

Migration and musical creativity in Bronx Neighbourhoods

Mark Naison*

Abstract This article connects musical life with urban housing policy in Bronx neighbourhoods for the last six decades. Most of the early Bronx hip-hop jams, led by pioneering DJs like Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, Charley Chase, and Disco King Mario took place in the community centres and public spaces of Bronx housing project and subsidized middle income housing developments created under the Mitchell Lama program. The Bronx's legacy of musical creativity was not only a reflection of the immigrants and migrants who came into its neighbourhoods it was fostered by enlightened government policies which created affordable housing for the Bronx's working class and middle class residents of the borough. It is my argument that culture is political, and that cultural creativity is responsive to government initiatives ranging from liberalised immigration laws to the construction of affordable housing.

Keywords Migration, musical creativity, Bronx, jazz, Bronx History, housing policy.

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For over sixty years, the Bronx has been a place where musical creativity has been stimulated by the migration of peoples from diverse regions of the US and the world, creating working class communities where people from many different cultural traditions lived in close proximity.¹ In the 1940's and 1950's the migration of African Americans, Afro Caribbeans and Puerto Ricans into neighbourhoods of the Bronx already inhabited by Irish, Italian and Jewish residents created a climate in which jazz, rhythm and blues, and Afro-Cuban music were performed and appreciated not only by people of the ethnic groups among which these forms originated, but by youth of every background. The result was an explosion of musical creativity, nurtured in clubs and theaters, schools and churches, and the community centers of public housing projects, remarkable for its hybridity. The Bronx was a place where the greatest Latin bands regularly employed Black musicians, where jazz artists played Latin numbers and employed Latin percussionists, and where doo wop (a term for urban harmonic singing without instrumental accompaniment) and rhythm and blues singers often created harmonies to Latin and Caribbean rhythms. But more importantly, many Bronx communities, in the 1950's and 1960's were places where cultural and musical traditions were shared on a grass roots level. To be from those neighbourhoods, whether you were Black, White or Latino, meant you danced Latin and sang in the urban harmonic style, and had a special appreciation for artists, like the Drifters, Joe Bataan, Mongo Santamaria or Jimmy Castor, who fused the two traditions.²

This first wave of musical creativity, lasting roughly from the mid 1940's to the mid-1960's, was triggered more by internal population movements within New York City than by the movement of new groups of immigrants directly into the Bronx. During those years, most Blacks and Latinos moved to the South Bronx from Harlem and East Harlem rather than directly from Caribbean or the American South, seeking better housing, schools and economic opportunities than they could find in Harlem's densely packed, highly segregated neighbourhoods. The sense of excitement such families felt about moving out of rooming houses and packed tenements into spacious apartments on racially integrated blocks was magnified by their easy access to the families, churches and cultural institutions they had left behind. Because the South Bronx was connected to Harlem by four subway lines and three bridges, Blacks and Latinos moving to the Bronx had little difficulty retaining a connection to cultural practices and musical traditions that had been part of their lives in Harlem neighbourhoods. With Harlem being only a 20 minute bus or subway ride away (and less than 40 minutes on foot) Black and Latinos living in the Bronx continued to shop on 125th Street, attend shows at the Apollo, dance at the Park Palace and go to the Rucker Tournament to watch basketball games.³ As the South Bronx emerged as the destination of choice for many of Harlem's upwardly mobile families, these two sections of the city remained powerfully linked.

However, what made the South Bronx unique as a site of cultural and musical innovation was the mixture of peoples that took place within its neighbourhoods, which differed markedly from what most people had experienced in Harlem. During the 1930's and 1940's, two working class predominantly Jewish South Bronx neighbourhoods, Morrisania and Hunts Points, each with strong trade union and socialist influences, experienced an influx of Black and Latino families more peacefully and harmoniously than white neighbourhoods in New York typically did. Although these neighbourhoods had become predominantly Black and Latino by the late 1950's, for nearly twenty years, their schools, shopping districts, parks and recreation areas displayed a mix of Blacks, Latinos and descendants of European immigrants rarely seen in any neighbourhood in New York, or in any American city... The high school that served these communities, Morris High School, was the most racially integrated in the United States in the 1940's and 1950's, and local junior high schools, almost all of which had excellent music programs, had a comparable racial mix.

**Figure 1 - Picture of 7th Grade Class in 1961
at Herman Ridder Junior High School in Morrisania.**



Photo from private collection of David Greene.

These integrated South Bronx neighbourhoods, which remained economically vibrant as well as culturally diverse through the 1950's proved extremely conducive to musical creativity. Not only did local schools promote music through talent shows and excellent music instruction, but the business districts that served these neighbourhoods, Boston Road, Prospect Avenue, Westchester Avenue, and Southern Avenue, had an extraordinary array of nightclubs, theaters and social clubs that not only presented the major Afro-diasporic musical traditions of the era – rhythm and blues, be bop, big band jazz, calypso, mambo, Afro-Cuban music – but created a setting where musicians from different traditions could listen to one another, jam, and create new musical forms. The 1953 New Years Eve show at the Hunts Point Palace,

the South Bronx's largest music venue illustrates the eclectic mix of music typical of these remarkable neighbourhoods. On the same program, you had the nation's hottest rhythm and blues group Sonny Till and the Orioles (whose signature song was *Crying the Chapel*), mambo king Tito Rodriguez and be bop legend Thelonious Monk. Less than a mile away, on Boston Road, there were six live music venues in six blocks, two of which played jazz (Goodson's and the Apollo Bar), one of which played Latin music (the Royal Mansion), and three of which played jazz, Latin music, and rhythm and blues in various combinations (Freddie's, the Blue Morocco, and the Boston Road Ballroom).

The musicians who came out of these neighbourhoods crossed ethnic and racial boundaries with reckless abandon. The great salsero Eddie Palmieri, who grew up in Hunts Point with an Italian father and a Puerto Rican mother, and received his first musical training at Junior High School 52, staffed his first band, La Perfecta, with almost as many Black and White musicians as Puerto Ricans, one of whom Barry Rodgers, was a Jewish kid from the South Bronx widely regarded as one of the greatest trombone players in the history of Latin music.

Figure 2 – Jam Session at Home of Arthur Jenkins on Union Avenue in the Morrisania section of the Bronx in 1956. The trombonist is Barry Rodgers and the pianist is Arthur Jenkins.



David Karp collection, Bronx County Historical Society.

Mongo Santamaria – the Afro Cuban percussionist – benefited from a long creative collaboration with African American jazz musicians who lived in Morrisania. His most popular hit *Watermelon Man*, was a song borrowed from jazz pianist Herbie Hancock. He discovered, accidentally when Hancock was sitting in with him at a gig Santamaria's band was playing at Club Cubano Interamericano, a Cuban social club on Prospect Avenue. Santamaria also had a productive relationship with jazz saxophonist Bobby Capers, who played in his band for eight years, and his sister, jazz pianist Valerie Capers, who composed many songs for Santamaria. The Capers, who lived on Union Avenue, and Hancock, who lived on 164th Street near Boston Road

with his roommate, jazz trumpeter Donald Byrd, were among a large and vital group of African-American jazz musicians who lived in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Among whom were jazz singer Maxine Sullivan, trumpeter Henry 'Red' Allen, and jazz pianists Elmo Hope and (for a few years) Thelonious Monk. But if Latin music captured the imagination of many African American musicians, jazz and rhythm and blues also captured the attention of many Latinos. Ray Mantilla, a Puerto Rican percussionist who grew up on Beck Street in Hunts Point, had his most memorable musical moments playing with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie, and South Bronx jazz greats Bobby Sanabria and Ray Barretto proudly feature pure bebop numbers in both their recordings and their live shows. But the most astonishing example of this, I have heard, is on a two record set called *The Sweeter Side of Latin Soul* which features singers from salsa bands, many of whom came from the Bronx, singing doo wop with incredible passion and conviction. In neighbourhoods where the music of different traditions came pouring out of apartment windows, parked cars, churches, bars and social clubs, from speakers outside music and furniture stores, from picnics and block parties, and from informal gatherings of congueros and urban harmonic singers in hallways, schoolyards, parks and on the roofs of buildings, imaginations were stirred. And new musical identities were created in ways that defied traditional measures of ethnic identification.

Though Black and Latino settlement of Morrisania and Hunts Point took place almost entirely through the private housing market, construction of public housing in the South Bronx, which began in 1950, also contributed to the multicultural atmosphere of South Bronx neighbourhoods. Not only were the earliest South Bronx housing projects, Patterson, Melrose, Bronx River, and Bronxdale Houses beautifully designed, meticulously maintained, and filled with upwardly mobile families of World War II veterans, they contained a significant group of Whites of different nationalities as well as Blacks and Latinos. Taur Orange, who grew up in the Bronxdale Houses in Soundview, described the mothers sitting on project benches as a 'little United Nations', and Allen Jones a former professional basketball player now living in Luxembourg, who grew up in the Patterson Houses in Mott Haven, described the white kids in his neighbourhood as tough, adaptable and able to 'rap and play the dozens as well as any black kid'.⁴

Though most of the Whites in these developments had moved out by the early 1960's, South Bronx housing projects, both the original developments built in the early 1950's, ones built between the middle 1950's and the middle 1960's (the last South Bronx housing project, Claremont Village, was completed in 1965), remained thoroughly multicultural, with Blacks and Latinos living in the same buildings and sharing food, music, dance steps, and styles of dress. Renee Scroggins, who formed the punk funk group ESG with her three sisters and their neighbour Tito Libran, grew up in the Moore Houses with the sound of Latin percussionists rising up from nearby St Mary's Park:

'Every summer... 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...' it was our summer sound.'⁵

Vickie Archibald, from the Patterson Houses, recalled how Latin dancing and Latin music became an integral part of the lives of virtually everyone who grew up in her project:

'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' (in Naison, 2002).

The contribution of public housing to musical creativity in the Bronx is a subject that deserves far more attention than it has received. Public housing in the South Bronx, sometimes regarded as a source of the area's precipitous deterioration, actually cemented the neighbourhood's character as center of cultural interchange between Blacks and Latinos and provided safe zones where musical creativity could thrive even when disinvestment and arson ravaged Bronx neighbourhoods in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Every public housing project had community centers staffed by social workers and recreation leaders, and many of these centres sponsored dances and talents shows where bands, DJ's and musical groups could perform. Particularly innovative center directors, such as Arthur Crier of the Murphy and Phipps Houses, and Hugh Evans of the Mitchell Houses, served as a bridge between generations, allowing young artists rhyming over beats to perform side by side with R&B singers, and Latin and funk bands who kept alive older traditions of instrumental and lyrical virtuosity. These performances took place outdoors as well as indoors. The schoolyard of PS 18, right outside the Patterson Houses, was the scene of memorable musical performances from the 60's through the 80's, ranging from jazz concerts featuring pianist Eddie Bonnamere accompanied by Latin percussionist Willie Bobo to DJ battles featuring legendary hip-hop figures Grandmaster Flash and Pete DJ Jones. Scores of local DJ's got their start in project schoolyards, parks community centers, the most famous of them being Afrika Bambaataa, whose parties in the Bronx River Community Center helped jump start hip-hop in his section of the Bronx, and Disco King Mario, whose legendary jams in Rosedale Park across from the Bronxdale Houses attracted thousands of people.

The passage of liberalised immigration laws in 1965 not only cemented the Bronx's importance as a site of cultural exchange and musical innovation, but also helped spread zones of multicultural interaction well beyond the South Bronx. A wave of new immigrants from the Anglophone Caribbean entered the Bronx in the late 1960's, many of them coming directly from the islands rather than from another section of New York City. Rather than settling in Morrisania and Hunts Point, where the private housing market was rapidly being abandoned by landlords and redlined by banks, they moved into newly vacated apartment buildings adjoining the Grand Concourse, Jerome Avenue and University Avenues, where neighbourhoods once closed to Blacks were losing Jewish and Irish residents, and to two and three family homes adjoining White Plains and Gun Hill Roads in the North Bronx, which were being vacated by Italian Americans. While some of the middle class flight that created room for new

immigrants was triggered by suburban home construction, it was also stimulated by the construction of tens of thousands of units of subsidised middle income housing under the Mitchell Lama program, which created whole new middle income neighbourhoods on the Northern and Eastern periphery of the Bronx in Soundview and Castle Hill and in Baychester, where the world's largest cooperative housing project, Co Op City, opened its doors.

The wrenching demographic shifts that the Bronx underwent from the late 60's through the late 70's, like the concentration of public housing in the 1950's and early 60's, have largely been portrayed in negative terms. The arson and abandonment cycle that destroyed tens of thousands of units of housing in once vital South Bronx neighbourhoods, leaving acres and acres of scarred and vacant lots where houses and business districts once stood, coupled with a withdrawal of city services from the affected areas, left remaining residents of these neighbourhoods battered and traumatized and turned the South Bronx into an international symbol of urban decay. But during those same years, tens of thousands of upwardly mobile Black and Latino families were able to rent apartments, or purchase homes and co-ops in middle income neighbourhoods once closed to them, either in new subsidised housing developments, or in apartment buildings and homes that had been vacated by Whites, later joined by thousands of recent immigrants from the Caribbean who were able to rent or buy housing in the North and West Bronx.

These social and demographic shifts had a powerful effect on the cultural and musical movement known as hip-hop, which was far more multicultural, and for more geographically dispersed throughout the Bronx than most scholars have been willing to acknowledge. In dramatic contrast to the 1940's and 1950's, when the vast majority of Blacks and Latinos in the Bronx were confined, by residential segregation, to four adjacent neighbourhoods East of the Grand Concourse and South of Tremont Avenue. Mott Haven, Melrose, Morrisania and Hunts Point, in the 1970's, tens of thousands of Blacks and Latinos were living in sections of the West, North, and Southeast Bronx that were once closed to them and contained a sizable number of people living in private homes of middle-income housing developments. In all of these communities, Caribbean influences were paramount. The most important early Bronx hip-hop DJ's were all of Caribbean background – Clive Campbell (Kool DJ Herc), came to the US from Jamaica in 1967; Kevin Donovan (Afrika Bambaataa) was born in the US of Jamaican parents, Joseph Sadler (Grandmaster Flash) was born in the US of Barbadian parents; Carlos Mandes (Charley Chase) was born in the US of Puerto Rican parents.

But equally important, with the exception of Grandmaster Flash, these DJ's did not begin their careers in the burned out, abandoned neighbourhoods of the historic South Bronx. Kool Herc held his first jams in the community center of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, a middle-income housing development in the furthest reaches of the West Bronx, one block from the Harlem River.

Figure 3 –1520 Sedgwick Avenue, where DJ Kool Herc held his first jams.



Photo from private collection of Joe Conzo.

Afrika Bambaataa held his first parties in the Bronx River Community Center, in a neighbourhood filled with one and two family homes, separated by a river and several bridges from the scarred and burned out sections of Morrisania and Hunts Point. Charley Chase began spinning in the community center of the Murphy Houses, just North of Crotona Park, and in the Phipps Houses just South of the Bronx Zoo. While the crowds who came to these parties contained a significant number of gang members and kids from tough neighbourhoods, the fact is that more of early hip-hop jams took place in community centers and schools than in abandoned buildings and on street corners. The most popular single setting for Bronx hip-hop jams, which every single important artists performed at, was the Webster Avenue Police Athletic League on 183rd Street, which was built as part of a subsidised moderate income housing development in the Fordham section of the Bronx.⁶ Even outdoor jams took place in the relatively protected setting of public housing projects, and Mitchell Lama developments, with housing police and parents nearby in case of trouble. Some of the major centers for outdoor hip-hop events in the Bronx were the Mitchell, Millbrook, Mott Haven and Patterson Houses, in the Mott Haven Section of the South Bronx, Echo Park, in the West Tremont section, Lafayette Morrison and Rosedale Park, both in Soundview, and Heffen Park in a section of Baychester called 'The Valley' near Co Op City.

When hip hop moved into commercial venues, it followed migration and immigration patterns that took Blacks and Latinos outside of their historic areas of settlement... The majority of Bronx clubs where hip hop was performed live were located on Jerome Avenue in the West Bronx (Disco Fever, The Ecstasy Garage, the Hevalo) or along Gun Hill Road in the North Bronx (the T Connection and the Stardust Ballroom), in neighbourhoods to which Blacks and Latinos had moved relatively recently, and which had a large Caribbean population. Most of these clubs were also close to subway lines, allowing them to attract customers from Manhattan who had become attracted to this musical and cultural movement that had sprung up in the Bronx.

The story I have just told, of how the Bronx could be the site of musical creativity in two dramatically different periods in the borough's history, hopefully provides a model for examining similar moments in the history of cities throughout the globe. Population movements which bring people from different cultural traditions together in city neighbourhoods whether the product of market forces or state policies, can create new cultural forms which have resonance far beyond the settings in which they arise. The Bronx, while probably better known for the multiple tragedies that beset it than its cultural creativity, was the site of neighbourhoods more racially and culturally diverse than any in the nation more than 60 years ago, and retained that diversity through wrenching social crises that destroyed large sections of the South Bronx. Some of that resilience, I am convinced, is due to enlightened housing policies, long since abandoned, which placed hundreds of thousands of units of low income and subsidised housing for working class and middle class New Yorkers in neighbourhoods throughout the Bronx. When a disinvestment crisis, coupled with a city fiscal crisis, spurred massive abandonment of private housing in older Bronx neighbourhoods, public and subsidised housing not only created residential zones protected from the business cycle, but nurtured new cultural forms among young people in a borough that most people in the city, and the nation, had written off.

So after exposure to the worst that globalisation and conservative social policies could inflict upon it, the Bronx is alive, well and still a site of musical creativity. The most affordable of the city's five boroughs, the Bronx is experiencing new waves of migration, which are inspiring another explosion of hybrid musical forms. As immigrants from the Dominican Republic, West Africa, Mexico, South America and South Asia are entering Bronx neighbourhoods, they are fusing their indigenous musical forms with what they are hearing on the airwaves and on Bronx streets. The two most popular new groups from the Bronx, Aventura and Toby Love, have combined Dominican bachata with hip hop and R&B, employing both English and Spanish, to create music which has become popular throughout Latin America as well as in US cities with large Latin populations. An amazing new group from Chile, via Chicago, which has settled in the South Bronx, Rebel Diaz, is giving political hip-hop a new lease on life, joined by Patty Dukes and Rephstar, two young Puerto Rican MC's who shatter traditional gender roles. But also, by La Bruja, a Puerto Rican MC who in the great Bronx tradition, combines salsa, reggaeton, hip-hop, and Jamaican dub poetry in her albums and performances. They will be soon joined by African immigrant poets, singers and MC's who are already performing at showcases and talents shows all over the Bronx and all over the city.

In Bronx neighbourhoods, migration and musical creativity are as closely linked today as they were 60 years ago. Let us hope that activists and community organisations can fight for the construction of enough new housing, while protecting what subsidised housing still exists, to keep those neighbourhoods affordable. Although this is an uphill battle, it is encouraging that hip hop pioneers DJ Kool Herc, Cindy Campbell and Joe Conzo have been active participants in the struggle to keep 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Mitchell Lama program of affordable housing and make sure its current tenants are not forced to pay market level rents. This alliance between cultural workers and community organisers, spearheaded by artists like Rebel Diaz and Patty Dukes whose

activism spans both roles, may create momentum for more egalitarian social policies than those which have dominated New York since the 1970's. Therefore, creating new opportunities for immigrants, workers and youth of all nationalities.

News Flash - March 4, 2008. Thanks to the efforts of hip hop activists and affordable housing advocates, the New York City Department of Housing and Urban Development just stopped the sale of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue to private developers.⁷

Notes

¹ This article is a revised and extended version of a communication presented at The House of World Cultures in Berlin on 18.10.2007.

² The Drifters, out of Harlem, were the best known urban harmonic group in New York City during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Although their members were all African American, many of their most popular songs, such as "This Magic Moment" were produced to Latin Beats. Joe Bataan, born in East Harlem to a Phillipine father and African American mother, immersed himself in Latin Music traditions and became one of the most popular exponents of a style called "Latin Soul". His most popular song was "Ordinary Guy." Mongo Santamaria was an Afro Cuban percussionist who became the head of one of New York's most popular Latin combos in the 1960's. Many key members of his band were African American, and his most popular song "Watermelon Man" was written by the African American jazz pianist Herbie Hancock. Jimmy Castor, and African American bandleader from Washington Heights, led a combo called "The Jimmy Castor Bunch" that fused the jabbing horns of James Brown with the complex Latin percussion of Tito Puente. His signature song "It's Only Just Begun" was one of the three most sampled songs by the first Bronx hip hop DJ's.

³ The Rucker Tournament was a summer basketball league in Harlem, organized by a social worker named Holcombe Rucker that attracted professional basketball players as well as the best basketball talent in New York's inner city neighborhoods. By the 1960's thousands of people were coming to watch the tournaments championship games at its outdoor court on West 155th Street.

⁴ "The dozens," sometimes called "the dirty dozens," is a tradition of playful verbal competition between black men and women, most often taking place on street corners or other public spaces, that usually involves boasting and the exchange of insults. One of the best discussions of the dozens is in Robin D.G. Kelley's (2004: 123-4). Interview with Taur Orange, Bronx African American History Project, November 20, 2005, transcript available at the Bronx County Historical Society. [Allen Jones, with the Assistance of Mark Naison, *The Rat That Got Away*, unpublished manuscript to be published by Fordham University Press, Spring 2009, chapter 13, page 94 – published meanwhile.]

⁵ Interview with Renee Scroggins, Bronx African American History Project, February 3, 2006, transcript available at the Bronx County Historical Society.

⁶ The Police Athletic League was an organisation formed by a police officer in the Lower East Side of New York in 1914 to keep young people out of trouble by getting them involved in organised sports. By the 1940's there were PAL centers all over New York City, including many neighbourhoods of the Bronx, which sponsored boxing, basketball, baseball and track and field. Occasionally, these centers opened their doors to cultural groups who sponsored dances, plays and concerts.

⁷ "Bronx Birthplace of Hip Hop Saved - For Now," *New York Observer*, 03.03.2008.

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