his fingers on air guitar. "Then one afternoon I was walking with a friend through the park on our way to chase girls or something and we passed my brother and his friends. The guitar was just laying on the bench, so I went over, picked it up, and started playing the song from television. I expected them to tell me to get off, to stop playing. But they all paid attention," he says, imitating them stroking their chins thoughtfully. "After that I joined them, singing and writing my own songs."

The troubadour's career has in a certain sense come full circle. After his brush with greatness at Peer Music, he is once again writing for himself and playing for his peers. "I figured out that the only way to survive is to stay out on the move, to keep out on the street," he explains. "That big horse -- what's his name? -- Emilio Estefan, is not going to come knocking on my apartment door asking if I would like to record for him. I have to do it myself. All you need is one of those," he points to the computer where Pablo Duran, the owner of Ozone Video, is playing with MP3 files, "and you can record for yourself."

Guided by that conviction, Poveda self-produced a CD titled *Caminando (Walking)* that he sells out of his trunk, balancing the case on his thigh as he writes a personal message to every purchaser on the plain white cover. "It's like a cry of liberty," he exclaims. "I don't care if I'm good, because I'm not. I don't care if I'm talented, because I'm not. I just have all of these songs inside of me, and I'm going to start recording all of them." The eight tracks in his unnamed collection have the same bare-bones quality as his live performances, a sharp contrast to the unreleased work he recorded for Peer, where his voice often is buried under a lavish production designed to imitate someone else's successful sound, adding up to a kind of Spanish-language Portishead knockoff.

In his own work, the light touch of his acoustic guitar accentuates the nakedness of his voice and startles the listener into an unexpected intimacy. On the title track, which Poveda wrote with fellow Peer Music recording artist Juanes, the syncopated rhythm of the guitar trips up the straight-ahead march of the vocals, pleasantly complicating the otherwise sanguine meditation on the necessity of love. On "Canciones de Amor" ("Love Songs") the chords lap the melody like eddies in a current whose approach is made painful by the certainty of their retreat. Suspended phrasing of both the guitar and the vocals on "Sombras de Ti" ("Shadows of You") heighten the sense of loss communicated by the soft delivery that impacts like a blunt object. Tickled by the faster fingering on "Sueño Mama" ("I Dream, Mama"), that delivery smolders with a passionate petulance. "I don't want anything to do with well-made arrangements," the composer declares, switching to English for effect. "I hate the *clean up*. I work on making the music dirty, sour, like an artisan's work." As with Babalu Aye, what is sickly brings salvation; what is abject is beautiful.

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