

LATIN RAPS

NUEVO RITMO A NEW NATION OF RAP EMERGES

Everything gets a little softer when touched by the tropics, even rap. And while Hispanics co-created the genre (Bronx-bred rappers Charlie Chase, Ruby Dee, and Prince Whipple-Whip have become legends), it's only recently that they've been bringing their culture so directly to rap, opening its traditionally hard edges to Spanish letters and Caribbean rhythms. Latin rappers have even developed their own language, "Spanglish," a mixture of Spanish and English that acts as a positive voice among the youth of their communities and as an urgent call to get up and dance.

One of the best of these rappers is Kid Frost, whose current single "La Raza" (The Race), from *Hispanic Causing Panic*, may be the most seductive rap music ever. It's as driven as they come, but a sax rings it around, backed by the layered percussion and conga runs that are found in the best of the Cuban big bands. This rap has as much to do with jazz and blues as hip-hop. Kid Frost (so named as a protégé of Ice-T) is reinventing the aesthetics of cool, and he's doing it in the name of "Brown Pride." At one point in the song he says, "So cool, I'll call you a coolo," a Frostian wordplay on *calo* (a tough Chicano), and a good example of the slang scattered throughout the bilingual rapping in "La Raza." In East L.A. and beyond, "La Raza" is known as the National Anthem of the Chicano people.

Kid Frost's departure from his earlier good-time party rap is a direct result of witnessing L.A.'s gang violence. When he saw his own friends getting killed, Kid Frost soon started talking about "being a conscience for kids who didn't have one." As mesmerizing as his music can be, there's a seriousness that echoes throughout all his

raps. Tough and stocky, Kid Frost has a presence that's just a bit menacing. He's no Mister Clean. "What I do is give a warning," he says. "I've been there and back. East L.A. is the downest city in the world. There's no place else, anywhere, where kids have so much heart." In *The Latin Alliance*—Frost's compilation album due out this spring—he takes these issues of heart and culture and runs them through the dialects and rhymes of rappers from Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Spain and Puerto Rico. "This is for La Raza," he says. Frost doesn't show much interest in tours or sales volume abroad. He's interested in East L.A.; Kid Frost still lives in the neighborhood.

Now that he's proven himself a writer, Frost would like to try his hand at films. He has a million movies in his head—like 1991 East L.A. Keystone cop scenarios. "But in the barrio, you take it one day at a time," he says cautiously.

Imagine Desi Arnaz as a rap musician, and you've got Mellow Man Ace. Born in Cuba, he loves his guayabera shirts, his white straw Panama hats, and his fat Havana smokes. Mellow Man, who was raised in L.A., mixes his idioms with hip-hop and Caribbean rhythms. In his most recent video, a rap version of *Blazing Saddles*, Mellow Man plays Wild West clichés against Carmen Miranda señoritas, rumbero sleeves, and that undeniable Cuban percussion. A few years younger than Frost, Mellow Man isn't interested in teaching anybody anything. He's interested in getting folks dancing. His sound is as playful as The Kid's is haunting. In the Cyprus Hill area of L.A. where he grew up, Mellow Man never needed to fight for his life—except when his Cuban charm threatened to come between Mexican boys and their girlfriends.

Mellow Man Ace has been crowned the initiator of Latin rap. "I never thought it could be done,"

he says. "Then in '85 I heard Mean Machine do a 20-second Spanish bit in their *Disco Dream*. I bugged out." Mellow Man and his little brother then began working out their bilingual rhymes in a series of small neighborhood clubs. "The next thing I knew, Capitol Records wanted to sign me up." The studio brought in industry heavies to give him a boost: The Dust Brothers, Def Jeff from Delicious Vinyl, and Johnny Rivers from 7A3's "Mad Mad World." Mellow Man's bilingual "Mentiroso" (Lying Female), based on Santana scratches, gave Spanish rap its first solid-gold hit.

"Hispanic kids were starving for rap," says the 23-year-old Mellow Man, who wants to rap forever. He envisions Spanish rap becoming more popular than its English-speaking brother. "Latin audiences appreciate everything. Black and white audiences have seen it all. But Latin audiences are just coming into rap. Everybody's freaking." Watch out for Mellow Man's forthcoming *I Love Lucy* themes.

According to 19-year-old Vico C, a Puerto Rican rapper, "If you're growing up on the island these days, you either become an artist or you sell drugs." Vico C is a storyteller. There's a Vico C *Friday the Thirteenth* story, for instance. Jason's back—in Africa this time, playing with monkeys and crocodiles amid soundtracks of lurid organs and desperate drumbeats. This is rap comedy at its most arch, with plenty of melodrama included. In one song, Tony Presidio's drug connections won't let him quit. The plot is accompanied by snatches of the *Godfather* theme rising behind the rap.

Vico C started rapping when he was 12. He would make a tape and run down to the housing projects to try and sell it. Now one of Puerto Rico's best-selling artists, he has become a rap evangelist, inundating the Caribbean with his music. At times he throws out hip-hop backdrops completely, mixing

Mellow Man Ace, one of a posse of Latino rappers, rhymes to the rhythms of the Caribbean. Stylist, Carrie Chanel.

ELIZABETH HANLY



RAPPING LATINO-STYLE: A MIXTURE OF ROOTS, ROCK, AND REGGAE THAT INSISTS ON POSITIVE MESSAGES AND DANCE MANIA

rap with reggae, or merengue's break-neck, ceaseless swing. An avid women's rights supporter, Vico C also pens most of the feminist rhymes for Lisa M., the number one *rapera*.

Back in New York, two more Puerto Rican rappers, Anthony "KT" Boston and Ricardo "Puerto Rock" Rodriguez of The Latin Empire, are also experimenting with Latin rhythms, which includes using Mexico's brassy mariachi music as a background. The Empire's usual meter is rap steady and then some. Their beat is fierce and quicksilver, yet they are more song-oriented than most other rappers. The balladeer Denise Lopez often adds her vocals to their recording tracks.

Latin rap distinguishes itself by insisting on positive messages, and none of the rappers are as willing to take on role model status as The Latin Empire. They have probably visited more grassroots centers and high schools than any of their fellow musicians, and it was their rhymes that could be heard on the public service announcement that was sponsored by Barbara Bush, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

As strong as The Empire's rap is, their most delicious achievement may be visual rather than musical. One of the group's frontmen, Puerto Rock, has a young son, Ricky. A few years ago he created a street-smart, sneakered, gold-chained, sweatsuited, balding, bearded and too-jive-for-his-own-good homeboy doll for little Ricky. One doll led to a series. Now the assembled miniature kingdom includes everything from gangsters to the homeless, and they have been exhibited in a variety of community centers—even in New York's Whitney Museum. Olmec Toys has recently taken on the manufacturing of a far less incisive, far less disturbing version, and predicts they will rival The Cabbage Patch Kids. A hip-hop TV cartoon based on the dolls and Latin Empire's rap is in the works as well.

More in the mainstream of Hispanic rap is the Ecuadoran-born Gerardo, whose recently released *Mo' Ritmo* may make him the first of his group to become a Stateside superstar. His smooth, macho moves play happily into Latin-lover stereotypes, and he rarely offsets them with the quick humor of his colleagues. Gerardo is far more focused on desire than on conscience or cultural pride. "I just have this Latin blood," he raps energetically. "It drives them all out of control."

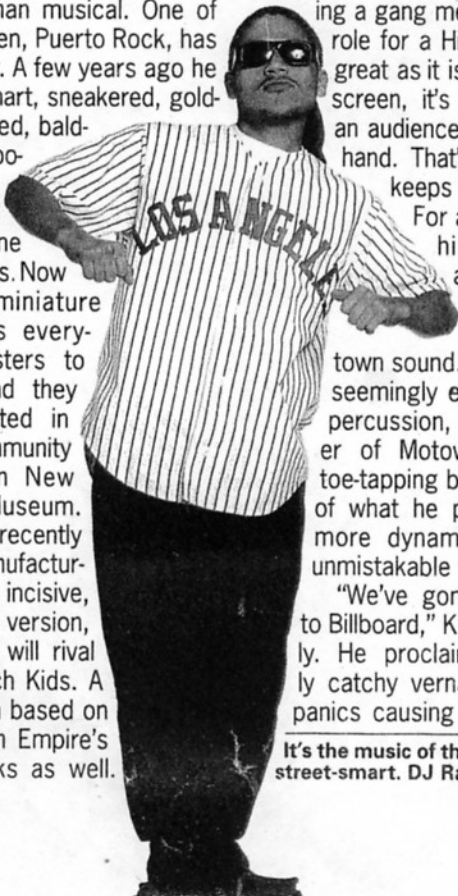
Although he's already something of a superstar, Gerardo's street dancing is what initially brought him to the attention of Hollywood producers. He had already starred in two smaller films when Dennis Hopper signed him to appear in the featured role of an East L.A. gang-banger in the director's controversial movie *Colors*, alongside Sean Penn and Robert Duvall.

Gerardo was a rapper before the film stints, and it was back to rap he went, even after his acclaimed performance earned him a number of starring-role offers—but always as an East L.A. gang-banger. "It was upsetting discovering how Hollywood really was." He continues, "I didn't feel that always being a gang member was the best role for a Hispanic. Besides, as great as it is to see yourself on screen, it's nothing like having an audience in the palm of your hand. That's the feeling that keeps me going."

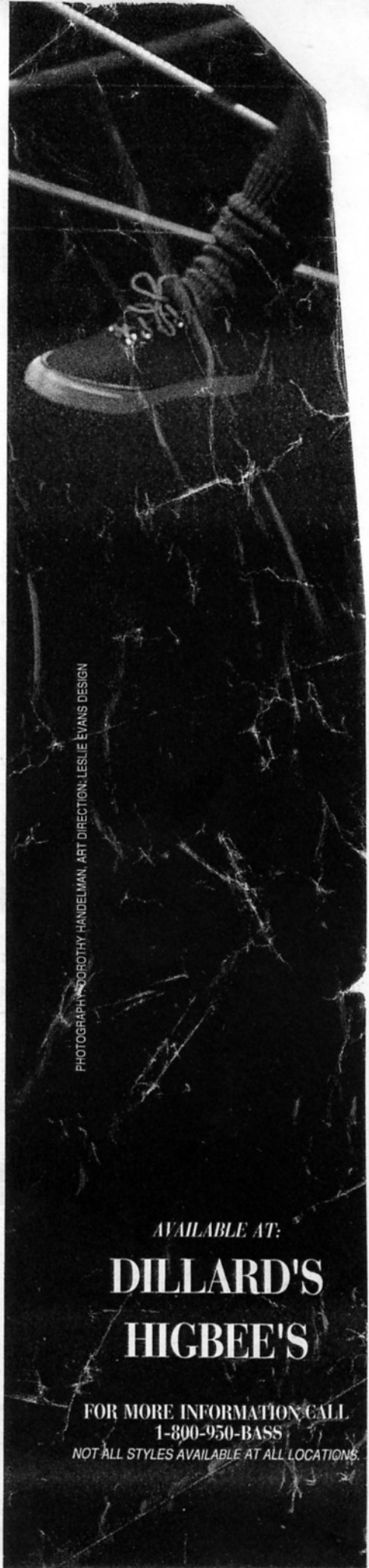
For all the choruses behind Gerardo's rap and for all the Spanish, *Mo' Ritmo* has a smooth Motown sound. Gerardo's got that seemingly effortless, elevating percussion, that baseline power of Motown, some serious toe-tapping beats, but with hints of what he promises are even more dynamic passions—that unmistakable Latin twist.

"We've gone from the barrio to Billboard," Kid Frost says proudly. He proclaims in his typically catchy vernacular: "We're Hispanics causing panic." □

It's the music of the street-tough and street-smart. DJ Ralph strikes the pose.



MARK HUSMANN



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