

Circa 95: Getting to the roots, and birthplace, of hip-hop

Story and photos by Marisol Rodríguez
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The synergy between Bronx native Patty Dukes and Washington Heights native Reph Star sparked in 2007 over a 24-hour period during which they wrote and recorded a rap song that won Cuerveton National Contest for Urban Latino talent.

"That win gave us more confidence that we needed to work together, that there was something here," remembered Patty Dukes.

"Growing up in Washington Heights exposed me to the urban arts," explained Reph Star. "From b-boying on Broadway, to writing graffiti, to rapping in ciphers, my skills as an artist were developed and refined by these experiences."



Their most recent project is the Circa '95 Pop-Up Shop, opened on Fri., Apr. 13th at the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab (BMHC Lab) located near Freedman Street and Southern Boulevard.

At rented gallery spaces in Brooklyn and Manhattan, Patty Dukes and Rep Star created the pop-up shop three years ago as a space to sell clothing and artwork inspired by the hip-hop culture from their own Circa '95 line and of those of other artists.

With the support of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco), the two were able to bring the Circa '95 pop-shop to a store-front space of Intervale Green, an eco-friendly housing complex built by WHEDco with a rooftop organic garden.

According to Patty Dukes, who sits on the Advisory Board of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, WHEDco proposed the conversion of the space at Intervale Green as a temporary location for

the Bronx Music Heritage Center, which will officially open in 2015 in the Melrose section of the Bronx offering state of the art performance venues and recording facilities for local artists.

Additionally, the project will include affordable residences for low-income artists.

Patty Dukes and Reph Star have a four-month artist residency at the Bronx BMHC Lab, which they have converted to a colorful space, with graffiti murals by the likes of Fred Ones, Toofly and Space Craft 1 adorning the walls.

While the shop is a way the hip hop duo can offer an opportunity for local artists to make some money through the sale of their products, it is also a way of showing gratitude to their fellow artists who have contributed to their own artistic growth.

"What's better than to put on some of the people that have supported us and the work that we've done in our career and give them a chance to shine?" said Reph Star.

T-shirts designed by Dominican artist Tony Peralta and wall clocks made by Crosby, who has designed album covers for Swizz Beatz, are among the various items on sale.

More than just a shop, Circa '95 is also a community space where artists can build relationships with other artists through networking and collaboration.

"There are all kinds of artistically driven folks that really want a place to meet up and talk, engage and network," said Patty Dukes, who has witnessed a diverse group of artists visit the shop in just the first week, from cartoonists to photographers.

The community space aspect to the shop has resonated with one of the rap team's good friend Tori Harris, whose graffiti artwork is also on sale at the shop.

"It's a place where all sorts of artists can come out and express with each other, and with those who love art as well" said Harris. "It's a place of sharing, inspiration, community and fellowship."

Additionally, it's one of the few spaces of its kind in the Bronx, noted its creators.

"There aren't really any spaces in the Bronx where artist can come and say 'Hey, can we sell our stuff? Can we perform? Can we engage with this'," said Patty Dukes. "People know that hip hop started in the Bronx, but there really isn't a central location where it's being celebrated, so this is part of it."

In addition to hosting open mics and art exhibits, the space will also be used to provide workshops on healthy living called "The Uptown Wellness Series." Among the workshops will be one on organic beauty products and one on making healthy snacks.

Reph Star would like to see these types of mixed-use artistic spaces in communities all over the city as a way for "real people to connect on a real level."

"If we could have a space like this every ten blocks, that would be amazing," he said.

The name Circa '95 pays homage to 90s hip hop culture, which is an important era for both Patty Dukes and Rep Star. They used '95 because it's the middle of the decade and it's after the word Circa to imitate the tagging style of putting the number of your block at the end of your tag name.

Patty Dukes also connected the word Circa to Circulation and the nostalgia of looking through catalogues of cards to find books at the library, a place she enjoyed spending time at as a youth.

"It's about all that old stuff that people might not remember, but it's those little things that make up who we are," she said.

Four years following their collaboration on "Mi gente Latina" for Cuerveton, the duo released their first hip hop CD, "Free Lunch" on November 11, 2011.

The title "Free Lunch" speaks to their public school days, where getting free lunch represents that your family is low-income.

For Reph Star, getting free lunch at school was also about making something out of nothing. "They weren't the best lunches, but it's about getting that sustenance and that survival spirit that keeps you alive," he said.

"Free Lunch" also makes reference to the Free Breakfast/Lunch Programs revolutionary groups like the Black Panthers and Young Lords provided to youth and the self-determination of community groups to collectively solve their own problems, a quality Patty Dukes identifies with.

"We shouldn't be waiting for someone else to help us out," she said. "[Action] really should come from the community itself."

The songs on the CD are a mix of English and Spanish rap, produced by a variety of artists, including French-Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux.

The duo wanted to reflect the hip hop aesthetic, while also capturing the "dual psyche" of being Latinos, such as speaking English and Spanish and being from both the Caribbean countries of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, as well as from New York City.

For Patty Dukes, this Latino experience is not very often represented in mainstream hip hop. "A lot of times we don't get to see hip hop from a Latino perspective, other than reggaeton," she said.

Harris, known by his tag name Ignite, said he really enjoyed the album for its authentic hip hop sound.

"It's raw hip hop without the drugs, liquor and women dressed in bikinis," he said. "It's straight music and I love it."

One of the tracks on the album, "Black Suit" inspired Harris to create artwork which represents Patty Dukes and Reph Star as superheroes, an identity he gave them because of their community activism work and resiliency.

"One thing I get from both of them is never be afraid to express your art talent and whatever it is you want to do, go for it," said Harris.

For Reph Star and Patty Dukes, the increase of attention and wealth that may come with release of rap albums and running Circa '95, is not as important as maintaining their integrity.

"It's [about] how to make money and be successful and still be down to earth, representing our values in this world and not exploiting people," said Reph Star.

The next Open Mic Event at Circa '95 will be held on Friday, May 4th. For more information on Circa '95 visit www.circa95.com .