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Italian Americans in Bronx Doo Wop-The Glory and the Paradox

The appearance of the Green Book, a mass market movie where the Italian American main character doesn't want Black people fixing things in his house, but feels confident enough to school a Black classical musician on the music of "Little Richard" is a perfect opening for discussing the prominent- and ambivalent- role of Italian Americans in the growth of Urban Harmonic Music- sometimes known as "Doo Wop"- in the Bronx. A form of music that was first performed by black artists in the Morrisania section of the Bronx in the early 1950's, and popularized through hits like the Chords "Sh-Boom" and the Chantels "Maybe," it spread quickly into Bronx Italian American neighborhoods and led to scores of Italian Americans groups making records, and two Italian American singers, Dion DiMucci and Bobby Darin (Walden Robert Cossotto), becoming among the best known rock and roll stars of the later 50's. This dominance spread into the 1960's when a half Italian half Jewish singer songwriter named Laury Nyro (Laura Nigro) became one of the most influential singer songwriters in the country

The Italian American prominence in Urban Harmonic Music is paradoxical for several reasons. First, of the three major white ethnic groups in the Bronx, Italians, Jews and the Irish, Italian Americans were the only ones to make a major impact as rock and roll singers, even though they were a far smaller portion of the Bronx's population than their Jewish and Irish counterparts. According to every account I have read, all young whites listened to and danced to Rock and Roll, but only Italian Americans made a name for themselves performing and recording the music. What makes this prominence all the more ironic is that the relationships between Italian Americans and African Americans in Bronx were filled with moments of extreme tension as well as examples of collaboration and co-existence. Some of the most shameful episodes of racial policing of urban space took place in the largest Italian American enclave in the Bronx, the Belmont Arthur Avenue community, and young Italian Americans constituted the bulk of the crowd during violent attacks on civil rights demonstrators protesting employment discrimination at a White Castle on Allerton Avenue and Boston Road in 1963. These violent attacks on African Americans by Italian youth were not only documented by numerous oral histories we did with African Americans who grew up in the Bronx, who spoke angrily of being chased out of the neighborhoods adjoining Fordham road in the 50's and 60's by Italian American gangs like the Fordham Baldies, but by some Italian Americans who were embarrassed to reveal that bats were

kept in the supervisors offices in an Arthur Avenue vest pocket pocket to attack black youth who dared venture within its borders

How is it that an ethnic group so determined to keep African Americans out of its largest neighborhoods and engaged in turf wars and gang battles at numerous high schools could take an form of popular music of African American derivation and give it such loving treatment and provide an appreciative audience to African American practitioners of this art, right up until this day?

To understand that, we have to both probe deeply into tensions surrounding the Italian American drive to assimilate into mainstream American whiteness, something which first became possible in the post World War 2 era, and the cultural commonalities which in certain circumstances made Blacks and Italian American good neighbors, good friends and occasionally marriage partners. Throughout the interviews we did for the Bronx African American History Project, we found as many examples of Black Bronx residents describing friendships with Italian American school mates, team mates and neighbors as we did examples of racial boundary policing and conflicts in school. Commonalities in language, the construction of masculinity and the theatrical presentation of the self- all described eloquently in John Gennari's new book "Flavor and Soul", made bonding between Black and Italian- American young men easy and comfortable when the pressure of the outside world didn't intervene. Several oral history interviews we did with Black men who grew up in Italian-American neighborhoods and with Italian men who were the only whites in all Black/LatinX housing projects spoke of the ease with which acceptance came in the communities they grew up in- though this did not always translate when they left their immediate surroundings..

These cultural commonalities shaped the powerful attraction young Italian American men felt when they heard their black counterparts singing, whether on the radio or in the cafeterias and hallways of schools they attended. Not only did young Italian men have numerous examples of vocal virtuosity from their own tradition, ranging from Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin to Enrique Caruso, they had the physical self confidence to sing in public in contested space. More than any white ethnic group in 1950's New York, Italian Americans were feared and respected for their ability to defend themselves, an attribute which gave them cachet with young women as well as

young men. If they started singing in public, no one was going to make fun of them or try to intimidate them, especially if they had talent.

And the talent was there! One beautiful song after another was produced by Italian American groups from the Bronx, from "Dream Lover" by Bobby Darin to "Tell Me Why" "Teenager In Love" and " I Wonder Why" by Dion and the Belmonts, to : "Barbara Ann" by the Regents. There was also the great Italian American lead singer of the multiracial Bronx group "The Crests", Johnny Maestro, who was the lead on the epic hit "Sixteen Candles." These hit makers were supplemented by scores of neighborhood groups, some of who made recordings at the Italian American music center on Fordham Road, Cousins Records

In the battle for the streets of the Bronx, sometimes ugly, sometimes infused with racial hostility, doo wop constituted a way of commanding space that was joyous optimistic and free from the threat of violence.. Blacks and Italian- Americans, sometimes fighting one another, sometimes befriending one another,, found in an art form a way of minimizing the damage that Racism and White Supremacy inflicted when it put them them in competition and gave Italian Americans an edge in status, employment and property ownership.

Some would call Italian American Doo Wop appropriation, but it also contained elements of homage, and perhaps served as a vehicle of escape from racial violence into a realm of beauty and harmony. Along with its Black counterpart, it is represents some of the most beautiful music ever produced in the Bronx, or for that matter anywhere else