Everyone seems to know everyone else in the Puerto Rican musical community here in the Pioneer Valley. Or at least it seems that way so far from everyone we’ve talked to. Our internet research and search for potential interviewees yielded a lovely number of leads, but there was no indication of the web of friendships—personal and professional—we’d find connecting all of them.

The Santiago family, headed by Ismael, and William Cumpiano, a master luthier, were our first two contacts. It turned out that they not only knew each other but were good friends! The restaurant displays a blueprint of a cuatro drafted by Cumpiano, and Ismael told us that William common fixes the band’s instruments. While interviewing him at his workshop, Cumpiano told us that he loves the food and the music down at the restaurant in Westfield and that he goes periodically. He, in turn, led us to Victor Rios, a close friend and Puerto Rican musician on the other side of the river in Holyoke. Victor, of course, also knows the Santiagos and introduced us to another Puerto Rican restaurant owner in Holyoke. In mid-October, the Santiago’s held a street festival where they invited Criollo Clasico, an Amherst-based Puerto Rican group, to perform. With each new contact the web of connections links back to itself and also grows outwards to more leads than we have time to follow up. William Cumpiano, it seems, is in the center of much of it because he is one of the only luthiers in the greater Boston area who can work on Caribbean instruments and speak Spanish with his customers. Like many of Finnegan’s observations within musical scenes, the musicians playing Puerto Rican music all seem to know of, if not know personally, one another.

As a newcomer or anyone unfamiliar with the Pioneer Valley (this includes many of the five-college students), it might seem odd that so many musicians playing Puerto Rican folk music could survive. But the large Puerto Rican populations from Hartford to Holyoke support many local musicians playing traditional Puerto Rican melodies. Victor Rios made his living for years playing Puerto Rican music as a full-time musician in the Valley. But it’s not just the local Puerto Rican communities which support the music. People of all backgrounds are exposed to and enjoy it. Criollo Clasico plays at the popular Veracruzana restaurant in Northampton. If you sit at the Santiago Family Restaurant on a Friday night, you’ll see people of all backgrounds enjoying the traditional food and music. The street festival thrown by the Santiagos to celebrate a decade in business was attended and enjoyed by more than just the Puerto Rican community. For the short time we were in the Fernandez Family Restaurant, it served members of many cultural contingents in the Holyoke community. Perhaps it is the hand-in-hand relationship of music and food in Puerto Rican culture that draws in the larger community.