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Time Was, the Bronx Was Burning With Music

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Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

Dr. Mark Naison speaks aboard the Bronx African-American Music Trolley.

The Bronx's night club scene once rivaled Manhattan's, with more than 200 colorful venues. Jams that defined the hip-hop movement were composed in the borough's school yards. South Bronx bands powered raucous block parties using electricity from street lamps.

Mark Naison sprinkled these facts about the borough's musical heritage—in between his own raps and digressions on street life—on a rambling trolley tour of the South Bronx Saturday, taking 35 passengers on a trip through the area's cultural history. They passed

Boston Road Ballroom, where Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk played, and noted the streets where Grandmaster Flash, one of hip-hop's early stars, first spun records.

"The greatest jazz club from the Bronx was four blocks from the Latin music club," said the 66-year-old Fordham University professor. "You had music everywhere, in the clubs, in the theaters, in the streets."

The occasional tours—given for a suggested donation of \$5—are part of an effort by Bronx artists, history buffs and a housing nonprofit organization to highlight the borough's cultural mojo. Clubs once dominated the streets in the 1950s and '60s, and doo wop, jazz, rap and Latin music have all been influenced by Bronx musicians.

But as the trolley rolled past corner bodegas and run-down buildings, there were few signs of that boisterous past. Ravaged by arson in the 1970s and a crack-cocaine epidemic in the 1980s that caused hundreds of thousands of residents to flee, the South Bronx is no longer a cradle for New York music or a gestation zone for aspiring artists. It remains plagued by social ills such as crime, obesity, poverty and teenage pregnancy at higher-than-average rates.

Mr. Naison, who studies the borough's musical heritage, and others in the community are trying to change that image, reminding people that the Bronx was once a cultural incubator.

"This is a neighborhood where many people call home who have no real understanding or memory of the good times that were here," said Nancy Biberman, director of WHEDco, a housing nonprofit organization that is among the leaders of the cultural effort. "This sort of stuff is a vicious cycle in a way, and unless you intervene and say, timeout, this isn't burning buildings and crime anymore, it doesn't change."

Carlton Collazo, a young Bronx native, is someone the group is trying to reach. He took the tour on Saturday and was surprised to learn a few things.

"I've been around these streets," Mr. Collazo said. "The generation of people my age doesn't know about this."

Bobby Sanabria, a seven-time, Grammy-nominated Latin jazz musician, lent his hand to the effort to revive memories of the Bronx's musical heritage.

"Several generations have grown up without any cultural references," Mr. Sanabria said. "These people are culturally unconscious. It's kind of a disease."

WHEDco has enlisted Mr. Sanabria and other musicians to stage frequent concerts, readings and art exhibitions at the 1,400-square-foot Bronx Music Heritage Center on

Louis Nine Boulevard. Musicians such as Mr. Sanabria and Will Calhoun, the drummer for rock band Living Colour, have performed and talked to school groups.

Mr. Calhoun, a Bronx native, recalled in an interview that playing old Bronx venues such as the Stardust Ballroom could be brutal. Impatient audiences would boo substandard performers. But those with talent were rewarded with tutelage from the greats.

"I felt like I was in Madison Square Garden," Mr. Calhoun said. "It was paradise playing uptown."

However, WHEDco has had trouble getting attention for some of its events, which haven't always been well attended. "If live music is going to grow in the Bronx, it will have to come from community groups," Mr. Naison said. "I don't see the private music clubs coming back."

The neighborhood has showed signs of gentrification, with a few hip restaurants and new apartment buildings cropping up. Buoyed by grants and private fundraising, WHEDco is planning a larger, 361,000-square-foot housing complex called Bronx Commons that will give preference to elderly musicians and provide a permanent home for the music heritage center.

The neighborhood trolley tours have been a hit. On Saturday, more than 70 people had signed up for 35 seats.

The tour is a showcase for the gregarious Mr. Naison, a white Park Slope resident who calls himself "Notorious Ph.D." and breaks into rap songs.

He asked tour-goers to sing along as he played tunes from musicians who grew up within 20 blocks of the tour, from Luther Vandross to Dizzy Gillespie to Mr. Sanabria himself. He told of dazzling evenings at the Blue Morocco and star-studded nights at the Hunts Point Palace. He pointed out the jazz joints where Donald Byrd played the trumpet, and Charlie Parker sang.

And Mr. Naison rapped, urging the crowd to sing along with a Grandmaster Flash song, before breaking into an original.

"I may be old, I may be white, but my flow is funky, and my rhymes are tight," he said.