Five Decades of the Puerto Rican Music Scene in Chicago: A Personal Recollection

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This essay documents the development and history of Puerto Rican music, places and musicians in Chicago. It highlights the musical relationships between Puerto Ricans and other groups, and the locations where such relationships took place.

[Key words: Chicago, music, Puerto Rican music, place, dance, Latin music]

ABSTRACT


Album cover of La Justicia's first album Salsa con Nostalgia, recorded in the 1970s. Courtesy of Carlos Flores.

New World Clipping (June, 1956) – Newspaper clipping from the Catholic Archdiocese newspaper The New World announcing the First Día de San Juan Festival in 1956. Courtesy of Manuel Martínez.
Music and dance traditions define Puerto Rican culture.
As Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States during the twentieth century, these traditions eased their pain and solitude and helped them face the challenges of harsh winters, an unfamiliar language, and overt discrimination. The Puerto Rican migration to Chicago and other Midwest cities, like Loraine, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Gary, and East Chicago, bears interesting comparisons and contrasts with the migration that occurred in other eastern cities in the United States.

This article will present a brief history of how Chicago's Puerto Rican community transplanted and supported its cultural traditions through popular music over the last five decades. It is also based on my own personal experiences, having followed this music scene for more than four decades. It will describe the social, civic, and cultural organizations Puerto Ricans established as they migrated to Chicago, as well as...
a job performing with his band at the Glass Hat Cocktail Room in the Congress Hotel. Castro performed at this venue for more than a year before moving on to form his own band, El Congo y Su Combo. He would perform in venues like the Cuban Village, the Palladium (presently the site of the famous jazz club the Green Mill Lounge), Mambo City, and the famous El Mirador—opened in 1957 by the late Mexican businessman César Dovalina. El Mirador was located on Rosevelt, near Halsted, and it was one of the first elegant Latino-owned nightclubs where patrons could enjoy dancing to Afro-Latino Caribbean music with live bands. Mexican bass player Manny García led the house band with an assortment of Mexican, Anglo, and Puerto Rican musicians. One notable musician who performed with García’s band was singer Pellín Rodríguez. Rodríguez had settled in Chicago for several years after living in New York and performing with the great Puerto Rican pianist Noro Morales. In the 1960s Pellín joined Andy Montañez, becoming one of the leading singers of El Gran Combo.

In 1957, Vitín Santiago arrived in Chicago from Puerto Rico with his orchestra to accompany the late Daniel Santos. They had been contracted for several months to open a new club named the Sonora Night Club. Due to a dispute with the club’s management Santos abandoned the group, but Santiago had to stay on to

The 1960s — Puerto Ricans Arrive in Chicago with a “Boom”
By the 1960s there were more than 32,000 Puerto Ricans living in Chicago, and the Caballeros de San Juan continued to play an essential role in organizing the community. They had established 12 concilios in the various parishes where Puerto Ricans lived and worshipped. The concilios organized dances where parishioners would come with their families to enjoy an evening of music. I remember as a young teenager attending these dances with my own family at the Concilio #3, located in the St. Michael’s parish gymnasium in the Old Town neighborhood.

Other civic-social organizations and the so-called “town clubs” also began to emerge as centers where Puerto Ricans gathered to socialize. The town clubs included Hijos de Ciales, Los Hijos de Yauco, Hijos de Lares, Hijos de Moca, Hijos de Patillas, La Sociedad Manatieña, Sociedad de Ponce, Sociedad Vegabajeña, the Puerto Rican Community Center, the Puesto Boricua (a Puerto Rican VFW organization), and others.

One organization that deserves a notable mention in the musical development of Chicago’s Puerto Rican community is the Congreso Puertorriqueño de Ayuda Mutua (Puerto Rican Congress of Mutual Aid). It was established in 1951 to provide cultural and social outlets for people by organizing baseball teams, musical events, and other social activities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this organization developed music programs geared towards the youth that continue to
their neighborhood friends, but also to protect themselves from attacks from other white ethnic groups. Constant police harassment and brutality set the stage to spark a disturbance that was beyond the control of the older established Puerto Rican leadership. This is the same generation of young Puerto Ricans that began to experience different musical tastes by listening, performing, and dancing to rock and roll, rhythm & blues (soul music), and doo wop. This is also the same generation who in the late 1960s and early 1970s embraced the music of a young Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe, Ismael Miranda, the Lebrón Brothers, the Joe Cuba Sextet, La Sonora Ponceña, Johnny Pacheco and Pete “El Conde” Rodríguez, Ray Barretto, Eddie Palmieri, and many more musicians coming out of New York and Puerto Rico.

In the midst of these turbulent years the music scene continued to grow as Chicago has its own history of the Latin explosion in dance just as New York had its Mambo Craze and Palladium Days. You also had several individuals teaching and dancing professionally in venues like the Robert’s Show Lounge, Basin Street, and the Saber Room. They included African-Americans (Saladeen Alamin, Gloria Farr), Puerto Ricans (Alma Miranda Garza), and others (Lupita “Lupe” González, Ángel Arroyo).

I remember as a youngster attending dances at community venues and watching the cool couples dancing on the floor, but I vividly recall a group of guys who attended many of the dances. People would form a circle around them, and in the circle these guys would take turns dancing. They would jump in the air and land on the floor in a split. They would throw a handkerchief on the floor and pick it up with their mouths as they performed their split routine, all in the
There were three great radio shows that played strictly Afro-Cuban and Afro-Latin Caribbean music (also referred to as “salsa”) during the 1970s and 1980s. The “Sabor Latino Show” was hosted by Mexican musicians Chilo Pérez and Víctor Parra. Cuban-born Juan Montenegro hosted another show, the “Latin Explosion,” for several years in the 1970s. The show came on WEDC-AM from Monday through Saturday, from midnight until the early morning hours, serving up a strong dose of hot tropical dancing music. The other program, entitled “Mambo Express,” began in the 1980s, when it was heard on the local public radio station and was hosted by Víctor Parra (Mexican) and Billy Zayas (Puerto Rican).

It is also important to mention that in the 1960s Puerto Ricans became the first Latinos to be presented on local television. In 1964, WCIU Channel 26 was the first UHF television station in Chicago that provided an opportunity for Rafael (Don Canuto) Cardona and Turín Acevedo to showcase Spanish language programming. It also aired “Tony Quintana’s Variety Show.”

**The 1970s — The Golden Era of Chicago’s Puerto Rican Music Scene**

By 1970, the Puerto Rican music scene in Chicago was at its peak. On any given weekend you could go dancing at La Concha, where you would be entertained by Gilberto Díaz y su Combo and Rojo Medina’s Orchestra (the majority of musicians in this band were Mexican-Americans). At Los Violines you could enjoy Joe Piano’s Orchestra, and at the Tropical Magic, Manuel y Sus Estrellas or Diego El Cubano y Su Combo. Other nightclubs included the Ali Bar, Night and Day, and Adan y Eva. Most of these venues were Puerto Rican-owned and were located in the heart of the Puerto Rican community.

As I mentioned earlier, the popularity of the New York/Puerto Rico music scene, developed through the distribution of recordings by Fania, Tico, and Alegre Records, reinforced Chicago’s Puerto Rican music scene, especially among the young. In the mid to late 1960s they were listening to and playing both rock and roll, and rhythm and blues, which included music by The Mustangs, Bob Stone Group (Roberto Piedra), the Mystics, and the Soul Medallions. In the 1970s the Soul Medallions became La Confidencia, led by Polish-American trumpet player Richard Straka, and the group remained for more than two decades one of Chicago’s most popular dancing bands. Other groups that also emerged were La Mafía del Ritmo, Shorty Ramírez & Orchestra, La Nativa, and Típica 78.

The Puerto Rican Congress seized the opportunity to use music to develop

*Orquesta Blue Son en Clave Negra, led by Carlos Garcia (timbales) perform at the Old Town School of Folk Music, 2004. Photograph by Carlos Flores. Reprinted, by permission, from Carlos Flores.*
and gangs. Several downtown nightclubs and restaurants that were not Puerto Rican-owned began experimenting by providing one of their off-nights as Salsa Night or Tropical Night—Salsa Monday’s at the Moosehead, for example. In order to stay competitive, Puerto Rican and Latino entrepreneurs had to provide similar venues, such as Latin Village, Cats (Puerto Rican-owned), and Tania’s (Cuban-owned).

In the 1980s salsa music began to go in a different direction with the development and commercialization of *música romántica*, which was intensified by the emergence of the DJs and the decision of nightclub owners to cut costs by not using large orchestras. These factors impacted the music in cities around the country, including Chicago. Hip-hop culture, *rock en español*, and other musical influences began to encroach on young urban Latinos, including Puerto Ricans, and took traditional Afro-Latino Caribbean music to another level. The 1990s saw the evolution of Christian music (Orquesta Ebenzer, Héctor Núñez y su Orquesta), as well as the development of Latin jazz groups such as Richie Pillot’s Havana Group, Blue Son en Clave Negra, Ensemble Descarga.

Veteran musicians from the late 1960s and 1970s continued to develop new musical groups (Orquesta Nova), and the new and younger musicians arriving on the scene were more musically educated. Outstanding bands developed during this time period, like Orquesta Yambo, Cayito y la Distinguidad, Orquesta 809,
Conclusion

For the last fifty years, Chicago’s Puerto Rican community has preserved its musical traditions, which have helped earlier generations of migrants make the transition from the island to the city. We are grateful to those who sustained our rich Puerto Rican cultural legacy, and I am honored to have been part of our musical history.

Our Puerto Rican musical traditions in Chicago are in good hands. I am confident that those traditions will endure in the face of community gentrification, cultural fusion, and other challenges on the horizon.