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Reggaeton gets solo tryout on station formats

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"I like reggaeton," said a caller to **Miss Jones'** morning show on WQHT (97.1 FM) yesterday. "But does every song have to have the same beat?"

Therein lies one of the questions radio programmers are weighing as they figure out how to deal with the hottest urban sound of summer 2005.

Can reggaeton support a whole format of its own or is it better as one element of a broader-based station?

Reggaeton, in its broad sense, is dancehall music - wildly popular in clubs and on the streets as well. Its roots are mainly Puerto Rican and incorporate hip-hop and tropical elements. Early stars like **Tego Calderon** have been doing it since the '90s, while newer stars like **Daddy Yankee** seem to come along every day.

Daddy Yankee's "Barrio Fino" is the top-selling Latin album of the year, and his first U.S. tour starts soon, with an Aug. 27 stop at Madison Square Garden.

Several radio stations think reggaeton is hot enough to make it a whole format, including New York's WCAA (105.9 FM)/WZAA (92.7 FM), which in May became La Kalle.

Parent Univision says early ratings have gone up - which is the same thing Spanish Broadcast Systems is saying about KXOL in Los Angeles, which also switched to reggaeton this spring.

But both WCAA and KXOL were stations whose ratings had a lot of room to improve. WCAA was well behind WSKQ (97.9 FM), which has dominated New York's Hispanic music market for years with its salsa and merengue mix.

WSKQ now plays a lot of reggaeton itself. Some hours, up to half its music is reggaeton or reggaeton-influenced, like **Shakira's** "La Tortura." But WSKQ clearly feels it's better off with reggaeton as just one element, however prominent it may be at the moment.

"The real lesson for radio here," says **Sean Ross of Edison Media Research**, "is that younger second- and third-generation Latinos will listen to Spanish music if it's in an idiom they like."

For years, Ross notes, Hispanic stations have assumed young Latinos who grew up here speaking English would drift to English-language stations.

"This is what's going to change radio programming," he says, "regardless of whether reggaeton in its current incarnation is still hot two years from now."

Ross says it was actually a few years ago when radio got hints that its assumptions about audience language preferences weren't correct - when **Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias** and Shakira crossed from the Hispanic to the pop market.

He also notes that the first reggaeton station, in Houston, is a bit of hybrid itself: "It's somewhat like a reggaeton Z-100. It's a rhythmic-leaning top 40 that plays a lot of hip-hop and some pop.

"It could be some of today's other reggaeton stations will take that direction. Or perhaps some form of Latin hip-hop."

Reggaeton already has a strong radio hip-hop connection. It's in the mix at both WQHT and WWPR (105.1 FM).

In other reggaeton news, the winner of an "American Idol" type reggaeton contest called "El Draft" will perform next Wednesday at Spirit, in a show co-sponsored by WCAA and Miller Beer. This fall, WSKQ will spotlight reggaeton at its annual Megaton concert.

GOODBYE: **Howard Stern** of WXRK (92.3 FM) and **Scott Shannon** of WPLJ (95.5 FM) were among those who said kind words yesterday about Joe O'Brien, an original WMCA Good Guy and long-time morning man at WHUD. He died last weekend in a car crash, age 90.