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Urban music with a Latin flair

By Justin Zartman

Try to remember the surprise millions of people felt when Linkin Park teamed up with Jay-Z to create the successful MTV Mash-ups album.

Or when seemingly polar opposites Ludicrous and Toby Keith came together to put on a concert.

It's happened again in the form of Hurban music, and if Louis Moctezuma is right, this combination is going to be more popular and longer lasting than any prior music blend.

"It's not only music. It's also just the way you are," said Moctezuma, a DJ at Club Mystique, the salsa and meringue club at 3122 Airport Highway.

Hurban music (short for Hispanic Urban) is a "term coined by the music industry for their younger targeted Latin music stations," according to Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming at Edison Media Research Inc., a New York- and New Jersey-based market research firm.

With these radio stations toting slogans such as "Latino and Proud," and "Where Latinos Live," it seems as though Moctezuma isn't alone in thinking of Hurban as a lifestyle.

Hurban stations usually play anything from Latin pop music by artists such as Paulina Rubio and Shakira, to traditional hip hop by artists such as N.O.R.E. and Pitbull, Ross said.

But something most Hurban stations have in common is reggaeton, which is most popular in dance clubs, he added.

Moctezuma defined reggaeton, which dates back to the late 80s or early 90s, as hip hop with a definite Caribbean sound.

Reggaeton was born in Puerto Rico, which is where the "Caribbean beat" comes from and where the style is still most popular, he said.

"It hasn't gotten really big yet, at least [not] in the United States," Moctezuma said.

In fact, reggaeton is relatively new to Americans.

"As recently as a year ago, most U.S. broadcasters viewed it as a fringe sound in the continental U.S ... not something you could base a format around," Ross said.

He noted the format is gaining more of a market and said stations centered around the Hurban format in Miami, Houston and Dallas have been successfully launched.

There are signs of new reggaeton stations springing up in New York City and L.A, Ross said.

Might a reggaeton movement spring up in the Toledo area?

It already has a fairly strong following, Moctezuma said, and he gets a lot of requests for the music with a tropical beat.

The themes of Hurban music focus on family and Latin culture, said Ronnie Spann, a sophomore majoring in music performance.

"My relatives are really big on family and that aspect of culture," said Spann, who comes from a mix of Mexican and African American heritage.

Spann, who enjoys listening to a Hurban group called Kumbia King from Corpus Christi, Texas, said he doesn't know of anyone in Toledo who listens to the genre now.

However, Spann also said he believes it's only a matter of time before Hurban music becomes mainstream.

"[Hurban music] has been around for a while, but now artists are starting to get signed with bigger labels," Spann said. "Once they get more Latin clubs around Toledo, it will definitely catch on."

Major artists in the Hurban/reggaeton genre include Daddy Yankee, whose record Gasolina is currently the top selling in the genre, according to Ross.

Other big names include Ivy Queen, Tego Calderon and Luny Tunes.

Like American hip hop, reggaeton has profited from remixes of current and classic chart toppers alike, so don't be surprised to hear songs such as "Drop It Like It's Hot" or Frankie J's "Obsession (No es Amor)" with a reggaeton song next weekend in the club.

Like the cross-genre Linkin Park and Jay-Z team-up for Collision Course, it's also fairly common for Hurban artists to collaborate with American rappers.

Luny Tunes, the production/artists team who produced the reggaeton remix for "Obsession (No es Amor)," also worked with rapper Petey Pablo on a song from Enemigo's album, Caminando.

"Now we're starting to see artists like R. Kelly work with Looney Tunes on his recent album, and we'll probably see a lot more of that in the future," Ross said.

Though reggaeton often features English vocals, much of it's still in Spanish, and this creates surprise at reggaeton's success in the U.S., he said.

"[Reggaeton] has shown that some younger Latinos will listen to a radio format in Spanish, although most stations mix in some English as well," Ross said. "It has also shown that 'Latino and proud,' the slogan of stations in Houston, Miami and elsewhere is a viable way of marketing to younger Latinos, who, again, had been thought to be too assimilated for that to appeal to them."

Now that the Hurban format has carved itself a niche in the U.S., the question is: will it continue to grow, and if so, how much?

"As for how far it stretches, it's too soon to tell yet. So far, what we know is that it transcends national heritage among Hispanics," Ross said.

While most Spanish-language formats are directed to groups from one particular area, Ross said reggaeton has surprised many people by doing so well in places like Los Angeles and Houston - places where it was originally thought that Caribbean-based music wouldn't take off.

"The Reggaeton music has a great beat. It's something a lot of people like to dance to," Moctezuma said. "This kind of music is really like a universal language."

- Annie Linder contributed to this story.
