



## Salty Dog Blues at Bronx Lab

By Howard Giske

The showing of the documentary Salty Dog Blues, on minorities in the US Merchant Marine, illustrated an interesting piece of history of the Bronx and Puerto Rico, together with the opportunity at Bronx Lab to hear the producers of this film, and a historian of the Porto Rico Line. The National Maritime Union (NMU), formed in 1937, was racially integrated and helped many blacks and Puerto Ricans join the Merchant Marine. They served on ships that sailed to Puerto Rican ports and ports of the Eastern United States. Leaders of the NMU included Ferdinand Smith—a Jamaican. Blacks and Puerto Rican Merchant Marines appear in the film in photos and rare film footage.

After World War II, the NMU came under attack as infiltrated by the Communist Party. Ferdinand Smith was declared an undesirable person, and sent back to his native island of Jamaica. In the early 1970s, the US cut off subsidies to American-flagged shipping, and many US ships went out of service and Merchant Marine members lost their jobs. By 2001, the NMU merged with the Seafarers' International Union (SIU) and disappeared.

Until the airplane flights of the 1950s, the only way to come to the United States from Puerto Rico was by boat. Puerto Rico had become a U.S. territory after the Spanish-American War, and the US declared Puerto Ricans as citizens in 1917. Members of the NMU also sailed ships during World War II, some of which were sunk by German U-boats.

The film highlights the plight of elderly Puerto Rican members of the NMU who lost most of their pensions after the merger of the

NMU with the other union. These retired people got only a pension of \$250 a month that did not rise with the cost of living.

A historian and collector of memorabilia, Ralph Mendez, spoke after the film about the Porto Rico Line, active between 1880 and 1940. In the beginning, the Porto Rico Line brought sugar, coffee and tobacco to the US. When the US took over Puerto Rico, people started to come to the US, and Americans came to Puerto Rico by ship for tourism. Brooklyn became a sort of Plymouth Rock for Puerto Ricans, as large numbers sailed to piers there. Many first moved to the Red Hook area of Brooklyn.

The film producers, Alfred Santana and Denise Belen-Santiago, worked on this film for over 9 years, traveling numerous times to Puerto Rico. Denise has a long term interest in the NMU because her father was a Merchant Marine, and Denise had worked on an oral history of the NMU. Another area of interest was the Puerto Rican soldiers and musicians recruited to the US Army during World War I. Some of these joined the 390th National Guard unit. The US Army recruited musicians to the unit, later known as the Harlem Hellfighters. These men had to fight in French army uniforms because at first US General Pershing would not allow non-whites to fight on the front line. Later, these men show up in the jazz bands of New York. For more Bronx Lab programs at 1303 Louis Nine Blvd, see <http://bronxmusic.org>.

Photos 1. MC -Elena Martinez, Ralph Mendez, Denis Belen-Santiago., Alfred Santana. 2, 3 Memorabilia from Shipping Lines.



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