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The Puerto Rican Influence on New York's Greatest Musical Traditions

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The Puerto Rican Influence on New York's Greatest Musical Traditions

Puerto Ricans have been an integral part of the musical and cultural fabric of New York City since the 1940's, helping create musical forms which, though spawned in New York, attained global significance

First, They were central figures in the emergence of Mambo and Afro-Cuban Music as musical forms in 1940's New York, as performers, as dancers, as club owners, and as music consumers. Many of the greatest performers at the Palladium and other clubs featuring this music were Puerto Rican (Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez) as were many of the best Mambo dancers. Puerto Rican entrepreneurs also opened numerous clubs and theaters in East Harlem, Mott Haven, Melrose and Hunts Point to feature this music.

Second, Puerto Ricans were important contributors to the Urban Harmonic (Doo Wop) tradition of Rock and Roll that took over the streets of New York in the 1950's and early 1960's as members of the Teenagers, the Crests, and other doo wop groups.

Third, young Puerto Ricans born in the Bronx, Eddie and Charlie Palmieri, Ray Barreto, Dave Valentin and others were the major figures in the emergence of Salsa as a musical form in the 1960's, derived from, but different, from the Afro-Cuban music that was performed and danced to in New York in the 1940's. The power of this hybrid musical form was displayed for the world to see at the great Fania Records Yankee Stadium Concert in 1973 and at the Ali/Foreman Fight in Africa a few years later

Fourth, Puerto Rican poets were central in the rise of slam poetry in New York through the work of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and Felipe Luciano's participation in pioneering revolutionary poetry group, The Last Poets.

Finally, Hip Hop would have never grown to the proportions it did in New York in the middle and late 1970's without the great Puerto Rican dancers, DJ's, and graffiti artists who played such an important role in Hip Hop's formative years. A few years later, Puerto Rican rappers, especially Big Pun and Fat Joe, would play a central role in hip hop's growth both locally and globally.

As someone who, through historical studies, has identified the Bronx as perhaps the world's foremost incubator of musical creativity in the last 60 years of the 20th Century, it is impossible to imagine that incredible legacy without a sizable Puerto Rican presence in every neighborhood where these varied musical forms were performed and consumed.

W.E.B. DuBois once asked " Would America Be America without Its Negro People."

Therefore, standing on this great historian's shoulder, I ask

"Would New York be New York without its large and dynamic Puerto Rican Presence?"