

New Nuyorican Poets, Voices and Sounds:

An Interview with Jaime Shaggy Flores

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Abstract

In this interview Jaime "Shaggy" Flores talks about recent changes within the Nuyorican poetry movement and the emergence of two new generations of poets over the last two decades. He discusses a number of issues including the ongoing "island" vs. "mainland" debate, the impact of music on both generations, race and class differences, and his own views about the place of Nuyorican poetry within the African diaspora and Black cultures of the United States.

New Nuyorican Poets, Voices and Sounds:

When Jaime Flores, aka Shaggy, enters a theater or performance space, he doesn't enter quietly but as a catalyzing burst of energy. Transforming the space with vibration, he glides down the central aisle delivering the simulated sounds of a human beat box, drawing the audience into an excited focus. Once on stage, he faces the crowd and gracefully pauses to find a breath before making his way through a verse from a traditional Yoruba Afro-Caribbean song: "Yemaya hace su, hace su Yemaya!" Hip Hop, African cultural traditions and a strong sense of performance indeed define Shaggy's poetic style, but his references are multiple, ranging from popular culture to spiritual rituals. Shaggy also plays on various poetic genres, including erotic and romantic poetry.

As one of the young up-and-coming poets who has worked to reinvigorate the Nuyorican poetry movement in recent years, Shaggy brings a scholarly attitude to what he refers to as cultural work. He sees poetry as a way to simultaneously inspire people and educate them. For him poetry is a vehicle to dismantle stereotypes and damaging myths and to share knowledge of music, Puerto Rican culture and traditions, urban culture, the political movements of the 60s and 70s, African cultural traditions and black history in the U.S. Shaggy's cultural work also involves organizing. He is the founder of the annual "Voices for the Voiceless" poetry concert, the "Urban Arts Project" and the Dark Souls Art Collective that serve as networks for African Diaspora artists. In the following interview, Shaggy discusses some of his views about the new generation of Nuyorican poets.

FF: Under the dynamism of poets Miguel Pinero, Sandra Maria Estevez, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Nicholasa Mohr, Louis Reyes Rivera and others, the Nuyorican Poets scene blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s. In the last decade the scene has been reinvigorated by a new generation of poets. What are some of the differences, the continuities and ruptures between these two generations?

JF: I always think of the movement in terms of three, even four generations. The first generation was transplanted from Puerto Rico to New York City. Julia de Burgos, Clara Lair, Clemente Soto Velez, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Jesus Colon, all came from Puerto Rico in the 30s, 40s and 50s and brought in traditional Puerto Rican styles, but also experimented with new emerging styles that were developing from the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movements. These poets started writing about their experiences living in New York City and in America. Of these, Julia Burgos was the most famous but not necessarily the best of the early Puerto Rican poets. Clemente Soto Velez and these poets were making a lot of moves in the poetry community and in the Puerto Rican scene in New York. This first generation of poets didn't refer to themselves as Nuyorican but as Puerto Ricans transplanted to New York. They were modern-day jibaros living in the tenements of a new land.

It was in the sixties that the term Nuyorican, which comes from the word Neo-Rican or New York Rican, meaning new-generation Rican or Rican from New York, emerged. Actually, at that time it was considered derogatory to call someone Nuyorican because basically it implied that the person wasn't Puerto Rican. This meaning was changed during the struggles of the sixties when first and second generation Puerto Ricans living in New York said "We are Nuyorican, we too are Puerto Rican and we are proud of it." This Nuyorican generation insisted on asserting their identity and they struggled with a

lot of identity issues particularly about race and where they fit into the Black and White debate. Through their poetry they were claiming "we are here... we will be heard" and "you have to respect our craft cause we'll do everything it takes to let our voices matter."

The third and fourth generations, which have emerged starting in the late 1980s and through to the present, have had to fight a different battle. We also struggled with the mainstream establishment, but also with the second generation of Nuyorican poets, who have not embraced the new generation. The new generation has basically had to be like the older, but a little harder. They've had to market themselves, and they've had to fight to get recognition, to get on the microphone, just to share their craft and their different style. They've faced the same struggle, but found different approaches to winning the battle and getting heard.

FF: What influences do the different generations share? How have the cultural and political influences shaping the poets changed?

JF: Poets from the Black Arts movements of the 60s and the Harlem Renaissance of the 20-40s influenced the original Nuyorican poets. Black poets and writers such as James Baldwin, Alice Childress, Amiri Baraka, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, the Last Poets, the Watts Prophets, Gil Scott Heron, John Oliver Killens and many more influenced the Nuyorican poetry movement in terms of subject matter and writing style. We, in turn, the new generation, have had similar types of literary influences such as writers like Louis Reyes Rivera, Abiodun Oyewole, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Quincy Troupe, Kalamu Ya Saalam, Sonia Sanchez, Piri Thomas, Ishmael Reed, Haki Madhubuti and others who pushed us to take our writing to new levels. Also, whereas the earlier generation drew mainly from musical styles like salsa, bugalu, jazz, cha cha cha, mambo and Latin Jazz, the new ones have drawn from Hip-Hop, House music, Drum and Bass and other forms of new technological black expression. We have the benefit that we have more futuristic influences because new things are always being created in the technological age. Yet, we understand that none of this is totally new. Old things are being re-made but the foundation of these expressions comes from African Diaspora cultural forms and have a foundation with the Drum. The living beat is at the center of the literary and musical expressions. That Drum is central to the understanding that the Nuyorican and African Diasporas all move to the same beat, a harmony that complements their existence.

FF: It is clear that Hip-Hop has had a great influence on the rhythms and style of your poetry. Say more about this influence of Hip-Hop on the new generation.

JF: Hip Hop is not just a musical form but an actual culture that was created by both Puerto Ricans and Black people living in the South Bronx during the late 60s and 70s. People always "leave out the Latino influence" like we weren't there, but in fact we were there from the very beginning. In fact, the great thing is that to this day the living epitome of Hip-Hop, the B-Boys, are still mostly Puerto Rican or Latino. But there were also DJs, graffiti writers and MCs that were Puerto Rican who should not be overlooked, folks like Charlie Chase, Julio, Lee Quinones, Jorge Fabel Pabon, Ken Swift and many others. So we've been a part of this developing Hip Hop culture since day one when both communities had to share the same ghettos. You have Hip-Hop godfathers like Afrika Bambaata who runs the Zulu Nation community youth organization. You look at his medallions that he wears and he has a medallion with the Puerto Rican flag. He's clearly not Puerto Rican, but he says it's all the same; he's part of the same African Diaspora that moves the Puerto Rican community. He's one of the founders of Hip-Hop culture and he acknowledges the Latino influence. But I think a lot of scholars and people in the hip-hop community tend to leave that influence out. Or they just focus on the rappers and leave out the rest of the components that fuel Hip-Hop culture. You can write all the books about Hip-Hop and Latinos that you like, but if the B-Boy (the moving poet of the culture) is missing then you have failed to see the bigger picture.

Hip-hop has a huge influence on the new generation because just like the old, they dance to the drum. The drum is our driving force. The Rumba drum might go: One, Two Three (pause) Four Five. This is the famous African clave which guides most Latin music. You might have those different styles of the clave from the Cha Cha Cha, Rumba, and Salsa. These are the same rhythms that drive the second generation yet the original foundation is present. Ours was a break beat, which is a variation of the Clave originated

by Hip-Hop founder and Jamaican Sound boy Kool Herc. Examples of this can be found in many of James Brown's Jazz, Funk break beats that can hit like: One, Two, Three, pause, Four, Five, Six, pause, One, repeat and then develops into a more continuous time; into a one two, one two, one, one two, one two, one. It's the same rhythm and it's also a reaffirmation of our cultural roots. Hip-hop was our way of defining ourselves and letting it be known that "we have also contributed to Black culture by creating new forms of music, new forms of dance, new forms of language."

FF: So, music has had a tremendous political force in that it has created unity. How would you describe this force? How does music work in a unifying way to draw people into politics and build a sense of collectivity?

JF: Music creates identity. It helps create an identity and it helps influence that identity. Take for example the documentary on the Younglords, entitled Pa'lante, Siempre Pa'lante, by Iris Morales. She catches a moment of history by using a soundtrack of music that brings you back to the turbulent 60s and 70s. You hear the singing: "que bonita bandera, que bonita bandera" and you see a Puerto Rican parade with thousands of Puerto Ricans singing the same song fifty million times. And you're sick of hearing it over and over again, but can't help to feel pride. That music and those poetic words build pride, bring together these different people and give them an identity. Songs like Ray Baretto's "Indestructible" in which you know that no matter what they throw at us, we will still keep moving forward no matter what. Then there's the food, THANK GOD FOR THE FOOD, which creates the atmosphere through smell and taste! So it's sort of like preparing for a war. It's like saying "this is who I am" and then when that music comes on you know it's going to be ON! Moments in time, like seeing and hearing Tito Puente playing the timbales, dropping classics such as "Oye como va", "Linda Chicana", "Ran Kan Kan", hit you in your heart. Then right after he passes away you have, "un Chicano", named Poncho Sanchez, doing Latin jazz and picking up right where Tito left off. Poncho Sanchez playing those congas like his life depended on each beat, following the tradition of Mongo Santa Maria, Patato, Candido, and Chano Pozo. It's a party; it's a mood, one of those things that you cannot take away from us, that will always be there. See, we could be broke, living in a plantation, and still break out that cuatro, break out those maracas, break out those congas and escape the misery of our surroundings. Music is a very strong factor in determining who we are and our place in the Universe. It's also a very spiritual force connected to paying respect to the dead and remembering them always so that we can learn from our history.

FF: Much of the new Nuyorican poetry continues to write about issues of race and against new forms of racism in the urban communities. Is there also a stronger embracing of Black identity by the new generation?

JF: To be honest, it depends on who you are talking about, what group in the Latino community, what group in the Nuyorican poet scene. Just like the debate between light skinned and dark skinned Blacks, Latinos don't want to deal with issues of race. They want to be the rainbow people and live in the middle or just blend into the white category. A few of us, and I mean a very few, are actually thinking and talking about issues of race. This minority of future academic scholars and poets are saying "yes we identify with the African Diaspora" or "yes we are black" or "better yet we are part of that African Diaspora that dances to the drum."

Much of the Latino community will acknowledge their African roots last. They'll say "yeah, I'm indigenous, yeah, I'm a little African, yeah I'm European, I'm a mixture of these three cultures" They describe this rainbow brown nation so as not to choose either Black or White in the race debate. Yet, when you go to the African-American community they'll tell you the same thing in terms of who they are culturally, "yes, I have some African roots, yes I have some European, yes I have some Indigenous roots through my Cherokee, Seminole or whatever tribes my family intermarried". Both groups describing the same three origins yet one wants to completely alienate themselves from the other. No one wants to be listed as Black because that's considered the oppressed, the lowest of the low according to racist America. Yet, I have yet to meet a scholar who can argue that these two groups are completely different from one another, that they are not the same. No matter how much racism exists between our communities, our shared history and culture binds us.

The new generation is quicker to go and perform in a black event, or in a black community showcase because sometimes that's the only market available to us, the only venue that is accepting of us as members of the same Diaspora. For example, at the 2000 and 2001 National Slam competitions, I was probably one of only two or three Latinos that actually performed in both the Afro-American showcase and the Latino showcase. I know where I belong. I know why I speak with a quick tongue and dance to a Drum. I know why I pay respect to the Santos in an ancient Lucumi African tongue. Yes, I am Boricua, I am Black, I am part of La Raza, a mixture of many but they all lead to the same place, the same foundation. Only a few of us understand this and are trying to get the academia behind these studies. By following in the steps of scholars like Arturo Schomburg and Louis Reyes Rivera we are pushing issues of race and identity.

FF: There has been a history of ongoing tension between island and mainland artists and scholars of Puerto Rican culture. Tell me more about the connections between Nuyoricans and Puerto Ricans. How have past hostilities been resolved? Or have they?

JF: That whole island versus mainland Puerto Rican issue still exists. We're still being told "You're Nuyorican, you're not Puerto Rican," what we (in the new generation) call "player-hating." When, in fact, a large part of our culture was not established in Puerto Rico. Our flag was made in New York City by Puerto Ricans who were in self-exile fighting for independence. The Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos, one of the largest institutions for Puerto Rican research, is based in Hunter College! There's a section of it in Puerto Rico, but the main one, the one that really has all the scholars and literature, is based in Nueva Yol! Even the Afro-American/Caribbean Cultural Institute, which was founded by famed Puerto Rican academic and founder of El Museo Del Barrio Martha Moreno Vega, is in New York City! Chicago and the mid-west have a whole other community of Puerto Rican activists and scholars doing great academic work! All these people, who supposedly are not considered Puerto Rican by elitist scholars from la Isla, are at the forefront of promoting Puerto Rican identity and political issues while living outside of the island. So the beef is still there but as more young Latinos move into the closed Puerto Rican academia, the less you will see this dynamic.

FF: The new generation of poets has a lot of new tools with which to express themselves and share their poetry with the world. How has the new generation promoted their poetry? How has the Internet galvanized the movement?

JF: A lot of new poets have learned that there's a business side to poetry, it's not just about sitting down and writing poems. You have to be able to express yourself in a way so that the mass marketer, the media, and also the community have access to it. You must accomplish this and at the same time keep a roof over your head so that you can stay alive long enough to share your craft. I think that economic survival is one of the biggest issues being dealt with by the new generation because unlike the previous generation we know that the revolution is not going to come any time soon. Early Nuyorican poets went through so much for us to be able to express ourselves today.

Yet many of our generation and future youth have become very materialistic. As a new generation you still have to be community oriented but come to a point where you understand that you better have your economics and your paper (money) in order. Through the Internet and desktop publishing we have been teaching the old dogs some new tricks and learning from them and their mistakes. This is one of the reasons why I started one of the only websites dedicated to Nuyorican poetry, www.nuyoricanpoetry.com and www.shaggyflores.com, to promote the movement and its writers over the Internet. In addition, I started my own independent publishing company, Dark Souls Press, using state of the art desktop publishing programs that weren't available to earlier Nuyorican writers. These tools allow us to reach a global audience in ways that weren't possible before.

FF: The term Nuyorican was specific to the New York urban scene but today we recognize that Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican culture is transplanted to cities throughout the country. How is the term Nuyorican being used today? Who are the new Nuyorican poets?

JF: Most of the Nuyorican poets come from urban areas, they've dealt with poverty or they've been

surrounded by adverse conditions most of their life. There are exceptions to this rule however. One of the things you have to understand is that when you get Nuyorican poets together in a room, you start talking about la musica, la salsa, growing up in the barrio, of your mom throwing chancletas and hitting you upside the head when you acted dumb, late night novella marathons, domino bravado, island independence politics and much more. We all have that in common, that urban, ghetto culture in addition to the Latino and Black cultures. So, most of us come from the same backgrounds.

To counter this tide of mainstream publishing, you have the New Generation of Nuyorican poets that are pushing the boundaries. These folks are writers like Tony Medina, Caridad De La Luz, Steven "Bonafide" Rojas, Mariposa, Emmanuel Xavier, Johanna Bermudez Ruiz, Flaco Navaja, Shaggy Flores, Hector Luis Rivera, Magda Martinez, Sandra Garcia Rivera, Willie Perdomo, Jane Alberdeston-Coralin, Flaco Navaja, Guy Lecharles Gonzalez, Aye De Leon, Hector Luis Rivera and many others who are the new and innovative voices in the Nuyorican movement. Writers who are establishing a literary cannon that is beyond the traditional belief that all things Nuyorican must come out of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York. The new generation sees the term Nuyorican on a larger scale that only has borders built in the minds of those that can't see that Nuyorican Puerto Ricans are a translocal nation (barrio) which can't be held down by a few scholars, publishers, nay Sayers, etc...

FF: The decade of the 90s was characterized by what the mass media often referred to as a "Latino explosion" that consisted, on the one hand, of a celebration of whitened Latino popular culture, and on the other of new expressions of Latino pride and the broadening of cultural spaces for the articulation of Latino experiences. What has been the effect of the "Latino explosion" on the Nuyorican scene?

JF: There are famous writers right now who have made a niche in the writing community by writing about the inner city. They appear in Time magazine and in all these articles as the Latino writers, but they make the people of the inner city sound like cartoon figures. So much in their book is negative, negative, negative, and there's no power in their characters. They describe a fantasy, an illusion of Barrio life and its inhabitants. So you can tell that they might have not lived in the barrio, but maybe they were watching what was happening from a near by window. But they were not participating in what was happening at that time, just observing and taking down notes. And that's very dangerous because white America will look at these Latino writers, publish them and say "that's the voice of the barrio, the voice of the ghetto." They become the "Milli Vinilli's" of the Nuyorican movement, Carbon Copy Clones of the real writers who are struggling to get their voices heard. The only way to curb this predicament is to publish more Nuyorican poets who are at the forefront of the movement and not necessarily the most famous or marketable.

FF: I'm thinking of your poems that make fun of Ricky Lake and the commodification of Latino culture. How has mass media affected the new generation?

JF: Corporate America takes Latinos and puts them in a little box and says "you too can have your own Latino" and it's all very exciting. In their eyes we are exotic, very sexual, sensual and very loud with bright colors to match. Corporate America promotes the worst stereotypes because they are limited in creating new ideas. You watch cable television shows like "Resurrection Boulevard," which was touted by Corporate American and many National Latino organizations because it has an all Latino cast, but then you watch the show and see that it's horrible. Not only is this show horrible, it creates more stereotypes. You see a character that is brought in for a few shows. He's this black man who falls in love with one of the women in the series, right? But, eventually she leaves because she's not in love with him; she's in love with her ex husband who is a Latino drunkard (another stereotype). So since she's not gonna be in love with a black man, they have to get rid of him, he's only there for a couple of shows. But then you see the dynamic develop even further because the father doesn't want him because he's black. It's almost like a repeat of the movie "Monsters Ball" in which all the black male characters have to die because they don't fit into the scheme of the stereotype. The worst stereotypes are put in shows and in movies because Hollywood and the industry is insane in the membrane. Let's look at a movie about Latinos in other countries, "Fidel." The characters are in Cuba, but they're speaking in English, but with an accent, but we know they're in Cuba, we know they're Latino, why the hell do you have to give them an accent? Then the

light skinned lady, the lady with the blonde hair, had a different accent than the rest of the characters, and her English was more refined. LOL! So the mass media does these little subtle things with Latinos. They put us out there and we become these characters...these very commercial characters. It's safe. But I mean, give me some substance to who I am. The last thing we need is to become disposable Latinos, "Look, look its Ricky Martin, he's so cute and we love him, but wait, he gets political and supports the struggle to liberate Vieques, and we don't love him anymore, he's too real not a character of fantasy anymore."

Nike and some other show companies got smart one time and they put the Puerto Rican flag on some sneakers. Man, they sold a whole bunch of those sneakers. Puerto Ricans are proud of their flag because for a long time you couldn't hold up your own flag. For a long time it was the revolutionary flag, the early independence flag. But the flag represents to us that we're here and we're being represented. People will buy cultural products. I know authors who've put the Puerto Rican flag on their book and people will buy it because it has the flag. It's the same thing with Chicano and Latino cultures. They have their icons like Zapata, Mil Mascaras, La Llorona, Che Guevara. Latinos put their icons out there and corporate America picks them up and redefines them and in the process they redefine Latinos. That's the danger. You have these kids growing up believing that being Latino lays in a Styrofoam container. It's disposable, it's quick. They don't get any substance because MTV is their God; BET is their holy trinity, Rap music is their soundtrack. No thinking or analyzing is done on their part to understand why they are given the quick and not the substance.

FF: In conclusion, what visions do you have for the Nuyorican scene? What issues and influences will shape the next generation of poets?

JF: I hope that more Nuyoricans begin to publish and promote their work on a larger scale. While a few of us are content with appearing on Def Poetry Jam in HBO or winning Slams, the real test of endurance for our movement will be the development of product. Creating materials that will stand the test of time such as books, CD's, posters and more that can be used to educate future generations of the importance of Nuyorican literature. That will be key. In addition, I hope that more young Nuyoricans are allowed into academia. Folks who will shake things up and create a forum where the Nuyorican movement can be studied as a whole and not just focus on one or two people who the academia deem the say all and be all to literature. Issues of racism, immigration of other Latino groups, identity issues, politics, youth development, gender studies, stereotypes and more will continue to be the issues at hand but you will see a bigger shift in terms of the performance aspect of the movement. More and more Nuyorican poets will be performers as well as writers. This is due to the increase of the spoken word and slam movements. Rather than see this as a negative, I respect the fact that by being able to do both, performing and writing, it will make the next generation a force to be reckoned with. The work of writers such as Steven Bonafide Rojas and his book *Pelo Bueno* or Tony Medina and his book *No Noose is Good Noose* will serve as templates for the next generation that is serious about pushing literary boundaries. By bridging the gaps between technology, literature, and performance, you will see a movement that is not just about moving art, but about history in the making.

Elegua

From the Book: *Sancocho - A Book Of Nuyorican Poetry*

Elegua
the small Black child
sitting at the crossroads
sending telegrams
to the forgotten
African gods
Twenty-one
different faces, yet
an Elegua is
an Elegua.
I saw one the other day
beautiful

heavy
with Cowrie shells
for eyes and three
cheek marks
on his face
Traditional
Yoruba fashion!
Small thing
spoken of like a
next door neighbor.
Elegua
brought over by Slaves
resurrected by people
who eat Rice and Beans
too much pernil!
Elegua
the living God
breathing, speaking
in the slums of Amerika.
Elegua
once something so real
but now I can buy one
in the Botanica down the street,
for 3 dollars and 50 cents.

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