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Paterson students write, film music video that celebrates Silk City

2-minute read

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PATERSON — The young musicians at the Paterson Music Project took on an interesting assignment: composing a song that captured the city's cultural diversity.

The nonprofit program, in collaboration with Rosa L. Parks School of Fine & Performing Arts, released “Life in the Silk City” in September. The project took a year to complete.

The students had a hand in all aspects of its creation: songwriting, composition and the sound-studio recording. The themes of the lyrics, written in three languages, were celebrating diversity, taking pride in Paterson and hoping for a better future.

“The diversity that you find in the songs reflects real life when you’re in the Silk City,” said Sam Tobias, jazz program coordinator at the music project.

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The song fuses different genres of music, including reggaeton, salsa, dembow, jazz and other Afro-Latin influences that reflect the heritage of its students. In the video, students wearing colorful jerseys wave flags from the Dominican Republic and Mexico and dance salsa and cumbia.

“The special thing about this music that we played is that it came from the students,” said Sebastian Chang, a 16-year-old percussionist. “If you listen to the

video, there's at least one piece that each student gave to make the song come to life."

Chang said his contribution to the song was the batá drums, a type of percussive instrument found in Cuba, home to some of his ancestors.

"It allowed me have a voice in the piece," Chang said.

Features Paterson's mills, Hinchliffe, Great Falls

The film locations play an important part of the music video's storytelling, beginning against the redbrick backdrop of the historic mills, then moving on to Hinchliffe Stadium and the Great Falls.

Near the 5-minute mark, the camera pans across the inside of a taqueria called La Morenita.

Meilynn Perez De Dios, a 16-year-old flutist, said filming there was her suggestion because it's one of her favorite restaurants — and one of her family members works there.

"We've performed on stage and on Zoom calls," said Perez De Dios, whose 9-year-old brother, Sebastian, also participated in the music video. "But making a video — I've never done that."

From many voices, one message

Tobias said he was inspired by Franklin Willis' creation of an award-winning original song as a music teacher with the Metro Nashville Public Schools.

"This was an exercise in musical democracy," Tobias said. "The students managed to make one cohesive message from all of those different inputs, and that's one of the powerful things about this project."

He said this project marks a new foray in the school's offerings.

In the 13 years of its existence, classes tended to focus on music performance. This school year, the Paterson Music Project introduced songwriting classes. But after learning that two of his past students went on to work in production, Tobias said he wanted to give students a chance to learn other career paths in the music industry.

The music was recorded in the sound studio at William Paterson University, which has a sound-engineering program.

“The students loved working on it so I’m sure it won’t be the last time we do this,” Tobias said.

The video can be viewed on YouTube.