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Freestyle's Forsaken

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

Freestyle is a genre of music born in the mid 1980s from Latino and Black communities in the urban epicenters of the United States. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Miami were among the main cities where Freestyle music thrived although it was never heralded and documented in articles or films as much as Hip-Hop or Neo Soul. This fact rings true especially for the women of Freestyle music. This project spotlights one woman, "Corina," who paved her way to create a name for herself within the genre. Not only does her story speak to the challenges she faced during her budding career, but also the struggles many of her peers faced just to be seen and heard. As Corina did whatever she felt was necessary to share her talents with the world, the ever-changing music industry slighted her. The last single on her debut album would prove to be a dance club hit but never got the visual promotion it deserved. This project documents the story of an artist, a Woman of color, how she suffered at the mercy of a patriarchal construct and finally got the moment of significance she deserved - the birth of a music video thirty years into the making of one of the most personal songs she has ever written.

## **Project Description**

*Freestyle's Forsaken* is a profile/documentary film short, approximately eighteen minutes in length, accompanied by a music video. As the project opens, you will see Corina on stage doing what she loves - performing. Corina is shown performing at the Coney Island Amphitheater in 2021 singing her smash hit song *Temptation*. She is very expressive and engages the audience to sing with her. This is because *Temptation*, released in 1991, is her most well-known song. The title appears: *Freestyle's Forsaken* and fades out. The title for this project stems from the fact that so many songs from the genre never got the notoriety they deserved.

Furthermore, these songs never received the music video accompaniment that so many songs released during this time were afforded, especially songs sung by men.

After Corina is shown performing on stage, we see her sitting in at the corner of empty room in a director's chair surrounded by lights. It is 2022. She speaks to the camera and shares her story about her life and her journey in Freestyle music. Corina Katt Ayala, who usually goes by Corina, was born and raised in the South Bronx and East Harlem. In a podcast interview that aired on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022, for a show called *Dope Nostalgia*, Corina speaks about her Puerto Rican heritage and upbringing, from her performances in her neighborhood to her often tumultuous experiences in the music industry. The interviews shown for the project are shot using two points of views, color vs black-and-white providing added depth to the story she is telling. During the conversation every time Corina's reflects on the past, it gives a cue that facilitates the shift from showing her in full color facing forward to showcasing her from the side in black-and-white surrounded by lights. It makes it seem as though she is directing the edit in addition to having the floor as the subject of the film. The viewer feels her presence behind the scenes at the same time that she is being documented. This is my attempt to give her the power in the dynamic. Corina and I also decided that all the color frames would be of her facing forward, and the black-and-white would be shots of her from the side, starkly showing the difference between the present and future as opposed to the past. Matt Halm, a Doctor of Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media, writes about how the shift of color also creates contrasts and separates moments within, "Regardless of the specific nature of a switch between color and black-and-white, the technique provides a uniquely visual way to indicate the contrast between different shots. This contrast is rooted in the inherent difference between color and black-and-white and can be used to call attention to various aspects of a film" (Halm 136). After seeing her

perform on stage in color, the film suddenly does a rewind sequence that visually shifts to black-and-white. During the sequence you see behind the scenes of Corina filming a music video. I put these elements in this order to just give the viewer a glimpse of what's to come without giving away to what I feel will be the ultimate climax of the project: a music video of Corina's song *Now That You're Gone*. "A visual context of an interview and visual cues contained within it can be critical to storytelling" (Bernard 185). The visual will take the viewer on a journey from her origins to the process of what it takes for her to create and share her art.

During Corina's talk, she provides insight into some essential experiences. Firstly, she explains her experience being a female recording artist during the 1980s and early 1990s. She discusses the dynamics of what it was like as a young Woman of color in the industry. Secondly, Corina speaks on creating her last single, which was released before she parted ways with her record label. The single *Now that You're Gone* was released in March of 1992 and is the only song from her debut album written entirely by her. Corina's first two singles/songs released from that album was *Temptation* and *Whispers*, both of which had terrific, big-budget music videos. However, the third song, which Corina explains as her most personal of the three releases, received no visual accompaniment.

What brought me to Corina and this project is my own love of Freestyle music myself. It's the music of my youth, my community. Dr Manuel Peña a music researcher, wrote in "Hispanic and Afro-Hispanic Music in the United States": "Normally, the most strongly symbolic or cultural musical forms are those which are connected to a people's deepest sentiments about their way of life" (Peña, 291). In the late eighties and early nineties, one could hear Freestyle music blasting from the speakers of a car or tenement building windows of the South Bronx, East Harlem, or East Brooklyn. Artists like Stevie B, Safire, and Shannon were

some popular selections of those times during block parties, school dances, and weddings. In my life, it was the music that my aunt played out her window every day after school. I would hear her sing the songs of all the female Freestyle singers, so I began to memorize the pieces myself. Later in life, I would also find out that I had a cousin who was a part of an all-female group called "Amoretto."

I lived with my grandparents on and off throughout my childhood because my mother and father were young parents and often found themselves in situations that forced them to be distant from me. My mother had many run-ins with the law. However, whenever I got to spend time with her, I often spoke of music on the radio. It helped me escape from the world. "We all hear the music we like as something special, as something that defies the mundane, takes us 'out of ourselves,' puts us somewhere else" (Frith 275).

The parts of New York City we called home at that time were not known for their success stories. I was born and raised in Brownsville - East New York section of Brooklyn during the early 1980s, and since the day I was born, I was constantly faced with unsafe situations. No sooner than a year after my birth, my mother was invited to a Puerto Rican family/house party on Palm Sunday, where there is no doubt in my mind Freestyle music was being played. My aunt convinced my mother at the last minute not to go. "Ten women and children inside that house had been shot to death. Some had been stuck at close range" (Levitt 17). The sole survivor of the event was my tiny, newborn cousin Cristina.

My mother did and continues to do all she can to rise above adversity. She eventually moved me to the Bronx with her for a better life. A notable author about Latino culture recounts her story in *The Art of Freedom* "Carmen had spent ten years in prisons. She lived in a part of the Bronx so dangerous that when my wife sent her a dozen roses to celebrate the completion of a

year without drugs, the delivery man was afraid to go to the neighborhood" (Shorris 42).

Although the neighborhoods we moved to in the Bronx did not have stellar reputations, they were still a breath of fresh air compared to what we endured in East Brooklyn. Through the shift from home to home in my upbringing, the music stayed a stable base from which my inspirations flowed. Whether in the Bronx or Brooklyn, we still had Freestyle music.

As I grew into adulthood, I pursued my aspiration of being a performer. Through my own entertainment business experiences, I was afforded many opportunities that led me to interact with several accomplished artists from this genre. My vision is that this project will be the first of many stories told of the countless women who didn't get the credit they deserved. "To try and tell Freestyle's story is to say a great deal about a moment when large numbers of young women found themselves on the inside of recording studios. It bears its own annals of the uncredited, adding volumes of names to those who have lent their uncompensated talents to the advent of studio-based recording" (Vasquez 109).

## **Research Analysis**

In the early 1980s, when what was known as Disco music seemed like it was meeting its end, other forms of dance music soon crept in to take its place. "Disco never died, it simply changed its name to dance-pop in the 1980s and evolved into such styles as deep house, Hi-NRG, and Latin Freestyle" (Bogdanov 255). Like in the many of the New York City urban dance movies of the time, *East Side Story* (1990), which features Corina as the lead, has Freestyle music, resounding throughout its soundtrack. "Often growing in tandem with contemporary styles like electro and house, Freestyle emerged in the twin Latin capitals of New York City and Miami during the early 1980s" (Bogdanov ix). I remember Freestyle music being played from

stereo boom boxes in front of corner grocery stores and blasting from sound systems in the rear trunks of cars that drove around the neighborhood. In the New York City newspaper, *The Village Voice*, the journalist Cristina Veran writes, "It arose from the streets of the Bronx and Spanish Harlem, Miami taking it up with gusto soon after" (Veran).

Being born on the streets of impoverished communities, Freestyle owes much of its roots to hip-hop. "Hip-hop originated in the United States of America, where during the '70s there were significant changes on the «black» radio. It was the original guardian of the cultural and musical traditions of Latin Americans and African Americans, who at that time were not in the best position in American society" (Mezhyrova 26). After the birth of hip-hop music, many subsets of musical genres emerged from the subcultures of populations within the African American and Latino Communities. Although having had a presence in hip hop since its conception, Latinos didn't always feel represented. "The growing African Americanization of hip-hop during the 1980s—largely media driven, premised upon a reductive notion of blackness, and suffering from severe cultural-historical amnesia—prefaced the increasing alienation of Puerto Ricans (and other New York Caribbean Latinos) from hip-hop" (Rivera 244). Thus, this other branch of hip-hop sprung into motion, and Latin hip hop became the mixture of hip-hop drum patterns with dramatic chord changes and lyrics about passion and pain. "Interestingly, despite a decided hip-hop foundation, freestyle emerged at a time when—some say because—New York Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, following breakdance overkill in the media, suddenly found themselves ostracized from the culture they helped create" (Veran).

Hip-hop, Freestyle, and artist of various genres catapulted their success by releasing songs accompanied by visual performance pieces that were aired on channels dedicated to showcasing the latest form of music promotion, "music videos." The most popular of these

channels was called *Music Television* or *MTV*. "In August 1981, MTV was launched. Within a matter of years, it revitalized a struggling record industry" (Banks). The households who could afford cable television were treated to this new form of visual performance that music videos provided. "One of music video's distinctive features as a social expressionist is its open-ended quality, aiming to engulf the viewer in its communication with itself, it's fashioning of an alternative world where the image is reality" (Aufderheide 57). During these times in the early 1980s, most successful artists had music videos being played on television. However, many songs from the Freestyle music genre still garnered significant sales success without any visual accompaniment. The few songs that did get videos were usually low-budget and made by the male artist. Songs like *Don't Break My Heart* by Safire and *Please Don't Go* by Nayobe were all street anthems that were played heavily by disc jockeys on the radio and in clubs. Although their music was played continuously, many of the females of the genre did not get the credit they so well deserved or the treatment and investment their male counterparts acquired. Nevertheless, countless songs were produced by these artists depicting the matters of love and living during these times. "Freestyle is both a musical genre and, as a multitude of fanzines will tell you, a lifestyle. The playwright Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas evoked our teenage surround when he called it a 'system of living'" (Vazquez 107).

Those who could watch music videos on television were exposed to an artist's vision of what they wanted you to imagine for that brief three to five minutes of a song's length. *Music Television* was saturated with images of White artists, with the occasional Black artist. It was few and far between when you could see artists of other ethnicities in broadcast rotation. "For years, White artists have dominated American pop music. With the notable exception of Black vocalists, non-White artists have rarely experienced sustained and substantial success in this

market" (Bender). Those who were able to convey their song's message through music video usually achieved so by acquiring a music video director who was not a person of color. Music videos were not considered a lucrative career for filmmakers of color. "Through audiences' responses to and expectations of their works, non-white filmmakers are thus often informed and reminded of the territorial boundaries in which they are to remain" (Trinh 69).

With the rise of hip-hop and electronic dance music in the 1990s, the Freestyle genre faded. The radio station that once played Freestyle music seven days a week began to shift to only one form of urban pop music, and the leader by sheer selling power was hip-hop. The Latino music culture from inner-city metropolises like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles that struggled to make a name for itself was replaced by initially Spanish first language acts.

"...artists like Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, and Marc Anthony reached extraordinary levels of success. Thus, music led the charge in the so-called 'Latino Boom,' in which Hispanic artists performing a Latino repertoire—and in many instances singing in Spanish— entered the mainstream market" (Viñuela).

Freestyle music, particularly the women of the genre, did not get their dues during its most popular time. This project aims to create an additional reference to how these women were pivotal to its acclaim.

### **Thesis Production process**

Finding an appropriate format was essential to creating a project that would honor the artist and the song being showcased. The artists affiliated with the Freestyle genre would have already gone through many trials and tribulations of exploitation. What was crucial was finding a way to get these very talented women who have experienced trauma in a patriarchal music

industry to trust me regarding telling stories they felt safe sharing. The truth is this project relies heavily on the song being showcased and its story. There is tension regarding why an artist might want, or not want, to revisit or expand on something they may have left behind long ago. Corina is the first story I am going to tell, and I want to honor her experience. At the same time I want the audience to experience why this story deserves the reverence. Filmmaker Marlon Riggs expresses in the interview entitled *Cultural Healing* "I think media work has to encourage a more self-reflexive response so that people do not just get mad or get joy from what they see, but also interrogate why they are mad, what's bothering them" (Harris 11). These songs that resonated with so many should be held up in full view for the mistakes and crimes of those who orchestrated business around them. For the audience that lived through these times, these women's stories behind the songs perhaps will provoke a closer connection to the music. Listening to the song again may evoke a nostalgia, but now listening to it with a music video some may prompt a deeper connection and give clarity to why they may have fallen in love with the music in the first place. The song *Now that You're Gone* by Corina has already been released, and the message has already been shared with the world in one way. This project is about taking that message that was in heavy rotation in March of 1992 and amplifying it.

Corina was kind enough to meet with me to do the interview segment in the Bronx, where I work. I made sure to have my Camera A and Camera B setup with sufficient lighting and sound coverage. Although the interview was scheduled for 3 pm, I arrived at 1 pm, remembering in *The Power of Production* by Heather Caban, "In many cases, the setup took longer than the interview. Microphones had to be correctly placed and operational, the lighting had to be appropriate, the background had to be nondistracting, and so on." I just wanted a blank space to showcase her in a director's chair. This would allow her story to be the main thread throughout

the project. Once we had the camera rolling, I asked Corina various questions that led to her sharing much of her experiences as a recording artist and a songwriter. During our conversation, she disclosed that the song *Now That You're Gone* was about her grandmother. In 1991 she lost her grandmother, and in response to seeing her mother in turmoil over the death, she wrote through the lens of her mother singing to her grandmother. She went further to say that now that her mother has passed away, the song has more significance because now she thinks about her mom when she sings it. We closed our discussion with Corina sharing her sentiments about doing a music video 30 years after the song's release. She shares that she somehow feels it's her mom revealing her presence from beyond the grave and cementing herself as a forever force in her life.

After filming such an in-depth conversation with Corina, I wanted to ensure that the information she conveyed about the song's message was translated in the making of a music video. She gave me much creative control, which fueled my ambition to carefully acquire what I needed for the video's production. This included location scouting, assembling a crew, developing storyboards, creating call sheets, budget spreadsheets, shot lists, and shooting schedules - and this was just pre-production! The *Now That You're Gone* music video was filmed in two locations. The first location was in Huntington Woods in the Bronx. I wanted to film Corina in this setting to set a mood for her searching for something in the wilderness. I purchased three cans of this special effect product "Spray Fog" hoping it would add to the ambiance. One of my best friends designed her clothes with the instruction of making sure earth tones were used to convey her attachment to the ground. In fact, the whole video is a pallet of earth tones. I remember the words of the filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha in regard to making of her film *Reassemblage*: "I want people to understand an action, not through verbal explanation but a

certain continuity" (Hulser 17). As Corina navigates through the woods singing the song, her focus slowly shifts from singing to what is right in front of her to sing to the sky. I hope this implies that she has a yearning for whatever may be above her in the skies to listen.

During the song's bridge, I filmed a scene where Corina goes through an archway in the forest (e.g. see fig. 1). When she travels through the archway, I want to convey that she ends up at our second location, a rooftop overlooking the New York City skyline. To achieve this effect, in the woods, I was cautious about filming Corina running from behind and having her brown skirt fill the shot as she traveled through the archway. As a choreographer myself I wanted to make sure that the movement of my principal character flowed and connect no matter if the scenery changed around them. Fellow choreographer and experimental filmmaker Maya Deren has stated: "Separate and distant places can be related and made continuous by a continuity of identity and movement, as when a person begins a gesture in one setting, this shot immediately followed by the hand entering another setting altogether to complete the gesture there" (Deren 126). The cut to the second location will begin where the first left off as I focused on Corina's brown skirt while she ran on the rooftop. Then, as I cut away from the dress, I instructed her to stop and act as if she was puzzled by her surroundings and then shift her focus to the sky again and sing her heart out as if her mother could hear. Corina is a phenomenal actress and has many accolades to her name. Aside from *East Side Story* mentioned earlier she was also picked by acclaimed director Tim Robbins to play Frida Khalo in the movie *Cradle Will Rock*. Her acting talents were essential to making the storytelling behind this music video believable. It was so rewarding to have her trust while executing this project and equally satisfying to observe her talent as she portrayed the vision that she entrusted me with. The spray fog, however, didn't work at all. I don't think it's best for outdoor shooting.



Fig. 1 Sage attempts spray fog as Corina runs through the archway. Cesar Nunez 2022.

### **Audience and Exhibition**

Before this Corina and I worked together on various artistic projects for her own catalog. We have formed a bond of trust that ultimately has led to us working together now on my project. She has agreed to allow me to use her likeness and story to create this project and permitted me to use her music. The music featured in this project has been written and performed by Corina. Later this year, Corina plans to reproduce *Now That You're Gone* so that in the future further accreditation to her prior record label will no longer be necessary. Although the project is completed for this thesis, the goal is to develop it further to include more stories of other female artists from this genre and their songs that didn't get music videos when they were released.

Corina closes her interview by explaining why the song *Now That You're Gone* never got a music video released in 1992 and how she feels making it thirty years later. I am confident that many of her fans and fans of Freestyle music in general will be happy to see this project once completed. As there are still many faithful fans of this music, it would only be right to shine a brighter spotlight on its existence. "Freestyle has persevered, and while it doesn't see the same nationwide success it did in the late '80s and early '90s, the now-classics are still quite popular in urban markets around the country. New York's WKTU boasts the number one freestyle radio show" (Diller).

I hope to showcase this project in various venues where the music genre holds significance, such as New York Latino Film Festival, Cinema Tropical, The Barrio Film Festival and Mott Haven Film Festivals, and other Latino neighborhood film showcases held at schools, churches, and street festivals in all major cities in the United States. Although this project has a solid connection to the Latin American community, Freestyle music did have a substantial following with Italian American and African American audiences. This project is just the beginning to what I hope to be a series showcasing many women who have been shorthanded in this music genre. This first chapter I hope can be used as a pilot to pitch to various production entities that have a history in raising Latino voices. Singer, dancer, and actress Jennifer Lopez who hails from the Bronx and was married to Marc Anthony, who "was active in New York City's freestyle music movement" prior to become a successful salsa singer (Stavans 27). Lopez founded Nuyorican Productions which has just secured a deal with Netflix streaming services. It would be great to shop this as the start of a series a homage to the women who opened the door for Miss Lopez. Coincidentally, this film was produced all throughout the month of March which corresponds with women's history. "March is selected as the month for observing Women's

History Month to correspond with International Women's Day" (WOMEN). Corina's story and the potential stories of all the women from this genre deserved to be elevated to any platforms that promote female empowerment. Cable channels such as *Lifetime*, or *Bravo* are other avenues to explore to shop this idea as a "Women in music *herstory*" series. The goal is to continue developing and disseminating the message of this American musical history to all those willing to listen.

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