Haaren: The High School on San Juan Hill

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Success in college would not have been possible for me without the preparation that I received from my teachers at Haaren High School. The school was located on the very top of a rise in a neighborhood that has been historically known as San Juan Hill. The building still stands and is physically situated on Tenth/Amsterdam Avenue and 59th Street in Manhattan and seemed to mark the start of the celebrated neighborhood.

I travelled to Haaren from the Lower East Side with two neighbors who lived in my building in the Jacob Riis Houses. One was José Perlón who was Puerto Rican. My other travel-mate was Arthur Burnside who was African-American. Haaren was a boys-only school. We travelled to the school most often by bus; the M14. We boarded the bus at 6th Street and Avenue D (an area now-known as Alphabet City). The bus would travel north, then west on 14th Street where it would leave us at the Meat-Packing District near 10th Avenue. We caught the M11, a second bus, in front of the legendary Old Homestead Steak House. That bus would travel through the Chelsea neighborhood, skirt the Times-Square area, and then ran through Hell’s Kitchen where it began the slow climb passed the vinyl-record wholesalers district (before CDs existed) until it reached the top of San Juan Hill. On the bus, I often saw Latin-records producer and promoter, Pancho Cristal. He was always friendly and talkative. He got-off at the records district.

Haaren offered both vocational and academic programs. The dedicated teachers prepared students to go to college with an academic diploma or to enter the work-force with a general diploma. The high school attracted students from Manhattan, The Bronx, and Brooklyn. Its enrollment was multi-ethnic but seemed to be a Mecca for Puerto Rican students. The Boricua population seemed to be dominant. The school also had a large percentage of Ukrainian students, mostly from the Lower East Side. There was also a significant African-American population. The smallest student group seemed to be comprised by white-ethnics from various immigrant backgrounds.

Haaren was not a specialized school and an entrance examination was not required. Adolescent boys often chose the school because they did not want to attend their neighborhood high school. Seward Park High School was my nearby school, but, it was very large in enrollment and edification. It was imposing to me and I could not see me attending school in such a large building. Seward enjoyed a positive reputation and it produced a number luminary graduates {that was not known to me and it did not matter at that time}.

Enrollment at Haaren was relatively small and it was one of three high schools in that immediate vicinity. Two blocks north was Power Memorial Academy that was operated by the Catholic Archdioceses, and six blocks from Haaren was the High School of Commerce. Of the three buildings that housed high schools in the 1960s, only the Haaren building survives as part of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Power Memorial and Commerce were demolished; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts now occupies those spaces.
Haaren was closed in the 1970s but before that it graduated a number of very significant students of Puerto Rican heritage in addition to many outstanding stateside residents from various ethnic backgrounds.

Despite its location on the West Side of Manhattan, Haaren attracted many Puerto Rican students from various communities of New York City. The following are brief biographical sketches of several outstanding Haaren graduates with roots in Puerto Rico.

**Herman Badillo** was the first elected member of the United States Congress who was born in Puerto Rico. He may be the most recognizable of the many outstanding Haaren graduates. He was re-elected for three consecutive terms. Previously, he was elected Bronx Borough President and held other city-wide governmental positions. The former congressman was also the first viable Latin-American candidate for the office of New York City mayor (he was defeated in a highly contested Democratic Party primary). Several years later, he served as Deputy Mayor. Badillo was a professor and published author who also served as chair of Board of Higher Education of the City University of New York (CUNY).

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1 The people of Puerto Rico elect a Resident Commissioner every four years since 1900. This elected official is a non-voting member of the House of Representatives and is often called a member of Congress. Badillo, however, was a traditional voting member of the House of Representatives.
The congressman was born Germán Badillo y Rivera in 1929 in Caguas, Puerto Rico and immigrated to New York as a youngster with family-members after his parents died. After graduating from Haaren in 1947, he completed bachelor-degree studies as the City College of New York (CCNY) then graduated from Brooklyn Law School.

Badillo was a trailblazer and had an illustrious career in New York and United States politics. He assumed the role of spokesman for the Puerto Rican people in the diaspora and the homeland. He represented the South Bronx congressional district with an aggressive demeanor and always reminded his supporters and rivals that he was Puerto Rican from the Bronx. Badillo was community oriented and was constantly the subject of media coverage because of his strong advocacy. When he vacated his congressional seat, he facilitated the election of a successor who was also of Puerto Rican heritage. Ironically, that second Puerto Rican congressman was also a graduate of Haaren High School.

Badillo was a role-model and hero to me and many young Latin-Americans who understood the many obstacles that he overcame. More than one school in New York carries the Herman Badillo name as a tribute to the accomplishments of the first elected and voting member of Congress with roots in Puerto Rico.

Robert García who was best known as Bob graduated from Haaren in 1950. After his graduation, he served the military during the war in Korea to 1953. García also attended the City College of New York. He was the second elected United States congressman of Puerto Rican heritage. He held the position from 1978 to 1990. Prior to his election to Congress, García was elected to the New York State Assembly starting in 1966. He was subsequently elected to the New York State Senate.

García was a Democratic Party member but he also received the endorsements of the Republican and Liberal Parties of New York State. At a time, García was the official representative of the United States Congress to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

The congressman played a significant role in securing the Martin Luther King National Holiday. García was also a member of the delegation that sought to normalize diplomatic relations with The People’s Republic of China. He lobbied to include the term Hispanic in the US Census Bureau count of
residents and therefore succeeded in empowering that population. Bob García assumed some responsibility in the representation of the Puerto Rican population in the homeland. Because of the colonial condition of Puerto Rico, the people have no voting legislators in the US House of Representatives or in the US Senate and cannot vote for the US President.

When I moved to the North Bronx in 1980, García was serving the South Bronx Congressional District. Ironically, my Congressman was Mario Biaggi, another Haaren High School graduate. Both members of Congress enjoyed very positive reputations within and outside their constituencies.

After many years of laudable service, Congressman García was forced to resign when he was implicated in the notorious WedTech Scandal. García was convicted of extortion but was subsequently exonerated. He later retired in Puerto Rico where he died at age 84 of complications from emphysema.

Ray Santos was one of the finest musicians ever produced by the Puerto Rican community in the Diaspora. Santos’ specialty was the saxophone and he mastered many aspects of music including composition, arrangement, directing, and teaching. He graduated from Haaren High School circa 1946. He also graduated from the Juilliard School for the Performing Arts in 1952.

Santos was a Grammy-award winner, who performed, composed, arranged for the finest Latin-American orchestras of the United States and Puerto Rico. He played for such luminaries as Tito Puente, Machito, Tito Rodríguez, Noro Morales, Eddie Palmieri, and many others. In the States he also worked with Linda Ronstadt, Jon Secada and others who were more associated with mainstream music genres. He was outstanding in the tropical music venue, Latin-Jazz, Big-Band Latin, and Jazz. He earned the nickname El Maestro because he knew so much about music and he was a commendable teacher of music at the City College of New York [CCNY] until he was 84 years of age.

El Maestro was named Raymond Santos when he was born in 1928, the same year that his parents married. His mother was Carmen [Camacho] and his father was Ramón Santos. In the 1930 US census his father is listed as an elevator operator in a hotel, his mother is identified as a home-maker for several family members. The family lived at 1771 Madison Avenue in El Barrio/East Harlem.
Ray Santos started early in the music field. He played in the Catskills Mountains resorts where many hotel cabarets existed. He also played extensively at the world famous Palladium Ballroom in New York; a place that was also known as the Home of the Mambo. Many believe that the unique way in which mambo was danced was created in the New York Palladium. In a filmed interview, Ray Santos said that he was a close observer of the dancers. He said that he was fascinated by them and their sophisticated moves on the dance floor.

At mid-point in his career, Ray Santos moved to Puerto Rico where he performed with the greatest bands of the time. In a filmed interview, Santos talked about the challenges of working in the music landscape that is Puerto Rico where Boricua genres blend with Cuban, Jazz, Pop, and Rock.

After living in Puerto Rico for several years and playing with the best orchestras, Santos returned to New York at a time when the tropical-music scene was headed by three big bands: Tito Puente, Machito, and Tito Rodríguez, Ray Santos had the distinction of having worked with all three.

Santos received a Grammy Award in 1992 for his arrangement and direction of the Linda Ronstadt album titled *Frenési*. He has been inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame and he received the Latin Grammy Trustees Award. In 2016, he received an honorary doctorate of music from the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Santos served as music consultant for the feature film *The Mambo Kings*. He arranged the Oscar-nominated song *Beautiful María of My Soul*. Santos also appeared in several movies and documentaries.

In May of 2022, Evergreen Avenue, starting at Westchester Avenue, was named *Ray Santos El Maestro Way* in his honor for his many achievements and in tribute to his long-term residency on that avenue in the Bronx.

**Joseph Esteves Vargas** (Joe Loco) was an admirable jazz, Latin-jazz and tropical-music pianist in the States and in Puerto Rico. This former Haaren student who was best known as Joe Loco was unique in that he dropped-out but returned after experimenting with employment in the entertainment field.
Esteves was born in New York on March 21, 1921 to Frances Vargas and José Esteves. Both his parents were recently arrived from Puerto Rico when he was born. He began his incursion in the music field when he was a teenager of 15 years of age in the 1930s. His first instrument was the trombone that he learned while a student at Haaren. However, he transitioned into a pianist and developed an outstanding reputation with that instrument. He is best known as an innovative pianist that blended many genres from the States and Latin America.

He acquired the Joe Loco moniker after suffering head injuries in an accident; according to some sources. Other sources indicate that it was his friend and fellow-musician Tito Puente who labeled him Joe Loco. Jazz expert Scott Yanow has written that Loco acquired the name after he composed, in 1943, *Cada Loco Con Su Tema* for the legendary Cuban-American bandleader Frank Grillo (best known as Machito).

According to jazz historian John Storm Roberts, Esteves began his career in the world of jazz as a dancer at the iconic Apollo Theater. He appeared with the Chick Webb Orchestra that featured Ella Fitzgerald in the 1930s. Esteves was living with his parents on East 116th Street in El Barrio. From dancer to trombonist to an exceptional jazz-oriented pianist was the trajectory that was chosen by Joe Loco.

According to Storm Roberts, Esteves was more jazz-oriented when compared to the innovative Noro Morales who was a Puerto Rican standout pianist. Over time, Esteves' repertoire fell into two categories: Latin and Latinized Anglo standards. Roberts goes on to say that *some of Loco’s versions of American material were little short of wonderful*. Fortunately, a lot of Esteves’ recordings have survived and this makes possible a deep appreciation of his music and style. Many recordings are available on the internet. *Vaya! With Loco* (Columbia, 1956) and *Joe Loco Motion* (Columbia, 1955) are two easily accessible LPs.

Although Joe Loco was not born in Puerto Rico, the lure of his parent’s homeland was too much to resist and following the example of many contemporaries, he moved to San Juan in 1968. Esteves found plenty of opportunities in the many hotels and cabarets.

After many years in the music industry, Joe Loco left an impressive discography of recorded compositions and arrangements. Esteves remained in Puerto Rico until he passed of natural causes in 1988. His remains are interred in Cementerio Nacional de Bayamón.

**Pedro Pietri**: On a street-corner, one-block south from where my junior high school was situated now carries a street-sign that reads Reverend Pedro Pietri Way. The corner in Loisaida (Lower East Side) is in the section affectionately known as Alphabet City. The exact location is 3rd Street and Avenue B; close to where J.H.S. 71 the Robert E. Simon School stood. The street-sign is near the home to one of the most creative centers of the Puerto Rican community, The Nuyorican Poets Café. The Café was founded by poet and educator Miguel Algarín in 1973 and Pietri is often cited as one of several co-founders. It is where the outstanding writer often recited his work. As a tribute to Pietri, a large image of him was painted and adorns the entrance to this landmark institution.
Pietri was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico in 1944. As a child, he came to New York City with his mother and four siblings. The family home address according to the 1950 census was West 131 Street in Upper Manhattan. He may have travelled from that location to Haaren High School from where he graduated. Not long after graduation, Pietri was drafted into military service and sent to fight in the War on Vietnam from 1966 to 1968.

Pietri is best-known as a poet however he was also a successful playwright. As a poet, he is credited with being a pioneer and Poet Laureate of the Nuyorican Movement. He began to write poems when he was a student at Haaren. His style reflected his experiences while growing-up in New York City and his participation in the war in Vietnam.

His best known poem is, arguably, *Puerto Rican Obituary*. The work sketches the lives of Puerto Ricans who came to the States with dreams that sadly remained unfulfilled. I recall hearing the poem circa 1970 when there was an apex in the Puerto Rican movement for social and political justice. The poem seemed to energize and solidify Boricua youth who sought justice and equality through the independence of Puerto Rico.

Pietri wrote many poems that captured the realities of the Boricua communities in the States. Fortunately many of the poems as recited by Pietri were recorded and available today in different formats. Pietri had an ingenious sense of humor and often wrote poems that would make people smile or laugh although the subject matter was somber. Several titles seem humorous such as *Suicide Note from a Cockroach in a Low Income Housing Project*.

Pedro Pietri was also an outstanding playwright. His plays also reflected his realities as a Nuyorican and a Vietnam War veteran. His best known play is arguably, *The Masses are Asses* from 1974. The play has been described as an absurdist satire that exposes issues of social class, parodies the notion of the American Dream and features political parody. I had the opportunity to see this hilarious but poignant comedy at the Puerto Rican Travelling Theater on West 47th Street in Manhattan. As was true with Pietri’s poems, his plays carried an underlying political message. The poet never lost sight of the conditions under which his community lived and of the socio-economic inequalities in his homeland, Puerto Rico.
The Nuyorican poet was the recipient of several New York State Creative Arts in Public Service Grants and a grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Unfortunately, Pedro Pietri passed away at the youthful age of 59 from stomach cancer. He created a lasting legacy and has influenced poets and writers-in-general to this day. It’s satisfying to know that Haaren High served as an incubator for the literary talents of the writer. The teachers of the high school who imparted the knowledge and skills to Pedro Pietri would be proud of his many accomplishments.

Henry Silva was not a lawyer nor government official and he was not a musician: instead, he was an award-winning movie and stage actor who appeared in films produced by Hollywood and in Europe. He was another student from Haaren who was incredibly successful throughout his long career. He proved to be exceptional in his chosen profession.

Silva was born in Brooklyn on September 23, 1926 to Puerto Rican parents. His mother was Angelina Martínez from the south-coast city of Coamo. She held many different jobs in factories and hotels to make a home for her family. His father was Jesús Silva from the cosmopolitan city of Mayagüez on the west coast of Puerto Rico. Jesús was a lifelong merchant marine. According to an interview granted to journalist Miluka Rivera, Henry Silva stated that his father left his mother when he was three-months old. According to existing archival records, although separated, the couple may have never divorced. Silva also stated, in the interview that over time there seemed to be a kind of reconciliation between he and his father; who appeared to be a life-long resident of El Barrio. His parents may have maintained a distant relationship.

Without realizing, both of his parents left paper trails on official records that confirm the information granted by Henry Silva. For example, in the 1940 census, Henry, 13, was living with his mother who indicated that she was Angelina Silva, born in 1889 in Puerto Rico. She was 51, married, and employed as a framer of eye-glasses. They lived on East 102nd Street in El Barrio. In 1925 Henry’s father was on the SS San Juan, probably as a crew-member. He indicated that he was married and born in

2 Pedro Pietri in www.poets.org
3 Rivera, Miluka (2021) Legado Puertorriqueño en Hollywood: Famosos y Olvidados, Burbank, Kumaras Center For the Arts and Etiquette, LLC, pp. 157-160
Mayagüez in 1886. Later, in 1947, Jesús Silva appears to be employed as a chef on the legendary SS Marine Tiger (a ship that acquired emblematic status in the Puerto Rican community).4

Henry Silva grew-up in El Barrio when many emerging Puerto Rican entertainers were also residents there. Musicians such as Tito Puente, Joe Loco, Tito Rodriguez, Noro Morales, Rafael and Victoria Hernández were his neighbors. Actor Olga San Juan and her sister Aura along with Diosa Costello and other performers were also members of the same community.5

As many Puerto Rican boys from El Barrio, Henry Silva made his way to Haaren High School. The tall, lanky youngster studied at the school for two years6 before he dropped-out to help his mother cover the expenses of the home. At age 17 Silva began to hold jobs in various capacities as he also prepared for a career as an actor. In an interview conducted by Miluka Rivera, Silva said that he also worked with the US Postal Service for a time for which he received much praise from his mother.

Henry Silva was best known as a prolific character actor and played the role of villain in many Hollywood productions. He successfully avoided being ethnically type-cast and therefore played roles as a member of different ethnic populations. His unique features allowed him to play Latin-American, Asian, and other ethnic and non-ethnic roles. The skills that he acquired at the prestigious Actors Studio and other educational environments made him a versatile actor with a long career.

Silva started his professional career in an episode of the Armstrong Theatre in 1950. Then he appeared in an unaccredited role of the 1952 Viva Zapata feature film. Later, as a stage actor in 1955 he was a cast-member on the production of A Hatful of Rain that was produced by the Actors Studio. From 1955 on, for the next several decades, Henry Silva was gainfully employed primarily in movies and many television episodes.

In addition to several Broadway plays and television productions, the actor is most associated the following films: Hatful of Rain (1957), The Manchurian Candidate (1962), Johnny Cool (1963), The Return of Mr. Moto (1965), Ocean’s Eleven (1960 & 2001), Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai (1990), Justice (1999), and other Hollywood productions.

Silva also appeared in many European films. He developed a reputation in Europe because of his participation in films that originated in Italy. He was so associated with those films that many believed that he was Sicilian. Among his European films are: L’insolent (1973), Zanna Bianca Alla Riscossa (1974), Poliziotti Violenti (1976), Razza Violenta (1984), La Via della Droga (1989), among others.

4 This information on Henry Silva and his parents is available from Familysearch.org and Ellis Island passenger records.
5 Military Draft Registration Card that was completed on September 23, 1944 as Silva turned 18. He was living with his mother at 176 East 103rd Street and unemployed. This is available from www.familysearch.org or New York City, World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1940-1947.
6 World War II Army Enlistment Records 1938-1946, this record indicates that Silva completed 2 years of high school when he entered the military service in 1944 at Fort Dix, New Jersey.
Silva appeared in more than 140 productions in the United States, Italy and other countries.

Several sources indicate that Academy Award winning super-actor Robert Mitchum had been expelled from Haaren High School. However, when he passed in 1997, he was graduated from the school. If Mitchum was granted a diploma posthumously, perhaps the same can or should be done with actor Henry Silva who was forced to drop-out in the 1930s to help his single-mother.

**Why did many students succeed at Haaren High School?**

From my experiences at the school, I would consider the following factors that, arguably, contributed to success:

- The students pre-selected Haaren as opposed to being obligated to attend their local high school. For example, I chose the school instead of Seward Park High School. This selection or choice gave me and my classmates a sense of empowerment and investment.

- Haaren was boys-only and this may have permitted a more focused environment with reduced number of distractions associated with relationships, courtships or infatuations.

- Haaren had a dedicated faculty. I recall Ms. McAlpin a devoted English teacher. Mr. Rompapas who took his students to Broadway plays. I recall Mr. Kirsch who taught Spanish in a jovial atmosphere. Mr. Write was a devoted home-room teacher and among the first black teachers that I ever had. My guidance counselor was Ms. Miriam Sisson who was instrumental in getting me to go to college because she believed that I could succeed.

- The Haaren students sacrificed time and money to travel to the unique school and they sought to get something from their investment.

- I believe that Haaren created an inclusive atmosphere where everyone felt equal. Equality led to an unpressured environment with minimal competition among students. When we competed it was against entities outside of Haaren; like the other schools.

**Haaren’s Location**

The school was located on San Juan Hill that was highly residential, the site of a historic Puerto Rican community and home to a number of luminaries of that community. Arturo Alfonso Schomburg may have been among the first Boricuas to move into the neighborhood. He was from San Juan and arrived in New York circa 1891. According to the 1900 US Census, Schomburg, his wife Elizabeth (Bessie) and his boys Arthur and McKenzie were residents at 220 West 62nd Street. This address may have been among the earliest to house the incipient Schomburg collection of artifacts, books and realia associated the peoples of African ancestry. Schomburg was listed as Schambrgh on the census; his employment is listed as porter. Years later, The Schomburg Collection became The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The prestigious Center occupies an entire building in Harlem.
Another early settler from Puerto Rico was jazz key-board specialist Rogelio “Ram” Ramírez. According to the Ellis Island Records, when Ramírez arrived in the States, he identified his home address as 210 West 63rd Street. Ramírez (also known as Roger) had a long career as a jazz artist who composed and performed until late in life. His most significant composition was *Lover Man Where Can You Be*. The tune with added lyrics has been recorded by many. It was hit for both leading jazz singers Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

Actor and founder of the Puerto Rican Travelling Theater, Miriam Colón was also a resident of the neighborhood where Spanish was often heard. When she, her mother Josefa Quiles and her sister Onelia Colón arrived from Puerto Rico, they indicated that they lived at 130 West 62nd Street. Miriam remained a life-long resident of the West-Side of Manhattan since many years later she owned a brownstone not far from where she said lived in 1950. It was from her West-Side homes the Colón developed into an outstanding actor, producer and community activist.

Another prominent Puerto Rican from San Juan Hill is English and Spanish language actor Erik Estrada. The actor who was born Henry Enrique Estrada grew-up as a resident of the Amsterdam Houses, a low-income housing project operated by the City of New York and located from West 61st to West 64th Streets. Estrada developed a national and international reputation because of his role in the 1970s TV program titled *CHiPs*. The program focused on the day-to-day adventures of the California Highway Police.

Actor Liz Torres was another product from San Juan Hill. In 1950 she was living with her family at 163 West 63rd Street; according to the census of that year. The census bureau also reported that immigrants from Puerto Rico lived at that location as early as 1920. Torres also stated that she also lived in the Amsterdam Houses. Torres told Miluka Rivera, in an interview, that she knew Erik Estrada and that he gave her a first kiss. Liz Torres has had a long career in television and in the theatre. She has had roles in many situation comedies, including the iconic *All in the Family* that starred Carroll O’Connor.

**Conclusion**

Despite the many success stories associated with the students of Haaren, the high school was closed in the 1970s. Reports indicate that problems developed and New York City administrators decided that the most viable solution was to permanently close. It’s not known if the City Board of Education consulted the community at-large or the Puerto Rican community specifically before closing Haaren.

Ironically, Haaren has been immortalized when it was selected as a sight to film two Hollywood productions that were both relatively successful. The first was the award winning drama, *Up the Down Staircase* from 1967. It starred Sandy Dennis and the cast included Eileen Heckart, Jean Stapleton, one or two students from Haaren and others. The viewer can appreciate interior elements in scenes that were filmed in the school.

The second film was the award winning, musical-drama, *Fame*, from 1980. This film starred Irene Escalera Betancourt whose performing name was Irene Cara. She was a Puerto Rican-Cuban youth from the Bronx who played Coco Hernández in the film. Cara’s father was Gaspar Escalera, a jazz...
saxophonist from Puerto Rico. Cara sang the lead song *Fame*. Cara also co-wrote and sang the lead song for the 1983 movie *Flashdance; What a Feeling*. Cara shared an Academy Award and she also won a Grammy Award for the song.

The cast for *Fame* included many high-school aged students including Antonia Franceschi, Lee Curreri, Gene Anthony Ray, Debbie Allen, and others. Interior scenes of the film were shot at Haaren that was permanently closed when filming occurred.

Although events in San Juan Hill neighborhood inspired the *West Side Story* Broadway play and 1961 film, neither the neighborhood nor Haaren were used as filming locations. For the Steven Spielberg 2021 remake of the film, the San Juan Hill community was recreated in other New York City locations since most of the original community buildings were demolished; Haaren survives and could have been spotlighted.

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