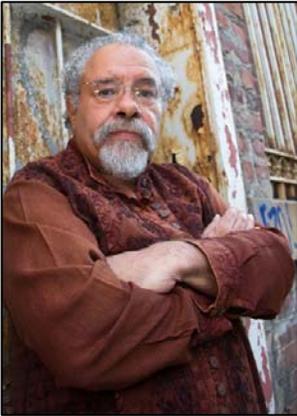


Jesús Papoleto Meléndez

Poet-Playwright-Activist



Jesús Papoleto Meléndez ("Papo") is a New York-born Puerto Rican award-winning poet most associated with the Nuyorican movement. He is also a playwright, teacher and activist.

Meléndez was born and raised in El Barrio (also known as "East Harlem" or "Spanish Harlem," located in the upper east side of Manhattan), of Puerto Rican parents who migrated to the mainland in search of a better life. Growing up with three sisters and one brother, Papo, the middle kid in the family, acquired a penchant for looking at things from a different perspective. Attending the public schools of his neighborhood, Meléndez became interested in writing at a young age, and participated in his first poetry reading when he was 19 years old.

Meléndez emerged onto the New York City scene at the right place at the right time. He published his first poem, "Message To Urban Sightseers" in *Talkin' About Us* (NY, 1969). He went on to publish his first volumes of poetry, *Casting Long Shadows* (NY, 1970), *Have You Seen Liberation* (NY, 1971), and *Street Poetry & Other Poems* (Barlenmir House, NY 1972), which firmly established Meléndez in the Nuyorican community. During the 1970s, he worked as a teacher-poet for Teachers & Writers Collaborative, a then relatively new organization founded by a group of writers and educators who believed that writers could make a unique contribution to the teaching of writing.



Meléndez 1993

Meléndez is credited as one of the original founders of the Nuyorican Movement.

Headquartered in New York City in El Barrio, the movement evolved during the late 1960s and forged a distinctly "Nuyorican" aesthetic and consciousness. Meléndez' early and close collaboration with poets and writers such as Miguel Algarín, Pedro Pietri, Sandra Maria Esteves, Americo Casiano, Jr., Miguel Piñero, Lois Elaine Griffith, Ntozake Shange and Tato Laviera contributed to the founding of the Nuyorican Poets Café in Manhattan's Lower East Side, which helped to foster a fertile environment for an emerging generation of Puerto Rican writers, scholars and artists raised predominantly in New York. He also began a working relationship with fellow poet, Pedro Pietri, a collaboration that became central to furthering his artistic output and would last until Pietri's death in 2004.

Meléndez' play, "The Junkies Stole The Clock," is notable as the first Latino play produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival The Public Theatre's Nuyorican Playwright's Unit. Directed by Hector Elias, the original play was produced in April 1974. In 1997, Veronica Caicedo directed and produced an updated version of "The Junkies Stole The Clock" at the Clemente Soto Vega Cultural Center in New York City.

Writing Style

Meléndez employs innovative narrative themes and forms in his creative works, including "Spanglish," the back and forth shift between English and Spanish within a framework that is predominately English. As Meléndez' work continued to expand linguistic and conceptual parameters, he developed a distinct written form of word-visualization he calls "Cascadance." Instead of writing poems "flush left," Meléndez' poetry "jumps from the page" and becomes a melodic processional sound of syllables. The words "cascade" down the page in a form of dance, and the words "play" with their associations to the words around them, becoming "visual poetry."

By 1980, disillusioned by the politics of the city, Meléndez left New York for the "greener pastures" of California where he continued to write, perform, teach and eventually published the poetry collection, *Concertos On Market Street* in 1993, merging his Nuyorican melodies with a Southern California sensibility.

Most significantly in these years he formed the musical group “Exiled Genius,” with Eugene Mingus on piano, and M’Chaka Uba on bass, a trio that combined the tradition of jazz spontaneity and precision with the natural melody of the poetic voice in poetry/jazz collaboration. “Exiled Genius” performed at several festivals throughout San Diego, Los Angeles and Baja, California, Tijuana, México and has opened for such artists as Tito Puente, Urban Bush Women and The Art Ensemble of Chicago.

When Meléndez returned to New York in the mid-1990s, he continued teaching, participating in community projects, writing new works, and performing at prestigious venues throughout the United States. He also formed “Nuyorican School – Original Poetry Jazz Ensemble” in 1997 with Americo Casiano. Now an elder statesman of the Nuyorican poetry scene, Meléndez has become a mentor for upcoming poets and writers that follow the Nuyorican tradition.

2Leaf Press published Meléndez’ long-awaited poetry collection, *Hey Yo! Yo Soy! 40 Years of Nuyorican Street Poetry, A Bilingual Edition* in 2012. This 368-page collection, comprised of his three previously published books, , comprised of three previously published books, *Casting Long Shadows* (1970), *Have You Seen Liberation* (1971), and *Street Poetry & Other Poems* (1972), consist of 60 poems about growing up Puerto Rican in New York City’s El Barrio during the 1960s and 1970s that remain socially and politically relevant today.

Meléndez is a recipient of the Union Settlement Association “Innovation Award” (2011); The 1st Annual “El Reverendo Pedro Pietri Hand Award” in Poetry (2006); El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico, El Puerto Rican Embassy; The Universes Poetic Ensemble Company Award in Appreciation of Inspiration & Commitment to the Development of the Company (2006); The Louis Reyes Rivera Lifetime Achievement Award (2004); a 2001 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry; an Artist for Community Enrichment Award (ACE) from the Bronx Council on the Arts (1995); and a Combo (Combined Arts of San Diego) NEA Fellowship in Literature (1988).

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