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The Multiracial Bronx: A Unique Cultural Incubator in Post War America

In 1950, a basketball team from City College of New York achieved a feat that had never been equaled before and has never been equaled since, winning the two most prestigious college basketball tournaments the NCAA Championship, and the NIT Championship, in a single year. The team that achieved this remarkable feat was entirely composed of players from New York City public high schools, but what made it even more remarkable was that the four stars of the team. Ed Roman, Ed Warner, Irwin Dambrot, and Floyd Lane, two of whom were Black, two of whom were Jewish, all came out of the Bronx. In the light of research I have done on Bronx communities in the post war years, this hardly seems accidental. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Bronx had more racially mixed neighborhoods, more racially mixed housing projects and more racially mixed high schools, than any place in New York City and quite likely, any place in the United States. The result of this was an explosion of cultural creativity, visible in sports as well as popular music, that was unique at the time and worth celebrating and commemorating

The demographic context for this was the migration of nearly 100,000 people of African descent into the Bronx between 1940 and 1950, most of them upwardly mobile families from Harlem. Of both Southern and West Indian ancestry, they moved largely into Jewish working class neighborhoods in the Southern Bronx filled with tenements and apartment buildings, Morrisania, Hunts Point and Tremont, and into North Bronx neighborhoods, Williamsbridge and Baychester, filled with small private homes largely owned by Italian Americans..Because the new arrivals were at the same economic level as residents of the neighborhoods they moved into, and because leftist influences were still strong among Jewish working class Bronxites, these neighborhood integrated without immediate white flight, and without the violence and overt discrimination that greeted Blacks if they tried to move into neighborhoods like Belmont, the Grand Concourse, Morris Park or Norwood. In addition, every single housing project in the Bronx constructed between 1950 and 1960, whether in the South Bronx, West Bronx, Southeast or Northeast Bronx, was racially mixed

What this meant, is that from the early 1940's through the mid-1950's, most Blacks in the Bronx lived in racially mixed neighborhoods, and without exception, attended racially mixed high schools. This became clear to me when, during the early years of the Bronx African American History project, I interviewed Black people from the Bronx who went to high school in that borough in the 1940's and 1950's. Every single high school they mentioned, Morris, Clinton, Taft, Walton, Roosevelt, Evander, Columbus and Jane Addams, was a racially mixed institution. And while three of the schools, Roosevelt, Columbus and Evander, were located in neighborhoods hostile to Blacks and featured significant racial tensions, most of the other schools were far more welcoming. Indeed one school, Morris, located in the Morrisania community, who had a principal who prided himself on building " a little United Nations" in his building may have been the single most integrated high school in the United States in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Two of the most distinguished products of the Bronx, Civil Rights leader/ historian Vincent Harding, and

General/Secretary of State Colin Powell attended Morris in those years, and extolled Morris' integrated character in their writing and speeches.

Integrated schools and neighborhoods not only nurtured academic achievement, they promoted cultural creativity. Not only did the Bronx produce some of the nation's greatest basketball players during the 40's, 50's and 60's, ranging from the 1951 City College national champions, to NBA great Nate "Tiny" Archibald, to three of the players on the 1966 Texas Western NCAA Championship team, it also spawned artists who had a lasting impact on American popular music. The Chords, whose 1954 song "Sh-boom" was the first Urban Harmonic Song to sell a million records; were students at Morris High school when they had their first hit. The Chantels, the first female harmonic group to sell a million records, were 8th Graders at a Catholic School in Morrisania in 1957 when their hit "Maybe" came out. The first white urban harmonic group to sell a million records, Dion and the Belmonts, were also from the Bronx- their signature song, "Teenager in Love" came out in 1957

The same neighborhoods that spawned "doo wop" - along with two other South Bronx communities, Mott Haven and Melrose, would also become crucibles for the creation of Latin Music. A Puerto Rican migration from East Harlem to the Bronx paralleled the African American and West Indian migration from Central Harlem, and had an equal impact on American popular music. Many important innovators in the music that became known as salsa, Eddie and Charlie Palmieri, Willie Colon, Ray Barretto and Barry Rodgers came out of the public schools of the Bronx, joining the older generation of artists like Machito, Maria Bauza, Arsenio Rodriguez, Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez who performed regularly in Bronx clubs and theaters. Bronx artists like Pete Rodriguez also played an important role in the creation of Latin Boogaloo while Pucho and His Latin Soul Brothers explored the boundaries between Latin Soul and Funk.

The mixing of cultures and peoples in the post war Bronx is something that deserves further study, not just because of its unique features, but because it may have had parallels in other cities, from Los Angeles to Denver, to Chicago, to Cleveland, to Pittsburgh, to Newark where Black and LatinX migration created new kinds of communities and new kinds of public schools. Since these were the years where Rock and Roll exploded on the scene as a multiracial music marketed to American youth, it is time to take a look at the multiracial communities and schools which helped make this possible.