

STUDY GUIDE



MIGUELITO: A SONG TO PUERTO RICO **(MIGUELITO: CANTO A BORINQUEN)**

A film by SAM ZUBRYCKI

COLOMBIA, AUSTRALIA, PUERTO RICO / 2020 / 94 MIN
Spanish and English with English subtitles



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BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a foreign film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from.

Find out the history of the New York salsa music scene of the 1970s' and its relationship to Puerto Rico. Listen to some of the artists you find online. Some of the main singers you can listen to are Héctor Lavoe, Willie Colon, Celia Cruz, and Ruben Blades. What are some of the main elements of Puerto Rican salsa music during this time?

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this official synopsis for *Miguelito*:

In 1973, the eleven-year-old Miguelito was discovered singing in San Juan airport by the legendary New York record producer Harvey Averne. Within a year, he went from the slums of Manuel A Perez to recording an album with the finest salsa musicians of the time, to finally performing with Eddie Palmieri at Madison Square Garden in front of 20,000 people. Every radio station played some of his tracks, like Payaso and Canto a Borinquen. A year later, he had disappeared from public life.



- ❑ From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main elements from the film's plot and the socio-political background to the film.
- ❑ How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- ❑ Can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about just from the marketing materials (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images)?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- ❑ The film opens with a collage-like mix of different mediums -- still photographs, archival footage, stock imagery, and new footage. Why do you think the filmmaker chose this mixed structure to open his film?
- ❑ Being a movie about a Latin singer, music obviously plays a huge role in the film. How is salsa music used throughout the film? How is it used for emotional impact? How is it used to transition scenes?
- ❑ This is a documentary, but for the first half of the film it takes on a sort of detective genre similar to Searching for Sugarman. What cinematic techniques does the filmmaker use to keep the audience hooked onto Miguelito's mystery?
- ❑ How does the filmmaker build tension and suspense leading up to the discovery of Miguelito's whereabouts? What cinematic narrative and dramatic tools does he use to keep the audience engaged?
- ❑ How would you describe the film's editing? Is it fast-paced or slow?



NARRATIVE

- ❑ Why do you think the filmmaker decides to open the documentary with a still photograph of Miguelito? Do you remember how he found Miguelito in the first place?
- ❑ Think about the song, “Payaso (Clown),” which opens the film and is Miguelito’s most famous tune. Why do you think the filmmaker chose this song? Think about the song’s emotional tone, as well as its lyrics: “To feel this fear and to think you laugh at me. What is paid from those who laugh at me. Clown. Yes, I am the clown who has been forgotten.” How do the lyrics express the narrative themes of the documentary?
- ❑ How does the first half of the film portray Miguelito as a sort of mythical figure among Latin music experts? What information does the filmmaker show us? What information does he exclude?
- ❑ Music producers are very influential when it comes to what artists get discovered. They also have great control over music tastes. Think about the portrayal of music producer Harvey Averne in the film, how is this influence emphasized?
- ❑ How is Harvey portrayed at the start of the film? Did you find him a likeable figure when he was first introduced? How does he use his charisma?
- ❑ How does the filmmaker build the legacy of Miguelito? How does he structure and edit the interviews to give Miguelito a mythic-like figure?
- ❑ There are many memorable characters in the documentary: Harvey, Miguelito’s mother, the band members. How does the filmmaker get us to know them? Think of two or three scenes that give you a sense of character of Harvey, Miguelito’s mother or the band members.
- ❑ Why do you think Miguelito’s whereabouts were such a well-kept secret for so long? Why do you think Miguelito was so hard to find? Do you think Harvey had something to do with this?
- ❑ How does the filmmaker make himself a character in the film? Why do you think he does this? Think about his interactions with Harvey.
- ❑ Were you surprised or shocked to find out what happened to Miguelito? Did you think he would still be alive? Why or why not?
- ❑ What would you say is the film’s climax? How does the filmmaker build up to this moment?
- ❑ How does Harvey’s meeting with the family go?
- ❑ Do you think Harvey owns up to his mistakes? Do you forgive him?
- ❑ Think about the scene where Harvey is left alone in the car while Sam buys something from Walgreens. What is the importance of this scene? Do you think Harvey knew the camera was still rolling? Do you think the filmmaker did this deliberately? What emotional impact does this scene have?
- ❑ How does Harvey turn into the film’s antagonist by the film’s third act? Do you think Sam, the filmmaker, sympathizes with him? Why or why not?
- ❑ Do you think Harvey is guilty? What do you make of him as a character by the film’s end? Do you hate him? Why or why not?
- ❑ Why do you think the film ends with Harvey essentially calling for the documentary to end? “Enough paparazzi,” he jokes. How is this a powerful ending to the documentary?

THEMES

- ❑ Early on, Harvey Averne says there is a distinct difference between New York salsa and Puerto Rican salsa: New York salsa is hectic and fast-paced like the city, while Puerto Rican salsa is laid-back and slow like the beach. Can you think of other examples of music genres whose sounds speak to their place of origin?
- ❑ Do you think there are other cases like Miguelito's in the salsa music business, or do you think he was an exception? Can you think of any examples of young singers (or stars) who became famous at a young age in the United States? How are their stories similar or different to Miguelito's?
- ❑ How is Miguelito's story that of a cinematic tragedy?
- ❑ The film spans New York City, Colombia, Puerto Rico and back. How is the documentary also one about cultural exchange?
- ❑ How is this film also about Puerto Rico and the important role music plays in the country's culture? What images does the filmmaker include to portray this theme in the film?
- ❑ Think about the fact that Harvey is an American businessman and that Miguelito was a poor Puerto Rican boy. How is the story a metaphor for American Imperialism?
- ❑ What do you make of the irony that Miguelito's LP had an interview where he condemned drug use but he himself died from an overdose?
- ❑ How is Miguelito's story one about young fame and unfulfilled promises? What does his story say about the music business, and generally, the show business?
- ❑ How does Harvey's character and attitude follow the classical trope of producers who only care about artists if the art sells? Can you think of any fictional or real examples of this trope?
- ❑ Do you think the film -- and by extension, the filmmaker -- take the family's side? Why or why not? How can you tell?
- ❑ The documentary is in many ways a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of early fame. Do you think it's fair for kids to become famous at a young age? Why or why not? Think of examples of young stars in the United States who ended up drug addicts or abandoned by society and the business. Why does this problem exist?

