



Latin Music and Puerto Rican Migration to New York City

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is the history behind Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, and how did Puerto Rican migration affect American Popular Music?



OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students identify the reason behind Latin music's growing presence in the United States by uncovering the history of U.S.-Caribbean relations during the 19th and early 20th centuries that led to Puerto Rican migration to New York City. By watching video clips, students discover how historical events and policies such as the Monroe Doctrine, Spanish-American War, Platt Amendment, Foraker Act, and Operation Bootstrap led to Puerto Rican migration into New York City. They then listen to the music popular among the Puerto Rican migrant community during the first half of the 1900s. Finally, students trace how specific Latin musicians borrowed elements from Swing and Big Band music to create a new form of Latin Music.

On February 15th, 1898, the U.S.S. Maine mysteriously exploded in Cuba's Havana Harbor. The battleship was deployed to Cuba to protect U.S.-held lands during an ongoing war for Cuban Independence between Cuban Revolutionaries and the colonialist Spanish Army. The destruction of the U.S.S. Maine led to the U.S.'s direct involvement in the Cuban Independence struggle by initiating the Spanish-American War.

The Spanish-American War was relatively short, lasting only three months before resulting in a U.S. victory. As a result, Cuba became an independent country, but the U.S. had immense influence over its governance. The Platt Amendment, ratified in 1901, granted the United States the right to land in Cuba (most notably Guantanamo Bay), and the right to unilaterally intervene in Cuban political and economic affairs.

As part of Spain's surrender, the U.S. also gained the island of Puerto Rico. In 1900, the U.S. Congress passed the Foraker Act of 1900, which made Puerto Rico an "unincorporated territory" of the United States.

Like Cuba, for much of the early 20th century Puerto Rico acted essentially as a vassal state to the United States: their economies and governments were molded by the U.S., largely at the behest of the sugar industry. Cuba and Puerto Rico's economic reliance on the whims of the sugar trade led to widespread poverty for much of the population.

To remedy its economic reliance on sugar production, the Puerto Rican government began Operation Bootstrap in 1947, in an attempt to diversify Puerto Rico's economy through industrialization. One of the effects of Puerto Rico's industrialization was a mass migration of Puerto Rican agricultural farmers to the contiguous U.S., as they procured manufacturing jobs to aid the U.S. war effort.

The vast majority of Puerto Rican migrants arrived in New York City, and often settled in established Spanish-speaking communities. The largest of these communities was Spanish Harlem, also known as El Barrio ("The Neighborhood"). There, Caribbean culture thrived, and brought new forms of Latin music, dance, and culture to New York City.

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 Rodríguez, 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, leading to larger projects such as the musical and film *West Side Story*, which introduced the musical and cultural effects of Puerto Rican migration to new audiences across the United States.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The history of U.S. foreign relations with Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 19th and early 20th centuries
- Amendments and policies related to the U.S.'s relationship with the Caribbean, including the Monroe Doctrine, Platt Amendment, Foraker Act, and Operation Bootstrap
- The economic and living conditions that encouraged Puerto Rican migration 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 affecting New York City culture
- Musicians Rafael Hernández, Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, and Frank "Machito" Grillo

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the historical reasons behind Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, and the effects the migration had on American Popular Music.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play the YouTube video “Lamento Borincano” by PJ Sin Suela and Kristal Fonrodona (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSKyQ3LW5p4>). Ask students:
 - Have you ever heard of these musicians? (*PJ Sin Suela is a Bronx-Born Puerto Rican musician who has worked with Bad Bunny and Ñejo; Kristal Fonrodona is a Puerto Rico singer who has worked in musical theater and pop music*).
 - Based on what you see in the video, what might this song be about? (Feel free to ask Spanish-speaking students in the class to help elaborate the song’s meaning, based on the lyrics.)
2. Display **Image 1, “Lamento Borincano.”** Inform students that they watched PJ Sin Suela and Kristal Fonrodona’s version of the song first released in 1930 by Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernández. Since then, it has come to be known as “the first Latin American protest song” and has been performed by many musicians.
3. Distribute Handout - Lyrics to “Lamento Borincano.” Read the lyrics aloud as a class or individually. If possible, read the lyrics aloud in Spanish or ask a Spanish speaking student to read the lyrics, so the class may hear how the verses sound in their native language. Individually, in groups, or as a class. Then ask students:
 - What story is being told in this song? Who might be the main character?
 - What is a lament? What might Rafael Hernández be lamenting in this song?
 - Hernández wrote this song while in New York City. How might have that inspired the lyrics to this song?

PROCEDURE

1. Inform students that in this lesson they will be examining the historic situation alluded to in “Lamento Borincano.” Specifically, they will be discovering how Puerto Rican migration to the contiguous United States helped bring Latin music to mainstream U.S. audiences.
2. Distribute **Handout - U.S.- Caribbean Foreign Relations, 1823 - 1948 Graphic Organizer** (*Teacher Edition available*).
3. Play **Clip 1, U.S.- Caribbean Foreign Relations, 1823 - 1948**, and encourage students to take notes on their graphic organizer as they watch the clip.
4. Work through the graphic organizer together as a class, filling in notes for all the terms on the handout. Use the Teacher’s Guide of the organizer to help spur thinking (*you may need to rewatch portions of the video with the class*).

5. Ask students to again examine **Handout - Lyrics to “Lamento Borincano.”** Ask students:

- Having watched the video clip, does the song take on added significance?
- Based on what you know now, who might have been the protagonist of the song?
- What historical situation might have left the town in the song “deserted”?
- What was the primary cause of Puerto Rican migration in the 1940s and 1950s? How is Puerto Rican migration illustrated in the song lyrics?

(If this lesson is split between multiple sessions, this would be a good stopping point.)

6. Display **Image 2, Map of Manhattan.** Point to the Northeastern part of the map, noted as “Spanish Harlem,” and inform students that this was one of the major landing spots for Puerto Rican migration to New York City. It became known as “El Barrio,” or “The Neighborhood.”
7. Inform students that Puerto Rican migrants brought their traditional music with them when arriving in El Barrio, as well as music throughout the Caribbean. Play **Clip 2, Caribbean Music, 1940s-1950s** and explain this is some of the music and musicians people in El Barrio were likely listening to in the 1940s and 1950s. Ask students:
- Have you heard this type of music before? Does it remind you of any other type of music you have heard? Were there any songs you recognized?
 - What were the primary instruments you heard in these songs?
 - How many members would you estimate these groups had, on average?

(Hint: the names of the groups in the video often gives a clue as to how many people were in them.)

8. Display **Image 2, Map of Manhattan** once again. Explain to students that while Spanish Harlem in the northeast of Manhattan played an important role in Puerto Rican migration, many began playing in Midtown Manhattan, in the middle of the island. One of the most famous venues for Latin Music was the Palladium Ballroom, located on the map.
9. Play **Clip 3, Latin Big Bands in New York City.** Explain to students that they will be watching and listening to music from the “Big Three” Latin band leaders of this era who often played in Midtown: Machito, Tito Rodríguez, and Tito Puente. *(You can point out to students that Tito Puente and Tito Rodríguez were a product of Puerto Rican migration, while Machito was originally from Cuba.)* After watching the clip, ask students:
- Have you heard this type of music before? Does it remind you of any other type of music you have heard?
 - How did this style of Latin music differ from what you listened to earlier in the lesson?
 - Do you notice any new instruments in this music that you didn’t hear in the previous music? What were they?
 - Why might band leaders such as Machito, Tito Rodríguez, and Tito Puente incorporate more instruments?
10. Play **Clip 4, Machito and Gillespie Bands Compared.** Tell students they will be comparing recordings and photographs of Latin musician Machito and Jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie’s bands. Encourage students to take notes on

how each band looks and sounds similar and dissimilar. Ask students:

- What similarities do you notice between the two bands in the photograph? Any differences?
- What similarities did you notice in the way the two bands sounded? Any differences?
- Why might Machito have created a Big Band similar to Gillespie's?
- Ballrooms where Machito played, such as the Palladium, were known for dancing. Why might having more musicians be helpful when playing in large ballrooms?

11. Display **Image 2, Map of Manhattan** a third time. Point out that the Palladium was in a commercial center of New York City, and close

to many office buildings for media companies and theaters.

12. Display **Image 4, West Side Story Advertisement**. Ask students:

- What is *West Side Story*? (*West Side Story* is a musical created by Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and Harold Prince, that is largely based around the cultural and social effects of Puerto Rican migration to New York City. It debuted in 1957, became a movie in 1961, and then again in 2021.)
- How might the presence of Latin people and culture in New York City have lead to the development of these productions?
- What influence might these shows, which featured Latin music, had on American popular music and culture in general?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Divide students into groups, and distribute **Handout - Latin Music in New York Timeline**. Have each group follow the instructions on the handout.
2. Once student groups have completed the handout, ask them to share their results as a class, while making a "Collective Timeline" on the board. If necessary, use the Teacher's Guide to further fill in the timeline.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Listen to the musicians discussed in this lesson in this YouTube playlist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJ69G2eTTsQ&list=PLQXXISq_vcZX1luNVTLfKH5-PW4KVOgv
2. Listen to Episode 1 of NPR's La Brega Podcast to learn about "Preciosa," an unofficial anthem of Puerto Rico by Rafael Hernández: <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/974836637/la-brega>
3. 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 productions like *West Side Story*.
4. Assign students to read **Handout - 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.
 5. 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 Rodríguez? 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 Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Responding

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.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Responding

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- U.S.- Caribbean Foreign Relations, 1823 - 1948
- Caribbean Music, 1940s-1950s
- Latin Big Bands in New York City
- Machito and Gillespie Bands Compared

HANDOUTS

- Lyrics to “Lamento Borincano.”
- U.S.- Caribbean Foreign Relations, 1823 - 1948 Graphic Organizer
- U.S.- Caribbean Foreign Relations, 1823 - 1948 Graphic Organizer (Teacher’s Guide)
- Latin Music in New York Timeline
- Latin Music in New York Timeline (Teacher’s Guide)