



Inspiration, Collaboration and the Power of Music

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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Inspiration sometimes comes when you're not looking for it, and I've learned that it can helpfully transform into intuition. I was thinking recently about what music to download from iTunes, and thought, why not go back to my youth and to the music that helped shape me? I went from Santana to Cat Stevens, Malo to Nina Simone, the Beatles to the Fania All Stars, etc. Suddenly, [Joe Bataan](#) popped into my head, and a near-instant correlation emerged between prioritizing Joe Bataan and a new initiative of the [Smithsonian's Latino Center](#) and [Asian Pacific American Program](#) exploring historical confluences and collisions between this country's two fastest growing populations, a historical trajectory that takes us from Spanish Colonial trans-Pacific trade routes (the Manila Galleons) to Chicano-Filipino Hip-Hop crews in Los Angeles. Joe Bataan fits somewhere in the middle.



I imagine that some readers are scratching their heads: Joe Bataan, who's he? Born Bataan Nitollano to a Filipino father and African American mother, Joe survived the rough and tumble streets of New York City's East Harlem to become the King of Latin Soul, a genre that bridges Salsa, Soul, Doo-Wop, Boogaloo, Disco and Funk. When asked to describe himself, Bataan will say that he is Afro-Filipino by birth and culturally Puerto Rican. Think about that for a second. I think it's fair to say that Latin Soul could only have developed in New York, where its inbred multicultural mix aligned perfectly with the political and social fervor of the late '60s and '70s. Much of Joe's music is a reflection on his own cultural milieu, as in "Mestizo." As a Chicano, I find it remarkable that Joe has taken care to learn about other Latino communities. In his song, "Chicana Lady," which he recorded with The Raza All-Stars, he references Chicano Park, a community space in San Diego's Logan Heights neighborhood that stands as a lasting symbol to Chicano community struggle. He comments on the limitations of racialized social class in "Ordinary Guy," which he later converts into a great cha-cha, "Muchacho Ordinario." In "Peace, Friendship, Solidarity," he yearns, pleads for cross-ethnic unity. Not surprisingly, he composes and sings beautifully in English and Spanish, and will often mix the two in the same song. And, boy, can one move to his music... in all kinds of ways.

I think of Joe Bataan as a bridge. This is the compelling concept that we will focus on as we plan to bring Joe to Washington in October. During a public program we will welcome former members of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers, and other activists who will help place Joe and his music in its appropriate socio-political-cultural context. Understanding multiculturalism in this country is a layering process. Since we began conceptualizing this program with our Asian American friends, colleagues from the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) and [National Portrait Gallery](#) have shown interest and joined the collaboration. It turns out that building bridges is still important today. I'm sure Joe couldn't agree more.