



Raperos Rule

As rap recedes on the U.S. mainland, reggaetón rises on the enchanted island

Growing up in Puerto Rico's projects, or caseríos, may be no different than in any other hood on the U.S. mainland. Bullets, drugs, and a rap sheet are part of everyday life. But so is music, a legit way for many a street philosopher to escape the surrounding crude reality.

Lately in the States, the urban sounds of rap are suffering staggering losses along with the music industry as a whole (\$600 million last year alone) -- the Tommy Boy label, for example, recently dropped its rap acts in favor of electronica. In Puerto Rico, however, rap and its newest incarnation, reggaetón, a less lyrical, more danceable Spanish rap infused with Jamaican beats, have become an unprecedented success story.

Propelled from the underground to the mainstream by ghetto and well-to-do kids alike, rap and reggaetón have been embraced belatedly and reluctantly by the media and advertising agencies and condemned by both moralist and nationalist groups. But the music has gained increasing radio exposure; shows draw 20,000 fans in a single night; and artists, with little promotion beyond T-shirts, decals, and flyers, sell between 50,000 and 100,000 copies of a CD. Even though major record labels such as Sony Discos, EMI Latin, and Universal Music Latino have gotten into the act, the raperos are still seen as the last bastion of true street cred.

Of a wide array of emerging and established artists on the island, rappers Lito and Polaco -- Rafael Sierra and Rafael Polaco respectively -- are the undisputed kings of the genre. The duo, signed to indie label/distribution company Pina Music, have reportedly sold over 100,000 units of new album *Mundo Frío* (Cold World) since its release in December. The album made Billboard's Top 20 Latin Albums chart and is up for a Billboard Latin Music Award for rap (in competition with Wisin y Yandel and veterans Vico C and El General).

"They outsell artists in every other genre, whether salsa, merengue, rock, or ballads," says a proud Rafael Pina, the 24-year-old wunderkind behind Pina Music, which releases around six albums a year and is also home to rappers Los Francotiradores and Don Chezina. "Here you have a group of artists that went from making home tapes and distributing them in an underground fashion 10 years ago, to selling 50,000 albums easily in Puerto Rico and the U.S."

Some five years ago, when Pina brought rappers to the record label founded by his father, Rafael Pina, Sr., few of his contemporaries dared venture into that territory. Pushing rap forward, the young executive admits, was not easy.

"There was no radio support, no interest by the media," he remembers. "But the movement was growing, sales were surging."

Combining forces in 1998 after somewhat successful solo careers, Lito and Polaco rode the crest of that emerging popularity and became veritable stars as a duo. But unlike the P. Diddys of the world, Lito and Polaco's story is not one of privileged youths copping an attitude and adding grit to their lives. Lito and Polaco are project products through and through.



Chilling at a burger joint on Ocean Drive, on a break from promoting their latest opus in heady U.S. cities, Lito and Polaco -- no posse in tow, no entourage of bodyguards -- speak of their music as something to bet on.

"Rap and reggaetón are the driving force behind the music business in Puerto Rico, no question about it," says the soft-spoken Lito, the heavier-set and more eloquent of the two. "The TV programs that would never have us, the news that would never cover us, now they come to us."

In Polaco's view, because this has been the music of the marginalized classes, it was ostracized until it proved to be a sales boon.

"It was pure ignorance. Ignorance of where we come from, of the genre. They shut the doors in our faces," says the 25-year-old rapper, who hails from the caserío of Villa Fontana, in the municipality of Carolina. "Not anymore. We have the Puerto Rican fans. Now we want to go after all Latinos in the States and then, the crossover."

Neither rapper boasts of being a great singer or composer. They simply "relay the news, the reality of what's going on, and we add rhyme to it," explains Lito, 26 years old, originally from El Mirador project in Santurce.

Not surprisingly their music is the antithesis of boy bands and teen-queen sounds, steeped in profanity and violence, sex and hopelessness. They make no apologies.

"It's not like we are indecent people who don't know how to behave," says Polaco. "But the fact is that we come from the barrio, and this is what we see, what we hear."

Adds Lito, who like Polaco is a father: "I can assure you, nobody who lives in a project likes to live there. Everybody would like to get ahead in life, but not everybody can do it. I lived in a project for fifteen years, and I'm one of the lucky ones who got out."

The themes today are the same as when a first generation of rappers in Puerto Rico, including several women, hit it big in the early 1990s. Vico C, Lisa M, and Francheska, to name a few, became household names by infusing Spanish rap with Dominican merengue, creating meren-rap. Following the cyclical nature of all music, Puerto Rican rap came to a halt by the middle of the decade.

Lito and Polaco blame it on outside forces. "Look, rap was outselling merengue and salsa. But then came all this bad publicity in the States over the music, the shooting of Tupac [Shakur, 1996], the controversy over the 'Cop Killer' song [1992], and the effects were felt in Puerto Rico," says Polaco. "We were shut down."

When rap next surfaced, it showed the influence of Jamaica's dancehall reggae, heard through tapes brought by visiting Panamanian musicians (in Panama, where there's a large Jamaican population, reggae in Spanish is very strong). It morphed into reggaetón, spilling out of the ghettos and into the clubs.



"Cassettes made by some of the genre's top DJs, such as DJ Negro and DJ Playero, started among the corrillos [crowds of fans] of this music," remembers Andrés Ramos, content editor for one of the island's hip-hop Websites, www.phantomvox.com (launched by none other than former Menudo member and "Livin' La Vida Loca" composer Robi Draco Rosa). "I think in that respect the hip-hop community here has a lot to learn from the people that took rap to the masses."

Radio exposure helped spread the word on reggaetón two years ago, when independent FM station Mix 107.7 underwent drastic programming changes. That marked a turnaround in the growth of the sound.

Twenty-eight-year-old Jaime Ortiz, better known as El Coyote, started young in radio, at age eighteen. He used to host a reggaetón program on Y-96 FM, acquired later by Miami impresario Raúl Alarcón's Spanish Broadcasting System(SBS).

"I went to them with the same proposal I presented Mix 107.7: to offer the latest music to the most radical music fans," remembers El Coyote. "SBS didn't think it would work."

As programming director at Mix 107.7, El Coyote proved the naysayers wrong. He hit a chord with fans by shying away from normal radio formats and presenting not only rap and reggaetón, but dance, trance, drum and bass, and techno -- music that doesn't find airtime easily. And for each genre El Coyote has recruited "specialists" who know what's playing in their field.

One of these is Richie Rich, who, at 29, also owns a booking agency for rap and reggaetón artists.

"What we offer in this radio station no one else here does because most programmers are very conservative, or are older, or are not aware of what's out there. And when they try to copy us, it's not the same," says Rich.

In reggaetón shows such as "D'Pary" and "El Salpafuera," hosted by 26-year-old Candyman, the station wins its time slots, says Rich. He cites the latest ratings by monitoring agency Arbitron, which places Mix 107.7 as the fastest-growing radio station among young listeners on the island.

"We're in the 'mainstreaming' stage of reggaetón, where whatever prejudices that exist against the music will tumble," says Candyman. "Because when Lito and Polaco can sell over 100,000 records, believe me, prejudices do come down."