

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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It is difficult to sit still when the rattlesnake makes a “scratch, scratch, scratch.” Sound from a guiros syncopates against the rhyming lyrics of a Puerto Rican plena. Pedro Rivera and Susan Zeig’s film, **PLENA IS WORK, PLENA IS SONG**, travels from the sugar plantations of Puerto Rico, to the docks of San Juan, to the streets of New York’s barrio, in search of this unique musical form.

Everywhere the camera roams it finds plena singers, pleneros, combining a rhythmic mix of politics, comments on daily life and love, to create a spicy Caribbean stew of protest, satire, and joy.

The plena’s roots go back to the early 1900s when the majority of Puerto Ricans were peasants, artisans, or farmers. By the late 1920s RCA had created its first plena recording star, Canario. One woman, who recalls working for only 50-cents a day, says, “In those days the poor person’s only source of enjoyment and news was the plena.”

New pleneros, like Mon Rivera and Rafael Cortijo, donned suits and bowties in an effort to move their songs off the streets and into venues like New York’s Palladium and the Tropicana, or into American living rooms through television during the 1950s. Their plenas still enlivened every imaginable topic: unrequited love, mechanization, funerals, unsafe factory conditions, and many more.

During the 1960s the form's commercial viability declined, but the film captures its continuing influence as a large, plena-throbbing throng of people attend the 1985 funeral of popular singer Ismael Rivera. A young man takes the filmmakers on a tour of his shanty town in the shadow of San Juan's skyscrapers. He tells how his father taught him the meaning of plenas, how the pleneros helped build the city, leaving its lingering rhythms in the slabs of concrete and in the hearts of the people.

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### About the Filmmakers

#### **SUSAN ZEIG and PEDRO RIVERA**

Susan Zeig and Pedro Rivera co-directed *Manos a la Obra: The Story of Operation Bootstrap*, which was funded by the NEH, the NEA, and New York State Councils for the Arts and Humanities. Together they directed the Young Filmmakers Super-8 Workshop on New York's Lower East Side. **ZEIG** is an Associate Professor of Film at Long Island University and co-directs a project for the University Satellite Network. **RIVERA** holds a Masters Degree in American Studies and has been awarded an Artist-in-Residence at El Museo del Barrio in New York City.

### Credits

*Plena Is Work, Plena is Song* was funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts- Folk Art Division, and the New York Council on the Humanities.

#### **Directors/ Producers**

*Pedro A. Rivera*

*Susan Zeig*

#### **Cinematographer**

*Andrej Zdravic*

*Susan Zeig*

*Emilio Rodroquez*

#### **Editors**

*Susan Zeig*

*Gary Winter*

#### **Writer**

*Pedro A. Rivera*

#### **Sound**

*Gerald Lindahl*

*Pedro A. Rivera*

Cara Mertes is the Executive Producer of *True Lives*. The series is produced by American Documentary, Inc. Major funding for *True Lives* is provided by the Tides Foundation.