

50 years of West Side Story: the real Gangs of New York

Paul Kendall

'All you had was this pride in being bad ...' New York in the Fifties was terrorized by real-life Jets and Sharks at permanent war, with running battles involving chains, clubs and guns. There was little to sing about, as Paul Kendall reports

Just before midnight on a stifling hot August evening in 1959, five Puerto Rican boys, including a mysterious caped figure, marched defiantly into a playground in the New York neighbourhood known as Hell's Kitchen. A handful of white teenagers were there already, chatting on a park bench, and they immediately sensed trouble.

The playground - basically a concrete slab between 45th and 46th Streets - was near to the White House, a bar used by the area's Irish gangs, and 'Spanish' boys knew it was off-limits. After scouting the playground carefully, the Puerto Ricans approached the youngsters on the bench and asked if anyone had seen their friend Frenchy. He had been beaten up by members of a rival gang and they wanted to talk to those responsible.

The white boys said they knew nothing about it. This seemed to satisfy the Spanish group, and they retreated into the shadows. But a few minutes later they were back, having met up with the rest of their party, a coalition of boys from three gangs: the Vampires; the Young Lords; and the Heart Kings. This time they blocked the playground's exits. When the white youths got up to leave, a Spanish boy stood in their way and declared: 'No gringos leave the park.'

Another gang member threw a punch and, with that, the rest of the Puerto Ricans attacked, piling in with broom handles, leather belts and bottles. In the melée, the boy with the cape pulled out a silver-handled knife and plunged it into the back of 16-year-old Robert Young. He then turned to Young's friend, Anthony Krzesinski, and stabbed him in the chest, piercing his heart. Within minutes, both boys were dead; the ninth and tenth victims of gang-related violence in New York that summer and the third and fourth in a week.

It was such grim, senseless, and all too familiar warfare that inspired West Side Story. Conceived, in 1949, as a musical about the conflicts between Jewish and Irish-Catholic communities in lower Manhattan, the tale was adapted by the writer Arthur Laurents following the escalation of gang violence in New York during the early 1950s.

Dr Lewis Yablonsky, a criminologist and sociologist who worked with gang members in the 1950s, says West Side Story was an accurate reflection of gang conflict. 'I went to see the original play on Broadway,' he says. 'It got a lot right, such as the clothes, the language and the locations; the basketball courts, roof tops, and tenement buildings.' The scene in the dance hall - where Tony and Maria first meet - was also familiar to him. 'I used to organise dances and baseball games for these guys in an effort to bring them together. I remember one dance where there were 500 people in the ballroom of Columbia University. There was no fighting, but you could sense the tension.'

Gangs had existed before the Fifties, of course, but teenage gangsters were a new and frightening phenomenon. In Brooklyn, there were the Mau Maus, Jokers, Bishops and Barons. In the Bronx, the Fordham Baldies and the Golden Guineas. In East Harlem, the Dragons, Red Wings and Egyptian Kings. And in Washington Heights, the Jesters and the Amsterdams. Gang leaders were rarely older than 20 (some gangs had members as young as eight) and each group laid claim to its own micro-neighbourhood - sometimes no more than six square blocks - which it guarded with military-style proficiency.

Any incursion by a rival gang was treated as an act of aggression and often led to a 'rumble' - a pitched battle in which gang members went at each other with anything from bare knuckles and studded belts to baseball bats, car aerials, machetes and guns. These

sometimes involved more than 100 boys and even attracted spectators: on Memorial Day - a public holiday at the end of May - crowds would gather in Prospect Park to watch the rumbles that took place there every year to kick off the summer gang-fighting 'season'. Many of these fights - like the ones in West Side Story - were between youngsters from different ethnic backgrounds. After the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of young Puerto Ricans and African Americans, from the country's southern states, had poured into New York looking for a brighter future, and ended up competing with each other, and with the white working class, for jobs and homes. Certain areas of the city became almost exclusively black or 'Spanish'. But, in every case, the communities felt boxed in - by each other and by existing Irish, Italian or Jewish communities. African-Americans living in West Harlem, for example, had Central Park to their south, Italian and 'Spanish' Harlem to the east, Washington Heights (which was predominantly Irish) to the north and Manhattanville (where Puerto Ricans lived) to their west.

This siege mentality, combined with a lack of working-class jobs, cramped living conditions and widespread racism, left many adolescents feeling vulnerable, frustrated and angry. They asserted themselves and proved their manhood by forming gangs and fighting. So Puerto Ricans in the Viceroy's waged war against the mostly Italian Red Wings, who 'owned' a neighbouring area of Harlem, while the Irish Jesters in Washington Heights fought running battles with black gangs based next to them in the Bronx.

As one former gang member, called Bobby, recalls, in a book by the American historian Eric Schneider, Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: 'All you had was your turf, there was nothing else. All you had was this pride in being an hombre, in being bad and taking care of your people. This sense of identity was reinforced by the clothes they wore. Rough as they were, these kids liked to look good. Many had special sweaters which featured their gang's insignia - such as a crimson 'MM' for the Mau Maus - on the breast. Certain gangs were also known for their hats. The Beavers, a Brooklyn gang, favoured black, felt hats, for example, while the Tiny Tims wore blue berets.

But there were also similarities. Leather jackets were commonplace, as were Levi jeans and chinos. Hair was meticulously brushed into a pompadour and the whole gang culture was influenced heavily by bebop and rock 'n' roll. Fighting was known as 'bopping', and walking 'bop style' meant to walk with a swagger, swinging your shoulders and hips.

There was also an elaborate set of 'street' rules. Rumbles were organized at war councils, where a representative from each gang met on neutral territory - Doc's Candy Store, in West Side Story - and negotiated the time and location of a conflict and agreed the weapons to be used. Of course, these agreements were frequently broken. Boys were anxious to gain a reputation as a tough guy and the best way to do this was by being particularly vicious in a fight - drawing a gun, for example, when everyone else had chains or clubs. Many of the larger gangs, such as the Bishops, which had up to 100 members, were split into age grades. 'Juniors' seeking to establish a reputation - or 'rep' - looked for a chance to prove they could be more awful than anyone else. Anyone who failed to show up for a rumble or backed down from a fight would be considered a coward. Repeat offenders would be expelled from the gang and find themselves without any friends or protection.

'Rumbles' over girls were common, says Dr Yablonsky, and gang leaders would be enraged if a boy from another gang went out with one of 'his' girls. But unlike in West Side Story, relationships between Puerto Rican girls and white boys were rare, mainly because white gang members were so racist. 'Some of these guys were quite deranged and most of them had some sort of emotional problem. They weren't like the nice guys in West Side Story. Individuals had low self-esteem and joined gangs to gain some feeling of power and control, which is the same reason kids join gangs today. New Yorkers were morbidly fascinated by these reports, but at the same time most people regarded juvenile delinquency as the greatest threat to society -