

From Salsa to Reguetón:

Using Music and Dance to Teach about the
Puerto Rican Diaspora

National Council for History Education

Thamar Lebrón Fernández
Providence Day School

Lourdes del Mar Santiago Lebrón
Chatham Hall



The Soundtrack of your Life

Your Story



What's your name?



where do you call home?



what do you teach?

Your Anthem



What song defined your childhood?



What track was your anthem at 25?



What's on repeat for you right now?



Puerto Rico before the US Invasion



- Conquered by Spain



- Taínos died in huge numbers



- Enslaved Africans become primary labor source



- Neglected by Spain– becomes military stronghold



- Sugar and Coffee became main crops in the 19th century



- US colonial privateers and later merchants are trade partners



- Pro Independence movements active during the 19th century.



- Spanish American War

A TIMELINE OF PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION

Early Presence

1800'S



Trade expands. Early migration includes exiled pro independence leaders. Some Puerto Ricans in NYC before the Spanish-American War (1898).

Before WWII

Early 1900's



Early 1900s: Labor recruitment established communities in Hawaii, New Orleans, and San Francisco.



1930s-1940s: The Great Depression and WWII set the stage, with increased recruitment and the first large influx of Puerto Ricans to NYC, including war veterans.

Great Migration

1940's-1960's



Post-WWII Boom: Cheap airfare and U.S. factory jobs fueled mass migration; over 470,000 came in the 1950s-60s, with a peak around 1953. **Operation Bootstrap:** While industrializing the island, this program also caused agricultural decline and unemployment, pushing people to leave. **Settlements:** Primarily NYC (Spanish Harlem, Brooklyn, Bronx), expanding to the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and New England.



Shifting Patterns

1970's-2000's



1970s-1990s: Economic struggles and policy changes (like phasing out tax incentives in 1996) caused continued, though smaller, migration waves.

Early 2000s: A significant shift began, with more Puerto Ricans moving to the South due to climate, cost, and job opportunities, a trend that continues today.



Recent decades

2000's-

Economic Crisis & Disasters: Severe economic issues, hurricanes and earthquakes triggered another major outflow, with hundreds of thousands leaving the island.



Life in the US for the Puerto Rican diaspora

Early immigrants



U.S. citizens, but still treated as outsiders and facing racism.



Mostly low-wage, physically demanding work with long hours.



Limited English and schooling blocked access to better jobs and services.



Built tight-knit barrios with familiar food, churches, music, and mutual aid.



Joined unions, community groups, and the military to gain rights and recognition.



Later migration (after 1980)



Arrived with more education and stronger English skills.



Found work in clerical, professional, and service-sector jobs.



Settled beyond traditional hubs like New York and Pennsylvania, including suburbs and Sunbelt states.



Expanded Puerto Rican leadership, politics, and cultural visibility, sometimes creating class and generational tensions with earlier migrants.



Music of the Island brought to the US



Bomba

Bomba is a vibrant Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance style born from the resilience of enslaved Africans. It served as a form of communication, celebration, and resistance against oppression. It features a dialogue between dancer and drummer using barrel drums (barriles) and maracas.

Plena

Plena is an Afro-Puerto Rican musical genre born in the working-class barrios of Ponce around the turn of the 20th century.



Seis/Décima

Fast, lively music/dance in Puerto Rican mountainous regions. It combines Spanish, African, and Taino musical roots, often performed with the cuatro and güiro.



Danza

Puerto Rican Danza originated in 19th-century Ponce blending Spanish ballroom elegance with Afro-Caribbean rhythms.

Movement through the Caribbean area and US cities

Cuban son



Puerto Rican plena



Jamaican reggae



Trinidadian calypso



Hip-hop



Latin jazz & Boogaloo



Reguetón



Caribbean communities in cities like New York developed shared spaces where music and dance from different islands mixed. Styles such as Cuban son, Puerto Rican plena, Jamaican reggae, and Trinidadian calypso blended with local scenes, helping create new genres like Latin jazz, boogaloo, and later hip-hop and reguetón.

Music and Dance- from the 50's to the early 70's



Salsa

Salsa music and dance grew in New York directly out of Caribbean ethnic enclaves communities. Puerto Ricans and Cubans who have settled in neighborhoods like El Barrio and the South Bronx fused mambo, son, and plena to create a distinct sound. Although the struggles of the community were present in some lyrics, other universal themes dominated.



Protest Music

Puerto Rican protest music in the diaspora during the 1950's emerged as a cultural weapon for communities confronting racism, poverty, and colonialism. In this period, activists, artists, and Nuyorican intellectuals used song to affirm national identity, denounce U.S. colonial rule over Puerto Rico, and build solidarity with other liberation movements.

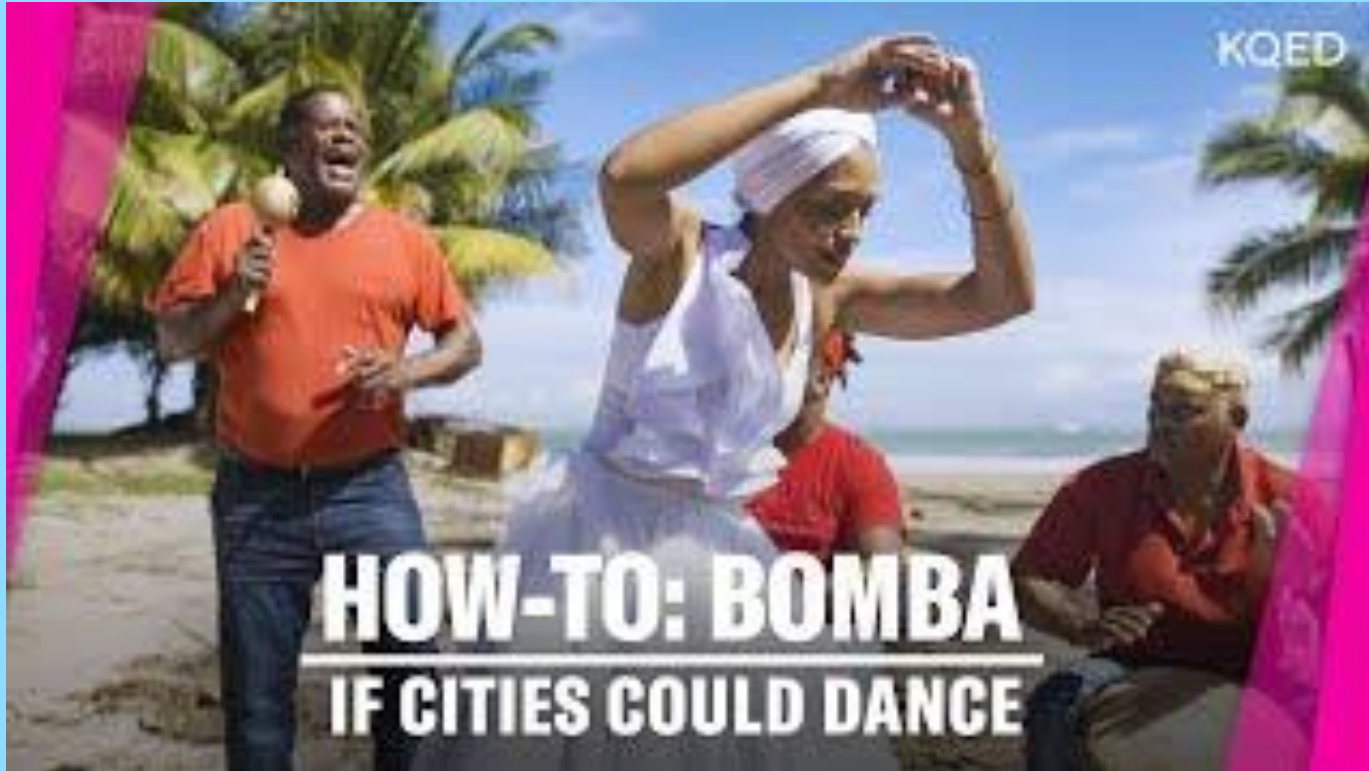
80's-2000's

From the 1980s to the 2000s, music made by the diasporas laid the groundwork for reguetón by blending Jamaican dancehall, U.S. hip-hop, and Afro-Latino rhythms across transnational circuits linking Panama, Puerto Rico, Colombia, New York, and other urban centers. Reguetón crystallized in Puerto Rico's underground scene in the late 1980s and 1990s, but its sound and themes reflected broader diasporic experiences of racism, marginalization, and youth culture.





Learn How to Dance



Learn How to Dance



Spotify Playlist



Contains salsa, bomba, seis corridos, plena, reguetón, and more.

Resources

From Salsa to Reguetón Drive





Thank you!