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From Mambo To Hip-Hop: A South Bronx Tale

Director: Henry Chalfant
Cast: Willie Colon, Ray Barreto, Eddie Palimieri, Paula Grillo
(2007) Rated: Unrated
US DVD release date: 31 March 2009 (MVD)

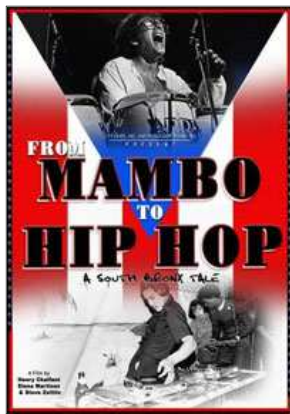
By [Terrence Butcher](#)

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From Puente to Poppin' – Where d'you think you are, in da Bronx?

There's a certain sub-genre of films I love to prattle on about ... let's call it "Newyorksploitation", for lack of a better term. These overheated thrillers painted a now-vanished New York, bracketed by the late '60s and Giuliani Time, as a grimy hellhole patrolled by flashy street thugs and littered with crumbling brick tenements.

More often than not, these urban dystopia flicks are set in the infamous South Bronx – think 1979's *The Warriors* or the somewhat classier Paul Newman vehicle *Fort Apache: The Bronx* – and they've sold the neighborhood to enquiring minds as a poster child for postwar metropolitan decay. Comedian Robert Klein even recorded a wickedly satirical tune, "The Bronx Is Beautiful This Time of Year", an FM radio staple in the early '80s.



AMAZON

However exaggerated Hollywood's portrayals were – and Chuck Bronson's hysterical Road Warrior-esque *Death Wish 3* is surely a nadir – the borough named for Dutch sea captain Jonas Bronck had definitely seen better days by the late '70s. Buildings stood empty and derelict, abandoned cars decorated the avenues, and those who could escape fled to greener pastures.

If "the Bronx" became shorthand for urban devastation during the Me Decade, then what had it represented in earlier times? How did its denizens conduct their lives? What did they do for fun? These questions are answered in Henry Chalfant's documentary *From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale*, revealing a vibrant inner-city culture more often satirized than examined.

From Mambo to Hip Hop aired first on PBS, in their "Independent Lens" series, and like much of their programs, illuminates the non-white ethnic experience in America. We've all taken bus tours to view attractions both cheesy and high-toned, but I don't imagine too many of us have hopped a ride on the South Bronx Latin Music Tour, which opens the documentary.

It may be news to many that the South Bronx, from just after WW II through the '70s, was a fertile pot for Latin American rhythms serving up salsa, mambo, merengue, and anything else that got booties shaking. There was live music everywhere, as mambo fever during the Truman/Eisenhower years transformed Jewish catering halls and Irish vaudeville houses into raucous danceterias for the quickly-expanding Latino immigrant population.

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Directly following the Second World War, Puerto Rican migrants flooded the Big Apple, taking advantage of the island nation's Commonwealth status to flee poverty back home. These folks crowded into the Bronx and Manhattan's famed Harlem district, carrying their foods, Spanish tongue, and musical traditions with them. They would be joined ten years later by a smattering of Cuban refugees who forsook balmy Miami for the job-producing dynamism of New York, as yet unaware that the industrial employment they sought would soon dwindle.

Aside from impromptu games of stickball – “the poor man’s baseball”, many took up music – or continued playing as they did back home. P.S. 52, a popular local high school, was a magnet for young musicians, with a solid arts program, something too many campuses today would envy.

As Chalfant makes clear, these so-called Nuyoricans and *cubanos* weren't alone in that borough north of Manhattan. They were joined by African-Americans with Southern roots, seeking cheap – and non-discriminatory – housing, and possessed of the richest musical warehouse of perhaps any people in history. Mixing with an easy camaraderie that even today eludes black Americans and their Mexican-American neighbors in the Sun Belt, these seemingly disparate groups would together introduce salsa – believe it or not, originated in New York—and much later, the world-conquering genre of hip-hop, fomenting a musical revolution equaling that of rock's early days.

Indeed, New York's black and Latino communities liberally borrowed from each other, black hipster cool transforming Puerto Rican “hicks” into suave and streetwise “Nuyoricans”, like the slick but doomed Bernardo in *West Side Story*, or the brilliant, drug-addled playwright Miguel Pinero. Of course, many Puerto Ricans – and their Cuban “cousins” – are partially or wholly of African descent, so maybe it's no surprise that their music would share stylistic predecessors in Africa with that of American blacks.

Sadly, this vibrant scene would begin to evaporate as darker social forces tore away at the Bronx. Narcotics hit the streets in 1953, prompting the closure of numerous dance halls. Asphalt and concrete would divide the South Bronx in the form of the Cross Bronx Expressway, shoved through close-knit 'hoods by the New York's urban planning godfather Robert Moses. Abetted by the looming deindustrialization of the nation's largest city and a corresponding ascension of gang culture, the Bronx, beloved by generations of recent arrivals, now teetered on a precipice.

The musical landscape of the borough, however, continued evolving in exciting ways. Salsa became an international sensation, inspiring the fabled Tito Puente to perform in the Bronx, and many Latin stars who cut their teeth in Bronx ballrooms would join the newly formed Fania Records, for a time the world's premiere Latin label. These performers came to be known as the “Fania All-Stars”, appearing in a series of massive concerts, at Madison Square Garden, The Bronx's own Yankee Stadium, and overseas.

During this period, in tandem with a general social and economic malaise in New York, the concept of the South Bronx among Americans as a hellish snakepit came into full flower. Street gangs slaughtered each other with depressing regularity, hard-up landlords torched their cruddy buildings for insurance loot, and woe to any white kids whose parents hadn't decamped for the suburbs; they risked an ass-whupping on “Get Whitey Day”, which unfortunately was also inflicted on a few light-skinned Nuyoricans. One middle-aged interviewee discusses the need for having a “stone-cold killer” expression on one's face in order to stave off thugs who might rob you, kick your ass, or both.

Things took a slightly positive turn in 1973, when a Gang Peace Meeting was called, but a far more epochal development occurred that same year. At 1528 Sedgewick Ave, in an unassuming high-rise apartment bloc, in the first-floor rec room, a party was held in the sweltering summertime. Attendees danced and rhymed to funky instrumental tracks, and records were occasionally spun by hand backwards or forwards, dragging the phonograph needle to create a dissonant *scratching* sound, and a revolution, devised by ghetto youngsters bereft of the cash to purchase new instruments or lessons, was hatched.

At least, that's the legend. There's no credible evidence that hip-hop music originated at this event, just as no one can pinpoint precisely where jazz bubbled up in turn-of-the last century New Orleans, but few would argue that the sound predated this affair.

It's equally futile to pinpoint exactly when the terms “rap” or “hip-hop” were grafted on to this loquacious, bass-heavy music, but it spread like arson wildfire through the South Bronx. Abandoned buildings quickly became party zones to accommodate this makeshift scene and the younger set, provoking much parental consternation, rejected the brassy grooves of salsa and mambo for this aggressive new beat. Still, there was a definite connection between the frenetic mambo dance style and the rubber-limbed gyrations the kids concocted.

The first rap DJs and “crews” were indisputably African-American, but their Latin brethren came up fierce, bringing a bit of “Boricua flavor” to the mix. For a time, it even seemed that breakdancing “battles” – rigorous




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dance-a-thons which determined who had the slickest moves – became a substitute for pitched gang warfare, which had escalated to gunplay. Sometimes local fire alarms provided rhythmic accompaniment to these streetside dance contests.

Extras on this DVD are a series of interviews with various noted personalities from the era, including Eddie Palmieri, Joe Conzo, who played on the premiere disc from The Sugar Hill Gang, Ray Barretto, Mike Amadeo – owner of record shop Casa Amadeo, and Paula Grillo – daughter of the famed Machito, among others. These discussions provide valuable information – the documentary itself only runs a scant 56 minutes – but I wish there'd been more details about the streetscapes of the South Bronx, more historical facts, and perhaps a scholarly breakdown of the distinct musical styles.

If *From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale* isn't exactly a comprehensive look at the Bronx music scenes through some crucial years in American history, it's certainly an infectious introduction to South Bronx youth culture. This repository of rose-tinted memories is also a seminal document of cooperation between two marginalized groups in American society who cooked up some beautiful music...together.



— 5 May 2009

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