

# Reggaetón explodes in Puerto Rico and Tucson

By Juan Carlos L. Albarrán  
Special to the Green Valley News

**SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO**—José Luis Guzmán, the front desk clerk at the MontCaribe International Guesthouse in Ocean Park, a San Juan beach barrio, keeps humming to his headphones as he checks in guests from the mainland. They don't mind: They're listening to the same beat that he is.

"Reggaetón made this possible," Guzmán says, gesturing at the lengthening line of young visitors. "I just love it." Reggaetón, a Puerto Rican-born, often bilingual blend of reggae, hip-hop, salsa, and local folk rhythms, has been called the 21st century's first international music craze.

Guzmán has seen a steady surge in youthful tourists to his island since 2000 when the reggaetón explosion began. "I did not like reggaetón at the beginning," emphasizes Guzmán, "I changed when I heard Daddy Yankee's hit El Cartel."

Daddy Yankee's megastar career, and reggaetón itself, evolved from rap music sessions in Villa Kennedy, a nondescript housing project that taxis filled with arriving reggaetón fans pass on the way to San Juan from the airport.

Today, Daddy Yankee's *Pasame la Botella*, (Pass Me The Bottle) blares from street stands selling pirate CDs from Mexico City to Rio. The swaying throngs who pack Havana's Palacio de la Música know all

the words to songs of the Puerto Rican reggaetón duo Wisin y Yandel, as do the crowds in downtown Tucson's club Sharks.

Even Southern Arizona salsa venues like El Charro and El Parador now spin reggaetón into their mix.

In Puerto Rico, the 500-year-old Spanish architecture of Old San Juan is shaken nightly by the aggressive pounding of reggaetón in discotheques like The Noise, Pink Skirt, and Club Lazer. The intermingling of locals with foreign tourists underscores one reason that the music has become so important here and in Puerto Rican enclaves like New York and Orlando: Suddenly, to millions of young people worldwide to be Puerto Rican is considered very cool.

Puerto Rico is also the birthplace of world-renowned musicians who contributed to the development of salsa in New York in the 1970s and 1980s such as Tito Puente, Ismael Rivera (Maelo), Willy Colón and Marc Anthony.

In the beginning, however, many *salseros* wanted nothing to do with reggaetón.

"Reggaetón was musically poor," says Ruben Rivera Laye, a bass player who has performed with many famous salsa musicians. "Its lyrics lacked artistic value." Unlike salsa, he notes, reggaetón doesn't require complicated foot work or even a dance partner. Laye, who has directed the group Conjunto Salsa Clásica for the last ten years, expected the reg-



A YOUNG CROWD enjoys itself at a Reggaetón nightclub in Old San Juan.

KYLIE WALZAK PHOTO

gaetón boom to pass quickly. "Step by step, reggaetón has improved a lot in the last few years," says Laye. "We even play together now."

Among the biggest current stars is Tego Calderón, whose lyrics talk about racism and social inequality in Puerto Rico. Calderón's music success has elevated him to island icon

status and collaborations with U.S. rap musicians like Snoop Dog, 50 cents, and Usher. His music style comes from the African roots of his town Loiza, the most predominantly black community in Puerto Rico.

The success of reggaetón was sealed with Latin Grammy Awards in 2005 for Daddy Yankee and, in 2006, for the group

Calle 13, whose lyrics garble English and Spanish.

"Spanglish is strategic," says Tucson-based, Puerto Rican-born folk musician José (Pepo) Saavedra, who has appeared at Plush, The Grill, and local folk festivals. "That's the same way we talk in Puerto Rico."

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A team of University of Arizona's international journalism students recently visited Puerto Rico for an exhaustive report on the U.S. commonwealth. The project was led by veteran reporter and associate professor Alan Weisman, who takes a team of UA journalism students each year to a different part of Latin America. Weisman is also an author, whose latest book is "The World Without Us," published by St. Martin's Press/Thomas Dunne Books. The series raises interesting questions about the U.S. relationship with Puerto Rico now and in the future. Could the United States accept a Spanish-speaking state? What would happen if Puerto Rico became independent? Student reporters participating in the series were Lorena Barraza, Laura Belous, Laura Dent, Juan Carlos Leblanc Albarrán, Riley Merline, Gabby Rentería-Poepsel, Dave Trautman and Kylie Walzak. The Green Valley News has decided to publish most of the series in print and online, publisher Pam Mox said, because the project was well reported and written. In addition, the newspaper wants to support the UA journalism department's effort and to encourage young journalists, Mox said.

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