

Latin Music and Puerto Rican Migration to New York City

Est. Time: 60-90 minutes

Subjects: History, Social Studies, General Music

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★

What is the history behind Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, and how did Puerto Rican migration affect American Popular Music?

In this lesson you will:

- Trace history of U.S. relations with Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 19th and early 20th centuries
- Discover the economic situation that encouraged Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. during the 1940s and 1950s
- Recognize the importance of New York's *El Barrio* ("The Neighborhood") in influencing New York City culture
- List to the music of Rafael Hernández, Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, and Frank "Machito" Grillo



Watch the video [“Lamento Borincano” by PJ Sin Suela and Kristal Fonrodona.](#)

About the musicians: PJ Sin Suela is a Bronx-Born Puerto Rican musician who has worked with Bad Bunny and Ñejo; Kristal Fonrodona is a Puerto Rico singer who has worked in musical theater and pop music

Consider or ask a partner:

- Based on what you see in the video, what might this song be about?

[Read the lyrics](#) to “Lamento Borincano” in Spanish or English.

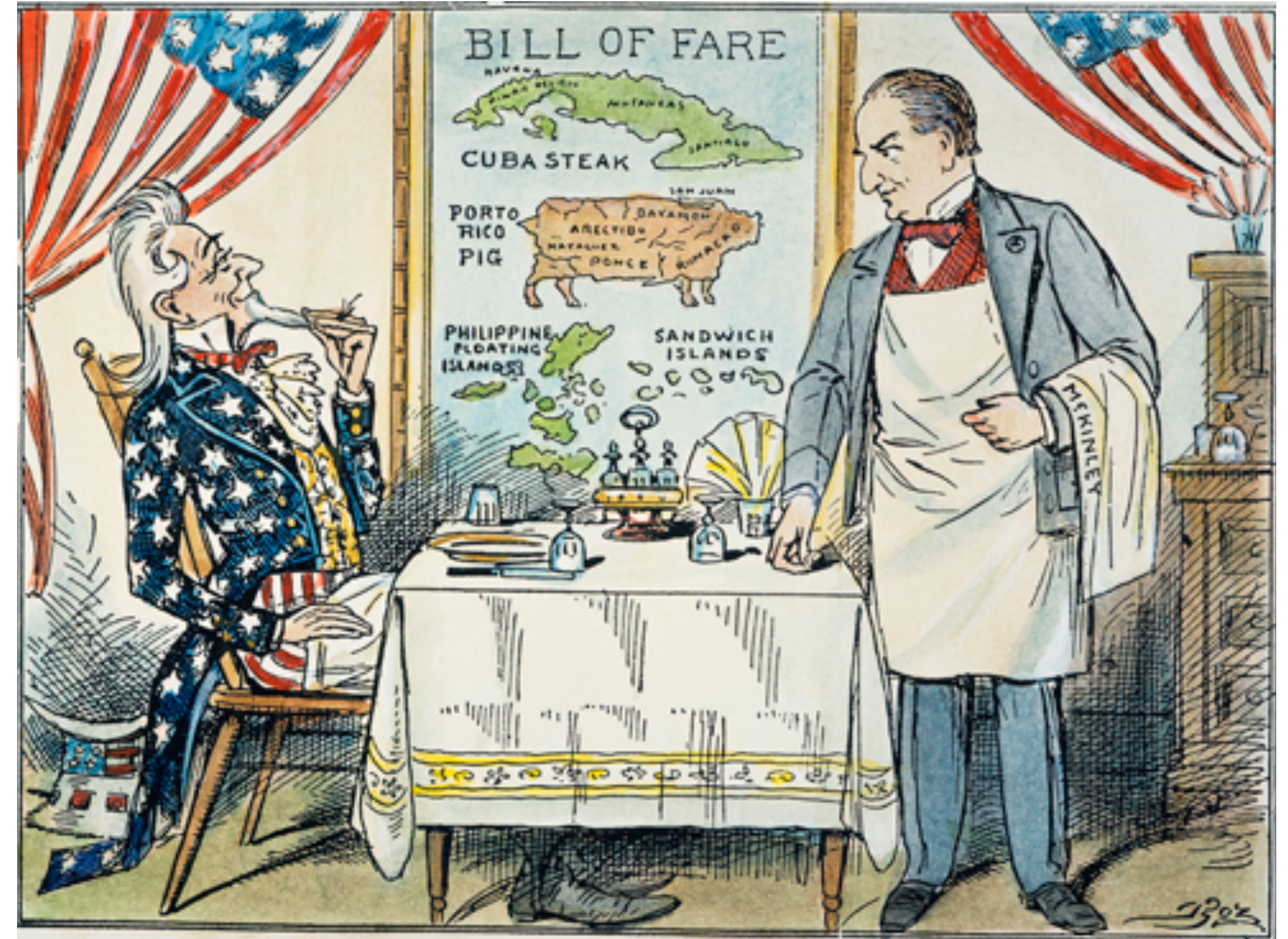
Vocabulary: “Borinquén” is the indigenous Taíno name for the island of Puerto Rico.

Consider or ask a partner:

- What story is being told in this song? Who might be the main character?
- What is a lament? What might Rafael Hernández be lamenting in this song?
- Hernández wrote this song while in New York City. How might have that inspired the lyrics to this song?

The issues addressed in “Lamento Borincano” relate to the historical relations between the U.S. Government and Puerto Rico.

Watch [this video](#) on the history of Puerto Rico, and use [this graphic organizer](#) to take notes on the important events and policies addressed in the video.

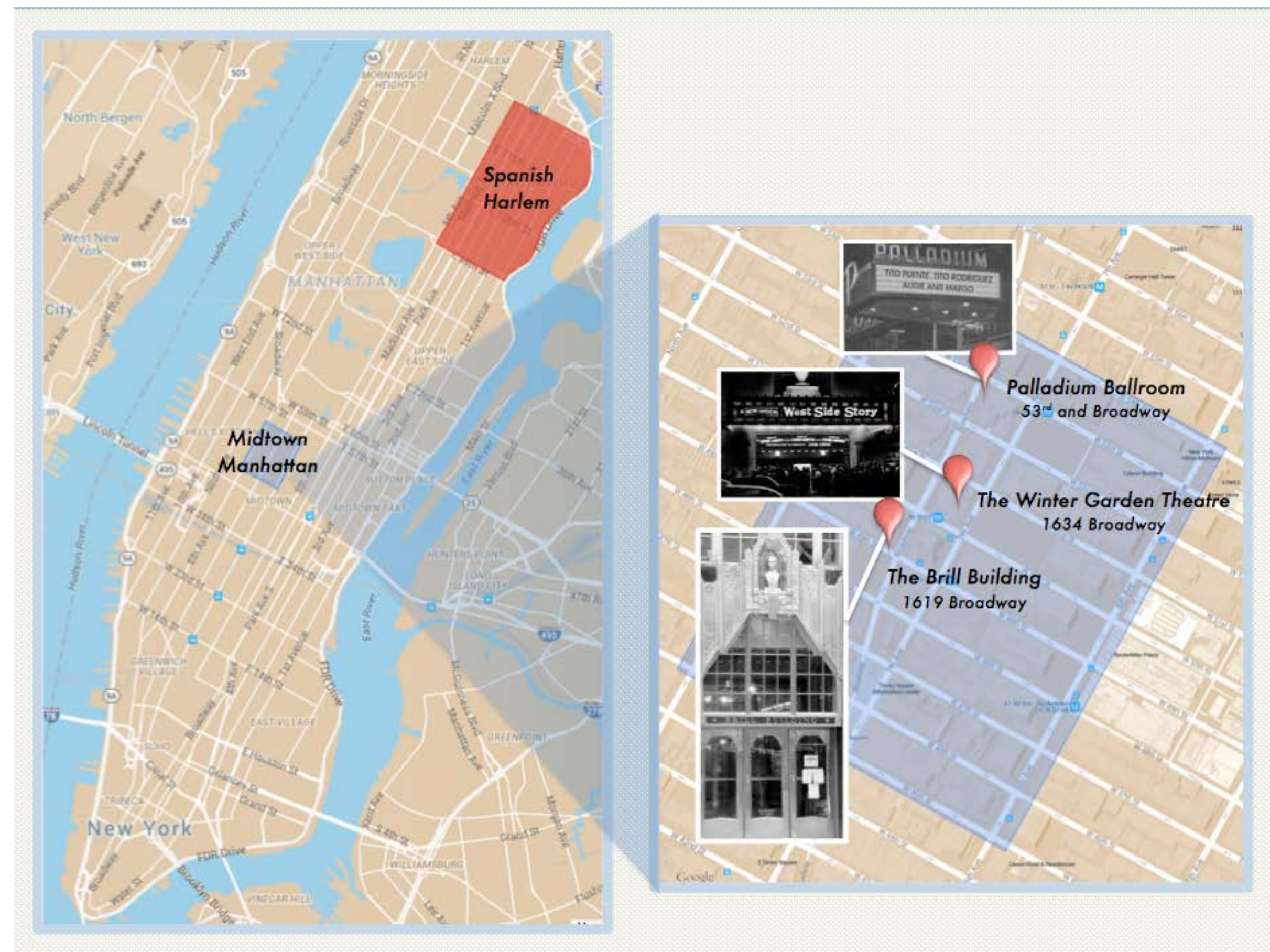


The majority of Puerto Rican migrants to the United States settled in New York City - specifically the area of Spanish Harlem, located in northeast Manhattan.

Spanish Harlem became known as “El Barrio,” or “The Neighborhood,” and was a site of Spanish Caribbean culture in the city.

Watch [this video](#) to hear some of the music migrants in Spanish Harlem may have been listening to in the 1940s and 1950s.

Does any of it sound familiar to you?



While many migrants from the Caribbean lived in Spanish Harlem, Midtown Manhattan was one of the central sites for music and entertainment in New York City.

Soon, musicians such as Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, and Frank “Machito” Grillo began performing Latin music in large dancehalls like the Palladium Ballroom, in Midtown Manhattan.

Listen to some of the music produced by these musicians in [this video](#).

How is this music different from what you heard in the previous slide?

In addition to Latin Music, Big Band music was very popular in the 1940s and 1950s in New York City and throughout the United States.

Watch [this video](#) of Machito and Jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie's bands.

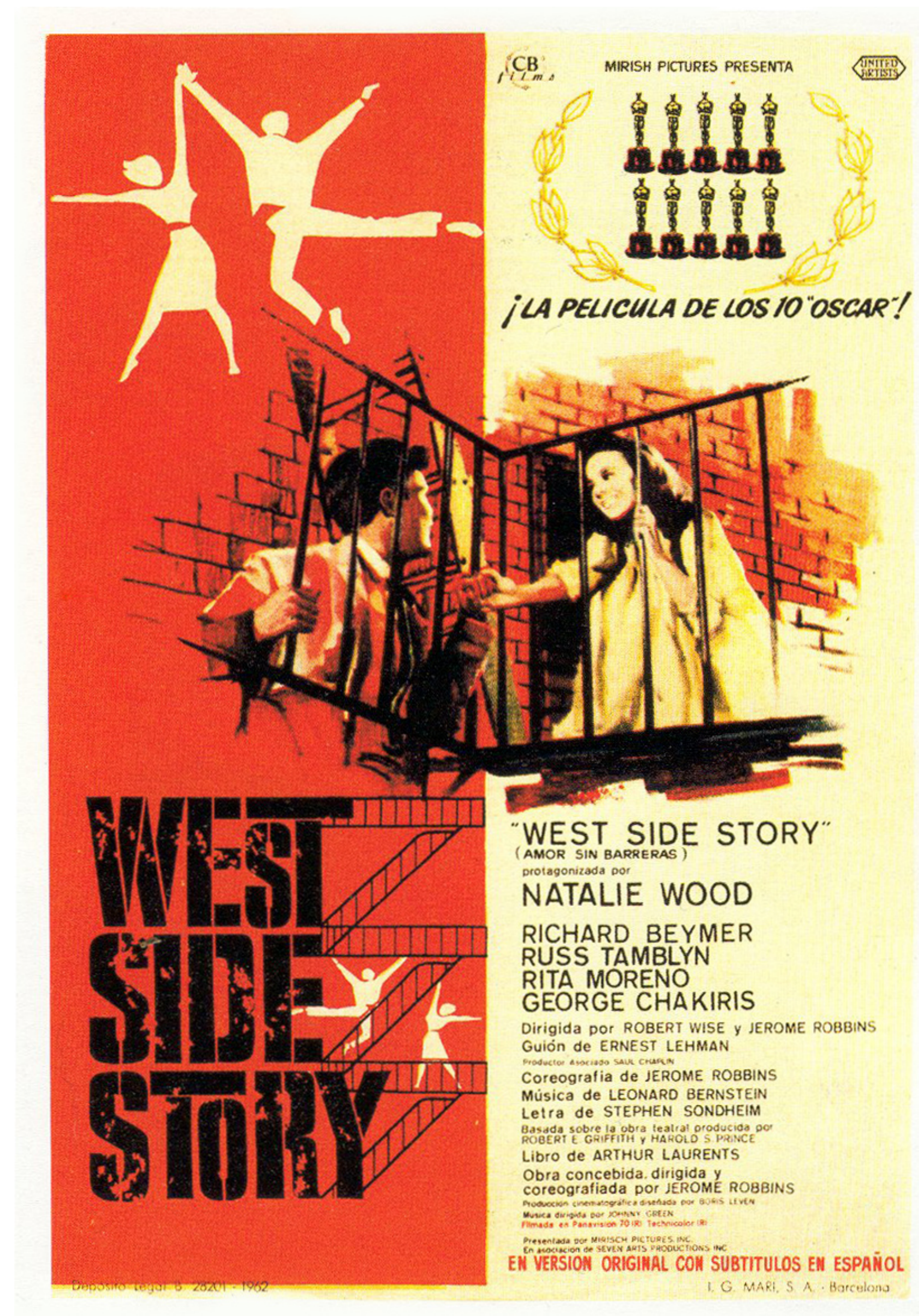
Consider or ask a partner:

- What similarities do you notice between the two bands in the photograph? Any differences?
- What similarities did you notice in the way the two bands sounded? Any differences?
- Why might Machito have created a Big Band similar to Gillespie's?
- Ballrooms where Machito played, such as the Palladium, were known for dancing. Why might having more musicians be helpful when playing in large ballrooms?

Midtown Manhattan was also the center of plays and musicals.

West Side Story is a musical created by Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and Harold Prince. The story of the music is largely based around the cultural and social effects of Puerto Rican migration to New York City. It debuted in 1957, became a movie in 1961, and then again in 2021.

As a successful musical and movie, *West Side Story* spread awareness of Puerto Rican culture throughout America.



SUMMARY

- Puerto Rican migration to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s was a result of economic conditions set into motion by U.S.-Puerto Rican relations going back to the late 1800s
- Puerto Rican migrants arrived in large numbers to New York City, and many resided in the northeastern area of Manhattan known as Spanish Harlem or *El Barrio* (“The Neighborhood”)
- Musicians Rafael Hernández, Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, and Frank “Machito” Grillo were Spanish Caribbean musicians who helped bring Latin Music into American consciousness, in part by adding Latin Influences to popular Big Band music
- The musical and later films *West Side Story* helped spread Latin Culture and music across the United States

BE CREATIVE

Create a timeline of events that led to Latin Music's popularity in the United States using [this handout](#). (Hint: use the graphic organizer you filled out for guidance.)

BE CURIOUS

Listen to the musicians featured in this lesson in [this YouTube playlist](#).

Research the career of Dizzy Gillespie and consider the following questions:

- What evidence can you find that indicates he was influenced by Latin American music?
- How might he have been inspired by artists such as Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodriguez?
- What work did he produce that reflected this inspiration?

Write a one-page response, citing examples from the lesson and your research.

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