

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin for our fourth and final students spotlight for the semester we spoke with graduating senior Sebastian Otero Oliveras. Sebastian's a musician, and he knew music would play a role in his life at Brown. After spending a semester in Cuba his junior year, he decided to add a Latin American and Caribbean Studies concentration to his ethnomusicology . Major

After that, he took a year off to pursue his music in Puerto Rico before coming back this year to finish his degree. We are truly excited to see what he does next. We talked about his love of music and about how he combined his musical and academic projects. We maybe even had him sing for us. Enjoy.

SEBASTIAN OTERO OLIVERAS: Music has always been a very fundamental part of my life, since I was a little kid. And I came to Brown undecided. I didn't know what to study. But I did have some academic interests in writing, reading, music. And so I took an ethnomusicology elective my first semester of freshman year, and I was like whoa, I kind of can combine all of these things.

It was a really new approach to me to music. And I felt that-- I don't know, it got my interest for sure. And getting to know the music department and it lacked content on Latin American and the Caribbean, as I went to Cuba to study abroad in Fall of 2016, I realized that I wanted to have a more in-depth knowledge of my region. I'm Puerto Rican, so I felt that I needed to study more of that particular region.

So while abroad I realized that the courses I was going to take in Cuba would count for the Latin American and Caribbean Studies concentration. And because that concentration is very interdisciplinary, and very open, I decided just to focus on that and also take it as part of my ethnomusicological and just Brown experience.

SARAH BALDWIN: Talk to me a little bit about ethnomusicology. What's the ethno part of music?

SEBASTIAN OTERO OLIVERAS: I would say the ethno part of music is humans making music. It's so entrenched. And music is not just sound-- music has meaning, and music has the power of transforming people, of reflecting our own culture.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it sort of gives-- it embeds music in a context.

SEBASTIAN In a context, in a particular context. And the really cool thing about it is you can have an
OTERO ethnomusicological approach to music in whatever context it is. It's not necessarily something
OLIVERAS: that has to do with a very specific community. But you can have an ethnomusicological
approach of like, I don't know, music as activism, music as a reflection of ecology.

SARAH BALDWIN: Interesting. And what were you doing in Cuba for your Junior year abroad? What were you
studying specifically?

SEBASTIAN I took two courses in the Faculty of Letters and Arts in the University of Havana, one of
OTERO literature and one of art history. And then I took a sociology course on the legacies of slavery
OLIVERAS: in Cuban contemporary society. And another one on cinema. But I pretty much also went to
explore the music there. I try to be as curious as possible and tried to immerse myself as
much as I could in the hip hop scene and the singer songwriter scene, which is called Nueva
Trova or Trova in Cuba.

SARAH BALDWIN: What does that mean?

SEBASTIAN It's-- I would say it's kind of like what a singer songwriter in terms of like folk music would
OTERO sound like here in the US. But particular to Latin America. And much of it-- it's closely related
OLIVERAS: to the canción protesta, which originated during the revolution in Cuba as part of like
preaching or just communicating the ideals of the revolution.

And so I was trying-- really trying-- to make connections and just like understand myself and
see another-- just by the close relationship between Puerto Rico and Cuba and the long
history of relationships-- trying to see another way of living the Caribbean experience. And like
the possibilities are the possibilities of my country through the lens of Cuba.

SARAH BALDWIN: You're a violinist and you're a singer songwriter. You were a violinist from a very young age.
Did you arrive at Brown already a singer songwriter?

SEBASTIAN I had written a couple songs, but here I took it way more seriously.
OTERO
OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: And so I'm wondering, did you interact with musicians directly in Cuba? Like were you jamming
together? Were you writing songs and having them played? Or were you consuming music?

SEBASTIAN Yeah, so first I just started going to shows and to whomever I thought it was of-- that I thought

OTERO his or her project was inspiring. I would just reach out and was like, I'm a musician, I'm from
OLIVERAS: Puerto Rico. That already opened a door-- a lot of doors for me. And I would say, like, I want to be your friend.

Like, I play violin, I sing, whatever. But mainly I just want to be your friend. And from those type of relationships I ended up traveling to one city with one singer songwriter and rapper and play violin for him. I even had my own hip hop show in one club called La Gruta and I performed three times in this kind of like block party, this rap duo called Obsesión in Regla.

I performed there three times and I made a track with one of them. And then I came back for spring break and I recorded a little bit more. And then last year of March, March of last year, of 2018, I spent five weeks working in a studio that pretty much just unites the rock scene there. So I also got to know that scene. I recorded my stuff, mixed a couple products. So I feel like Cuba became a place where I'm going to be visiting regularly.

Cimafunk, the Cuban artist, was here. And I met him there. And we became friends. So it was amazing to just finish the cycle of the Brown experience by just having him here and just performing together [INAUDIBLE] one of my songs. You know, like, I-- it was a very-- in such a short amount of time I felt like I did a lot and I really took a really big part of my heart, that city and those people.

SARAH BALDWIN: What about it that you love so much?

SEBASTIAN I think I-- so it's-- in terms of the people it's the closest thing to being a Puerto Rican. And I felt
OTERO so much love and warmth from them. And as this-- the same way Puerto Rico has a rich
OLIVERAS: culture, I felt Cuba has its own. And by being-- by growing up listening to a lot of Cuban music, I felt like I already knew some of it.

But by being there and having those references made it possible for me to dive more into other stuff in there. So I don't know. I also fell in love there, so that was probably one of the things that prompted me to go back. I don't know, I-- I--

SARAH BALDWIN: It speaks to you.

SEBASTIAN Yeah, it speaks to me, really closer to my heart.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: Why did you want to come to Brown?

SEBASTIAN I thought it was going to go to the University of Puerto Rico. Both my parents went there. And I
OTERO went to school to a Jesuit school with a full scholarship. My parents would not be able to pay
OLIVERAS: for that. And there I learned that the same way my high school had a financial aid program, universities here in the US also have financial aid programs.

So that's how I started to look into schools that had really good financial aid packages. And one of my childhood friends got into Brown. And one Spring Break I met some of her friends, and I really enjoyed how diverse they were. Like for example, her ex-boyfriend played the cello, was in the soccer club, and studied physics. And I was like, wow, this is amazing, just be able to be around people who do a lot of things and have so many different interests.

So it was always in my mind. And I took a summer program here, a summer class. And I thought that the campus was all right. Like it was an extraordinary. I didn't visit any other campuses. So that was my expectation of what a college campus is. So I applied early decision, and I got in. And that was pretty much it. And I'm really blessed. I haven't had to pay anything to be here.

SARAH BALDWIN: And has it lived up to your hopes?

SEBASTIAN Yes. Yes. I've grown a lot. I think one of the most fundamental aspects of this community is the
OTERO student community. I've learned so much from my friends and just be able to sit at a table with
OLIVERAS: people that have such many different backgrounds, and to know their stories, and know the similarities and differences of where they come from and who they are has definitely impacted my own personal life, as well as my music, as well as my academic curiosities.

SARAH BALDWIN: Speaking of your academic curiosity, what-- did you write a thesis?

SEBASTIAN Yeah, I did.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: What was it about?

SEBASTIAN I took poems of a Puerto Rican author called Ángela María Dávila and I made them into
OTERO songs. And so I did the musicalization-- as I would say in Spanish [SPANISH], and I did the
OLIVERAS: writing part, which is pretty much just doing a textual analysis of the poem, and how from that

point I based my creative decisions.

And it was a project that pretty much encompassed my experience here and my passion for music making, my passion for lyrics, for poetry, the dialogue between poetry and music. And then, again, going back to the Caribbean identity and the ethnomusicological and literature, like personal and academic questions-- everything right there in that little baby.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what's next for you?

SEBASTIAN What's next? I really want to perform my thesis with my band back home. I'm really excited to

OTERO do that.

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: Is that la ponina?

SEBASTIAN La ponina, exactly.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: What does la ponina mean?

SEBASTIAN La ponina is a Cuban word, actually, that pretty much means to everyone, collect like a group

OTERO of people, put something-- that's why it's ponina, as in poner. You put something to buy

OLIVERAS: whatever it is for the group.

So the idea behind it is that every single band member puts their dreams, their fears, into this project. And also talks about the musical fusions that I try to do and don't try to stay really close to one genre. I really believe in fusions. And also in the content of my songs I could talk about love, but then also about like political issues in my country or whatever I feel like I need to talk about. So that's what it means. Pretty much in essence. And that's the plan. Graduate, go back home, work a lot in my music, and see what happens.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's amazing. Will you sing a little something for us that you've written?

SEBASTIAN Yeah, totally.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

[SPANISH SINGING]

We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine.

[SPANISH SINGING]

Where did he go? Was he going home? Please don't let your story ever, ever go untold?

SARAH BALDWIN: My god, that was so beautiful? Can you tell me what that was about?

SEBASTIAN Yes. It's about these person that transform itself. He's in the desert of Atacama, he becomes
OTERO the bone that a dog is chewing in a square in Andalucía while five gypsies are organizing a
OLIVERAS: poetry night, and then he's in Abbey Road singing Yellow Submarine.

And then that other part of the song, which I didn't sing, talks about the trip of going in a boat, migrating from one island to the other-- to the golden island. And it's a song about migration. And like, it's for the people that risk their lives to keep living. And I do it in Spanish and English just because that's part of who I am by being here, being in this country for almost five years. And yes, that's the main idea of the song.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what's it called?

SEBASTIAN Memoria Fragmentada, Fragmented Memory.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: Sebastian, thank you so much for coming in and talking to us.

SEBASTIAN No, thank you.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: This was great.

SEBASTIAN Thank you.

OTERO

OLIVERAS:

SARAH BALDWIN: To this episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards and Babette Thomas.

Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to Watson.Brown.edu

And finally, a big congrats to all our graduating seniors. We're so excited to see what you all do next. Thanks for listening. We'll be back soon with another episode of Trending Globally.