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Rappin', Writin', & Breakin'

By
Juan Flores

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***Now all you Puerto Ricans, you're in for a treat
cause this Puerto Rican can rock a funky beat
if you fall on your butt and you start to bleed
Rubie Dee is what all the Puerto Ricans need
I'm a homeboy to them cause I know what to do
cause Rubie Dee is down with Black people too.***

—Rubén García

Word has it that Machito, the father of Latin jazz who died in early 1984 at seventy-five, was learning how to breakdance. The great Cuban bandleader, who since the 1940s had performed with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and stood at the juncture of Caribbean and Afro-American musical traditions, must surely have recognized an exciting new stage in the dual heritage he had made his own.

For break and rap rhythms, with all their absorption of intervening and adjoining styles, remain grounded in African musical expression. They are further testimony to the shared cultural life of African-descended peoples in New York City, which for the past generation, at least, has centered on the interaction of Puerto Ricans and blacks.

The proximity of the two groups is perhaps more striking today than ever before, especially among teenage youth. Aside from some studies of language convergence, the voluminous literature on U.S. ethnic relations includes no sustained treatment of the interaction between Puerto Ricans and blacks. Perhaps the "pop" ascendancy of hip-hop, which stems directly from that interaction, will provide a needed impetus.

The intellectual antecedents go back even before Machito's beginnings to the early 1900s, when the first contingents of Puerto Ricans began arriving in New York. They were mostly artisans, with a high level of political education, and many were black. Though Cubans and other Spanish speakers were their most immediate coworkers, black Americans were already a significant presence in their neighborhoods and workplaces. One of these very early arrivals was Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, who came to New York in the late nineteenth century. Unbeknown to many, he was Puerto Rican, and in fact dedicated the first period of his emigrant life to the Cuban and Puerto Rican struggle against Spanish colonialism.

Early on in this century he moved up to Harlem, there to become one of the foremost scholars of the African diaspora. His contribution has been memorialized in Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Another black Puerto Rican pioneer, who came to New York in 1917, was Jesús Colón. A long-time journalist and revolutionary activist, Colón in his literary sketches and political campaigns stressed the common historical and cultural experience of Puerto Ricans and blacks. Writing in the 1940s and 1950s, he was the first Puerto Rican author to publish a book in English, and the first to describe in psychological detail his experience of American racism.

An early admirer of Jesús Colón was the Puerto Rican novelist Piri Thomas, and here we draw closer to the contemporary world of hip-hop. Thomas's novel, *Down These Mean Streets*, published in 1967, is a work in the autobiographical manner of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* that probes intensely the complex and not always harmonious relations among black and Puerto Rican youth in New York. Here, in scenes set in the 1950s, we witness a young Puerto Rican saying the dozens and hanging out with his black friends; from them he learns that, according to the color code operative in the U.S., he is black and had better start liking it.

Starting in the late 1950s and extending through the 1960s, doo-wop or harmonizing prevailed in the same neighborhoods that later gave rise to rap music.

With such hits of a longer historical trajectory in mind, it is to this period of the late 1950s and the 1960s that the origins of present-day hip-hop must be traced. In the spectacular surface of Broadway and Hollywood, one thinks of *West Side Story* and *Blackboard Jungle*, the scene of gang wars, drugs, and juvenile delinquency. A more circumspect account, though, would recall that these years saw the dawning of the second-generation black and Puerto Rican communities in New York; it was the time when the first offspring of both migrations, many of them born and raised in New York, were settling into their new situation. They comprised, and still today comprise, the two largest nonwhite groups in the city. They came from southern, largely rural backgrounds; they lived in the same or bordering neighborhoods, attended the same schools, and together occupy the most deprived and vulnerable place in the economic and cultural hierarchy: they are the reserve of the reserve.

Small wonder, then, that young blacks and Puerto Ricans started liking the same kinds of music, doing the same dances, playing the same games, and dressing and talking alike. Their common experience of racist exclusion and social distance from their white-ethnic peers drew them even closer together. In groping for a

new idiom, young blacks and Puerto Ricans discarded rural trappings and nostalgic “down home” references, but retained the African rhythmic base and improvisational, participatory qualities of their inherited cultures. In so doing, black and Caribbean peoples came to recognize the complementarity of what seemed to be diverse origins.

One such intersection of the popular cultures was evident in rhythm-and-blues music of the late 1950s. Although both Fats Domino and Bo Diddley had already infused Latin and Caribbean beats into their influential rock-and-roll sounds, New York was really the site of direct black and Puerto Rican musical interaction. There several street-based groups, like the Harptones and the Vocaleers, combined black and Latin members, as did the hugely successful Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers. The music itself was basically black rock-and-roll, but with a good deal of mambo and other Afro-Caribbean features blended in. The same is true of the boogaloo craze of a decade later, though in this case it was mostly Latin musicians like Pete Rodríguez, Joe Cuba, and Joe Bataan who were responsible, and the Latin influence was even stronger.

Of course this is only to mention the music that came to be recorded, the studio version of what thousands of young Puerto Ricans and blacks were singing in the streets, schoolyards, and hallways. Starting in the late 1950s and extending through the 1960s, doo-wop or harmonizing prevailed in the same neighborhoods that later gave rise to rap music. Despite obvious differences in style, and the accompaniment of rap rhymes by ingeniously manipulated sound systems, harmonizing clearly prefigures rap musical practice in significant ways. And like rap, doo-wop was a form of black urban music that was accessible to young Latin musicians, as a recent recording of Totico y Sus Rumberos singing “What’s Your Name” illustrates. It’s a “doo-wop *rumba*,” and as Totico and his group recall, it fits perfectly.

By the late 1960s the political implications of this cultural interaction were becoming more evident. The civil rights movement and the black liberation struggle sparked the organization of the Young Lords party. The cultural affirmation following from the work of the Lords and the Panthers needs to be emphasized, since the assertion of racial pride and black and Puerto Rican rights inform the social stance of hip-hop. It is no accident that today’s rappers and breakers adore James Brown, whose unforgettable “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” has resonated ever since the late 1960s.

Around this time, too, black and Puerto Rican poets began to join forces: Felipe Luciano, later a leader of the Young Lords, was one of the original Last Poets, and Victor Hernández Cruz was with the Third World Revelationists. The reliance of “Nuyorican” writing and public readings on the language and cadences of black poetry was evident then, and it still strong today in poets like Louis Reyes Rivera and Sandra María Esteves. As with the popular music, black forms of verbal expression lent themselves perfectly to articulation of Nuyorican experience, and are enriched by the inclusion of Spanish and bilingual usages.

Graffiti-writing also began to become widespread in those years of the early 1970s, and I would associate this movement of naming and identifying with the assertive political tenor of the times. Despite the decidedly personal and turf-oriented cast of early graffiti, the political and social context of this practice should not be overlooked. The same is true when considering the later development, when writing moved to the subways and iconography became a public art form. Though the represented content often derives from cartoons and television commercials, those samples of mass culture take on a transformed meaning when posted in defiance of established rules.

Most of the New York graffitiists have been black and Puerto Rican youth, and whatever becomes of graffiti in its commercial and elite transmutations, the movement is part of the ongoing cultural convergence of those communities. So, too, is breakdancing, the first recognizable signs of which also appeared as far back as the early 1970s. This may seem surprising, since the more current style—floor rocking and electric boogie—are indeed phenomena of the past few years. But some experienced breakers, like Dennis Vázquez (the original Rubber Band Man), often hark back to the days of “up-rock,” danced to James Brown’s “Sex Machine” and Jimmy Castor’s “Just Begun,” as the initial innovation in popular dance style. Still part of break routines, up-rock was first danced as an alternative to violent street fighting. This social function of breaking as a surrogate for destructive and self-destructive physical confrontation has remained. It is also one of the links between the contemporary North American style and Brazilian *capoeira*, another African-based dance bearing striking similarities to breakdance and initiated over three centuries ago as a response to slavery.

Such, then, are but a few of the many forerunners and early manifestations of the triple-form style called hip-hop, which is not to say that rap, graffiti, and breakdancing are not qualitatively new modes of cultural practice. On the contrary, the innovations brought to each area of popular expression are substantial indeed. Gaining a sense of historical background is mainly important in counteracting the sense of miracle attached to these phenomena as they are represented in the dominant, mediated culture, which portrays these practices and stylistic novelties as though they sprang up suddenly out of thin air. Rather, all aspects of hip-hop belong to the ongoing traditions of black and Puerto Rican experience, and to their convergence and crossfertilization in the New York setting.

For example, there is some ground for emphasizing the impetus lent by Puerto Ricans to the origins of breaking. The speedy footwork, elaborate upper-body movement and daring dips in up-rock rested on a formative background in *rumba* and *guaguancó*, and was to some extent also anticipated by the Latin hustle. It is indicative that the Rock Steady Crew, the most accomplished of the many breakdance groups, is composed almost entirely of Puerto Ricans. Input from other sources having more to do with Afro-American experience has been duly noted—

such as martial arts, the jitterbug, tap dancing, and African social dance. And the performance styles of James Brown and Frankie Lymon were, of course, key models. But, I'll say with all necessary caution, the impulse toward a radical change in the physical center of gravity in popular dance and toward a "break" in the formalizations of couple dancing seems to follow largely from developments in Latin dance styles.

With rap music, of course, the relative contributions are the opposite. Rap belongs squarely in the blues-derived tradition of black vocals and relies upon rich verbal dexterity in English. Here the cultural confluence consists of Puerto Ricans joining in the extension of Afro-American styles. But the distinctive Puerto Rican dimension is not absent here either. Recital of *décimas* and *aguinaldos* in the Puerto Rican tradition involved methods of improvisation and alternation much like those typical of rap performance, while the tongue-twisting (*trabalengua*) style of some *plena* singing is an even more direct antecedent. More important, perhaps, just as with doo-wop and *rumba*, there is a fascinating "fit" between Puerto Rican *clave* and characteristic rap rhythms. One of the Puerto Rican rappers, Rubie Dee (Rubén García), who started off in street music as a *conguero* and a lover of salsa, illustrated this congruence to me, and he was convincing. Dee, the Puerto Rican emcee from the Fantastic Five, even raps occasionally in Spanish, and is appreciated as a valuable component of the rap repertoire. His brother Orlando has composed bilingual, "Spanglish" rhymes for the Funky Four, which indicates how close rap is contemporary to Nuyorican experience.

Determining the relative ethnic sources of subway graffiti is the most complicated of all, partly because the first subway writer to attract media attention was Taki, who is Greek-American, and because some of the best subway artists are youths of Italian and other national origins. There is clearly an important working-class basis to the graffiti movement that should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, a majority of the practitioners are black and Puerto Rican, and graffiti experts like Henry Chalfant and Manny Kirchheimer agree that most of the early styles originated with the Puerto Ricans. Craig Castleman in his book *Getting Up* indicates a similar view, though he does not speculate as to reasons and rightly argues against the futile attempt to treat it as an exclusively Puerto Rican movement.

But I think Herbert Kohl had good reason to center his discussion of the graffiti impulse on Johnny Rodríguez, the young Puerto Rican who went to him for reading lessons and from whom he came to learn so much about naming and public identity. Felipe Luciano would associate the vitality of the pictorial medium with the Puerto Ricans' remote Taino legacy, and call to mind the Chicano mural and *placa* movement as parallel indigenous experience. More pertinent, in my view, is the Nuyorican preoccupation with language in its semantic and graphic aspects, and the need to manifest a sense of idiosyncratic presence in the face of imposed anonymity. Norman Mailer captured this motivation well in his 1974

essay "The Faith of Graffiti": "Your presence is on their presence, your alias hangs on their scene. There is a pleasurable sense of depth to the elusiveness of meaning."

Mailer was accurate, too, in pointing out that it is also a matter of color and ecological aesthetics. Another pioneer of the Puerto Rican migration, the poet Juan Avilés, told me recently that when he first came to New York in the 1920s you could always tell where the Puerto Ricans lived because they were the only ones to put plants in their windows. Similarly, Mailer seems to have been thinking of the Puerto Ricans when he described graffiti art as "a movement which began as the expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous, iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete and clangor." Graffiti for Mailer, and he might as well have been anticipating the whole hip-hop ensemble, "erupted biologically as though to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from a macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their unfed brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and pretty plants of a tropical rainforest."

Precisely because of its grounding in black and Puerto Rican street culture, hip-hop harbors a radical appeal. Despite the momentous hype with which the dominant commercial culture would doom it to quick oblivion, that appeal promises to carry and to flourish.

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