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Reggaeton: 'This is not a fad, this is a movement'

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From the Lambada to Livin' la Vida Loca, American pop music is dotted with hotly hyped Latin crossover successes that were supposed to remake the mainstream in their multicultural image.

Is reggaeton any different?

Fired up by Daddy Yankee's addictive hit single Gasolina, reggaeton had a breakthrough year in 2005.

The mix of hip-hop, reggae dancehall and salsa has roots in 1980s Panama, where descendants of Jamaican immigrants working on the canal began rapping over reggae rhythms in Spanish. After building in popularity over the last decade in Puerto Rico, its home base, reggaeton has become the linchpin of a radio format often called "hurban": Hispanic-urban.

All-Spanish FM stations in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Denver and Washington gave U.S. exposure to longtime Puerto Rican stars such as Tego Calderon, who became the first reggaeton artist signed by the pop division of a U.S. major label (Atlantic), and Ivy Queen, the foremost female diva in the male-dominated genre.

With 42 million Spanish speakers in the United States, signs abound of reggaeton's growing influence.

Amid an industry-wide slump, Latin-CD sales grew 8 percent last year. Reebok will launch a Daddy Yankee sneaker in March. Latin pop stars such as Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias have hopped on the reggaeton train, as have R&B acts such as R. Kelly, who collaborated on Burn It Up with Wisin & Yandell, the up-and-comers whose grabby Rakata is the heavy-rotation reggaeton hit of the moment.

"This is not a fad, this is a movement," said Daddy Yankee by phone on his way to perform on MTV's Total Request Live. Born Raymond Ayala, Yankee, 28, grew up in the Santurce neighborhood of San Juan listening to hip-hop pioneers N.W.A. and Rakim.

Rap stars Snoop Dogg and Paul Wall are guests on his new live album Barrio Fino en Directo, the follow-up to 2004's Barrio Fino, which has sold 1.5 million copies stateside.

"When you see kids dressing like us and rhyming like us, you can see that it's not a fad, it's a subculture," he said. "I compare reggaeton's momentum to hip-hop in the late '80s and early '90s."

He believes reggaeton, like hip-hop, will succeed because the sexually charged music "comes from the street. We didn't go looking for the pop music business. It found us. It's not manufactured. It grew by itself, natural."

Old-school fans give props to trailblazers such as El General and Vico-C, but reggaeton began to pick up steam in recent years thanks in large part to the production skills of Luny Tunes, the music's leading knob-twiddlers.

They've produced all the major artists, and scored a U.S. breakthrough in 2004 with rapper N.O.R.E.'s Spanglish Oye Mi Canto, which featured Daddy Yankee.

That song set the table for Gasolina, whose success on hip-hop and pop stations convinced radio programmers that the time was right for reggaeton. The first key to the music's success, says Leila Cobo, Billboard magazine's Miami-based Latin music editor, is that "it has a rhythm you can dance to, which is very important in Latin culture."

Reggaeton's hard synthesizer hooks and salsa- and merengue-flavored rhythms make the hips move — as opposed to hip-hop's insistent beat, which makes the head nod.

The reggaeton dance of choice is "el perreo," the name derived from the Spanish word for dog, and which involves hip-grinding after the manner of copulating canines.

The second key, Cobo says, is that reggaeton is a true hybrid. "It doesn't sound like anything else. It does not sound like a copy of hip-hop. And then, with Gasolina you had a really great song."

Reggaeton is "the big wheel in the Latin music market," says Gino "Latino" Reyes, who programs Sirius satellite radio's Rumbon channel, which dropped its former moniker, Tropical, after making reggaeton almost half of its pan-Latin play list.

Reyes notes that salsa artists such as Tito Nieves and India have adopted reggaeton's signature boom-ch boom-ch beat.

Sean Ross, a music analyst for Edison Media Research, calls reggaeton "the most exciting new genre of music in radio in 2005. And it's the only significant one based on a new body of music rather than a new way to program old music."

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