

## From New York to Puerto Rico - Part 2

By Harry Marquez

In 1958, I recall the very first steps Puerto Ricans took to create the first Puerto Rican Parade. It united people across restricted boundaries set by street gangs. Puerto Ricans always loved their culture, but now we wanted to express our pride to the rest of the world. Everyone in El Barrio was involved in doing something to make this first parade a success.

The Barrio found common ground in its efforts to show cultural pride. Many of the women worked in the garment district and used their skills to make dresses and costumes for the parade. It was the talk and excitement of the community. Guys constructed floats representing their hometown or pueblo.

I was only seven years old, yet I felt pride in the community coming together. We had been defined as "una cultura fea" by the rest of the world. It was time to give everyone our definition - a multicultural people crossing color barriers as Puerto Ricans seeking common dignity. It was an outcry against values of "white purity." We stood strong as a people of mixed culture and were not going to adopt divided America's ideas. Most people did not know anything about Puerto Ricans, just that we talked different and that we all looked different in a world where being white was paramount to achieve success.

The day of the Puerto Rican parade, I was on Madison and 110th street waiting for my girlfriend who was crowned "la princesa de la parada." It was a day of pride and dignity in being Puerto Rican. We were no longer in the shadows having others define us. It was the very first step in getting back our stolen dignity. It became cool to be a "jibaro," the Taino word meaning bird that flies high and free. It became cool to dance to "El Negrito del Batey." It was a collective stand against cultural degeneration. We learned our past not from the books centered on Spanish culture but also of our Black and Indian roots. These traditional cultures had been of interest to the community before the corruption of Anglo society. The movement to investigate how corruption had affected the underdevelopment of these colonial societies came out of the simple movement of pride and disenfranchisement.

Joe Cuba was the highlight of the day with Pete Rodriguez. It was a mix of urban American mainstream with Latin-thing. It would be the beginning of what we call "salsa" today. It was a gathering on 110th street. Other gatherings grew out of pride and unity of that first Puerto Rican parade. On Fridays, the most talented conga players gathered on the stoop of "El 23" that attracted a lot of bands - "El 23 de la 110." Joe Cuba, Sonny, as he was known in El Barrio along with Jimmy Sabater, Cheo Feliciano and Johnny Colon would sing to the tune

of &ldquo;Tun tun tun babale.&rdquo; This new awareness united former street members on the basis of culture and pride. I could hear the congas at night echo against the tenement walls from my open window that faced the yard of 110th street. It was the first festive steps into reclaiming our Black and &ldquo;Taino&rdquo; roots at a time when the dominant society of Anglo European values considered slanted eyes, flat nose, dark skin and an accent as inferior.

The parade sparked an interest, and people started taking to the streets with musical instruments showing pride of their cultural heritage. Before then there was too much rivalry among gang members of different blocks. It was unconceivable to get a gathering with members of other blocks to even hang out on 110th street. They might come in to buy drugs but had to leave the block, no hanging out. Folks might not know, but it was where drugs were sold. They would go up, get high and come down to the stoop and get off on congas and singing. It was the outlet of the day since most recording company would never consider having a &ldquo;Latino&rdquo; on its label.

Everyone wanted to be a musician and pick up an instrument to show their pride. It fostered an important movement that still reflects today. Tito Puente and Machito (from 111th street) became famous to the younger generation, and after school we would know that they were in the bar on the corner of 110th and Madison. I would open the door just to get a glimpse of them. I was interested in music because my &ldquo;madrina&rdquo;s&rdquo; son played congas for Tito Rodriguez. I would hear him on the fire escape adjacent to ours. He got me interested by taking me to his house and letting me bang on his congas while he tied up his dog that wanted to rip me apart. I couldn&rsquo;t keep a rhythm just thinking of his dog. I did learn to play but never thought of it as a profession because it was too much effort for very little pay. When Willie Colon first hit the clubs he started making \$35 a night. It was music that sparked Puerto Ricans into their culture and history. Now they wanted to express it and did by creating a new modern formula of &ldquo;salsa&rdquo; dance. We all had pride before but only to share among our own family; now we shared something with the community. New founded values of ourselves had been neglected; now we rejoiced celebrating in music and dance. The &ldquo;boogaloo&rdquo; was born; it influenced all Latin communities in a world stage. Latin and Black professional musicians had a history of jamming together since they never were recognized by American labels. Music is an expression of emotion and man, there was a lot to express. Our music reached the Black communities.

We dressed in Italian knits and alpacas with &ldquo;mohair&rdquo; pants and playboy shoes. Gang boundaries were open to this new expression. We had &ldquo;salsa.&rdquo; and the Blacks had Motown. It fostered a personal pride similar to the Mexican American &ldquo;Zoot Suits.&rdquo; We dressed out of self-respect and pride that we craved. We were forced to live in crap, but we did not want to represent that crap. We wanted to show that we looked good and smelled just as good as a Wall Street banker. We didn&rsquo;t have to copy their style because we had our own style.

This pride was critical to the civil rights moment. We did not have to assimilate a culture the rejected us. We returned to our traditional cultural values that society wanted to make undesirable. We were white washed in our education with it defining us as culturally inferior. I had grown to disrespect the system that enslaved blacks.&hellip; I hated school and what it represented. I disliked politicians, and I felt that the law was tilted against us. The law was blind to our rights to have the equal opportunities. The line had been broken among the gangs, yet the most important things of society still lingered in our day-to-day existence.

In Junior High School, I was a student who had problems attending school. I preferred jumping the gates at the World&rsquo;s Fairs, going to Coney Island, and 42nd street to buy two hamburgers for lunch with 25 cents. I never did like school -- nothing of interest in any of the classes. It was an education of indoctrination giving hope yet no opportunity. Most people I knew graduated only to work in factories, as superintendents or other low-income jobs. The best hopes were a job as a truck driver... Society had a stigma against Blacks and Puerto Ricans. They could only get so far and not cross the line. It was the beginning of the civil rights movement. The beginning of Black pride and that message was first expressed in our music.

I rebelled by not going to school. I didn&rsquo;t care for a diploma that would lead to a broom as a good citizen. I was considered a trouble maker in school and in the 9th grade; I was placed in a special class. The school called it &ldquo;career guidance,&rdquo; but the rest of the students used the C.G. to rename us &ldquo;Crazy Guys&rdquo;. In part that was true, yet we just wanted an equal chance for a future that looked dim. We had a retired policeman as a teacher with the dean right next door. I would often be between the dean's office and my class. I was a hyper kid and had

a small attention span. Just learning the alphabets would burn me inside out of frustration that my ears would get hot.

The school got to the point that it did not want to deal with me. I was told that if I skipped one more class, I would get thrown out of school. I could see that they had all the paper work ready, and all it needed was a signature. They were willing to give me a final chance to change my ways. I knew this was very serious; I wanted to go to high school and get my high school diploma. I wanted to finish school, but it looked too far away. I wanted to make my family proud by graduating from high school. Inside I wanted to do the right thing; outside I felt it would not make much of a difference anyway. I gave doing the right thing a chance.

From that day forward, I never missed a class. I had perfect attendance until graduation day. I graduated high school winning attendance awards. Two months into my new found interest in school, the dean called me to his office. I wondered; "what did I do now?" He told me that he noticed a change in my behavior and interest in school, and it was reflecting in my grades. He wanted to award me by offering me a part-time job. I definitely was interested.

I finally got the chance to see Puerto Rico the summer before going to high school. I was the youngest and would have to listen and wonder about the experiences of my older brothers and sisters when they would return. Now it was my turn. I was thrilled at the chance to see the island. We had a big family, and they could not afford to take everyone at the same time. Now I had money and could afford to take that trip. I heard of riding horses and eating off the trees, and now I wanted to experience it for myself. Something I only knew from Adam and Eve in the bible garden. Now, I had my chance, now it was my turn, finally, after years of listening to the amazing stories of others.

That morning, I got up very early to make sure I had my clothing pressed and ready to impress. I wanted to look good for them native "Rican" sisters on the island. I dressed always hiding the real dump where I came from. But in the street, you would think I was from Madison Avenue on the rich side. I guess it was about pride more than looking good. I guess that is why I always did dress good to represent who I really wanted to be. I think we all felt we had to hide the real shame of where we were forced to live.

That morning we went to J.F.K. and got on a 747, and I was thrilled because it was the very first air flight. It was such a beautiful craft with a piano and bar on the second floor; I had my Latin music, Panasonic boom box and was ready to experience the time of my life. I was looking forward to this experience for years, and now here I was entering a 747 directly to that special place everyone talked about so much. It was like it was my place too. I had to see it with my own eyes, not only in black and white photos and hallmark cards. At the time, there was very little printed about Puerto Rico. They did not have internet or documentaries like today. Everything would be of by word-of-mouth and pictures brought back from the island. I had a 35 mm camera I had brought on 42nd Street a few months back, and I was going to do my private journalist assignment.

On the plane everyone was as happy as I was... I was going to meet the family I never met. I heard so much about them that it was like I knew them already. I kept going upstairs because the window had a clear view for pictures. Once we did start seeing the Island, I could not take my eyes of the water and how clear and blue it was. It was one of the most surprising and beautiful things I ever saw in my whole life. Then, I actually saw the Island and palm trees that I had only seen before in cartoons. I felt I was entering another dimension that turns fantasy to reality. The Island was wonderful and beautiful. The San Juan airport was small at that time. and we exited from outside the plane to enter the terminal. I saw the most beautiful fighting cocks in the airport exiting the plane going to the terminal. It seemed someone wanted to smuggle them to New York but had to leave them behind. I remember the humidity was like entering the YMCA steam room. Man, was it humid. The airport did not have air conditioning. All you saw was older women with old-fashioned Spanish hand fans and guys with handkerchiefs wiping their brows. Everything was new and exciting. I talked Spanish typical to a "nuyorican." I understood it well but could not write or read it. I knew how to get a cup of Bustelo coffee at a "bodega" and a plate of rice and beans at a restaurant and defend myself in the street. I could dance "salsa." I thought that was enough to get me over.

I found out very fast that we talked almost two different languages. I did not like that fact. Everything I said was being

corrected, and I did not take kindly to that&hellip; I expected better understanding and cooperation in communications. After all we did not put them down when they came to the States with the deep accent and not speaking a word of English! We understood, and, of course, they said things in a funny way that we both would laugh but not to annoy them. It got to the point where it was a little annoying not letting me speak my peace. Some folks knew how to explain things; others just wanted to prove they came from an educated background. They were the ones who pissed me off, because I knew they had limited education and were only hanging the hinges of the language to enforce their pseudo-intellect. I was only a 14 year old kid trying to understand the language the best possible way without any formal training; after all, my schooling was in English. I felt I had a better understanding of them, then the one they had of us.

One could enjoy the difference if it were done right without any harm. I did not mind being corrected and enjoyed a laugh about it. I just resented the ones who wanted to appear above you. I had a blast with others who understood, and we both found the humor in it. One such person was my cousin; we hung tight learning from each other's experiences. He reminded me of Papo, my best friend from El Barrio who came from Catano. My cousin asked me if I had &ldquo;un traje de bano,&rdquo; and I took it literally thinking of &ldquo;un traje para ir para el bano?&rdquo; I asked him, "You need a suit to go take a crap?" We both laughed hysterically. I later found out, it was a bathing suit he was asking for. I understood the language, but every once in a while I got lost with a few words. Yet I learned from everyone, even the vulgar ones.

My cousin would take me to get &ldquo;kenepas, platanos, aguacates&rdquo; and &ldquo;mangos&rdquo;. I was so excited. I still remember him shaking trees, the &ldquo;mangos&rdquo; would drop like it was raining. They were everywhere. The cars would smash them like if doing a &ldquo;merenge&rdquo; going up the hill. "What a waste," I thought. If I lived here, I wouldn't have had to steal a cup cake when I was younger; I would just eat a &ldquo;mango&rdquo;. That would have changed my diet from putting sugar in milk and making sugar sandwiches so I would not go to school hungry. These people had food in abundance. I through how could they go hungry! Even the rats in Puerto Rico looked nourished compared to the nasty ones in the City. Here they had shiny coats and looked like if they had a fest, not like Willard.

Finally, I went to the beach. I could not believe the beauty, warm clear water in a tropical setting. We might have been poor but damn, we had a beautiful island to be proud of. I felt even though the United States controlled it, it would never be taken from us. I just looked at my mother in amazement and wondered why leave this place for that dump in El Barrio that only makes one feel second rate. Why? Here, there was order and no drugs; people had manners; I actually saw the very first Puerto Rican policeman. The only person in our community we looked up to was the grocery owner who gave us &ldquo;credito&rdquo; to buy &ldquo;fiao&rdquo;.. He was the community's most important man beside the &ldquo;boletero&rdquo;. Puerto Rico was a society that had lawyers and professional broadcasters. I may have not been viewing it from a historical economic political stand point, but I knew it was something that we could never afford to lose. Back home in New York, I had an uncle who went to NYU, and he would only be hired as a &ldquo;lava plato.&rdquo; He had the educational background to be a lawyer, but the doors were closed because he had an accent and color. He was too advanced even for his own people, and he finally went crazy. Here in Puerto Rico, I saw lawyers and judges, and it gave me a sense of pride I never had in New York. This was my &ldquo;mecca&rdquo;&hellip; I promised myself I would return to live here one day.

I was so tuned into how simple and natural things were compared to New York. Life was not as complicated; no one was in a rush, and people didn't even wear wrist watches! People were tuned to nature and not to sophisticated hype, or daily struggles of meeting up with pre-set standards. At the time, the housing was made of wood, and people lived just fine. They had ample space to expand because most owned the property. Doors wide open to the natural breeze. Some did not have electricity. Those who lived in concrete houses with electricity were considered &ldquo;rich&rdquo;. It was all about respect con &ldquo;Don&rdquo; or &ldquo;Dona&rdquo; and &ldquo;permiso&rdquo; if crossing anyone in a conversation. They would often tell you &ldquo;buen provecho&rdquo; after serving you something to eat. Something I found very appealing. Something we lacked in a cold city that if anyone snatched your food you were ready to fight to protect it from others with your elbows. There was plenty of exchanged food among the neighbors in communal style. People did just fine with one pair of shoes and few pairs of pants. My cousins had what we call &ldquo;brinca charcos,&rdquo; pants that hung above the ankles, and I gave him a few pants and a pairs of Pro Keds.

I noticed we came from different kinds of poor cultures. We had to struggle to pay the light, the rent, and buy food. Yet we only owned the clothing on our backs and not even the toilet we flushed. In contrast, they lived in an underdeveloped

country but had a more decent and carefree lifestyle. They had food because they grew most of it, but they did not have luxuries we were conditioned to have in the city. We lived in one of the most developed cities in the world, yet the only things we could claim were the clothing on our backs. The apartments were not ours; they were rented from month to month. I saw the lies in this type of living. I saw how it bonded you to a material world that was unfair and unbalanced regardless of how hard you did work.

Most "Nuyoricans" went back to the Island as people who accomplished something. Yet the only thing they accomplished was to have a two week or three week vacation from their daily struggle to pay the bills. However, they went back giving the impression they were living the good life. They never mentioned that they lived in dilapidated dwellings that they could not afford. They gave the wrong perception of things back in New York showing pay checks that were worth a lot more in Puerto Rico. They wanted to impress, but what they did was to mislead. They painted a picture of fulfillment but didn't mention the antagonistic life style they were forced to live. The Islanders love to hear it because that only meant they had something coming to them for the graceful treatment of room and board.

I left the Island very impressed. I experienced something that satisfied my curiosity. I finally saw the island that my family talked so much about. I knew it would not be my last trip. It opened my eyes to how different people lived. I preferred the simple life of Puerto Rico yet was still conditioned to the one I was raised in. I enjoyed the night life, going to clubs and just walking down Broadway. In the flight back, I thought to myself, I am not ready for this at this point of life. There were things I wanted to do. But I kept it in mind because it was a great place to bring up children. They didn't have to worry about who to challenge on the streets or schools. I was not ready then, but I left the door open for the future!

My older brother was in college in Boston and was graduating the same year. I had completed the career guidance class and was heading to Brandeis High School. I was shocked to find out he was graduating from Brandeis University. I went to his graduation and could not believe the campus. I had the same feeling when I went to visit my other brother in Lincoln Hall, but this was even better. I met Angela Davis who my brother tutored in Spanish. She spoke to me in Spanish; I asked my brother if she was Puerto Rican. Once before she had visited us in "El Barrio." I was so impressed; she spoke better Spanish than I did. I was proud of my brother watching him graduate. He was the smartest in the family and was a Fulbright scholar; only six others could claim that in all the United States. Coming from 111th I wondered how he made such a leap. I told my brother that I had changed my ways and that I was also coming to the graduation to see its campus. We made a deal that for every "A" I got, he would reward me with ten dollars. I took him up on it. He figured that I would only get one such grade on physical education; man was he wrong.

While in High School, I went to work full time as an elevator operator. It was against the law, but my boss said, "Who's going to know?" I agreed. So I went to school from 7 a.m. until 1 p.m. and went to work from 4 p.m. until mid-night. The good thing was that I was unionized and worked on the elevators one hour and was off the next to take care of my school work. Since I knew, I was going to get thrown out of school I made it my business to take my study more serious. I had changed from being the class prankster to the guy who had answers to questions. I was on my way to a more disciplined way of life. I now was taking time to study on how to learn. I noticed a change with classmates. I was no longer as funny now that they too were getting serious. Coming from uptown to a school downtown also revealed how behind I was academically. I noticed that these folks downtown play under different rules and actually did their classwork and homework. Here the most popular were not the jokers, but the guy that got good grades. It was a completely different world in and out of school. For the first time in my life, I felt ashamed of my abilities in school. I studied hard and worked hard.

From Friday to Sunday, I had money to go to clubs and had the finest knits, alpaca, and they were very expensive. I went to Bond, and Barney's to get the best. I put on my two tone play-boys, got in my Camaro, and went to the Bronx. At that time, a lot of people from El Barrio had relocated to the Bronx. I too had relocated to Chelsea in mid-town Manhattan. I left the dim lights streets to brightly lit ones in a neighborhood that had everything possible from the Mc Burney Y.M.C.A to a public library on 23rd street. I later found out that the person who made the Puerto Rican flag lived across from my yard in Chelsea. He had passed away, but that did not stop me from looking at the entrance of his building on 23rd St. between 7th and 8th avenues.

I was in the academic program but had to get out because I had no time to go to the library while going to school and

working full-time. I could not explain in school that I was working eight hours and had to con my father in going to school and getting me out the academic program. I was a good student, and they could not understand why, if I wanted to go to college, I would leave that program. I went into the general program that did not force you to go to the library as much, and I found my way around things. I worked eight hours but had four hours off because it was a hazard to keep a person over an hour in an elevator. I actually worked four and the other four, I studied in the locker room for my classes. At the end of the week, I had 150 dollars in my pocket as well. The general program was not as intensive, and I got 4.0 grades in all my classes and my brother could not afford to pay for all the As. We settled on him taking me to a movie, and afterwards we went to the arcades to play games. He was now a graduate student going for his masters' at Harvard, driving his '66 volkswagon to and from college. I had taken my first Puerto Rican history class, and I wanted to find out if my brother was an "Uncle Tom" or knew his thing. I started talking about "Albizu Campos"; he knew a lot more than my teacher or than I had read. I asked him, "Where did you get this information?" He just looked at me and told me, "Jari I study hard." I asked him if they taught him that in college. He told me no, but it gives you time to get what interests you and read about it. I was sold; I definitely was going to college now. My brother had passed my test of not being an Uncle Tom, and I wanted to follow his footsteps. He had it together&hellip;.