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Time has come for reggaeton

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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 dance hall 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 like 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 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 like 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 & Yandel, 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," says Daddy Yankee. 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 like 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 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."

"Gasolina" rides a hammering groove as Yankee hollers lyrics that translate as "She loves gasoline," to which enthusiastic women shout, "Dame mas gasolina" (Give me more gasoline!).

Yankee denies that there's sexual innuendo in the song, which he says "is just about girls who love to drive their cars up and down the street in Puerto Rico and love to party." The song's success has led to other crossover triumphs such as Omar's "Reggaeton Latino," a rallying cry of Latin pride whose video shows Roberto Clemente, Frida Kahlo and Fidel Castro.

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 playlist. 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."

As it expands, reggaeton faces challenges. Though the genre has been percolating for more than a decade, the rush to build a radio format around it has meant that stations have had to lean heavily on artists' back catalogs, a risk when trying to court teenage fans hungry for fresh hits.

"For a while, there was a lack of new material," says Billboard's Cobo, though in the last few months, artists of promise like Wisin & Yandel, Alexis & Fido and Calle 13 have emerged. And reggaeton watchers are awaiting the arrival of the oft-delayed "The Underdog" by Calderon, considered the leading artist of substance, as a gauge of the music's future.

The way Daddy Yankee sees it, reggaeton's good fortunes will continue as long as it doesn't get watered down in search of an Anglo audience.

"It's grown over the years, and it's getting bigger every day," says the rapper and singer, whose recent arena tour took him to New York, Los Angeles and Panama. "People get into the music whether they can speak Spanish or not. We need a balance of party songs, club songs, songs from the street. You can mess around with English a little bit. But you have to be real, you have to keep it in Spanish."

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