

The Secret Legacy of Punks: Toward a History of *Rock en Español* in Puerto Rico

Rubén Ramírez-Sánchez, Ph.D.

Universidad de Puerto Rico

Escuela de Comunicación

ruben.ramirez1@upr.edu

Abstract: The phenomenon of *rock en español* (rock in Spanish) has been central to the evolution of rock music in Latin America. As such, the concept encompasses a form of complex cultural production that is both assimilationist and autochthonous. While a long history of *rock en español* has been strongly present in Latin America for decades, the phenomenon is historically recent in Puerto Rico, despite a deeply rooted rock culture. This article examines the role of Puerto Rican punk culture in shaping the emergence of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico. Using fanzines, media artifacts, first-hand accounts, and interviews, it structures a sketch of the emergence of both rock culture and punk culture in Puerto Rico in order to reveal both the complexities and importance of historicizing *rock en español* in the island.

Keywords: spanish rock, punk culture, popular culture, puerto rico, rock music

The origin and evolution of Puerto Rican rock culture are deeply rooted in the socio-political circumstances that define the island of Puerto Rico as a territory of the United States and the complex identifications that stem from the effects of its colonial history. The consolidation of rock culture in Puerto Rico, compared to other Latin American countries, was surprisingly slow. Today, rock is widely accepted as a cultural fact in Puerto Rico, and its multifarious manifestations are readily visible, especially through the creation of a Puerto Rican version of *rock en español* (rock in Spanish) and the successful commercialization of Puerto Rican rock music.

However, as this accepted history of rock was forged, a “secret” history of rock ran parallel to it. I argue that the origins of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico were deeply rooted in the Puerto Rican underground punk scene, as this subculture was in fact the first to successfully experiment with a version of *rock en español* in the island. In addition, it was the first to

produce an independent program of native rock production with the release of music, fanzines, and, most importantly, record labels.

Not much has been written about the history and evolution of rock in Puerto Rico. But as in many other countries, Puerto Rico quickly experienced the explosion of rock as it unfolded in the United States and Britain. However, the rock-and-roll phenomenon did not settle and spread as easily as one might think, even as rock culture has been profoundly engrained in Puerto Rican urban culture. Today, practically all music stations play rock music and/or English-language music, and all-rock radio stations, such as Alfa Rock, have been in existence for decades.

In order to trace the development of punk culture in Puerto Rico, a delineation of the trajectories of popular rock music and *rock en español* is crucial. First, it was the early appearance of rock and roll in the late 1950s that would slowly pave the way for the forceful reintroduction of rock in the island in the early 1980s. It would be in the 1980s boom, with the emergence of MTV and key all-rock radio stations, that a door would be open for all kinds of “rock,” from ballads to glam to heavy metal. The new wave of rock enthusiasts, having grown up in the 1970s and now booming in the 1980s, would play a crucial role in directly and indirectly influencing, by means of exposure, the young people who would become the first wave of Puerto Rican punk rockers in the late 1980s.

Consequently, two “histories” of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico would emerge. The first one concerns the accepted view of rock in Puerto Rico. This history only addresses the development of mainstream rock and the cultural production associated with it. This view overwhelmingly disregards the underground rock scene and the impact it has had and is still having on a large sector of Puerto Rican youth. The underground rock culture is what constitutes a second history of rock in Puerto Rico. This is an abject, marginalized history that is not only important for an understanding of the emergence of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico but also for our own understanding of the cultural intersections and contradictions that underlie the development of the hybridization of culture in Puerto Rico.

Rock Culture in Puerto Rico: Early Manifestations

There are practically no detailed and systematic accounts of the history of rock in Puerto Rico (see the works of Anzagasty-Rodríguez, 2002; Arévalo Mateus, 2004a; 2004b; Giovannetti, 2003; Santiago, 1994; and Soto Torres, 2005; 2006). According to Soto Torres (2006), the influence of rock and roll in Puerto Rico can be traced back to the end of the 1950s.

However, these early manifestations of rock and roll, even those of the magnitude of Elvis Presley, failed to gain wide acceptance in Puerto Rico. It was only a handful of Puerto Ricans who embraced the rock phenomenon, mostly among the upper classes.

Nonetheless, the rock phenomenon eventually started to gain momentum and acceptance. This was due, in part, to the work carried out by Alfred D. Herger, who had a presence in Puerto Rican radio and television and who became a promoter of rock and roll á la Dick Clark (Arévalo Mateus, 2004; Soto Torres, 2006). In fact, it was Herger who would pioneer the *Nueva Ola* movement, which was characterized by a distancing from more traditional forms of popular music, such as salsa. Artists from the *Nueva Ola*, although they did not necessarily play rock as it is known today, incorporated the use of rock's basic elements, such as electric guitar, bass, and drums. This in itself presented a sound that was different from most of the musical production at the time and, most importantly, paved the way for a new musical taste and culture.

During the 1960s, rock culture saw a change in sensibility and aesthetics, and the *Nueva Ola* movement was influenced in part by the contribution of the rock cultural production being forged in countries such as the United States at the time. As Arévalo Mateus (2004a) notes, *Nueva Ola* artists such as Chucho Avellanet and Lucecita Benítez initially began playing covers of English-language hits in Spanish. By the 1970s, *Nueva Ola* had secured its own distinctive configuration, combining folkloric sounds with standard rock elements. Artists such as Danny Rivera had already become very popular in urban Puerto Rico (see *Music of Puerto Rico*), manifesting the first attributes of a Puerto Rican form of *rock en español*. Indeed, it could be said that the *Nueva Ola* movement greatly contributed to the creation of a rock sensibility in Puerto Rico that, years later, would be at the heart of the creation of a mainstream rock culture.

In the early 1970s, rock had already been widely embraced by certain sectors of Puerto Rican youth. For example, in 1972 a major rock festival took place in the island—the Mar y Sol Festival—hosting more than 30,000 people (Smith, 2006, p. 99). The festival, thought to be another Woodstock by many, was controversial in its own right. For instance, a San Juan Superior Court judge ruled (and eventually reversed his ruling) that the festival could not take place due to the possibility of “alleged illegal sale of drugs at the site” (Ledbetter, 1972a). In addition, Christopher Gilligan, a 16-year-old from Saint Croix, was stabbed while he slept in his tent in the 429-acre farm where the festival was taking place (Ledbetter, 1972b).

It was also in the early 1970s that one of the first all-rock radio stations appeared in Puerto Rico—Alfa Rock. This radio station is important for two reasons: first, it has been operating non-stop since the 70s and, second, it is the only all-rock radio station in Puerto Rico to have endured the myriad cultural and commercial shifts of the island’s ever-changing mainstream music scene without fundamentally changing its programming. Alfa Rock was a major contributor to the cultural acceptance and popularization of rock in Puerto Rico (Soto Torres, 2006).

And even as the mainstream rock culture was being formed during the 70s, there were dissident views that serve to problematize the emergence of rock as mostly an assimilationist cultural trend. Influenced by protest music from Latin American countries, especially Cuba, a limited breed of songwriters was using this early rock aesthetic as a political medium. This became the *Nueva Trova* (New Song) movement, which combined populist, nationalistic, and anti-American themes with a mostly folk-rock sensibility. As Arévalo Mateus (2004a) notes, these “Boricua *rockeros* were much less interested in achieving stardom and were suspicious of both the politics and the capitalist tendencies in the mainland” (p. 93). This interjection in the evolution of Puerto Rican rock can reveal something about the sensibilities that were later at the center of the Puerto Rican punk movement.

Rock Culture Consolidated: The Decade of 1980

By the 1980s, rock culture was strongly rooted in urban Puerto Rican youth culture. The addition of additional all-rock radio stations, such as 95X, laid the grounds on which other, non-mainstream forms of rock would become popular and accepted. Another important turning point regarding rock influence in the island was access to MTV in the mid-80s through cable television. Although cable television had had a limited presence in Puerto Rico in the late 70s, the mid 80s saw a dramatic increase in subscribers, from 35,000 in 1980 to 127,400 in 1985 (Popelnik, undated). By the late 80s, MTV had already become emblematic of rock, cool, and mainstream youth culture within urban Puerto Rican youth. This period evidenced an unprecedented array of rock concerts in the island, featuring acts such as REO Speedwagon, Scorpions, Asia, Quiet Riot, and Bon Jovi, among many others, evidencing the realization of a new cultural market.

In the 1980s, the new cultural trend of the *rockero* (rocker) became a *class* trend. During the 1980s, it was not difficult to see the *rockeros* phenomenon as a socially and racially

codifiable trend. To be *rockero* meant, in many ways, to be “cosmopolitan”, “cool”, and “free”. In fact, these characterizations stood directly opposed to another mainstream cultural trend—the *cocolos*—or the culture associated with salsa music. Jorge Duany (1984) expresses the cultural and even racial rift that was so entrenched in the musical cultures of the 1980s:

The stereotype of the contemporary *cocolo* is a teenager who wears outmoded, flowered shirts, polyester pants, tennis shoes, and an Afro pick in the hair. *Cocolos* sport monstrous radios or cassette players wherever they go and listen to an all-*salsa* station like Zeta 93. They live in Nemesio Canales or another of the public housing projects in San Juan. The *cocolo*'s antithesis is the *rockero*: a teenager dressed in tight jeans, Playero [a local surf shop] T-shirt, sandals, the latest in American fashion, and long, tousled hair. *Rockeros* can be seen windsurfing at Isla Verde beach or listening to a radio station like Alfa Rock 105 in their cars. They probably live in Garden Hills or one of the more exclusive *urbanizaciones*. (p. 200)

Duany's remarks are important to an understanding of the historical connotations and evolution of rock culture in Puerto Rico. To begin with, practitioners of rock culture embodied a way of life that distanced itself from traditional cultural forms. In many ways, rock culture presented a cultural migration toward a foreign culture, more specifically toward a *colonizing* culture. For example, it could be argued that traditional cultural forms, such as *cocolo* culture and salsa music in the 70s and 80s, were mostly (but not entirely) representative of a political stance that regarded any US influence, such as musical influence, as oppressive in nature. Rock culture in Puerto Rico, in this sense, could be seen by certain groups as a homogenizing culture that served to erase autochthonous tradition and foment cultural assimilation.

The late 1980s were pivotal in terms of the island's musical cultural production. By now, rock had been widely spread and was no longer a novelty. In addition, the influence of radio stations, concerts, and venues sponsoring rock culture had an impact on the creativity of young people, prompting the creation of bands. The first bands of this era were mostly a direct imitation of bands from the United States. On the one hand, by 1985 bands such as Words for Two, No U Turn, NeoEngland, and Nirvana became influenced by the “New Wave” genre of mostly European groups such as Dead or Alive, King, and New Order. On the other hand, by the end of the decade, a “glam” version of heavy metal came to dominate mainstream rock culture, and this also had an effect on the musical scene in Puerto Rico. Bands such as Mattador,

Rockshot, and Rebel Rose assimilated this style, centering their music on the hard rock genre (see Soto Torres, 2006).

Rock en Español and Puerto Rico

One interesting aspect about this era of Puerto Rican rock cultural production is that the great majority of bands, either new wave or hard rock, exclusively produced music in English. By now, the *Nueva Ola* and *Nueva Trova* movements were nothing but *música de viejos* (music for old people) and had almost no connection to the emerging rock scene, which relied on synthesizers and distortion as *raison d'être*. In this respect, rock in another language, in this case Spanish, became an *impossibility*.

Although *rock en español* had been widely popular in places such as Argentina, Spain, and Mexico for decades, it remained in obscurity in Puerto Rico. This is surprising, given the fact that Puerto Rico's native language is Spanish and given the immense popularity of bands such as Soda Stereo from Argentina, which since its beginnings produced their music entirely in Spanish and conquered much of South and Central America and Mexico. As Vila (1989) states, Argentinean rock (*rock nacional*) became "the third most exported rock music in the world, after that of the United States and Great Britain" (p. 1). For instance, Soda Stereo—during the 1990 tour supporting one of its most influential albums, *Canción Animal*—toured Central and South America and Mexico producing an astounding response from the public, playing for hundreds of thousands of people who literally idolatized the band (see *Soda Stereo: Una Parte de la Euforia*, 2004). More surprising is the fact that during this tour, Soda Stereo made a stop in Puerto Rico, *playing* a free concert in the island in 1990. Years later, Gustavo Cerati, former Soda Stereo frontman and creative leader, would repeatedly play in Puerto Rico to thousands of fans who were probably oblivious to the fact that Soda Stereo, now legendary, had played in the island.

It is not until the end of the decade of 1980s that *rock en español* slowly starts to gain momentum in the island. In 1989, there is a limited amount of *rock en español* concerts from famous bands, such as *Mecano* (Spain) and Miguel Mateos (Argentina). In 1990, Melba Miranda, a media personality and advocate of *rock en español*, starts a radio show devoted exclusively to *rock en español*—*Punto de Fuga*—in public radio. In addition, she begins to bring mostly unknown bands from Spain, Argentina, and Venezuela to the island.

A Historical Sketch of the Punk Scene in Puerto Rico: Early Stages

The emergence of a rock culture in Puerto Rico had many effects in Puerto Rican cultural life. Rock culture served to create a culture that, not unproblematically, fused US popular culture within an emerging Puerto Rican urban psyche. However, from the mainstream culture of Alfa Rock and famous *rock en español* bands, there emerged a culture that, for diverse reasons, was being forged *against* the principles that had mostly shaped rock culture in Puerto Rico since its beginnings. In many ways, the punk movement in Puerto Rico emerged as a response to the inadequacies, failures, and injustices of a cultural infrastructure that was underpinned by class preference, artifice, and commercialization.

In many ways, the history of Puerto Rican punk culture is an oral history composed of diverse sources: people, zines, documentaries, flyers, and experience. One of the very few formal efforts to reconstruct a “history” of this scene is a documentary by Guillermo Gómez Alvarez (2005). A veteran in the Puerto Rico scene, Gómez Alvarez created a visual portrait of the evolution of the scene, its conundrums, successes, and failures. I rely on his work, on interviews I conducted, cultural artifacts such as fanzines, and my own experience in the scene in order to elaborate on the sketch he provides.

The early manifestations of the Puerto Rican underground punk scene were not initially rooted in punk culture, but in heavy metal and thrash. During the late 1980s, the Puerto Rican rock scene became heavily influenced by hard rock bands and strong media promotion (through concerts, MTV, and steady radio exposure). It was only natural for fans to create bands that would fit into this genre. Bands such as Rebel Rose, mostly considered as “glam” heavy metal, fit this description. The music of these early bands mostly consisted of cover songs of the heavy metal bands of this era, and any original material was written in English.

Nonetheless, even if the island’s rock scene was generally into more mainstream forms of rock, other forms of rock, especially harder genres, were gaining popularity. Heavy and thrash metal were quickly contributing to the formation of a “metal” subculture. Bands such as Iron Maiden, Slayer, Metallica, Anthrax, and Megadeth were increasingly becoming popular. This moment vividly becomes apparent when one thinks about a classic mall scene of the time: groups of long-haired teenagers promenading on *Plaza Las Americas*, the island’s main shopping center, wearing jean jackets that bore heavy-metal patches depicting skulls, demons, upside-down crosses, and fire. *Plaza Las Americas* was also one of the few places where one could find

the latest and most obscure heavy metal music and accessories (for example, stores like *Discomanía* were very popular among metal fans). This more obscure and aggressive subgenre of heavy metal had a direct influence on the people who later became associated with the punk movement.

Another crucial element in the formation of the punk scene in Puerto Rico, closely connected to the popularity of thrash metal, was “metal parties.” These parties, consisting in taking advantage of the absence of parental figures and inviting a bunch of friends over to drink beer and listen to metal records, were one of the earliest forms of expression for “non-mainstream” rock enthusiasts.

Metal parties were limited and soon became unnecessary as other spaces of expression, such as bars, became available. One of the first venues to support the creation and exposure of local bands was Steps, a bar near the University of Puerto Rico in the mostly working class town of Río Piedras. It was there that the first gatherings resembling a music scene took place, where rock enthusiasts from different styles would gather to watch bands play. As Javier Valentín, founder of one of the first punk bands in Puerto Rico, recalls in one of our interviews, the novelty of going to see local bands play was thrilling. Indeed, it was going to Steps to see bands what inspired him to form his pioneering band, Sham Pain. At the time, a place where one could exclusively see local bands play was unprecedented. In this respect, Steps served as a platform to the formation of an underground scene.

The early “scene” being forged through places like Steps was characterized by heterogeneity and relative acceptance. For example, shows were frequented by people from different rock subgenres, such as metalheads, thrashers, or glam rockers. This heterogeneity was promoted by the combinations of bands that played together. For example, it was not uncommon to see a hard rock band such as Rebel Rose play with a thrash metal band such as Cardinal Sin. For this reason, the early rock shows became focal points for a *general* scene of rock enthusiasts who were more influenced by obscure rock styles than by the typical commercial music of the 80s rock culture.

One important characteristic of the early scene was its geographical development. For instance, a place such as Steps was located in the mostly working-class and immigrant town of Río Piedras, next to the public university. This created an opportunity for lower class kids to become actively involved in their own version of rock culture. In fact, because many of the

bands that played in these venues were not regarded as commercial music at the time, this early scene was more associated with an underground, unsophisticated culture than with the rock culture promoted by Alfa Rock, surfers, and private-school kids described earlier by Duany (1984).

This first stage in the early rock scene was characterized by an absence of musical subdivisions. There were genres, but subcultural divisions were not yet determining, the circuit being mostly characterized by innocence toward the music that was being produced locally. However punk sensibility was emerging in key people, but it was not quite apparent. By the end of the 80s, a punk rock scene would emerge and a political sensibility would start to develop among its practitioners.

First Punk Manifestations: Late 80s

Between 1988 and 1989, a more coherent subculture, with factions and subgenres, started to emerge. The first “punk” bands emerged as a response to direct exposure to the rock culture of the US mainland. As noted earlier, bands—even those closer to more obscure genres such as thrash—mostly made original music in English and were too preoccupied with producing music that could be commercialized. However, musical production that concentrated solely on self-expression and self-initiative was nonexistent. Self-expression, as we will see, was instrumental to breaking away with a foreign rock aesthetic and the development of a native sound. In this respect, the first barrier that had to be broken was a language barrier, which explains why the first punk bands made it a point to make music in Spanish.

Motivated by a kind of idealization of the bands playing in the early circuit, the first punk bands were mostly created for fun. By 1988, a handful of bands were crossing over to the punk genre, just as many bands in the United States had crossed over to punk and hardcore from thrash metal. Bands such as Crystal Shit, Corrupted Society, and F.O.D. were among the very first to incorporate a punk style in both their music and attitude. However, one of the most influential bands to emerge was Sham Pain (formerly F.O.D.), which formed in 1989. Javier Valentín was one of the founders of this band. This band is important because it became very active in the construction of the scene, either by finding venues to play, promoting shows, and/or engaging in an active program of musical production. In fact, Sham Pain would become one of the very first bands to record music independently. Because of its energetic involvement, it could be said that

Sham Pain was one of a handful of bands to inspire and be the driving force for the first generation of bands that formed the early Puerto Rico punk scene.

Like its predecessors throughout the evolution of rock in Puerto Rico, Sham Pain began playing songs in English, most of them covers from metal and thrash bands, but also incorporating hardcore, a new genre in Puerto Rico at the time. In the United States, hardcore music had evolved from punk culture, but it differed from it in that it attempted to vehemently incorporate a more pronounced political philosophy. For example, in Washington, DC, the hardcore movement prompted the independent production of music and activism (for example, Dischord Records and Minor Threat). In the case of Sham Pain, the band started covering crossover hardcore bands such as D.R.I, Agnostic Front, and Corrosion of Conformity. Sham Pain's style at this point was not defined, even if it concentrated on hard, non-commercial forms of rock (mostly thrash).

In my interviews, Javier recalled having a desire to express himself in his music in the very same ways that the foreign bands he listened to were expressing themselves. He felt a need, for example, to curse in Spanish, "to say shit and motherfucker in Spanish, because no band in Spanish would ever say that" (Interview, July, 2006). In their first show, all the songs they played were in English. However, in March of 1989 they played in a *party de marquesina* with Crystal Shit, whose lead singer advised Javier to start playing music in Spanish. Javier wondered how they would write a song in Spanish, since he had never listened to such a thing, but he thought the idea was good. Sham Pain wrote its first song in Spanish, *Rebeldía*, and made it a point to build a repertoire of songs in Spanish.

Like many bands before it, Sham Pain's creation was directly connected to the work been done by early bands such as Spitfire and Cardinal Sin. At first, Javier knew of the existence of these bands but had not seen them play. Seeing them play changed his perspective. His urge to form a band came from the idea that it *was* possible to form a band. If other people were doing it, why couldn't they?

Puerto Rico Punk: The 90s

By 1990, the punk scene was exploding. All of a sudden, there were numerous active bands that embraced punk. Punk culture, already with a fairly long history in the United States and Europe, had become a noticeable trend on the island. At this point, young people would wear the distinctive attires of punk, such as boots, leather jackets, and spiked hair. Many spaces

of expression also emerged at this time. A handful of venues where bands could play started to emerge, and hang-out places, mostly public spaces such as plazas, became exclusive punk territory.

A crucial factor in the development of the scene was the emergence of new spaces of expression. Between 1990 and 1991, through the efforts of pre-1990 bands such as Sham Pain, Crystal Shit, *Abuso Legal*, and No More, more places became available for punk bands to play. Given that the broader rock scene was very selective, only accepting of mainstream US rock, most bar owners were reluctant to let punk and thrash bands play at their venues. Furthermore, given that rock in Spanish was rare and mostly ignored, punk bands of the early scene, most of them now singing exclusively in Spanish, were not taken seriously. In 1990, bands were playing where they could.

The year 1991 was crucial for the development of the scene, one of the main factors being an unprecedented outburst of bars supporting bands. In Río Piedras, *La Casa de Teo* became an important venue where punk bands were given a chance to express themselves. Founded by actor, playwright, and director Teófilo Torres, *La Casa de Teo* was not a bar but rather a small theater that supported experimental arts. It was here that bands that would shape the punk scene, such as *Golpe Justo*, played their first shows. Because it was quite easy for bands to play there, punk musical production was spurring. Also circa 1991, Old San Juan became another important geographical center for local punk culture. On the one hand, there were several venues in Old San Juan that were supporting the growth of the scene. Venues such as 205, Anything Goes, and Tiffany's were hosting shows almost every weekend, and more and more new bands were forming as a response to this support. Another crucial factor was the importance of Old San Juan as a point of convergence. It was in there that punks would gather after shows, which fomented the development of a cohesive subcultural group. Places such as *Plaza de Armas* and *PJs* (both public plazas) became famous gathering points for people subscribing to different punk styles.

Perhaps the most determining factor occurred in 1991 when the first record by a Puerto Rican punk band was released. Although it was the first time Puerto Rican punk bands appeared in a record, and although the record itself was produced in DIY fashion, this effort was not made by a Puerto Rican label, but by an underground US label. This first release, titled "House Arrest," was produced by Computer Crime Records, based in Connecticut. Computer Crime was

founded by Jeff Coleman, who was born in the United States of Irish/Danish and Puerto Rican descent. After a visit to the island in 1990, Jeff acquired tapes of several Puerto Rican punk and hardcore bands, which gave him the idea to document the scene. As he stated in an interview, his main concern was to get “music into people’s hands” since the Puerto Rico punk scene was lacking an active structure for documenting its music (interview in *Días Libres... De Un Esclavo*, undated). This first record included songs from No More, Subculture Underground, Frontside Generation, Hypocrite Solution, and Sham Pain, mostly from the early scene that started in 1989 (hence the names in English). Computer Crime later released the work of more Puerto Rican bands, such as Sham Pain, *Golpe Justo*, and *Hijos de Nadie*. The release of these records marked the beginning of a new era of native punk cultural production in Spanish.

The mid-90s consolidated the eclectic development of the scene. During this period, bands were numerous, and there was a vigorous emergence of different subcultural styles and musical affiliations. For example, between 1992 and 1994, skinhead and Oi influences gained popularity, and by 1994 a faction of punks had organized the *CPPR (Cabeza de Piel de Puerto Rico)* movement, a skinhead organization that embraced the British skinhead culture of the 1960s influenced by Jamaican rude boys. The emergence of skinhead culture brought with it new musical styles, such as ska, and consolidated a hardcore/skinhead musical subgenre. In many ways, the advent of new musical styles was a welcome outcome: the scene was musically and culturally richer and thus more people could identify with it. However, some observers who had an active role in the scene at the time argued that the emergence of new styles and the great number of bands available created subcultural rifts and divisions that, rather than enriching the scene, served to displace it. This is evident in comments in a fanzine of the time:

Today, the scene is somewhat stagnated due to the closure of venues such as Viper in Santurce and because of the lack of unity and apathy of certain people. We can say that ska, rave, and pseudopunk have taken strength from the [Puerto Rico punk] movement, because instead of contributing they have come to compete and create more divisions. (*Zine Vergüenza* #6, 1997)

The possible divisions that could have emerged, however, did not result in a fissure within the scene. For instance, Joel, one early Puerto Rican punk, recalls how “many skinheads had been punks, and when they became skins they began to look down on us just as punks had looked down on metalheads. But there wasn’t any violent confrontation because [after all] we were all friends, we all knew each other” (in Gómez Álvarez, 2005).

Between 1993 and 1996, the development of the scene continued, especially with the appearance of very influential bands, such as *La Experiencia de Toñito Cabanilla*\$\$\$, *Lopo Drido*, *Actitud Subversiva*, and *Cojoba*. These bands would mark yet a new era of punk production, with the creation of the very first native record labels, the organization of the first tours abroad, the creation of more fanzines, and the first precedents of popularity (as in the case of *La Experiencia*).

In 1994, *Golpe Justo* released *Seguimos Adelante*, what appears to be the first record produced by a Puerto Rican label, in this case Justo Records. In 1996, *Cojoba* released its first self-produced record, *Espíritu de Punk*, under their label, Anaconda Records. In that same year, *Actitud Subversiva* released *Censurados por Decir la Verdad* on their record label Discos Subversivos, and also in 1996 *La Experiencia de Toñito Cabanilla*\$\$\$ self-released its first record, *Generación ABCDE 1+1=3*.

Although many would quickly disappear, there also appeared several local punk zines. Of these, *Zine Vergüenza* and *Boricuas Bestiales* were by far the most prominent, the first one running from 1996 to 1999, producing more than 17 issues, and the latter running from 1996 to 2000, growing from “a half-sized Xerox affair to a 32 page newsprint thingie of which we press 2,000 copies” (*Boricuas Bestiales*, undated). There appeared other zines such as *Hard Core Taíno*, *Volátil*, and *Una Sola Escena*. In addition, it was during this time span that the first tours outside the island were organized. In 1996, *Golpe Justo* plays the legendary New York punk venue CBGBs, and in 1999 *Actitud Subversiva* goes on a short tour in New York and Washington, DC.

The fact that all these records were released within a two-year timeframe demonstrates the rapid growth of the scene and, most importantly, its subscription to an independent politics of production. Unlike the early scene of 1988 and 1989, mostly characterized by the novelty of actually playing music, the scene of the 1990s clearly subscribed to a view of punk culture as politics. This is clear in the cultural artifacts of the time: many band names explicitly or implicitly reflected some kind of subversive ideal, the content of fanzines overwhelmingly embraced an anarchist politics, and records were released independently, following a DIY philosophy.

In addition, the growing acceptance of mainstream *rock en español* in Puerto Rico presented a threat to the authenticity of the underground punk culture, which resulted in a more

explicit political stance against the corporate music business. By 1995, the rise of commercial pop bands such as *El Manjar de los Dioses*, *Radio Pirata*, and *Sol D' Menta* helped to incorporate rock made in Spanish into Puerto Rican mainstream popular culture. At this point, Puerto Rican youths started to regard *rock en español* as a novelty, even if the punk scene had been creating music in Spanish for several years. Furthermore, in 1996 the band *Fiel a la Vega* unquestionably consolidated Puerto Rican *rock en español* as a cultural commodity, selling 50,000 copies of their self-titled record (see Soto Torres, 2005).

The acceptance of *rock en español* also had an impact on the punk scene, as the idea of rock in Spanish made it easier for more people to become attracted to it. This situation created a sense of hostility and enclosure in the scene. The general feeling is described by a veteran member of the scene as he recalls that:

Suddenly, between 92 and 93, there is a boom of *rock en español* that encased any style of rock in Spanish. And there is a sudden loss of perspective, so more clashes begin to emerge [within the scene]—especially on our part, the older ones [in the scene]—[fearing] that everything would go mainstream, [because] we weren't sellouts. (Tito Barriga in Gómez Álvarez, 2005)

The crystallization of a structured politics of anti-commercialization and rejection of normalized culture became crucial in the subsequent development of the scene, especially in terms of its cultural production. This wave of independent cultural production directly inspired the next generation of Puerto Rican punk, which is characterized by a sophisticated international network of commerce, distribution, and production (see Ramírez, 2012).

Conclusion: Toward a History of *Rock en Español* in Puerto Rico

The history of punk culture in Puerto Rico underlies the development of a mainstream rock culture on the island. The acceptance of rock, although slow in the beginning, gained force to the extent of becoming a part of Puerto Rican culture. Since its early stages, Puerto Rican rock culture was characterized by a close assimilation of foreign rock styles, especially those originating in the United States. This resulted in the imitation of US bands, which cultivated the creation of music in English, despite the fact that Spanish is the native language in Puerto Rico. This closeness to foreign rock, in turn, precluded the possibility of creating rock in Spanish in the beginnings of rock culture in Puerto Rico.

In parallel, punk culture emerged at a time when rock had achieved a prominent cultural status in the island. The first Puerto Ricans to embrace punk had connections to a mainstream heavy-metal culture, which was gaining popularity. However, many of them began to experiment with more obscure metal genres, such as thrash, which led them to become familiar with small record labels and underground music scenes. As had happened in the United States, many of these people crossed over from thrash metal to styles such as punk and hardcore, which resulted in the creation of the first punk bands in Puerto Rico between 1988 and 1989.

By 1991, a Puerto Rican punk scene was fully consolidated. Numerous bands were formed and different punk styles and subgenres were adopted. By 1999, many bands had produced their first records and created the first Puerto Rican punk labels. In turn, these bands fully experimented with creating rock music in Spanish, well before the mainstream acceptance of *rock en español* as a legitimate manifestation of rock. In addition, it was during the 90s that the punk scene acquired a visible politics of resistance and dissent that led to the acceptance of anarchist sensibilities and the adherence to a DIY philosophy.

The phenomenon of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico and its contradictory history reveals several questions that underlie the island's complex post-colonial identity and contemporary cultural formation. Why did *rock en español*, being a colossal phenomenon in most of Latin America, fail to captivate Puerto Ricans even as they embraced a deeply-rooted rock culture? What is the cultural and commercial impact of Puerto Rican punks' incorporation of Spanish to their rock production on the larger Puerto Rican culture? What social, historical, economic, racial, and colonial discourses underlie Puerto Ricans' cultural relation with the US mainland? While this article cannot answer these questions directly, it does attempt to offer points of departure for examining the complexities of contemporary Puerto Rican culture and, most specifically, for a history of *rock en español* in Puerto Rico. Such a history will not only contribute to our understanding of the different trajectories of the cultural phenomenon of *rock en español* in general but contribute to the creation of a contemporary social history of Puerto Rico.

References

- Anazagasty-Rodríguez, J. (2002). Colonial capitalism, hegemony, and youth praxis in Puerto Rico: Fiel a la Vega's *rock en español*. *Latin American Music Review*, 23(1), 79-105.
- Arévalo Mateus, J. (2004). Boricua rock: Puerto Rican by necessity! In D. Pacini Hernández, H. Fernández L'Hoeste, & E. Zolov (Eds.), *Rockin' Las Americas: The global politics of Rock in Latin/o America* (pp. 91-114). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Arévalo Mateus, J. (2004). Everything you've heard, and nothing you've ever heard: Ricanstruction, new-Nuyorican punk activists. *Centro Journal*, 16(2), 248-271.
- Días Libres... De Un Esclavo* [Zine]. (n.d.). Puerto Rico.
- Duany, J. (1984). Popular music in Puerto Rico: Toward an anthropology of salsa. *Latin American Music Review*, 5(2), 186-216.
- Giovannetti, J. L. (2003). Popular music and culture in Puerto Rico: Jamaican and rap music as cross-cultural symbols. In F. R. Aparicio & C. F. Jáquez (Eds.), *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and cultural hybridity in Latin/o America: Vol. 1* (pp. 81-98). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gómez Álvarez, G. (2005). *La escena* [Motion Picture]. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico.
- <http://www.pulsorock.com/entrevistas/entrevista.php?id=283>
- Ledbetter, L. (1972a, April 2). Youth is killed at rock festival. *The New York Times*, p. 47.
- Ledbetter, L. (1972b, April 9). It was a success—Ask the people. *The New York Times*, p. E10.
- Popelnik, R. B. (undated). Puerto Rico. *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*. Retrieved from: <http://www.museum.tv/eotv/puertorico.htm>
- Ramírez, R. (2012). From Zines to MySpace: A Case Study of Media Infrastructures and Counter-power in the Puerto Rican Underground Punk Scene. *Journal of Latin American Communication Research*.
- Rosa, T. (Ed.). (1997, December). *Zine Vergüenza #6* [Zine]. Carolina, PR: Self-published.
- Smith, B. (2006). *I go to extremes: The Billy Joel story*. London: Robson.
- Soda Stereo (Musical group). (2004). *Soda Stereo: Una parte de la euforia*. Miami Beach, Fla.: Sony Discos.
- Soto Torres, E. (2005). *Salimos de aquí: La biografía de Fiel a la Vega*. Carolina, PR: Terranova.

- Soto Torres, E. (2006, May 28). Rock Boricua: Crónica de una historia accidentada. *Revista Alterna*. Retrieved from: <http://revistaalterna.blogspot.com/2006/05/la-historia-del-rock-en-puerto-rico.html>
- Vila, P. (1989). Argentina's "rock nacional": The struggle for meaning. *Latin American Music Review*, 10(1), 1-28.