ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the growth of New York City’s Latino population in the 1940s and 50s help to increase the popularity of Latin music and dance in American culture?

OVERVIEW

In the fall of 1957, the Broadway musical West Side Story opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in Manhattan. Featuring a musical score by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, its story centered on two rival teenage gangs -- the all-white Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks -- facing off on the streets of New York City. The play’s showcase number, “America,” dramatized the disparities between life in rural Puerto Rico and the opportunities available to immigrants living in the United States. Bernstein’s orchestrations drew heavily on Latin-style percussion and dance rhythms -- sounds that had become prominent in New York over the course of the 1940s and 50s, as the city’s Latino population boomed.

During and immediately following World War II, the United States experienced an historic wave of immigration from Latin America, including a record number of immigrants from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. In 1940, the U.S. census reported just under 70,000 Puerto Ricans living in the country; by 1950, that number had grown to over 226,000, with eighty-three percent of that population living in New York City. As alluded to in West Side Story, many Puerto Ricans, (who held natural born U.S. citizenship), arrived seeking jobs in factories and on ship docks -- industries with greater economic security than the agricultural work available in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican immigrants who arrived in New York often settled in established Spanish-speaking communities, the largest of which was Spanish Harlem, also known as El Barrio (“the neighborhood”). As the city’s Latino population grew, many New Yorkers from other backgrounds became familiar with the dance rhythms that pulsated from these ethnic neighborhoods. Artists who were particularly affected by these rhythms included Bernstein, who was of Ukrainian Jewish heritage, and Charlie Thomas, an African-American member of the Drifters, an R&B group that would incorporate the Latin feel into several of their recordings. “Brought up in Harlem, you’d be around a lot of Puerto Ricans, so the Latin feel is part of your life,” recalls Thomas. “Weekends and all night long, that’s all you’d hear: the
sound of Puerto Rican drums going through your head.” And as many New York neighborhoods vibrated with a Latin beat, television shows like I Love Lucy helped introduce mainstream America to Latino culture through its lead character Ricky Ricardo, a Cuban-American bandleader played by Desi Arnez. In real life, Arnez was a celebrated bandleader who helped to popularize the Conga drum -- a prevalent instrument in many forms of Latin music.

As Latin music developed a local New York fan base, Latin musicians, and the promoters booking them, began searching for larger spaces to showcase their music to a wider audience. In 1948, the manager of Manhattan's Palladium Ballroom began hosting evenings devoted to Latin bands and dance contests, with a focus on popular Caribbean-influenced styles including the Mambo, Rumba, and Cha Cha. Attendance at the ballroom quickly grew, and by the early 1950s the Palladium was widely recognized as one of the nation's premiere venues to see Latin entertainers, including famous bands led by Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, and Frank “Machito” Grillo -- known collectively as the “Big Three” within New York's burgeoning dance music scene. The shows were a massive crossover success.

Non-Latino musicians and Pop songwriters who worked in Manhattan often patronized the Palladium's famous dance contest nights. Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman were two Brooklyn-born songwriters of Jewish heritage who shared an office in the Brill Building, the hub of New York's music publishing industry. They were among several music business professionals who became regulars at the ballroom in the late 1950s, a time when Rock and Roll songwriters and artists were becoming increasingly fascinated with the idea of “the beat” in popular music. Infatuated with the music of the “Big Three,” Pomus and Shuman incorporated Latin-flavored rhythms into many R&B songs they wrote for the Drifters, including “Save the Last Dance for Me” and “This Magic Moment.” Shuman would later describe himself as “a mambonik” [a combination of “Mambo” and “beatnik”] who “wrote Rock and Roll but lived, ate, drank and breathed Latino.” Other Brill Building songwriters and record producers of the early 60s also incorporated Latin beats into mainstream Pop hits, including Phil Spector and Jerry Leiber's “Spanish Harlem,” performed by Ben E. King, and Bert Berns and Phil Medley's “Twist and Shout,” popularized by the Isley Brothers and later covered by the Beatles.

This lesson focuses on Latin American immigration to New York City during the late 1940s and 50s and the effect it had on popular culture. Students investigate a 1940 U.S. Department of Agriculture film about Puerto Rico, a graph containing immigration data, an interview with bandleader Tito Puente, an array of clips featuring Latin dance music, and both mainstream Pop songs and Broadway showtunes revealing the “Latin tinge.” As students examine these resources, they will consider and discuss the roles Latino artists played in bringing a Latin feel to American popular culture.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - Economic and living conditions that encouraged Puerto Ricans to relocate to the U.S. during the 1940s and 50s
   - The importance of New York’s El Barrio (“the neighborhood”) and other Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in forging a sense of community for immigrants and their families, and how those neighborhoods affect New York City culture
   - The role of the Palladium Ballroom in showcasing Latin music and dance for an ethnically-diverse audience
   - How artists including Leonard Bernstein, the Drifters, and Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, incorporated Latin dance rhythms into other music styles of the era, including Broadway and Pop

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Analyze data to discern demographic changes in New York City, determining the effects of immigration on metropolitan life and culture
   - Evaluate and discuss the extent to which Latin-American artists influenced work created by non-Latino Pop songwriters and composers
   - Common Core: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. (CCCS Reading 7)

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. Distribute Handout 1: Lyrics to “America” from the musical West Side Story. As a class, read the brief introduction to the musical, then play an audio clip from the song “America” performed by the original Broadway cast in 1957. While listening, students should underline any lyrics that describe life in Puerto Rico, and place a star next to any descriptions of life in the United States.

2. Discuss as a class:
   - What examples do the characters offer of differences between life in rural Puerto Rico and life in urban New York?
   - How do the lyrics convey a sense of ambiguity, a complicated feeling of being excited about living in America yet also missing life in Puerto Rico?
PROCEDURE:

1. Explain that in addition to Broadway musicals, the Latin influence also appeared in other styles of American music from the 1950s and early 60s, including Rhythm and Blues and Pop. Play an audio clip of Latin influences in Pop music featuring “Spanish Harlem” by Ben E. King (1960), “Under the Boardwalk” by the Drifters (1964), and “Come a Little Bit Closer” by Jay and the Americans (1964). Students should note the chart positions of these songs, which are included in the video.

   Ask students:
   - What do the chart positions signify about the popularity of these songs during the early 1960s?
   - Which elements of these songs seem Latin in nature? Consider the percussion, the rhythm, the lyrics, and the vocal delivery.

2. The rise of Latin music in popular culture mirrored a boom in Latino immigration to the U.S. between the 1940s and 1960s. Play a montage of short clips from Democracy at Work in Rural Puerto Rico, a film produced in 1940 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Students should pay close attention to how the film portrays the economy of Puerto Rico and the quality of life on the island.

   Ask students:
   - What industry is the Puerto Rican economy based upon? How does the film portray the nature of this type of work?
   - If you were living in Puerto Rico under these conditions, what are some reasons you might choose to immigrate to the United States? (Possible answers include: educational opportunities, better pay, a career in a field other than agriculture, etc.)

3. Display the following graph showing U.S. immigration statistics and dispersion of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

   Ask students:
   - How does the Puerto Rican population living in the U.S. change between 1920 and 1950? When does the greatest population change take place?
   - What does this graph tell us about the dispersion of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.? During 1950, what percentage of the total Puerto Rican population living in the U.S. live specifically in New York City? (Note to teacher: using calculators, students can divide the New York City population (187,420) by the total population (226,110), to reach the answer of approximately 83%.)

4. Display the following three photos depicting life in New York City during the 1940s and 50s: mechanical training offered at a Brooklyn factory (1942), a policeman practicing Spanish phrases (1958), and new apartment buildings under construction in Spanish Harlem, where a large concentration of the Latin Americans resided (1947).

5. Have a short class discussion concerning the following: imagine you’ve just moved from Puerto Rico to New York City. How do you imagine your life in the U.S. differs from your life in Puerto Rico? Consider your living situation, language barriers, employment opportunities, neighborhood,
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

access to education, etc. Cite any details you can infer from the photographs, when applicable.

6. Distribute Handout 2: Tito Puente and El Barrio. Assign student volunteers to read the introduction and interview excerpt aloud to the class. Ask the class: What did growing up in Spanish Harlem, or El Barrio (“the neighborhood”), provide for Tito Puente in terms of his music education?

7. Play a clip of Tito Puente performing “Maria Cervantes” in the 1950s, in which he is playing a vibraphone, a percussion instrument. Discuss as a class:

- In your opinion, what are some elements of this performance that Tito Puente may have learned while playing music “in the street,” rather than learning formally in university? (Answers may include: the performance seems to be more relaxed and playful rather than a formal recital, musicians are moving rhythmically, some of the percussion instruments seem Latin-American in nature, etc.)

- This performance aired on television during the 1950s. Do you think this performance was solely for a Latin-American audience, or might this music have appealed to a wider audience? Explain your reasoning.

8. Read the following quote aloud from Charlie Thomas, an African-American New York native who sang in the R&B group, the Drifters: “Brought up in Harlem, you’d be around a lot of Puerto Ricans, so the Latin feel is part of your life...weekends and all night long, that’s all you’d hear: the sound of Puerto Rican drums going through your head.”

Ask students to discuss the following question in pairs, then invite volunteers to share out their responses: If you were a musician or music fan living in New York City during the 1940s and 50s, how might you be influenced by the “Latin feel” that was then prevalent in the city?

9. Display the following two images, an album cover from Desi Arnaz’s 1947 recording “Babalu” and a 1956 magazine cover featuring I Love Lucy stars Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. In addition to being a popular Latin musician during the 1940s and 50s, Arnaz’s character on television, Ricky Ricardo, was also a Cuban-American bandleader.

Tell the students that I Love Lucy ran from 1951 to 1957 and was the most-watched show on American television for four of its six seasons. Ask students:

- How might the popularity of I Love Lucy have affected mainstream America’s familiarity with Latin American music during the 1950s?

- In your opinion, by conveying a marriage between an American woman and a Cuban man, how might I Love Lucy have advanced the idea of integration and cultural mixing in 1950s America?

10. Display a map of midtown Manhattan during the 1950s. Identify Spanish Harlem on the map. Point out midtown Manhattan, which is located approximately 3 miles south of Spanish Harlem.

11. Using Handout 3: 1950s Manhattan, set up three multimedia stations around the room for the Palladium Ballroom, the Winter Garden Theatre, and the Brill Building. The handout includes a one-page poster for each of the three locations, containing images and additional information about the location. Explain to the class that they will be moving...
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

through three stations in small groups. At each stop, they will read about the site and view or listen to an audiovisual resource. Students should take notes on their reactions at each of the stops, specifically noting any powerful instances of cultural mixing.

• The Palladium Ballroom, where students will watch a 1955 performance by Tito Rodriguez & His Orchestra and observe the style of dancing that made the club famous.

• The Winter Garden Theatre, the Broadway location that hosted the premiere of the play West Side Story in 1957, where students will watch a trailer from the play’s 1961 film adaptation.

• The Brill Building, the place of work for many Pop songwriters, including Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. Students will listen to and compare back-to-back audio clips of Frank “Machito” Grillo and His Afro-Cubans performing “El Jamaiquino” (1954) with “This Magic Moment” (1960), written by Pomus and Shuman and performed by the Drifters.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

In their small groups, students should have a discussion using the following two prompts:

• Prompt #1: What examples of cultural mixing did you take note of during your “trip” around midtown Manhattan? How did Latin-American music and dance seemingly influence popular art and culture in 1950s New York City?

• Prompt #2: Which rhythms, genres, artists, or instruments were prevalent in your own musical upbringing? Was there a particular style of music you heard often at home or in your neighborhood? Does this exposure influence your choice of music today, and if so, how?

Invite volunteers from each group to share out their responses. Prompt #2 can also be assigned as a writing prompt for students to complete individually.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Listen to other songs written during the early 1960s that featured Latin-American musical influences. Using independent research, write a one-page history of a song of your choice from the list below. Which Latin American rhythms, percussion, or other sounds does this song incorporate? What team of songwriters wrote the song, and what were some of their other compositions? How successful was the recording in terms of its chart position, award nominations, or covers by other artists?

• The Diamonds - “Little Darlin” (1957)
• Ben E. King - “Spanish Harlem” (1960)
• The Drifters - “Sweets for My Sweet” (1961)
• The Drifters - “Up on the Roof” (1962)
• The Drifters - “Save the Last Dance for Me” (1962)
• The Drifters - “Under The Boardwalk” (1964)
• The Isley Brothers - “Twist & Shout” (1962)
• The Crystals - “Uptown” (1962)
• Jay and the Americans - “Come A Bit Little Closer” (1964)
• The Crystals - “Then He Kissed Me” (1965)
EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

2. Design a poster board to display a Latin-American dance style, such as the Mambo, the Rumba, the Cha Cha, or the Conga. Choosing one dance, independently research the physical dance steps and the musical accompaniment. Gathering primary sources, poster boards should include album covers, movie posters or still shots, advertisements, or any other sources that point to the popularity of their chosen dance style during the 1950s. Questions to consider include:

- Which musicians were known to play this style of music?
- What famous performers were associated with this style of dance?
- Did the dance appear in any major film or television productions? Consider shows like I Love Lucy and West Side Story.

3. Assign students to read Handout 4: Review of a Machito Concert, as reviewed by music journalist Jerry Wexler. Explain that Wexler later became an esteemed music producer who helped guide the careers of such artists as Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and the Drifters. Also in the audience at the Palladium the night of Wexler’s review was trumpeter and bandleader Dizzy Gillespie, who became a major proponent of Afro-Cuban style Jazz in the 1940s and 50s.

Conduct independent research into the careers of Wexler and Gillespie. What evidence can you find that indicates these two individuals were influenced by Latin American music? How might they have been inspired by artists such as Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodriguez? What work did they produce that reflected this inspiration? Write a one-page response, citing examples from the lesson and from independent research.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 7: Analyze content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12
Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’ and/or performers’ expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

• Machito and His Orchestra vs. The Drifters – “El Jamaiquino” (1954) and “This Magic Moment” (1960)
• Ben E. King, The Drifters, and Jay and the Americans – Latin Influences in Pop Music (1960s)
• Tito Puente – Maria Cervantes (1950s)
• West Side Story, Original Broadway Cast – America (1957)
• Tito Rodriguez – Mambo Madness (1955)
• West Side Story Trailer (1961)

HANDOUTS

• Handout 1: Lyrics to “America”
• Handout 2: Tito Puente and El Barrio
• Handout 3: 1950s Manhattan
• Handout 4: Review of a Machito Concert