

The New York Times

Under the Tracks, a Kiosk With a Bronx Beat

By WINNIE HU JULY 25, 2014

Jazz and mambo flowed along a stretch of the Bronx in the 1940s and for years after. Lined with nightclubs, theaters and catering halls, Southern Boulevard was a musician's playground.

This summer, music is back on the street.

An open-air sound booth beneath the elevated Freeman Street station on the 2 and

5 lines is playing songs around the clock by musicians with a Bronx connection, including

Bobby Sanabria, Rebel Diaz, Willie Rodriguez, Will Calhoun, Ilu Aye and Circa '95. The installation, called the Boogie Down Booth, will run until September and is intended as much as a tribute to the borough's rich musical history as a respite for commuters and residents in a noisy streetscape.

"It definitely brings people around," said Talik Reed, 24, an airport security guard, who stopped to listen to salsa against a backdrop of rumbling trains one evening last week. "They may have to turn it up a little, but I think it's perfect."

The booth is part of an initiative by the city's Department of Transportation; the Design Trust for Public Space, a nonprofit organization that helped restore the High Line; and community groups, including the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, or Whedco, in the Bronx. The initiative,

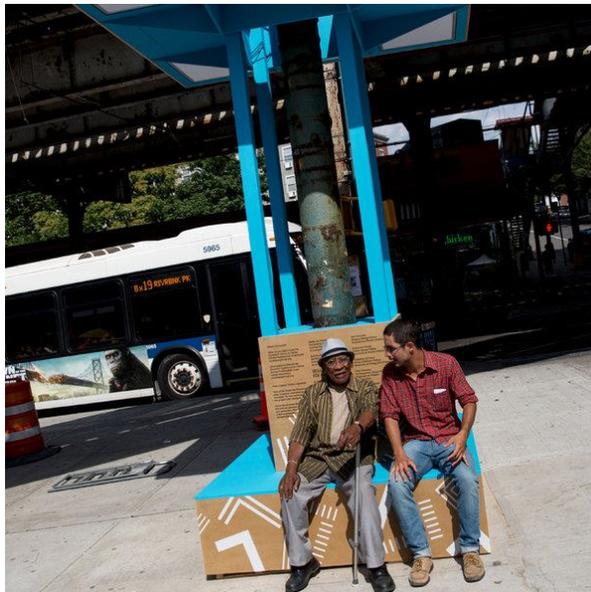


An open-air sound booth beneath the elevated Freeman Street station on the 2 and 5 lines features songs by musicians with a Bronx connection. Andrew Renneisen/The New York Times

“Under the Elevated: Reclaiming Space, Connecting Communities,” focuses on underused public areas below more than 700 miles of highways, bridges and train tracks. It is being financed with about \$200,000 in government money, foundation grants and donations.

“We’re finding ways to reimagine the uses for these spaces,” said Susan Chin, executive director of the Design Trust. “People think of them as being very loud and not pleasant to be in, so how do you improve this kind of space?”

The Design Trust selected five people with expertise in landscape architecture, graphic design and urban policy to work with community groups to create prototypes of installations. The first one, which ran from April to July, was a kiosk under the Manhattan Bridge in Chinatown that invited residents to post events and comments to a community calendar and blackboard. Other sites that are being considered include areas below the Van Wyck Expressway in Queens and the Gowanus Expressway in Brooklyn, and the Manhattan and Queens landings of the Queensboro Bridge.



The installation, called Boogie Down Booth, is intended to both improve the space and be a tribute to Bronx’s rich musical history. Credit Andrew Renneisen/The New York Times

Neil Gagliardi, director of urban design for the Transportation Department, said there had been other efforts to address these underused spaces, but this initiative was the first comprehensive, citywide approach. He said he saw it as a way to potentially add to the city’s growing inventory of street amenities — including bus shelters, newsstands and bike racks — with a goal of “making hospitable streetscapes for a diverse population.”

“We want to expand our efforts, and really learn from these installations what’s possible, what works, and what doesn’t, and develop a tool kit that we can use elsewhere,” he added.

The turquoise-blue sound booth in the Bronx, which cost about \$18,000, sits below the elevated station on a wide commercial strip dotted with bodegas, takeout restaurants and a laundromat. It provides bench seating around a rusted pole, underneath speakers and LED lights powered by solar panels.

The booth is decorated with the names of Bronx artists: Thelonious Monk, DJ Kool Herc and the Chantels.

The booth continuously cycles through a playlist of 18 songs selected from the archives of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, a performance and community space that is part of Whedco. The songs are by artists who have performed at the center within the past 18 months, or who are on the center’s advisory board, said Elena Martínez, the co-artistic director of the center along with Mr. Sanabria.

“It’s something different,” Tyre George, 30, a post office clerk, said as he took a seat on the bench to wait for the Bx19 bus. “I’m glad to see new and fun stuff around.”

Fred Negron, 49, an auto mechanic on disability, said the booth transformed what had been an ugly, dark corner in his neighborhood into a place where he could come and hang out. "It's like 200 percent better," he said. "I'm sitting here today and enjoying the music. If I come in two months and it's gone, that will make me cry."

Though the booth under the Freeman station will close at the end of the summer, there are already plans to replicate it in at least two other locations. Kerry McLean, director of community development for Whedco, said her group had secured about \$100,000 in grants to create booths and related programs on Southern Boulevard and at an affordable housing complex, under construction in nearby Melrose, that will house the Bronx Music Heritage Center and include dedicated apartments for older Bronx musicians and artists.

Mr. Sanabria, who was checking out the booth on Thursday, waved over two young men who were walking by. Together, they listened to salsa on the sidewalk. "There's going to be rap and pop and everything," Mr. Sanabria told the men. "Instead of just sitting here and hearing the sirens, you'll be able to hear great music from people born and raised in the Bronx."

Afterward, Mr. Sanabria noted that he often had to explain the Bronx's musical contributions to those who did not know about them, including young people, immigrants and those from outside the borough.

Now, he said, he is simply going to tell them, "Go to the Freeman Street subway stop, walk down the stairs and you'll hear what came out of the Bronx."

A version of this article appears in print on July 26, 2014, on page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: Under the Tracks, a Kiosk With a Bronx Beat