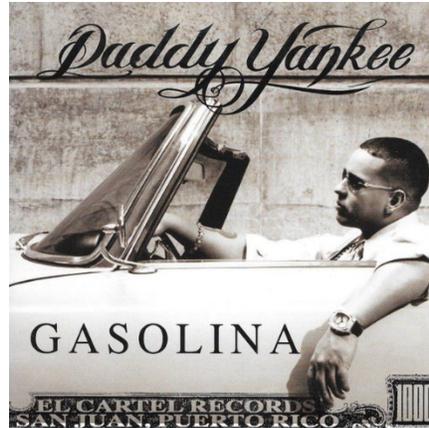


# “Gasolina”—Daddy Yankee (2004)

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Essay by Petra Rivera-Rideau (guest post)\*



In 2004, it seemed you couldn't go anywhere without hearing Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina." It starts with rapid, syncopated notes of a synthesizer punctuated by energetic shouts of "oooh!" and motorcycles revving up. Finally, Yankee declares: "Who's this? Dad! Eeee! Yank! Eeey!" And then boom-ch-boom-chick, the characteristic dembow beat of reggaetón drops and the song takes off.

On the surface, "Gasolina" is a bit silly--a thinly-veiled double entendre that Daddy Yankee once joked was literally about gasoline and energy policy. The chorus goes back and forth between Yankee, who says "a ella le gusta gasolina" ["she likes gasoline"], and Glory (the woman behind many of reggaetón's mid-2000s female background vocals) responding, "dame más gasolina" ["give me more gasoline"]. The chorus is catchy, and easy to belt out regardless of one's Spanish proficiency. "Gasolina" is a party anthem, but it is also much more. "Gasolina" fueled reggaetón's global rise, and laid the groundwork for the explosion of the genre on a global level.

Daddy Yankee was born Raymond Ayala in 1977 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He grew up in a *caserío*, or public housing development, called Villa Kennedy. Growing up, Daddy Yankee dreamed of making it in Major League Baseball, but these dreams were curtailed when, as an innocent bystander, he was accidentally struck by a stray bullet in a gunfight in his neighborhood. *Caseríos*, like Villa Kennedy, could be rough. Economic decline and the growth of the informal economy led to increased crime rates on the island from the 1970s through the 1990s. Despite the reality that crime and drug use crossed class and residential lines, the Puerto Rican government increasingly blamed *caserío* residents for perpetuating violence and drug trafficking. Then, in 1993, Puerto Rican governor Pedro Rosselló launched the *Mano Dura* campaign to eliminate violent crime. They focused their efforts on *caseríos*, at one point employing the US National Guard to join Puerto Rican police for a military-style occupation of these neighborhoods. *Mano Dura* lasted from approximately 1993-2000. While the initiative had mixed results in terms of curbing crime, it did ultimately reinforce racist and classist stereotypes of *caserío* residents.

Supporters of the *Mano Dura* campaign accused the musical style known as “underground”-- the precursor to reggaetón--of promoting this violence. Underground developed in the early 1990s when Puerto Rican DJs, like DJ Negro and DJ Playero, combined sounds from US hip-hop, Jamaican dancehall, and Panamanian reggae *en español* with their own sensibilities to create a new genre of music. DJs would have a crew of rappers who would emcee over their beats on mixtapes and for live performances at neighborhood parties and nightclubs like San Juan’s the Noise. The majority of songs were party songs, but they also addressed the problems that artists witnessed in their everyday lives, including poverty, racism, violence, and police brutality. Underground exposed the systemic inequality that adversely impacted *caserío* residents, directly calling out the hypocrisy of a government that targeted them when many officials themselves were caught in corruption scandals.

Daddy Yankee got his start as a rapper in the underground scene in 1995. He performed with DJ Playero, one of the most important pioneers of underground. Yankee’s style combined the rapid-style vocals he would later use in “Gasolina” interspersed with Caribbean dancehall-style flows. By the mid-1990s, underground became more established, shifting to what we now know as reggaetón. Artists began recording their own albums and selling them in record stores. Daddy Yankee was frustrated with the lack of support from record companies who repeatedly dismissed reggaetón due to their biases against the music and the communities from which it came. And so, Daddy Yankee created his own label, El Cartel Records, which gave him full creative control over his artistry. He has remained an independent artist throughout his career.

Daddy Yankee wrote “Gasolina” with fellow reggaetón star Eddie Dee and reggaetón phenom producers Lunny Tunes. “Gasolina’s” sound, with its dramatic beat drops, syncopated synths, and sing-songy break, became characteristic of the mid-2000s reggaetón. In fact, “Gasolina” not only thrust Daddy Yankee into the global spotlight, but arguably made Lunny Tunes the most important architects of the reggaetón sound. Their numerous hits dominated Latin airwaves throughout the mid-2000s, thus laying the groundwork for how reggaetón, and arguably Latin pop, would sound for decades to come. “Barrio Fino” debuted at number one on “Billboard’s” Hot Latin chart. Although “Gasolina” never made it to number one, the song charted on “Billboard” Hot 100 at number 32, indicating its mainstream appeal outside of Spanish-language audiences.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of “Gasolina” to the development of reggaetón. “Gasolina” took the genre to new markets far beyond Puerto Rico or even Latin America. By the end of 2004, “Gasolina” was on regular rotation at major US hip-hop and pop radio stations, and its music video appeared regularly on MTV, BET, and other US English-language channels. This was no small feat. Spanish-language songs have rarely made it into the US mainstream, let alone a song from an independent artist of what had been a heavily stigmatized genre. Outside of the United States, “Gasolina” charted in countries such as Ireland, Switzerland, Australia, and even went platinum in Japan. Over time, “Gasolina” has been recognized as one of the best songs of the decade, and even made it onto “Rolling Stone’s” list of best songs of all time in 2021.

With “Gasolina,” Daddy Yankee brought reggaetón into the global spotlight. Now, not quite 20 years later, the sounds of reggaetón have come to dominate Latin music. In 2023, Spanish-

language reggaetón artists like Bad Bunny and Karol G released albums that debuted at number one on the “Billboard” 200 chart--the first and second Spanish albums to do so, respectively, of any Latin music genre in history. Reggaetón has also made significant inroads into US pop music, with artists like Justin Bieber and Ed Sheeran releasing songs with a dembow beat, or bilingual remixes of their hits. “Gasolina” is the song that made it all possible--it is the song that transformed reggaetón into a truly global sound while maintaining the genre’s connections to its roots.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.