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Bronx Soundscape: Reflections on the Multicultural Roots of Hip Hop in Bronx Neighborhoods

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“The Patterson Houses, at night, were alive with activity and alive with sound. . . . Music was everywhere, coming out of people’s apartments and on project benches. On one side of the street, you would have people who brought out portable turntables with the two big speakers . . . and on the other side of the street you could here some brother singing a Frankie Lymon song “ Why Do Fools Fall in Love.” But the one constant, every night without fail, was the sound of Puerto Ricans playing their bongos in local parks and playgrounds. The steady beat of those drums,” Bomm, Bamm, Bom Bamm, Bamm Boom,” was background music to my living reality”

Allen Jones The Rat That Got Away, chapter 3, (to be published Fall 2008 by Fordham University Press)

“ I will say this. Wherever we were, the Puerto Ricans was there. I don’t like to get into when we call them Puerto Ricans. They are Africans just like we are. . . . We got to remember that our Puerto Rican brothers are the ones that kept Africa alive. They are the Africans that kept the drum. They kept the Gods of Santeria alive. In the Sixties, Blacks and Puerto Ricans were always playing the Conga. Always had the rhythms”

Afrika Bambatta as interviewed by James Spady in The Global Cipa (Philadelphia, Black History Museum Press, 2006), p 265

“Well after I got to play the conga drums . . . I had a bunch of friends that were all interested in playing the congas, the Puerto Rican kids in my area We started to jam on the roof. It was like every Saturday and every Sunday. Everybody would go to the roof with their conga drums and we would be playing all kinds of rhythms. . . . it was like a big party with the drums. But meanwhile, down in the bottom, down on the street, we had these black people or whites and they were into doo wop. . . . You know, the Caribbean, they never took our drum away. The black folk here, they took their drums away. . . so they had to invent something and they invented that doo wop stuff. . . They were doo wopping and we were rhythm. African rhythms, we were playing them because thank God they never took our drum away.”

Interview with Ray Mantilla, Bronx African American History Project. January 24, 2006.

Hip Hip today is international music. Thanks to global commerce and communication, you can hear MC’s rhyming over beats in Dakar, Paris, Berlin, Dacca and Johannesburg as much as you can in Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans or the Bronx, and the words used, and melodies sampled reflect a dizzying array of languages and cultural traditions.

But the young people who created hip hop in the Bronx in the 1970's, and the neighborhood they held the first jams in, were hardly mono cultural. Descendants of families who came to the Bronx from Puerto Rico and the Anglophone Caribbean as well as the American South, they grew up with a wide variety of languages, accents, dialects and musical traditions, all of which, to use one writer's phrase, became part of the "Sound Track of Their Lives." From the mid 1940's on, when African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Anglophone Caribbeans began moving from Harlem and East Harlem into Bronx neighborhoods and housing projects, public spaces in the South Bronx became places where different musical traditions clashed, fused and became transformed by people trying to reinvent their identities in settings different than any their families had ever lived in. Hip Hop emerged among young people who had experienced a level of sonic diversity unmatched in any neighborhood in the US and possibly in the world. Not only did residents of the Bronx bring musical traditions from many portions of the African diaspora, they used those musical forms, on a daily basis to worship, to mark territory, to celebrate, to evoke memories of ancestral homelands, to bring in needed income, to escape the pressures of poverty and scarcity and to show their defiance to forces rendering them powerless and invisible..

And they did so, both intentionally and unintentionally, IN PUBLIC SPACE, turning Bronx neighborhoods into a giant, sometimes melodious, sometimes cacophonous soundstage. When we began doing interviews for the Bronx African American History Project four years ago, we were struck at how many of our informants mentioned being exposed to different musical traditions when walking down the street, sitting by their apartment window, or trying to escape the summer heat by sitting on a fire escape, hanging out on their stoop, going up to their tenement roof, or sitting on a project bench.

In communities where the overwhelming majority of people lived in five story tenements and high rise public housing, and where air conditioning was unaffordable, people tended to do much of their socializing in public spaces, and whatever music they used to build community amongst friends and family inevitably was inevitably heard by the entire neighborhood

But even when people gathered indoors, whether in apartments, community centers, churches, or clubs, the music they played was often overheard, especially in summer months, because they kept doors and windows open to combat the heat. Gene Norman, whose Afro-Caribbean family moved from Harlem to the South Bronx in the early 1940's, recalled how the sounds of Latin music captured his imagination when he sat on the fire escape of his apartment on Kelly Street off Westchester Avenue, the same block Colin Powell grew up on.:

"There was this nightclub on Westchester Avenue not far from us called the Tropicana club . . . named after the Tropicana Club in Havana Cuba. I remember as a kid twelve years old or so, on a summer night, hearing the trumpet riffs of the mambo band floating through the air like a pied piper's tale. . . . as the neighborhood became more and more Hispanic, music took on a greater and more engulfing place in your life. Music seemed to be everywhere."(Interview with Gene Norman, Bronx African American History Project, July 12, 2004)

Norman, an architect who served as Landmarks Commissioner of the City of New York, said his lifelong love of Latin music grew out of that experience and ended up marrying a Puerto Rican woman he met in his neighborhood.

Arthur Jenkins, an African American pianist and composer who spent most of his career playing Latin music, also attributed his immersion in Latin music to the sounds of ensembles playing in a neighborhood club around the corner from his house in the Morrisania section of the Bronx, less than a mile from where Norman lived

“When I was five years old, we moved to Union Avenue in the Bronx. . . . we lived around the corner from what was known as the Royal Mansion Ballroom. And during the summer time, when the window was open, we would hear this music coming out of the road . . . Machito was one of the main bands that played there ”(Interview with Arthur Jenkins, Bronx African American History Project, December 14, 2005)

Jenkins spoke of his little corner of the Morrisania community, which produced a large number of successful musicians (including the singing group The Chords, pianist Valerie Capers and her brother, saxophonist Bobby Capers, who played for eight years with Mongo Santamaria)- as a place where live music from many traditions could be heard in the streets

“I’ll tell you another thing that’s interesting. On the corner, you had Boston Road and Union Avenue kind of curved into it. You had Jennings street that end there . . . the corner of Boston Road and Union Avenue on the side where I lived . . . usually had a fundamentalist church where a lot of music was played. I used to stop and listen to it. They had trombone players. You know it was sort of like church music, but with a New Orleans type flavor. So there was a lot of music going on in that area”

During his high school years, Jenkins honed his skills in playing Latin jazz in jam sessions at his apartment and later became a fixture in neighborhood clubs on Boston Road like Freddie’s and the Blue Morocco, where he backed up singers like Irene Reid and Sir Harvel and performed with African American ensembles who played Latin music.

The experiences that Norman and Jenkins described, which took place in the late 40’s and early 50’s , were repeated when the first public housing projects opened in the Bronx in the early and middle 1950’s. People who grew up in the Patterson Houses, a huge public housing complex that opened in 1950, describe a extraordinary profusion of sounds coming out of apartments, hallways, schoolyards, and on project grounds that united Patterson’s Black and Latino residents as much as it marked their cultural differences Victoria Archibald, a social worker who grew up in the Patterson houses in the 1950’s and 1960’s, described how Latin music became a powerful force in the life of her Black friends and neighbors:

“Frankie Lymon was one of my favorites. But I loved all kinds of music, including Latin music. It was in sixth grade when I was first introduced to Latin music. Before then I’d heard it because there were a lot of Latinos in the building, but I didn’t really dance to it. But as I got older, I began to notice more and more black people dancing to Latin music and they were good! They used to

dance semiprofessionally at the Palladium and places like that. And we watched these folks who also lived in Patterson, who were maybe high school age, and we just fell in love with the music”

To emphasize the Bronx’s uniqueness as a site of Black/Latino sociability and cultural exchange, Archibald asked the interviewer “whether he had ever heard the term ‘Bootarican,’” and told the following story

“my husband Harry, when he and I first met, would hear my friends and I talk about the ‘Bootaricans in the Bronx’ and he’d say ‘Now what is a Bootarican?’ And I said “ You can’t have lived in New York and be black and not know what a Bootarican is!’ But he lived in a neighborhood where there was hardly any cultural diversity. . . . Now I don’t know where the term comes from, but it describes somebody who is both black and Puerto Rican. So we’d be somewhere, and we’d hear somebody speaking Spanish, somebody who looks just like us and we’d say ‘Uh Bootarican’ Harry and I just recently went to a dance where Eddie Palmieri was playing. I love him and I’ll go wherever he is performing. And there was a women singer there named ‘La India’ And when she said “And all you Bootaricans out there,’ Harry turned to me and said. ‘You weren’t lying.’ I said ‘Why do you think I would lie? This may not be in the dictionary, but there is such a word.” (‘It Take a Village to Raise a Child’: Growing Up in the Patterson Houses in the 1950s and Early 1960s, An Interview with Victoria Archibald-Good,” The Bronx County Historical Society Journal, 40, No. 1 (Spring 2003).

Nathan Dukes, an African American teacher and social worker who grew up in the same project building as Archibald, had equally powerful memories of events where African American and Latin music traditions mingled, from “grind em up parties” where songs by the Temptations and the Four Tops alternated with songs by Joe Bataan and Eddie Palmieri, to the annual outdoor concert organized by Clark JHS music teacher and jazz pianist Eddie Bonamere, which featured timbale player Willie Bobo. .Dukes lovingly recalled impromptu musical performances by local “doo wop groups,” on project benches

“You had Bobo Johnson and James Johnson. They had their doo wop groups. . . . When they were doing their little doo wops in the hallway, or in the summertime, especially in the summertime, they would always get a big crowd because they would do . . . little Anthony tunes and would also do Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers tunes.”

But his most intriguing commentary was reserved for Puerto Rican conga players, whose pounding beats captured the imagination of African American youngsters and in Dukes eyes, reconnected them with their African origins

“You had Hector. He would be across the street from the Patterson; he would be across the street with his conga drums. He would start at 5 PM and wouldn’t finish till maybe 2:30 in the morning. As I got older, I realized what he was doing was basically just giving signals, letting people know that all was well in the village. That’s what the conga drums were for, to let people know that all was well.” (Interview with Nathan Dukes, Bronx African American History Project, April 25, 2003)

To be sure, not everyone living in Bronx neighborhoods interpreted late night conga playing as a sign of social health . Renee Scroggins, one of four African American sisters who formed the women's funk/punk band ESG, recalled how some of her neighbors in the Moore Houses threw eggs at the Latin percussionists who played till wee hours of the morning

"We lived in the projects. . . . Behind us there was a park, St Mary's Park. And every summer in St Mary's Park. . . . you would have some Latin gentlemen in the park with some coke bottles, a cow bell and a set of congas playing the same thing "boom boom boom, tata ta boom, boom boom" you know, and it was our summer sound. Plus they were singing . . . You would go to sleep by it, okay . . . and be it one or two o'clock in the morning, you're still hearing this roll. . . Eggs started going out the window."

(Interview With Renee Scroggins, Bronx African American History Project, February 3, 2006)

But there is no questions that many Bronx residents who lived in high rise housing projects and crowded tenements used music to help humanize their environment and put their personal stamp on public space.

Often, they were quite creative in how they did this. Well before Bronx hip hop dj's started hooking up their sound systems to panels at the bottom of light poles, small Puerto Rican bands called "Kikirikis" (in imitation of the sound of roosters) were doing the same thing with their amplifiers when they played in parks in Hunts Point (Interview with Angel Rodriguez, Bronx African American History Project, May 8 2007) But not only Puerto Ricans brought amplified music to the streets . From the early 60's on, it was extremely common for African American as well as Latino Bronx residents to bring their portable record players outside and dance on sidewalks and stoops during hot summer nights. Talibah Roberts, a Bronx school teacher whose father was African American and whose mother was Puerto Rican, recalls how people entertained themselves outside her apartment building on Crotona Park East during summer months:

"In my building. . . It was a norm for people to bring their equipment outside. . . whoever would have the best equipment or a good stereo, they would bring their radio right from the living room and bring it outside and play it. Or sometimes, people would put their speakers in the window, with the dj working the system, and we're standing outside in front of the building and we would dance" (interview With Bronx African American History Project, March 15, 2005)

Given experiences like this, and it is not surprising that the outdoor jams held in schoolyards, parks and public housing projects by dj's like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaata seemed more familiar, than revolutionary to Bronx residents. While the use of two turntables and mixing equipment might have been new, the pounding percussive rhythms, and use of powerful amplification, had been fixtures of music on the streets of the Bronx for more than twenty years. So was the fusion of Latin music with soul and funk. When Grandmaster Flash would mix Jimmy Castor's "It's Only Just Begun" into James Brown's "Give It Up and Turn It Loose" and the Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache," he was affirming a multicultural, multinational sonic community that gave Bronx neighborhoods a distinctive flavor, inspiring his audiences to

celebrate who they were at a time when most of the outside world had written them off as gang ridden, drug ridden predators.

The following description of outdoor musical activities in the Millbrook houses in the late 70's captures the air of excitement those gatherings generated. Matthew Swain, who was only 11 at the time his family moved to the Millbrook Houses from a neighborhood devastated by fires, remember thinking:

“ ‘this is so cool man.’ Right there on my block and they just played. It was a live DJ out there and they would set up two metal garbage cans. They turned them upside down and put this big board to set the turn tables on, run the watts to somebody's second story apartment straight through and it was just on. It would go all night and it was just a cool thing.. . they had two turntables, giant speakers. . . Pioneer and Kenwood mixers... It was a lot of freestyle rappers . . . the crown was just galvanized by this one mc. He's just rapping. He had the whole crowd going.” (February 2, 2006)

But the mc's and the dj's did not have project airspace entirely to themselves. Even though Puerto Rican adolescents were an important part of the crowd at the hip hop jams, older Puerto Ricans in the community made sure the music they listened to was played loud enough for everyone to hear. Swain recalled:

“We had a lot of Spanish people around then. Especially summertime, they would have a stage set up right there off 137th Street, right in front of the bodega. A little stand at night. They'd have their live jam session from the bongos and playing music, have a mike and go out there singing.”

Swain, like many other people who grew up in Bronx neighborhoods and housing projects from the mid 40's through the late 70's, remembers the melodies and rhythms that surrounded them in their daily lives with extraordinary vividness and fondness. Whether it was doo wop or mambo, funk or salsa, Motown or the scratching of early hip hop dj's, they saw appropriation of diverse musical traditions as something that gave their life added joy and made their upbringing rich and distinctive.

If Hip Hop was in some measure a gesture of defiance in the face of arson, disinvestment, and the closing of public services, it was also an affirmation of an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of musical traditions that had found a home in Bronx neighborhoods for more than thirty years. If Hip Hop DJ's were, in the words of Afrika Bambaata, “looking for the perfect beat” they were also, to paraphrase Nathan Dukes “letting people know that all was well in the village.”