

# What Makes Miami, Miami?

By Vanessa Navarro

*It's a lot more than sand in one's shoes, although we use that illustration to explain why people love Miami and choose to stay. It's about the diversity of our residents and the diversity of their cultural heritages, their foods, and traditions. It's about our geographic location as a great international community and a gateway to Europe, Asia, Central, and South America. It's about economic opportunity and yes, it's about climate--sun, sand, ocean, beaches and balmy breezes. Finally, it's about a fun and exciting place to live. That's what makes Miami, MIAMI.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

What makes Miami, Miami? A stranger to Miami may answer by drawing from the city's portrayal in movies and TV shows as a tropical paradise with beaches, parties, and beautiful people in bikinis. A native's answer may also include descriptions of Miami's endless, sometimes brutal sunshine and its sandy beaches, but many Miamians will tell you that there is more to this fascinating city than its water and weather. There is a rich complexity under the glimmering surface.

The Florida Folklife Program sought to explore Miami's inner world thirty years ago with the first Miami-Dade folklife survey conducted for the [1986 Florida Folk Festival](#). The survey highlighted Miami's traditional culture and provided the impetus for the creation of the South Florida Folklife Center at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, now HistoryMiami Museum. In 2016, the Florida Folklife Program partnered with the now three-decades-old HistoryMiami South Florida Folklife Center to reexamine Miami's folk traditions and paint a new portrait of the city by exploring the question, "What makes Miami, Miami?" Fieldwork was conducted by HistoryMiami Museum's Folklife Specialist, Vanessa Navarro, and Vice President of Curatorial Affairs and former staff Folklorist, Michael Knoll. The project was overseen by the Florida Folklife Program's State Folklorist, Amanda Hardeman.

This field research project focused on customs and practices that are unique to Miami, particularly the sayings, occupations, musical styles, dance forms, beliefs, rituals, celebrations, and foodways that are quintessentially "Miami." The findings of this study informed the 2016 Florida Folk Festival, and the artists and presenters chosen for the program reflect a sampling of the components that make Miami the unique and vibrant city it is.

## Painting a Portrait of Today's Miami

*Home to wanderers - almost everyone is from somewhere else and brought the best of where they were, to mix and mingle in merry mayhem - a haven surrounded by water topped by magically lit towers springing from glistening waters against a blazing sky – it's magical. It's Miami.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Miami is a transient city, surrounded by water, with people heading in and out from all directions. It's an unusually diverse city composed of fragmented communities that tend to isolate themselves from each other. People come to South Florida and often find a microcosm of the places they came from, built and maintained by immigrants before them. It's easy for many newcomers to continue their traditions and speak the languages spoken in their home countries. For these reasons, Miami's folklife is exceptionally rich and diverse.

Miami is also a relatively new city, incorporated in 1896. Even before its incorporation, the diversity of people who lived here or passed through was remarkable. Today, over 2.6 million people live in Miami-Dade County. According to the 2014 American Community Survey, the county's population is 66% Hispanic or Latino, with over half of that population claiming Cuban ancestry. The Black community, which includes African American and Afro-Caribbean residents, makes up almost 20% of the total population, with the White, non-Hispanic population at just 15%. In addition to the unusually diverse array of people who

### **What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Ability to live in a foreign country and enjoy multiple cultures and still be within the US.*

-HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

live in Miami, tourists also contribute to the mix. According to the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, in 2015 alone, 15.5 million tourists visited Miami, roughly half of which were domestic visitors. International tourists, primarily from Europe and the Caribbean, accounted for the other half. Today's Miami is even more ethnically diverse than it was thirty years ago with influxes of immigrants from all over Latin America and increasing populations from South American countries, particularly Venezuelans, Hondurans, and Colombians according to the 2010 census. The cultural landscape continues to evolve with constant waves of newcomers and visitors to Miami's shores.

## Intersections of Urban Traditions and Popular Culture

*Miami is a blend of surreality surrounded by stunning beauty and filled with frustration. We drive slowly through neighborhoods of incredible poverty literally adjacent to million dollar homes. We eat food from a dozen countries in an average day, and usually converse in bits and pieces of 3 languages. It's loud, often wet and hot, and laden with little treasures of shops and people found nowhere else in the world. It takes a lot to live here, but for those who can handle it, there's no place else.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Miami earned its nickname, The Magic City, due to its rapid growth from a typical Southern town to a booming city, seemingly overnight. Over 100 years since its incorporation, the city maintains its magical ability to change the landscape at an incredible rate. When exploring the expressive culture of a city like

### **What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*...a blend of different cultures and the possibility of enjoying magnificent weather most of the time. The capacity of having a chaotic, disorganized city and still have the daily adventure of loving it!*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Miami, where there is always something new around the corner, it's necessary to include more recent developments in order to capture a realistic understanding of the cultural framework and the city's living, breathing folklife.

In areas such as Little Havana and Little Haiti among others, you will find centuries-old practices from distant places maintained by immigrant populations alongside more recent developments in traditional culture, such as street art and graffiti. These urban traditions are manifestations of Miami's

longstanding and thriving hip hop culture as well as its booming art scene. In the growing Wynwood neighborhood, an international hub for mural art, the streets are canvasses for local and visiting artists alike. Many of these contributing artists came into the street art scene as graffiti writers, learning the art form as apprentices and from other members of their B-boy crews. Although these art forms have made their way into popular, mainstream culture, these urban traditions are shared informally and passed down experientially within distinct folk groups.

Miami's music scene is no different when considering how older genres live alongside and often fuse with newer music styles. The city's thriving DJ culture has evolved through the decades, beginning with its roots in hip hop culture in the

80s and 90s to today's booming electronic dance music (EDM) scene. Similar to hip hop, EDM straddles the realms of mainstream popular culture and traditional culture. Apart from the music, the EDM scene includes distinctive adornment, lingo, and customs that make up the cultural framework of this particular group of music lovers. EDM events such as festivals and live shows provide a space for members of this folk group to perform and enact the culturally specific practices associated with this genre, such as exchanges of handmade bracelets (called kandi) through a handshake of gestures that symbolize the lifestyle concept and credo PLUR (peace, love, unity, and respect). DJ culture and EDM

### **What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Warm sun, sparkling Biscayne Bay, a mix of cultures since the beginning, and a place for new opportunities for tenacious souls; that's what makes Miami, Miami.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

music make up a prevalent part of everyday life in Miami, especially within youth culture. These music genres and the circles in which they thrive are important components to the city’s music scene and world-famous nightlife, both of which contribute to Miami’s unique character.

## Exploring What Makes Miami, Miami

At the onset of this research project, HistoryMiami Museum conducted a community poll and asked residents to help answer the question, “What makes Miami, Miami?” Based on these answers, researchers composed a list of artists, craftsmen, and tradition bearers that demonstrated the themes and characteristics that were most prevalent in the survey results.

The most common characteristic highlighted was Miami’s rich diversity and its people. Residents commented on the vast array of musical styles, languages, and kinds of food that can be heard and tasted on the streets of Miami from all corners of the world, but especially from Latin America and the Caribbean. Answers also pointed to elements that were particular to Miami, such as

### What Makes Miami, Miami?

*The people - always in motion with actions and ideas!*

- HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

the use of “Spanglish” as an acceptable language and the city’s famously frustrating traffic. Of course, many answers focused on Miami’s natural environment, celebrating its sunshine, beaches, and water and the variety of ways that residents and visitors enjoy the landscape. The artists and tradition bearers documented during this project reflect a sampling of what life is like in South Florida and the many cultures and people that make Miami what it is.

## Music

Given its unusually diverse and fragmented makeup, Miami’s folklife is rich and varied, and syncretism is not common. However, there is one domain in which Miamians are comfortable with fusing different cultures – music. You can hear music from around the world here, but you can also see combinations of elements from different genres to create new sounds. There is no concrete definition of the “Miami Sound,” but if there were any definitive characteristic, it would be fusion. A prime example of Miami’s characteristic musical fusion can be found in the sounds of DJ Le Spam.

**DJ Le Spam** (Andrew Yeomanson) was raised in Toronto, Bogota, and London, and has called Miami home since 1993. Since he was young, he has been fascinated with a plethora of musical genres, equipment of all kinds, and experimenting with recorded sound. Although he is primarily a DJ, he began playing guitar at a young age and started his musical career as a guitarist. Along the way, he added to his now massive vinyl collection and when off the road, would DJ locally. He collaborated with different artists on projects and performances under the name Spam Allstars. Since the last decade or so, the group has formed into a more concrete group of musicians from a variety of backgrounds. DJ Le Spam & Spam Allstars describe their music as *electronic descarga*, a blend of improvisational electronic elements

and turntables with Latin, funk, hip hop, and dub. Their sound paints an auditory portrait of what it's like to live in Miami's rich cultural mix.

Renowned DJ, Artist Delgado, also known as **DJ Craze**, was born in Managua, Nicaragua. He came to the United States in 1980, first arriving in San Francisco and shortly after, moving to Miami. He was first introduced to DJing by his older brother, who was spinning at local parties, and he began helping him at gigs across the city. Craze performed within different music scenes, playing electronic music at raves and Miami Bass at hip hop clubs. He became particularly interested in turntablism and began to diligently practice different scratching techniques. At the age of 15, he entered his first competition, and to the surprise of his much older opponent, he won. He continued to compete in regional and national competitions until he made it to the DMC World DJ Championships in 1998, winning the trophy three times consecutively. He is the only solo DJ in history to accomplish this. He has won multiple championships and awards throughout his career and is highly regarded as an expert and pioneer in the DJ world. He no longer competes but continues to perform all over the globe, including sets at the Winter Music Conference and Ultra Music Festival in Miami. Craze is adamant about maintaining the practice of turntablism in DJ culture and continues to be regarded as an important voice within this community and an expert in his craft.

**Michael Obregon** is a Spanglish rapping MC for local band, **The Problem Kids**. Mario describes the band's music as "island hip hop," fusing diverse musical styles as well as the backgrounds of the band's members: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. Mario incorporates Spanglish in his music, a language predominantly spoken in Miami. Mario's love of music and poetry converged when he began freestyling

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Its diversity of languages, music, and customs, coupled with lots of sunshine!*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

with his friend, Christian Martinez who was creating hip hop beats. The two began to practice together and eventually formed a duo called The Dream Team. Mario and Christian recruited other musicians and debuted as The Problem Kids in the early 2010s with two MCs, a bassist, a guitarist, drummer, and a member who doubles as a keys and saxophone player. All six band members are from Miami and most are first generation

Americans of immigrant families from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. This mix of cultural backgrounds is evident in their music which includes elements of hip hop, rock, and Caribbean rhythms. The Problem Kids is a reflection of the city that birthed the group with diversity and fusion at the core of their sound.

**The Lee Boys**, one of America's most celebrated sacred steel ensembles, are another example of the product of fusing traditional and popular music styles. This family band created a unique brand of sacred steel music, a little-known African American gospel music tradition thriving in South Florida. Sacred steel is described as an inspired, unique form of Gospel music with a hard-driving, blues-based beat. The musical genre is rooted in Gospel, but infused with rhythm and blues, jazz, rock, funk, hip-hop, and country. This music features lap and pedal steel guitars, a type of guitar played with a bar or slide called a "steel." From Perrine, FL, The Lee Boys consist of two generations of musicians, all of whom grew up in the House of God Church where their father and grandfather performed this style of music.

Another artist who fuses religious music with popular music genres is musician, artist, and Vodou priest, **Jude “Papaloko” Thegenus**. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jude Thegenus, known to most as Papaloko, entered the Catholic priesthood at a young age, but after a series of events which included recurring dreams and a conversation with his grandmother, he decided to leave the priesthood and begin his three-year initiation into the Vodou religion. He learned from his grandmother (who was a Vodou priestess) about growing food, making medicine, and acting as a leader in the community. He currently serves the Vodou community in Miami as a counselor and priest, leading ceremonies and celebrations, but the bulk of his work as a priest is as an advisor. He views his work as a priest, artist, and musician as being intertwined because his art and music are rooted in the Vodou religion. In the 1990s, Papaloko created the music style “Vodou Pop” which is a fusion of samba, Brazilian, Haitian, Pop, and African elements. He is the bandleader for Loray Mistik which specializes in this music style. Aside from his work as an artist, musician, and priest, Papaloko is an advocate and in 2004 established a non-profit organization, Papaloko4Kids, with the mission of empowering the youth through the arts. Papaloko is multifaceted and dedicated to the many creative enterprises he has built. He explains that everything he does, especially in regards to his work as a priest, is done with love.

## Latin Culture

The influence of Latin culture in Miami is palpable. The smell of Cuban coffee fills the air from street café windows lining the sidewalks, and music from all over Latin America and the Caribbean play loudly outside private homes and businesses. Cuban culture is especially prominent in Miami, and its influence spans all genres of folklife particularly music, foodways, and religious beliefs. One of the more notable religious traditions associated with the Cuban community is the Afro-Cuban Orisha religion (sometimes referred to as Santería or Lukumi). A visible reflection of this prominent religion are the various *botanicas*, or general purpose religious stores, that line the streets. Local Lukumi priest Jeff Gonzalez frequents Miami’s many *botanicas* for his ritual needs.

### What Makes Miami, Miami?

*You are in both the United States and Latin America at the same time.*

-HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

**Jeff Gonzalez** was born and raised in Miami. He is a Lukumi practitioner, although he explains that he has been influenced by and exposed to a variety of religious traditions. He went to Catholic school, and his family has a history of being Espiritistas, or Spiritualists. For the last 45 years or so, Jeff has practiced the Afro-Cuban religion, Lukumi, or what some call Santería. His father became a more involved practitioner of the Lukumi tradition when Jeff was about 9 years old, and his Grandfather was initiated into the tradition in Cuba as a ritual musician specializing in *batá* drumming. Jeff is a Lukumi priest and was initiated to the orisha Obatala 26 years ago in Miami. Jeff’s interview took place at a local *botanica*, a general purpose store for people who practice African-derived spiritual traditions. These stores not only cater to the Afro-Cuban community but also to Haitians, Dominicans, and other groups who practice similar traditions. Jeff conducted a tour of the *botanica* and described the use, origin, and

significance of many of the items for sale. *Botanicas* are important fixtures in the community because they provide a variety of religious paraphernalia in one location.

Aside from Orisha practitioners, there is also a large Jewish population that came to Miami from Cuba. One of these immigrants is Susana Behar whose Sephardic singing has contributed to Miami's musical

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Jewish religious rituals and cultural ceremonies.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

and religious diversity. **Susana Behar** was born in Havana, Cuba to a Cuban father and Cuban/Turkish mother. She grew up listening to the island's traditional music but also to the Sephardic songs that her grandparents brought from Turkey. In 1965, she immigrated to Caracas, Venezuela where she developed a passion for the culture of her ancestors and learned

as much as she could about Sephardic music and the Ladino language. In 1983, she immigrated to the United States and continued to perform these musical styles. Aside from singing for religious ceremonies for Miami's Jewish community, Susana participates in many projects, recitals, and festivals across Venezuela, the United States, Japan, and Peru. She continues to perform primarily Sephardic music, but because of the influence of Cuban and Venezuelan music in her youth, she also performs Latin American folk songs.

Although Cubans make up a large percentage of Miami's immigrant population, there are large groups of immigrants from many Latin American countries, one of the largest being the Venezuelan community.

**Nelly Avila** is a Venezuelan singer specializing in the traditional music genre, *gaita*. Nelly was introduced to the tradition at home, but at a young age, she began training formally in school and continued to learn through her teenage years. She became a licensed teacher and founded a system of *gaita* schools in Venezuela. Aside from her life as an educator, Nelly was also an avid performer, singing with ensembles and famous musicians. She received numerous prestigious

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Its blend of various cultures, including noticeable & notable contributions over the years from Bahamians, Jews, Cubans, Afro-Caribbeans and Central & South Americans*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

awards and is considered a celebrity in her home country. Nelly and her husband Wolfgang Barriga, a *cuatro* player, formed the group La Gran Maquinaria in Venezuela and continue to lead the group from their new home in Miami. Nelly and Wolfgang struggle with the fact that they left behind their lives and careers in Venezuela, but they continue to share their music here in the states. They explain that when they play *gaita* for the Venezuelan community in Miami, it is a way of reconnecting those here to their home country. They also perform this music for audiences from a variety of backgrounds in Miami and enjoy the opportunity to share this art form and introduce people to their culture.

Latin culture permeates Miami's musical landscape as well as the prominent dance genres, such as salsa. There are a variety of dance studios and centers that teach this popular dance style, but one of the longest-running studios is **Salsa Lovers**. Salsa Lovers founder **Rene Gueits** was born and raised in Miami and grew up listening and dancing to salsa music at family parties. Like many of his family members, he was a gifted dancer. In 1992, when he was 24 years old, Rene saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a salsa instructor and thought he would be perfect for the job since he considered himself a great

dancer, not realizing that the establishment was a ballroom studio. He was surprised to see that ballroom salsa instruction was more structured than the dancing he learned while growing up, but he refined his technique by taking classes at the studio and following the dancing syllabus. He worked as a ballroom instructor primarily teaching salsa, and garnered a loyal group of salsa students who followed him as he taught at different studios. Eventually he opened his own studio, Salsa Lovers, which has been highly successful over the last 22 years. Rene developed the Salsa Lovers Authentic Dance Syllabus which provides students with a faster way of learning how to dance socially. An active promoter and competitor, Rene has been awarded at many national dance competitions, and received the honors of City of Miami Proclamation and City of Miami Beach Proclamation.

In addition to religious traditions and music and dance styles, Latin culture contributes heavily to local foodways of which the “cafecito” is a staple. Street café windows called “ventanitas” are found across the county and servers such as **Iris Diaz** busily serve Cuban coffee called *cafecito* and snacks throughout

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Cuban coffee. Dark and strong, but with no bitterness because of its dizzying sweetness, and it doesn't break the bank to have one a day.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

the day at **Sergio's Restaurant** in Westchester. Since she began at Sergio's in 1987, Iris has worked at the *ventanita* where she takes orders, serves food, and makes coffee. Iris Diaz was born Camaguey, Cuba in 1949. She left Cuba, first arriving in New York, and later came to Miami in 1987. She began working at Sergio's Restaurant shortly after moving to Miami. Iris is not only a beloved employee but an important part of this established restaurant. The customers know her by name and

ask for her specifically because she is known for making the best *cafecito*. She learned to make it from her grandmother and uses her same technique. Iris explains that her job not only requires technical skill but also interpersonal skills. The *ventanita* is a place where people come to talk, gather, and unwind, and Iris must be a good listener to attend to the customers and their needs. Iris has many stories about the kinds of encounters that occur at the café window that demonstrate the significance of the window to the community. There are friends who gather there regularly, customers who come to the window as a part of their daily routine, and many reunions of people who have not seen each other in decades. Iris says that she is now retired, although she still comes to work every day of the week. She is an important part of Sergio's and her story is a testament to the significance of *ventanitas* and *cafecitos* to this community.

In addition to cafecitos, Miami is known for a popular cocktail with origins in Cuba – the mojito. **Kevin Morris** is a Bartender and Bar Manager at Ortanique on the Mile, a Caribbean restaurant that has been consistently voted as one of the top places to drink a mojito in Miami. The mojito is as iconic to Miami as Art Deco, and the cocktail is a part of Miami's identity as a Caribbean influenced city with a vibrant nightlife. Kevin explains that what is special about Ortanique's mojito is not only its fresh ingredients, but the quick speed at which the mojito is made. Kevin's interest in bartending began when he was about 14 years old, and it was sparked by his father's old fashioned bar that housed a variety of containers, bitters, and other ingredients and tools for making

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*Jai-Alai, mojitos, basketball, yucca con mojo, Art Deco...*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response



cocktails. He has been bartending now for 16 years and began by going to Bartending School. After Bartending School, he waited tables for two years before he could work behind the bar, which he explains is typical when beginning in this kind of career. Later in his career, he began to view bartending as a form of art and maintains that approach to his work. For Kevin, the ability to understand and communicate with customers is as important as the ability to craft cocktails. He considers himself to be a speed bartender focused on efficiency and stresses the use of picking the right ingredients when making drinks. He is knowledgeable about the history of bartending, bartending trends in Miami, and bartending techniques, as well as the significance of the mojito to Miami's history and culture.

**Suzy Battle** also brings flavors from Cuba to life in Miami at her "Cuban ice cream shop," the **Azucar Ice Cream Company** which features Cuban-based flavors. The shop's most popular flavor is Abuela Maria which has guava, cream cheese, and Maria Crackers. She created the flavor Mantecado, based on the Spanish dessert, after continuous requests from the players at Domino Park across the street. There is also a flavor called Willy Cherrino, named after the famed Cuban singer Willy Chirino and made with bourbon and two different types of cherry. Before going into the ice cream business, Suzy Battle was a Banker for 20 years. When the industry plummeted in 2008, she began looking for a new business venture to support her family. The idea of an ice cream shop came about because Suzy is part of a "big ice cream family." Her grandmother made ice cream in Cuba and across Latin America, taking fruits from different countries to make unique flavors. Growing up, Suzy ate ice cream with her family every single night, and it was a special family tradition. Because of her longtime love of ice cream, she decided to open her shop but did not know how to make ice cream herself. She attended the ice cream school at Penn State and the Frozen Dessert Institute in St. Louis. Suzy opened the Azucar Cuban ice cream shop in July 2011 in the heart of Miami's Little Havana. In its five years in business, Azucar has become an important part of the Little Havana neighborhood and of the larger Miami community. Azucar's ice cream can also be found at local hotels and restaurants such as Sergio's. It is a popular stop for tourists and locals alike and is a quintessential Miami establishment.

Across the street from the Azucar Ice Cream Company is Maximo Gomez Park, also known as **Domino Park**, where regulars such as **Joaquin Mesa** come to play almost every day. Joaquin Mesa was born in Havana, Cuba in 1946 and came to the US in 1989 as a political exile. Joaquin is a skilled domino player and a frequent visitor to Little Havana's Maximo Gomez Domino Park. He was even featured in a documentary about Domino Park called *Doble 9* produced by local filmmaker Karina Silva. Joaquin learned to play the Cuban version of dominos, the double nine version, when he was about 5 years old in Cuba, where the game is frequently played at home and at gatherings. In Cuba, Joaquin would often play for money, but here, he mostly plays for interest because gambling is not allowed at the park. He sometimes plays in formal tournaments across the state. Joaquin is an expert in the rules, lingo, and strategies for playing in pairs, including the ways that players communicate with one another without speaking by using their eyes and subtle body movements. Frequenting Domino Park almost every day, he not only enjoys playing the game but reuniting with friends and neighbors. Domino Park sits in the heart of Little Havana, and although the city's Cuban culture is prominently exhibited on the streets, the domino players at the park come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and age groups. The park is a significant gathering place for locals as well as a tourist destination for visitors to Miami.

## Material Culture

Immigrants are often tied to their homelands in a special way in Miami. People not only preserve and practice the traditions from their birthplaces; they maintain connections with their homeland through self-identification and their ideas surrounding sense of place. One of the first questions people ask when meeting each other in Miami is, “Where are you from?” and the concept of *home* or *origin* is often shared between Miami and some other place, even if you were born in Miami or have been living in the city for decades. There is, however, one ethnic group for which Miami has been the only home for almost

300 years, the Seminole Indians. Adapting to life in the Everglades, Seminoles developed ingenious ways to survive in these wetlands, and one such method was carving dugout canoes. Pedro Zepeda continues to practice this centuries-old tradition in South Florida.

**Pedro Zepeda** grew up learning a variety of traditional Seminole arts from his family, particularly his grandmother who taught him basket weaving, beading, and sewing. He became interested in canoe carving as he grew older and learned from an experienced tribe member about the process, from selecting the right piece of wood to creating a smooth finish. Although he is skilled in a variety of woodworking, beading, and patchwork traditions, Pedro specializes in basketry and canoe carving. He has an interest in lost or dying practices and remarkably taught himself how to make a kind of traditional basket by trying to replicate it through trial-and-error. Pedro is not only a skilled artist but a seasoned demonstrator. He worked for the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Seminole Museum in Clewiston, FL as a presenter of a variety of Seminole arts and led numerous programs for the museum.

Like Seminole patchwork, the *quinceañera* tradition is a custom that is rooted in history but evolves in response to modern trends. This rite of passage is practiced in many Latin American countries, and because of the Miami’s large immigrant population, this is a prevalent tradition in Miami. Zayas Bridal and Quinceañeras in Hialeah is a decades-old establishment that has offered an array of *quinceañera* dresses, accessories, and much more for 20 years. Owner **Lillian Zayas** was born in Cuba and came to the United States when she was 12 years old. Her parents opened their clothing store in Hialeah in 1968, and Lilliane grew up in the family business, eventually taking over as Owner. She attended Miami Dade College where she studied Fashion Design. In 1997, Zayas began selling *quinceañera* dresses when many of her family members were turning fifteen and looking for dresses for their birthday celebrations. Her *quinceañera* dress business bloomed, and she began to specialize in this area. Zayas purchases dresses and alters the designs in-house to customize dresses for her clients’ tastes and specific party themes. Along with *quinceañera* dresses, the store provides accessories, after-party dresses, and dresses for photo shoots. The store is constantly updating its inventory to keep up with the latest trends because, as Lilliane explains, “Every year there is a change.” Lilliane owns the store along with her husband, and

### What Makes Miami, Miami?

*Miami's is a mix of cultures making every day something new and exciting. The mix of so many different people coming from such diverse backgrounds adds excitement, experiences, and cultural exchanges, there's no other place like it.*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

the couple organizes shows to promote their business and work with schools to provide dresses for students who cannot afford a large party. Liliane’s husband describes the store as the “Capital of Quinceañeras in Florida” because families come to Zayas all the way from places like Tampa, West Palm Beach, and Orlando to find dresses.

## Street Art

Street art has grown exponentially in Miami in recent years, and there is an array of mural and graffiti styles across the county. Although the Wynwood neighborhood is considered the city’s street art hub,

### What Makes Miami, Miami?

*Heat and passion. Deco and bright color. Gators and music.*

.-HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

murals can be found in a variety of communities. The thematic content of these pieces often reflects the neighborhoods in which they are created and the prominent ethnic groups residing in those spaces. This is the case in the Little Haiti neighborhood (a center for Haitian immigrants), where Haitian muralist Serge Toussaint’s pieces line the sidewalks and reflect the everyday life of local Haitians and Haitian-Americans.

Born in Carrefour, Haiti, **Serge Toussaint** is a Miami-based muralist and sign artist. His creations can be found in several parts of Miami-Dade County, especially Little Haiti, a neighborhood that boasts a long-standing street art tradition. His murals include portraits of prominent figures such as President Barack Obama, Martin Luther King Jr., and Miami Heat basketball players, and his painted signs grace the exteriors of numerous local businesses. Serge is primarily self-taught and developed his signature style on his own from an early age. His artistry draws from the street art traditions, styles, and techniques he has been exposed to in Haiti, New York, and Miami. His work is tremendously influenced by Haitian and Haitian-American realities on both the island and in the US, and his murals depict the pain and suffering of the Haitian people throughout the years as well as the everyday life of Haitians, from scenes inspired by the Vodou religion and Haitian *rara* music, to grocery store and beauty salon advertisements. Serge Toussaint was recently honored with a 2016 Florida Folk Heritage Award in recognition for his work.

Another prolific Caribbean street artist is **Trek6** (Oscar Montes), a graffiti writer and muralist based in Miami. Trek has been involved with graffiti and street art since he was a teenager, but his love of visual art began at an early age. Growing up in Puerto Rico to a family of art aficionados, Trek spent many summers learning a variety of techniques from renowned Puerto Rican artists that were close to the family while also becoming involved in the island’s street art scene. During his teenage years, he immersed himself in hip hop culture and apprenticed under a graffiti bomber before officially joining a local graffiti crew. Since then, he has continued to write using the name Trek6 and is an active artist in Miami’s street art scene. His pieces can be seen across the city and some are emblematic of the streetscape such as “Everlasting Bass,” a mural of a boom box that can be seen from the I-95 highway. Every year, Trek revisits the mural and maintains it, knowing how important it is to locals. Trek is both passionate about his work and its importance to Miami’s continuously evolving streetscape.

In addition to graffiti and mural art, there is another art form found along the streets of Miami and Miami Beach that not only serves a functional purpose but has become an identifying characteristic of the Miami aesthetic - neon signs. Many of the neon pieces found in the windows and doors of Miami stores, hotels, and nightclubs were created by **Steve Moser**, a craftsman specializing in neon sign art. He began as a woodworker and continues to incorporate woodworking in his neon pieces. Steve's interest in neon art began in Texas, through a woman called Cindy Hester, also known as "The Neon Lady." Steve learned to create neon pieces in Cindy's shop and eventually went into business with her creating commercial pieces. After working in Texas, Steve moved to Miami and later opened his neon shop, Neon Specialties. He no longer makes commercial pieces and now focuses on original art work and commissioned pieces. Steve is adamant about maintaining the traditional craftsmanship of neon art and emphasizes the importance of using quality materials and meticulous technique to create handmade pieces. His work can be found across Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. Steve currently works from his shop in Key Largo where he creates neon pieces outdoors by the water. Many of his pieces these days reflect the environment and culture of the Keys.

## Tourism

Miami is easily accessible by land, sea, and sky through airports, seaports, and highways and draws more and more visitors every year with its booming hospitality and tourism industry. Miami's largest airport, Miami International Airport (MIA) reported that in 2016, 44.6 million passengers traveled through its terminals. MIA is among the busiest airports in the world boasting over 100 airlines flying to and from approximately 150 destinations around the globe. PortMiami, the bustling seaport located in Biscayne Bay, is an intersection of many of the factors that contribute to Miami's identity: tourism, commerce, and maritime traditions and occupations. The cruise ship industry draws local residents as well as visitors from all over the world, and PortMiami reported that in 2016 alone, 4.98 million cruise guests embarked on ships at the seaport. Miami's geographic location and booming cruise industry position the city as a point of connection to other destinations in the Caribbean and Latin America. Cruise ships line the coast with dedicated, hard-working crew members such as Jaime Dee onboard.

### What Makes Miami, Miami?

*The diversity of its residents and visitors under a tropical climate.*

.-HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

Jaime Deitsch, who goes by "**Jaime Dee**," is a Cruise Director for **Carnival Cruises**. Originally from Detroit, Jaime sailed as a guest on two Carnival cruise ships and was inspired to pursue a career in the cruise ship industry. She began as a member of the entertainment staff and worked her way to a promotion as Cruise Director. As Cruise Director, Jaime is the "face and voice of the ship" and is tasked with creating a positive mood onboard. Her responsibilities include hosting all of the large scale shows, learning about the ports of call and excursions, learning the scripts for all types of programming, and organizing the onboard programming schedule. She is in charge of safety responsibilities as well and must be able to remain calm as she informs passengers about any situation aboard the ship. Much of the job knowledge is learned by watching others and shadowing. There is much experiential learning

through exposure to different kinds of situations. One type of informal learning mechanism is a Ship Life Q&A Session during which new crew members listen to other Cruise Directors discussing their background and telling stories about their experiences on board. Jaime explained that this experience makes her feel as if she is part of a family whose stories and experiences are passed down through the generations.

While cruise guests pass through Miami to explore other places, Miami is the final destination for many other tourists who immerse themselves in local culture and history through guided tours by individuals like **Gordon Hoover**, a tour guide and instructor with Big Bus Tours. Gordon Hoover was born and raised on Miami Beach. He began working in the tourism industry in 1978 with Gray Line Tours, where he underwent a 6 week training before he began leading bus tours. He conducted Miami city tours and

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**  
*The weather, the mix of people and the food! It makes the traffic worth it.*  
.-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

tours of the Everglades and Key West but also led groups to places like New Orleans and the Smoky Mountains. Gordon now works for Big Bus Tours which established a post in Miami in 2008. Gordon came into this line of work because of his love of transportation and history. He explains that aside from learning about local history and architecture, it is important for guides to know about plants, trees, and animals so that they can draw from

the landscape when the bus is stopped or stuck in traffic. He has a collection of jokes that he tells on his tours, some of which have to do with the experience of riding on top of the double-decker bus. Gordon is motivated by his curiosity about people and places. He views himself as a host and focuses on being attentive to the guests on his tours. Gordon is not only highly knowledgeable about Miami's history, environment, and architecture but also about the tourism industry as a whole.

## Tropical Traditions

As you step off the plane on arrival to Miami, even before the smell of fried pastries or the sound of Spanglish reach your nose and ears, you'll feel a blanket of humidity surround and welcome you to the

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**  
*The natural environment. Its alive, it's palpable and able to touch you.*  
.-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Magic City. Miami's hot and humid climate affects daily life in a variety of ways- from the activities we enjoy on the weekends to the items we stock up on in preparation for hurricane season. The tropical climate also plays an important role in local foodways, particularly the kinds of fruits and vegetables that thrive only here and a few other places in the world. When it comes to tropical fruit agriculture in Miami, there is no better place to explore the

region's selection of produce than the Robert is Here Fruit Stand and Farm.

**Robert Moehling** is the founder of the Robert is Here Fruit Stand and Farm operating in Florida City. He started in agriculture when he was just 6 years old selling cucumbers on

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**  
*The unique natural beauty: we have flora and fauna that exist nowhere else.*  
.-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

the corner for his father's farm. On his first day selling cucumbers, he sat all day and no one stopped. That evening, Robert's father decided that people simply didn't know that Robert was there. The next day, Robert's father placed a sign on each side of the table proclaiming in big red letters "Robert Is Here." By noon Robert had sold all of the cucumbers and walked home. Over the years, that stand has grown into a large fruit stand, farm, ice cream shop, animal area, picnic and splash park, and an online store. The fruit stand is world-renown for its abundance of Homestead grown vegetables and delicious tropical fruit as well as its famous milkshakes. It is still a family-run business, and Robert remains visible at the checkout counter helping customers each day.

Miami's environment not only contributes to the variety of tropical fruit that grows here but also to the quality of the seafood. Perhaps the most well-known seafood establishment is **Joe's Stone Crab** in

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*..Miami has a little bit of everything. World Famous Joe's Stone Crab..we have it all..*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Miami Beach which has been operating since 1913. **Brian Johnson** is the General Manager of Joe's Stone Crab and has been in this position for 18 years. He was born in Long Island, NY and came to Miami in 1975. His first job in hospitality was as a bellhop at a Miami Beach hotel. He then went to culinary school and graduated from Florida International University's School of Hospitality. He began at Joe's as a waiter in 1980 and

was later promoted to Seating Captain. He was the youngest Seating Captain ever hired. He moved up to the position of Relief Maitre d'. He then left to New York to manage a restaurant at Rockefeller Center, but returned to Miami two years later. He came back to Joe's, but he began again as a waiter. He moved his way up from waiter, to Seating Captain, to Relief Maitre d', to Part-Time Manager, to his current position as General Manager. He is extremely knowledgeable on the history of the restaurant, all of its moving parts, and of its founding family.

La Camaronera is another beloved seafood restaurant situated in Little Havana. The restaurant co-owner, **David Garcia** comes from a long line of family members in the seafood business collectively known as The Garcia Brothers or *Los Hermanos Garcia*. The Garcia Brothers eleven in total, were born into a family of fishermen in Las Villas, Cuba. The boys learned the trade from an early age, and they fished, processed, and sold their fresh catch, first in Las Villas and later expanding to Matanzas. In 1964, after the establishment of the Castro regime and having their business confiscated by the government, the first of the brothers headed to Miami and the others eventually followed. The brothers worked and fished for local companies with the goal to save enough money to start their own seafood business in Miami. They achieved their goal two years later when Garcia Brothers Seafood was established. Initially a fresh fish market, processing plant, and wholesaler, the Garcias' business has thrived in Miami and now includes multiple restaurants and fish markets. David was born in Miami and grew up in his family's seafood business. He now runs **La Camaronera** Seafood Joint and Fish Market with his cousin, Maritza Garcia. La Camaronera was established in 1966 as a fish market by David's father and uncles, known as The Garcia Brothers, or. In

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**

*The best all-around weather in the world! Beautiful beaches. Readily accessible water activities, i.e.: boating, fishing, swimming...*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

1976, the market expanded to become a Cuban fish-fry with u-shaped counters so that customers could eat while standing, and essentially, get in and out quickly. This counter, which still exists today, gave the restaurant the nick-name "Los Paraditos" because customers eat standing up.

South Florida's tropical environment and oceans contribute to local foodways as well as a vibrant beach culture, propagated by locals and tourists alike. Although most visit the beach for a day of fun in the sun, lifeguards, such as **Lieutenant Gerry Falconer**, practice a variety of techniques and practices to keep the

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**  
*Bikinis, sunny ocean days, party choices  
24/7, palm trees, multicultural.*  
-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

beaches safe. Lt. Gerry Falconer began his lifeguarding career as a teenager in New Jersey. He remembers the first time he ever saved someone from a public pool and explains that his decades-long career was a calling for him, as it is for many lifeguards who choose this challenging

profession. After lifeguarding part-time on the Jersey shore during beach season, he decided that he wanted to be a full-time lifeguard and came to Miami, where it is summer all year long. He has been with Miami Beach Ocean Rescue for 23 years and is the President of Southeast Region of the United States Lifesaving Association. Gerry is no longer out on the beach and now manages his team of Miami Beach lifeguards from his office. Because he has made it to this level in his career, he is incredibly knowledgeable on all aspects of lifeguarding.

While lifeguards try to prevent dangerous situations on Miami's beaches, there are others such as hurricane surfer **Lance O'Brien** who look forward to stormy seas. Lance O'Brien, also known as Lance O, has been surfing since he was 4 years old. He grew up as a "hippy baby" in Miami's Coconut Grove during the 1970s and learned to surf from his uncle Robby.

Lance has surfed all over the world but is based in South Florida where he is now teaching his young son to surf as well. He is considered a leader in the local surfing community for his work to maintain and promote the tradition. Lance has been surfing during hurricanes since the 1980s and surfed during Hurricane Sandy, a storm that created what many surfers consider to be the "best waves" South Florida

**What Makes Miami, Miami?**  
*The weather... It can be completely  
raining with the sun out. Or it can  
rain one minute and barely look  
like it because of the sun*  
-HistoryMiami Museum  
survey response

has ever seen. He explains that it not only takes skill to surf during these types of storms, but a certain level of determination and courage. Lance has two loves in life (that aren't people), and he devotes much of his time to both- surfing and reggae. In addition to his many surf-related activities, Lance manages a music company and radio station called Kulcha Shock which specializes in reggae music.

Miami's oceans pose both opportunities and challenges depending on the abilities, duties, and perspectives of its residents and visitors. Similarly, the subtropical wilderness of the Everglades is a region where individuals, such as airboat mechanic **John Swait**, acquire a unique set of skills and body of knowledge to adapt to the challenges of daily life. John Swait is an airboat mechanic and manufacturer who learned the trade from his father, Jimmy Swait. His father was regarded as an innovator in the industry, and John continues to use many of the same models that his father developed. He runs the shop that his father established, Air Boat Services, Inc. in Davie, FL. There are photos of John on an airboat as an infant, and he can't recall the first time he rode on a boat. He began working in his dad's

shop as a young boy and says that his father taught him using a trial-and-error method. Aside from airboat repair and manufacturing, John and his father have been contracted to help with airboat stunts for movies and commercials, wildlife removal, and a variety of other circumstances. John is highly knowledgeable about the Everglades. He has been riding airboats in the Glades his entire life and supplies airboats to many of the companies in this area. He also offered airboat tours in the past, but no longer does so. John is an expert in all things airboat-related. When asked why he does what he does, John says, "This is all I know." He grew up immersed in this craft and believes that he is doing exactly what he was meant to do.

Alligator wrestler **Rocky Jim Jr.** also has a specialized set of skills that has allowed him to live and work in the Everglades for his entire life. Rocky Jim Jr. has been an alligator wrestler for over 31 years. He learned from his father, Rocky Jim Sr., and comes from a family of alligator wrestlers: his grandfather, Bobby Tiger and his uncles, Bo Jim and Elvis "Tippy" Cypress. Rocky dropped out of school when he was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and began working maintenance jobs with his father. He later worked in his brother's workshop, and eventually began working as a handyman at the reservation. One day, they needed an alligator wrestler for a demonstration and for the first time, he jumped into the pit, having learned from his father for years. Now 44 years old, Rocky has been the premiere alligator wrestler at the Miccosukee Indian Village since he was in his 20's. He was the featured presenter at the reservation up until a few months ago when he was bitten by an alligator and decided to retire. He'd been bitten before, but it was this last encounter that brought him to the decision to retire after so many years. He has a wealth of experience performing alligator wrestling demonstrations and has even performed travelling shows across the state. Rocky enjoys the opportunity to educate the public about alligators during his demonstrations and hopes to instill a sense of respect for these animals. He says that a good alligator wrestler never hurts the animal and always approaches with respect. Although Rocky is no longer wrestling alligators, there is the hope that Rocky may decide to come out of retirement.

## Conclusion

*Driving to work in December with the top down. Hearing a cacophony of languages everywhere. People in inappropriate dress for the Northeast but in Miami not so much. Believing in the future. Sometimes believing in the future too much!!*

-HistoryMiami Museum survey response

Although this project was driven by consideration of the question, "What makes Miami, Miami?" it was never intended to produce a conclusive answer. The experience of living in Miami is of course different for each resident, but there are overarching familiarities that create the sense of home that connects those who live here to this region and to their neighbors. By posing this question to local residents, artists, and tradition bearers, this project explored some of the more distinctive characteristics that set Miami apart and inform its multifaceted identity – such as its multiculturalism, cuisine, music, art, and



natural environment. In a city with an ever-changing landscape, the answer to this question is in constant flux. However, the source for these answers, the people who call Miami home, maintain the steady heartbeat of the city and continue to make Miami, Miami.