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Reggaetón igniting

This new multiculti musical mix of Latino salsa, reggae dancehall and hip-hop is "not a fad," says a hitmaker, "it's a subculture."

By Dan DeLuca
Inquirer Music Critic

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 reggaetón any different?

Fired up by Daddy Yankee's addictive hit single "Gasolina," reggaetón - one of whose leading men, Don Omar, plays the House of Blues in Atlantic City tonight - 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, reggaetón 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 (though not Philadelphia) gave U.S. exposure to longtime Puerto Rican stars like Tego Calderón, who became the first reggaetón 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 reggaetón'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 reggaetón 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 reggaetón hit of the moment.

"This is not a fad, this is a movement," said Daddy Yankee by phone Thursday 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 rhyiming like us, you can see that it's not a fad, it's a subculture," he said. "I compare reggaetón's momentum to hip-hop in the late '80s and early '90s." He believes reggaetón, 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 reggaetón 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 reggaetón. 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."

Reggaetón'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 reggaetón dance of choice - and a favorite at DJ Rashaan Lucas' *Esta Bien* parties, the final Thursday of each month at Philadelphia's Silk City Lounge - 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 reggaetón 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 más 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 "Reggaetón Latino," a rallying cry of Latin pride whose video shows Roberto Clemente, Frida Kahlo and Fidel Castro.

Reggaetón 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 reggaetón almost half of its pan-Latin play list. Reyes notes that salsa artists such as Tito Nieves and India have adopted reggaetón's signature boom-ch boom-ch beat.

Sean Ross, a music analyst for Edison Media Research, calls reggaetón "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."

The reggaetón hurricane has not hit Philadelphia full blast, however. "Philadelphia is like the last market in the country to really break," says Lucas, the Esta Bien DJ, with a sigh. Philadelphia is the 18th-largest U.S. Hispanic market, and its main reggaetón outlet is AM station La Mega (WEMG-1310).

Darvin Garcia, La Mega's program director, says his modest goal is to boost the station's Arbitron rank from 23d to the top 20. He programs reggaetón mixed with salsa and other styles, and will launch a Sunday-night all-reggaetón show on Feb. 5, with DJ Gigolo J.

"It's still a developing market," Garcia says. To his ears, reggaetón's language, Spanish, isn't a roadblock to success, especially since Luny Tunes productions have grown in sophistication. "You can be driving down 95 just listening to the beat, and you'll get hyped," he says. "You don't have to understand the words."

La Mega is also struggling to reach its core young Latino audience with an AM signal. "People don't listen to music on AM," Garcia says.

As it expands, reggaetón 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 reggaetón watchers are awaiting the arrival of the oft-delayed *The Underdog* by Calderón, considered the leading artist of substance, as a gauge of the music's future.

The way Daddy Yankee sees it, reggaetón'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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