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## Fiercely Boricua — An Interview with Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard

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**Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard created the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance & Cultural Center to honor her heritage. In turn, she teaches people to embrace their roots and the root of all humanity.**

*By Cy White, Photos courtesy of Puerto Rican Cultural Center / Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance*

Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard sits in a wooden chair. What looks like wicker. The wind sings a song. The leaves shift and sway to the soft *hush hush* of the song's rhythm. The woman before me smiles softly. She's unhurried, but much like the leaves swaying to the heavy sigh of the wind, Tekina-eirú Maynard's energy is restless. She must move no matter where she is or what's happening. Even

through Zoom, the moment she appears on the screen I know. This woman is completely one with nature.

Tekina-eirú Maynard was brought up humbly, in inauspicious environs. But like so many, myself included, her family life was rich. Full of all the decadence belying their economic circumstances. Music. There was always music and dancing.

“I came from a family of musicians,” Tekina-eirú Maynard says. “My grandfather had his own band back in the day in the mountains of Puerto Rico. He played boleros. My aunt was a lead singer, and she had a trio and her own radio program. So the culture musically has always been a part of my life. On Sundays, my uncle would surprise us and come with his guitar. We’d spend the whole afternoon singing. That’s the way I grew up.”

## The Island Calls



Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard (far left)

From this grew an inescapable love and passion for movement, dance, expression. Art. Tekina-eirú Maynard showed a deep appreciation for all things steeped in artistic expression from a very early age. However, the way she tells it there was something more beneath the surface. It wasn't just the sounds of her uncle's guitar or the voices raised in exaltation from the women in her family. Rather, those parts of her life simply awakened what she describes as a latent and natural yearning for music. A compulsion to move that flowed through her even when she didn't understand why. When she speaks, there's a teardrop in her voice. A musical note that cracks and aches and comes from a deep place.

"Ever since I was a little girl, I could always hear the island calling me," she says. "Growing up as a young kid and even as a teenager, all the other youth were listening to the radio, the American music, and I wanted none of that. I took my little allowance and bought albums of salsa. I would tell my mom to save me the tins of galletas, crackers, and I used to use them as my drums to play to the salsa music playing from the albums I bought with my own money."

## The Arcaico

This "thing" that called to the most primal parts of her pulled Tekina-eirú Maynard to seek it out. She did her homework, asked questions and learned that she is descendant from the oldest known indigenous tribe from Puerto Rico.

"Not only am I Taino," Tekina-eirú Maynard says, "I discovered something that nobody in my family knew. We are arcaico, archaics. Arcaico were the original indigenous people of Puerto Rico. My family has lived in Puerto Rico for 6,000 years. It made me understand a lot about myself and what I am doing with my life here, dedicated to Puerto Rico and upholding the culture far away from home. It's in my DNA so profoundly.

"I started going back and forth to Puerto Rico to study more in depth, not only what I knew, but

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“ We as humanity have to realize we are not the protectors of nature. We are part of nature.

all the pieces of my culture I didn't know. Twelve years ago, I am introduced to the chief of the Taino by

the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. They said, ‘Tekina-eirú, you have to know this man.’ Being an elder is not a crown. It is a responsibility to teach and to pass on heritage. When I was consecrated an elder, at first I was surprised. Then I was terrified because I knew that I really didn’t know enough to be an elder. It has been a beautiful journey in my own life to learn and to teach. To nurture a community who wants to learn.”

## A Galaxy Far, Far Away

With an answer to the source of this inescapable urge for movement and music, Tekina-eirú Maynard moved forth in the world. It’s interesting to note, then, that music wouldn’t be her initial path. Even more surprising is that her first steps into the professional world was through a career in tech.

“When it was time to go to college I actually took a year off. My love for music was so strong, I thought about majoring in music. But then I saw a movie called *Star Wars*. I realize I really had a love for technology that I didn’t know I had. A poor girl growing up in the Bronx, I didn’t even have access to a computer. But I did really well in math. Actually graduated number two in my high school class. So I could really choose the kind of future I wanted to have, but I didn’t know what that was. It was really the movie *Star Wars* that convinced me that I wanted to be in technology.

“I ended up with a doctorate in computer and electrical engineering from Carnegie Mellon,” she continues. Then I got a job at IBM Austin. So I had a wonderful 20 years working in research at IBM, and I had 11 patents. My creativity as an artist spilled over into technology, and I was able to see the world in a different way.”

## Technology & Nature

Perhaps it’s only to those who either know her the most or know her the least that working at IBM seems contrary. However, for Tekina-eirú Maynard, everything is connected. Technology comes from nature. Science is nature. On the other side, progress is natural. The world and its wonders are immense. That humans take their time discovering it all doesn’t diminish these facts.

“When you live the kind of life that I do, it’s really important that you spend time every day reconnecting with nature. Anyone who knows me knows Tekina-eirú doesn’t sleep. I went to bed at 6 a.m. this morning. Then I slept for a few hours, then woke up and went out to nature and took care of myself. And I grounded, and I de-stressed. That’s what I do every single day. When I can stand in peacefulness, in



who I am and feeling whole and sane and de-stressed, then I can go inside—or bring the technology outside—and engage in social media. But I don't see it as a terrible thing.

“I see it as a way to connect people together and connect people to my culture in general and connect people to my way of living specifically. Technology becomes a bad thing when you let it dominate your life. When it becomes an uncontrolled source of your life. But I don't have that. I have a beautiful balance. Technology is my friend and a way to communicate with people I might not have access to otherwise.”

## When Nature Sings

Her ability to reconcile both sides of herself isn't at all contrary to who she is as a person. The dichotomy of what makes up Tekina-eirú Maynard is apparent in her writings. In fact, social media was how she wrote her first book. Taking daily affirmations and journal-esque entries about her travels culminated in *When Nature Sings: A Taino Journey*.



“I have always felt a calling to nature. When I wrote the book, I actually wasn't writing a book. I was

trying to share basically on Facebook my adventures with nature. Like there's something going on in my life, and something out of the ordinary happens that nature has a part in. There's a bird in front of you, and you know this experience you're having is not normal. So you travel with your cell phone and take a picture of the bird. Then you write a story about this beautiful experience.

"I was writing for a year or two. My mother was the one who caught it and said, 'You know, you're writing a book there.' And I said, 'I am?' She said, 'Yeah, you should publish it.' I realized if I do publish it, anecdotes with beautiful original photography, that it could reach the hands of even more people who deserve to know that nature is alive and talking to you, if you only stop and pay attention."

## **Building Community**

Tekina-eirú Maynard's inherent inclination toward music and her connection to nature were never separate from her, even as an IBM researcher. In fact, she makes it very clear that integrating these aspects of her life was something she was determined to do. As with everything in her life, opening the Puerto Rican Culture Center in 1997 was the natural progression in her journey.

"There are actually to date more Puerto Ricans living on the mainland than on the island. We have many, many families and young people who are living in Texas who either left home or are a part of that heritage. To be able to build community using the cultural arts as a way of pulling us together, that's what we're doing. We're building a community.

"I grew up in such a beautiful culture with so much love and so much vibrant music and the upholding of traditions. It took the birth of my son to realize how blessed I was the way that I grew up inside my culture. He would never have that, and it made me sad. When I started on this adventure of starting the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, the intention was for someone like him and other children growing up on the mainland to be able to have access to their culture."

## **One-on-One Relationship With Nature**

There's more. So much more. The brilliance with which Tekina-eirú Maynard embraces life, embraces nature is a testament to who she is. She never wavers. Her mission has always been connection. Connecting with her roots, connecting with nature. She is steadfast in her desire to bring all people together regardless of ethnic background or heritage. To open her arms and bring them all into her world and culture. Back to nature, back to life. This is the true heart and soul of Ana María Tekina-eirú



Maynard.

“What I’ve realized is how important the way of life is related to nature. Your relationship and connection to nature. It has always been important to me as an individual, with and without my role as a Taino teacher. But now I’ve come to realize that a relationship with nature is important to everybody. If humanity wants to get out of this mess. It’s not about recycling and making sure the waters are not dirty and air pollution. All of that is important, but it’s missing the critical piece. Nature is alive. Many people do not have a relationship with nature or an awareness of how important that is.

“Having a relationship with nature is a one-on-one thing. It’s not about having that relationship the Taino way. It’s about your way, whatever that is. The same way you have a relationship with your loved ones, it’s the same thing with nature. We as humanity have to realize we are not the protectors of nature. We are part of nature.”

## Fiercely Boricua



Scholar, programmer, creator. Teacher, mother, elder. Singer and dancer. Protector and purveyor of her culture. They are all facets of Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard. Though these many facets aren’t directly connected to each other, they are all part of what makes her the woman she is. Every aspect should be celebrated and embraced. She does so with enthusiasm, bright laughter and deep affection. She sits in a wooden chair. What looks like wicker. The wind sings a song. And she must (and does) respond in kind.

“I grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York. Everybody was from Puerto Rico. This fierceness that you see is because everyone was from Puerto Rico and everybody missed home. So every day you breathe your Puerto Rican-ness, every hour of every day. That’s how I grew up.

“I am a fiercely Boricua woman. The name ‘Tekina-eirú’ means ‘sweet teacher.’ It’s a consecrated name. I am the founding creator and executive director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. I have discovered over the years that I am an activist. And I’m fighting for my people in a way of softness and beauty with the cultural arts.”

Find out more about the Puerto Rican Cultural Center on their [official website](#) and [Facebook](#).

DR. ANA MARÍA TEKINA-EIRÚ MAYNARD

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