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'Celebrate' Puerto Rican dance traditions

By: Jitin Hingorani

A local folkloric dance company is collaborating with artists from Puerto Rico to bring "Celebrando 2003" this weekend, which brings traditional dances, history and culture alive.

What started out with three people six years ago is now a powerful group of 24 musicians and dancers. Austin's [Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Company](#) stands out because of its diversity.

"It has such a mixture of cultures -- the African, the Indians on the island and the Spanish that we have a wide spectrum of dances all the way from very African styles to very ballroom, aristocratic, ballroom-type dances," dancer China Smith said.

The group is rehearsing for its biggest show of the year. The dancers will collaborate their talents with Puerto Rico's [Guateque Ballet Folklorico](#).

Almost all of "Celebrando 2003" will be accompanied by live music.

"You don't just see the dance, you see the music, you see what is being played and how it's played and how it's sung, so you get the full package. You get the real thing," musician Samuel Lopez said.

The real thing is not just the dances you see on stage.

"At least 80 percent of all the dances have a lot more to do with a story being told or conveying a part of the culture, rather than the dancing," Smith said.

Besides exposing Austin audiences to Puerto Rican culture through dance, this group also teaches youngsters how to perform the "bomba" and "plena."

"We provide performing opportunities for the children, but mostly it's so that they can have the experience of the Puerto Rican culture," Smith said.

The experience spices up the recipe of Austin's melting pot.

"There's a lot of different cultures and we're just bringing one more," Lopez said.

"Celebrando 2003" will take place at the [State Theater](#) Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. For ticket information, call (512) 251-8122.