

panama!

Latin, Calypso and Funk on the Isthmus 1965-75



- 1 **Los Exagerados**
Panama Esta Bueno y ... Ma
- 2 **The Exciters**
Exciters Theme
- 3 **Bush y Sus Magnificos**
Nana Nina
- 4 **Víctor Boa y Su Musica**
Soy Solo Para Ti
- 5 **Freddy y sus Afro Latinos**
Maltrato
- 6 **Papi Brandao Y Su Ejecutivos**
Viva Panama
- 7 **Los Silvertones**
Old Buzzard
- 8 **Los Fabulosos Festivals**
El Mensaje
- 9 **The Exciters**
New Bag
- 10 **Bolita y su Tentacion Latina**
Descarga Tentacion
- 11 **Los Caballeros de Colon**
Con Los Caballeros
- 12 **Los Dinamicos Exciters**
featuring **Ralph Weeks**
Let Me Do My Thing
- 13 **Los Mozambiques**
Viva Tirado
- 14 **Maximo Rodriguez y Sus**
Estrellas Panameñas
Mambologia
- 15 **Lord Cobra**
and Pana-Afro Sounds
Rocombey

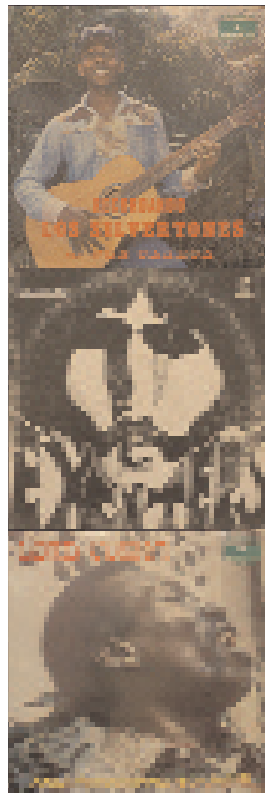


soundwayrecords.com
info@soundwayrecords.com

early 2002 I relocated to Costa Rica, where most of my father's family lives. During one of my many wanderings in the region I passed through the small working class city of David, Panama. Being on a totally deforested plain, David is baking hot, but has a nice colonial square where you can drink a sweet shaved ice and cool out. I asked a local where I might find old records, and he pointed me up the block to find a man named Antonio.

Antonio is a plump, quiet man who may or may not still have his little spot making mix CDs for workers and schoolchildren in the back of a cellphone and watch repair store. The tiny room he works in is literally crammed from floor to ceiling with LPs. Growing up in San Francisco, the only Latin music I knew well was Santana and Malo, and "Lowrider Oldies" as they are known on the West Coast. Stuffed into that tiny room with Antonio, fan blowing constantly, my education began.

After edifying me with classic mixes of Arsenio and Chappottin, Joe Cuba, Eddie Palmieri and Ismael Rivera (each one a revelation), Antonio mentioned the Combos Nacionales, Panamanian groups from the late '60s and early '70s. I think I picked up a few odd Panamanian records, but my focus at the time was on the amazing music he was playing for me. A few months later I returned to David, and Antonio was ill, not in his little room. I took to wandering around the back streets until I came upon a radio station, and mostly to get out of the heat I walked in and struck up a conversation with the DJ. Radio Cristal plays salsa and reggaeton between sound effects such as the smashing of dishes or windows and fake horror movie laughter. "Say my man, does the station still have its old records?" Radio Cristal's owner showed me out to a small concrete storage room of maybe ►



13. **Los Mozambiques Viva Tirado.**
Taken from the Taboga LP
El Presidiario (MTG 1017) 1970
D.R.
Soul (4.33)

Los Mozambiques LP *El Presidiario* (The Corvici), a big seller in the region, perhaps best crystallizes the Combos Nacionales sound: a stunning tropical mix of doo-wop soul, tipica, and guarachá. Los Mozambiques featured an excellent trio of bilingual singers in Carlos Martínez, Jaime Morrell and Eduardo Williams. Young rhythm guitarist Roberto Domínguez would later found the very successful salsa-oriented group Roberto y su Zafra with singer Ricardo "Babalá" Del Rosario. The wandering bass, flashes of the cobos guitar feel and Afro-Cuban percussion (with funky timbal work) on this reworking of the latin rock classic by "El Chicano" weave a mellow spell on the listener. Los Mozambiques later split in two, with Jaime Morrell forming the excellent combo, Skorpio.

14. **Maximo Rodríguez y Sus Estrellas Panameñas Mambología.**
Taken from the Taboga LP *Felicidad y Boogaloo, Maximo Rodríguez y Sus Estrellas Panameñas en El Rancho Grande.*
1966
Alberto Haro/Mane Nieto.
Descarga (4.05)

"Mambología" highlights the direct cultural link that existed between Panama (Puerto Rico, New York, Colombia, Venezuela) and Cuba, especially before the Missile Crisis of 1962. The song would fit comfortably between a Bebo Valdés and a Peruchín descarga from the late '50s Panart series of Cuban Jam Sessions. Pianist Mane Nieto started out as bongo player for Panama's best big band, La Perfecta de Armando Boza, but switched to piano while the band was touring Peru with Bery More. Timbalero Manuel González works the cascara, or metal side of the timbal, as director Maximo Rodríguez, who sang and played bass at the same time long before Oscar de León, holds down the *tumbao* like a metronome. *Y 'ta bien chevere mano*. (And it is very cool, bro!)

15. **Lord Cobra and Pana-Afro Sounds Rocombey.**
Taken from the Sally Ruth 45. 1970
Lloyd Thomas
Calypso (3.41)

Rocombey (or *Rookoombay*, *Rokombinej*) is a fairly well known song among calypso researchers, but few will have heard this rocking version by Lord Cobra (Wilfred Berry) and his six-piece Pana Afro Sounds. Pre-eminent among a powerful group of Panamanian calypso artists, Lord Cobra began as a bartender in the Canal Zone, where he was often called upon to grab a mike and improvise. This particular version of *Rocombey* features a haunting banjo/guitar-led mento rhythm as Lord Cobra talks and sings about a graveyard Voodoo dance. Lord Cobra later recorded LPs with Bocas del Toro's wildly popular combo the Beachers and with Colon's Duncan Brothers.

Special thanks to: Bush Buckley, Marcela, Francisquito, Popo and Andy, Anel Sanders y los pelaos al Minimax, Ricky Staples, Balto Chan, Kabir and Zuhairah, Reggie Johnson, Roy (Joe) Clark, Freddy, Mane, Chichi and Cabeza, Tommy Barreff, Cesar Villalobos, Luis Gooding, Fernando Serracin, Eric Jackson at the Panama News, and Sean Graham, Nickodemus, Tim Perry, Will Holland, Nat Turner, Will Appleyard. Mastered by Nick at Sound Mastering Ltd. nick@soundmastering.com. Design by Alex Geoffrey

► five by eight meters, and opened the door. Inside were around ten thousand LPs and 45s, stacked on shelves and thrown about. As I picked my jaw up off the ground, the owner said "Pick whatever you like, we can talk about it later." I spent three days in that little room that trip, gladly inhaling countless Panamanian spores and molds. Cachao, Joe Bataan, Ray Barreto, they kept coming. Panart, Fania, Tico. Fruko y sus Tesos, Los Dementes, Felix del Rosario. Fuentes, Velvet, Borinquen.

It was among the 45s that I began to see labels I did not recognize: Sally Ruth, Loyola, Taboga, Tamayo. They all said "Hecho en Panama" (made in Panama), and thankfully most of them noted the song genre on the label. As I read some, I couldn't wait to listen to them: a "soul boogaloo" by The Exciters, a "guaracha soul" by the Beachers, "calypso y guaracha", "salsa bossanova" and "funky soul." This, then, was the music of the Combos Nacionales and their antecedents. Two years and ten trips later, there are two things I find to be true: one is that I love the people of Panama, and the other is that I am just beginning to make sense of both the beautiful complexity of their music as well as the time and environment in which it blossomed.

There are four reasons why assembling a representative collection of Panamanian popular music has been very frustrating. To begin with, Panama was a country of perhaps 1.5 million people in 1970, and the number of records pressed was accordingly small. In addition, the people of Panama are *muy rumbero*, they like to party – so of the paltry few records I have found, most are worn or scratched beyond playability. The weather, so hot, humid and rainy, wreaks havoc on vinyl and especially on record covers while providing perfect growing conditions for hungry molds, cockroaches and other vinyl-eating insects. Compounding these problems is the fact that Panama is a very urban environment (Panama city holds over 90% of the population of the entire country) where space is always at a premium, and where the old is routinely discarded in favor of the new. Bulky, musty record collections are often thrown away during a

move or to make way for a CD collection, and whole radio station inventories have been thrown into dump trucks. On the other hand, the same dense living conditions no doubt facilitated the multiple transmissions and retranmissions of culture that led to a unique musical explosion.

The artists' stories have not been as hard to document: although many of the members of the Combos and their older musical pioneers moved to the U.S., and many others have passed on in recent years, there remains a strong core of local musicians, fans and historians who appreciate the significance of Panama's musical legacy. The time I have spent among them has permanently put the word *chevere* (cool) in my daily vocabulary.

Panama is located at the end of Central America, but has more in common culturally with the Caribbean (the Antilles) and South America. Always sparsely populated, Panama's often impassable jungles proved good cover for thriving runaway slave communities both Indian and African. Indeed, in addition to a large and varied Indian population (even today the five modern indigenous nations living in Panama represent over ten percent of its population), colonial Panama had such a strong African presence that it was known after independence from Spain as "Colombia's Black province". The Spanish trading centre at Portobelo on the Atlantic coast – a magical place to visit today – was such a fruitful target for pirates that it was sacked at least five times.

Panama's radically multicultural society got a jump start in the 1850s as North American interests seeking a faster route to the gold fields in California imported West Indian (Afro-Antillean) labor to do the dangerous job of building a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts. More Afro-Antillean and Chinese workers were imported to undertake the first canal project, funded by the French. The effort failed spectacularly, and by the turn of the century North American Financiers engineered a coup that gave Panama independence from Colombia and the United States control of the Canal Zone in perpetuity. ►

1. **Los Exagerados** Panama Esta Bueno y ... Ma.
Taken from the Discos Istmeños LP
Los Exagerados (STG 1021) 1971
Jose Chombo Silva
Descarga (5.26)

One of the few Panamanian LPs known outside of Panama itself, *Los Exagerados* joined and appreciated jazz saxophone great Jose "Chombo" Silva with latin jazz trumpet wailer/composer Rafael Labasta and an enigmatic Cuban piano player named Carlos "Salsa" Zulueta. Chombo toured and recorded throughout the 1950s and '60s with Cal Tjader, Mongo Santamaria and Johnny Pacheco, while Labasta got his start – and his introduction to Panama – with Timbal legend Francisco "Koko" Bastar's group. "*Panama Esta Bueno y ... Ma* is a descarga of Chombo's confection, a long and monstrous straight ahead burner. Backing musicians included 'Freddy' Anglin on Bass and Tomas "Plomo" Espinosa on congas. The song's title translates roughly as "It's all good in Panama – and then some."

2. **The Exciters** Exciters Theme.
Taken from the Loyola LP The Exciters
(ELD 15008) 1969
The Exciters
Soul (3.49)

This musical calling card off the Exciters self-titled first LP is a beautiful, wandering ventures-style jam featuring Antonio Rodriguez's psychedelic guitar punctuated by light trumpet work by Ramon Davidson and Enrique Stevens. The Exciters LP has been repressed at least three times in Panama, and includes favorites such as the tropical danzon *Ojos Verdes*, and covers of the Drifters' "I, Who Have Nothing" and James Brown's "Let Yourself Go". Other members who round out the Exciters roster included Carlos Rodriguez on rhythm guitar, William Lawrence on congas, singers Rich Burns, Toribio Samuels and Joaquin Moore.

3. **Bush y Sus Magnificos** Nana Nina
Taken from the Sol 45. 1970
Freddy Anglin
Descarga (2.59)

"*Nana Nina, me hace pensar, me fascina, me hace olvidar*" (Nana Nina, it makes me think, it fascinates me, makes me forget). Bassist/composer Freddy Anglin wrote this thundering descarga about his love affair with a certain herb that many artists and writers use for creative sustenance. The saxes give Bush's group a post-mambo big band feel, and once the percussion opens up, (Bush on timbales, Shazam on congas, Anel Sanders on bongos) it doesn't stop for the whole song. Benito Guardia is heard on piano. Bush's popularity as bandleader was enduring: he recorded at least eight full-length LPs over a long and full career. Bush recently published a memoir/history of music in Panama called *La Musica Salsa en Panama*, y Algo Mas, available from descarga.com.

4. **Victor Boa y Su Musica Soy Solo Para Ti**.
Taken from the Discos Istmeños LP A Bailar con Victor Boa y Su Musica MTG 1008. 1970
Victor Boa
soul boogaloo (4.13)

El Maestro released a handful of 45s, but only one LP. Victor's piano stylings (all instrumental) are perhaps the best example of the diversity of forms and sensibilities that influenced Panamanian musicians in the 20th century: the LP includes two soul numbers, two bossa novas, two guarachas and a vals moderno, all of Victor's composition. When he passed away in December 2004 at age eighty, Victor left behind over three hundred original compositions and a place as one of the great composers in Panamanian music history. Internationally recognized jazz pianist and native of Panama, Danilo "El Cholo" Pérez counts Victor as one of his influences, and some had hoped that before his passing Victor would find a larger audience, being recognized along the lines of Cuba's Ruben Gonzalez. *Soy Solo Para Ti* is a funky piece of Victor's own *Tambo Jazz* with crisp drumming by Danny Clovis and admirable sax work by Jose "Tata" Pinto and Reggie Johnson. Both Danny and Reggie play latin jazz weekly with their bands - free admission - at casinos in Panama City.

5. **Freddy y sus Afro Latinos** Maltrato
Taken from the Panavox LP Freddy y sus Afro Latinos PLP-1002. 1972
Napoleon Bright
Guaguanco (6.03)

This song was one that really inspired me to keep looking for more Panamanian creations. Composed by pianist Napoleon "Napo" Bright, *Maltrato* (treating me bad) is a stunning, six minute long jazz guaguanco. Powerful singer Pedro "Boilita" Gomez sings a classic despecho (literally, "getting it off your chest" - the love complaint of a broken heart) over Freddy's guaguanco bassline (engineer Bailito Chan placed a single mike right under Freddy's bass to get that deep sound) and amazing mellophone (something like a French horn) work by John "Rubberlegs" McKindo, a Panamanian jazz legend. Percussion on this selection includes hot timbales work by 'Yeyo' Downs and tasteful vibes playing by music professor (no relation to the Mambo King) Dr. Tito Rodriguez.

6. **Papi Brandao Y Su Ejecutivos** Viva Panama.
Taken from the 45. 1969
Papi Brandao (2.59)

Roberto "Papi" Brandao's *Viva Panama* is a beautiful example of the musica tipica that remains the genre of choice for a good chunk of the Panamanian population. A cousin of neighboring Colombia's porros, and cumbia vallenatos, by the late 60's musica tipica compositions had integrated many Afro-Cuban/salsa forms and instruments. Papi was the first to use the stand-up bass in tipica music, and you can hear the timbales and tumbadoras (conga drums) as his accordion interplays with an electric guitar. After heartfelt patriotic lyrics that proclaim: "Long live Panama, long live its flag!" we are treated to a number of typical lyrics from the interior of the country. The song ends with a slogan famous during the culturally fruitful Torrijos era: "*Panama, puente del mundo, corazon del universo*" (Panama, bridge to the world, heart of the universe)



7. Los Silvertones Old Buzzard
Taken from the Padisco 45 P - 113. 1972
D.R., Carlos Allen
Calypso (3.07)

Old Buzzard is another (mento) calypso standard, here the versatile Silvertones, winners of "Best Combo of the Year" two years in a row, have created an upbeat re-working that manages to have both a jazz and latin feel. The whole song is another testament to the beautiful mixing that Panamanian music embodies: multi-talented singer and composer Carlos Allen sings here in Patois, whereas on other songs he sings in English (the sweet soul *Oh Gee*, a local classic) and Spanish (the bolero soul *Fin a M Soledad*). Band members included singer/guitarist Joe Clark (who went on to solo stardom), director/sax player Ricardo Bermudez, Eugenio Dodge on second sax, Johnny Phillips on bass, Pepe Lopez on congas and the talented Robert Cole on drums.

8. Los Fabulosos Festivals El Mensaje
Taken from the Onda Nueva 45 ON-
1490-B. 1972
Cymande
Soul (3.27)

This is one of those songs that make DJs grit their teeth. Festivals drummer and director Ronald George and singer Edgar (not Emile) King put this raw, funky, guitar-led remake of the beautiful Cymande tune together. Lead singer Emile King, now a muslim cleric named Kabir, told me "The band loved it, Ronnie loved the drumming and everything. It wasn't my type of song. But we put the Panamanian beat in it, that's why it sounds different than the original." Other Festivals band members included lead guitarist/composer Alfred Peters, who left the band to study medicine, Ricky Yearwood on rhythm guitar, Carlos Danvers on bass and his cousin Melvin Wright on congas.

9. The Exciters New Bag.
Taken from the Loyola LP Conozco a Los
Dos ELD 15010. 1971
J. Brown
soul boogaloo (8.29)

The New Bag is an eight and a half minute long James Brown-derived funk jam taken from the Exciters' second LP. It was also released in a short version as *The Bag* on a Loyola 45. James was so well loved in Panama that he played there in 1972 (he brought his own band - this is around the time of *The Payback*) on the same bill with the Exciters and local funky soul favorites the Festivals. The Exciters featured a world-class rhythm section in musical director /bassist Carlos Brown and drummer Ray Adams, whose drum work really stands out on this cut: the trumpets blare, the bass nubs along, the drums are a funky bus between Panama City and Colon... "Hey hey, I feel alright... two times!... Unh unh!"

10. Bolita y su Tentacion Latina
Descarga Tentacion.
Taken from the Sally Ruth LP *Todos*
Somos Hermanos (SR-1003) 1974
Bolita Gomez
Descarga (10.59)

Bassist Freddy Anglin and singer Pedro 'Bolita' Gomez were involved in two excellent one-off recording projects, Freddy y sus Afro Latinos and Bolita y su Tentacion Latina. The liner notes for the LP *Todos Somos Hermanos* notes that Bolita and the group were "doing something new with salsa rhythms", and the result is very fresh and powerful. This ten minute long jazz descarga is a percussive showcase, as 'Cubita' on bongos, Virgilio 'Villo' Ortega and 'Catalino' on timbales trade solos with Freddy, sax player Jarge Silvester and Pastor Marcelino on trumpet. Note the tres guitar playing by Ignacio 'Cancer' Ortega. Bolita was a notorious brawler who was known to knock feisty GIs out for fun; he later moved to Puerto Rico where he sang with the great Joe Quijano's orchestra, among others.

11. Los Caballeros de Colon Con Los Caballeros
Taken from the Loyola 45. 1972
Los Caballeros
Descarga (3.14)

Many members of the group were still in their teens when this record was recorded. From Colon, Los Caballeros come right out of the gates with trumpets and sax blaring on this straight-ahead descarga.

Los Caballeros were another trilingual group that liked to play calypso songs and soul covers (they recorded the Archies' "Sugar, Sugar" and Stevie Wonder's "A Place in the Sun") along with their guajiras and guaguanco. *Con Los Caballeros* has a similar feeling to a lot of the raucous salsa being played in the barrios of Panama, Colombia and Venezuela in the late 1960s, with percussion that calls to mind some of the hot *Costeña* salsa (Michi Sarmiento) being recorded at the same time by the Fuentes label in Medellin.

12. Los Dinamicos Exciters featuring Ralph Weeks Let Me Do My Thing.
Taken from the Jacher LP *Lo Mejor de Los Dinamicos Exciters* (JH-101 A) 1972
Ralph Weeks
Funky Soul (3.22)

"Alright... out of sight... alright... out of sight" Singer Ralph Weeks fronts the Exciters for his composition "Let Me Do My Thing", originally released on a Sally Ruth 45. I was floored when I put the needle to this song for the first time - "Let Me Do My Thing" is as professionally an executed funk song as one could hope to hear. Tight trumpet blasts are heard over the solid bass and drum track, with Ralph's strong belt-it-out vocal throughout. Note the tasty conga playing in the background. Ralph also recorded a number of 45s with his own group, Ralph Weeks and the Telecasters, before going on to become a fireman in New York City.



Above: Jose Chombo Silva



► Completed in 1914, The North American Canal Project was truly a feat of immense proportions, sponsoring a worker migration wave of around 150,000 in the decade of 1904-1914 and costing some 25-30,000 workers' lives in the end. Greeks, Lebanese, Spaniards, Chinese, Irish, Salvadorans and Hindus all came to work in the young country, but the overwhelming portion of workers entering Panama from 1880 to 1915 were Afro-Antilleans from Jamaica, Barbados, Martinique and Trinidad. Many did not return to the islands, but remained and settled on Panamanian soil. Afro-Antilleans also composed the great majority of workers on the United Fruit Company banana plantations on Panama's stunningly beautiful Bocas del Toro Archipelago.

Panama's musical legacy is a product of both the rich mixture of cultures its population encompasses and its geographically central location. Directly to the south of Panama is Colombia, whose tradition of cumbia and vallenato featuring accordion and hand-held scraper deeply influenced Panama's own *musica típica* (Mestizo folk music). To the east are the Antilles, from which workers and sailors brought not only the Afro-Cuban majesty of the son, rumba, guaracha and guaguanco, but also the work songs (which were a large part of the soundtrack of the canal's construction) and mento/proto-calypso of the Jamaicans and Trinidadians. From the north, Mexican soldiers brought rancheras and boleros, foxtrots and military marches, while Afro-American jazz and gospel music (Afro-Antilleans were observant Protestants) was brought from the port at New Orleans a short distance away.

Panama's population was concentrated in the port cities at either end of the canal: Colon on the Atlantic coast, and Panama City on the Pacific. Whereas today all the action and most of the population resides Panama City (while Colon languishes with high unemployment and a reputation for violence), from the 1940s through the early '70s Colon was the undisputed entertainment capital of Panama. Colon was described as a "little Havana" with cabarets and the-

aters such as Club Tropical, the Copacabana, the Florida, the Monte Carlo, Club Savoy and the Teatro Panama. The patronage of the Afro-Antilleans of Colon and a steady flow of U.S. army and navy personnel helped support a vibrant scene of local jazz and calypso groups.

An early 10 inch record of Panamanian mento-calypso on the Paragon label featured singers Black Czar, Sir Jablonsky and Two-Gun Smokey doing favorites such as "Chinee Bamboo Dance" and "Roocombey". Other famous rhymer still remembered with wonder include Black Majesty, Delicious, Lord Kontiki, Lord Panama and Lord Kitty, who is said to have bested Mighty Sparrow himself in a controversial calypso MC Battle. Bocas del Toro-born Lord Cobra (Wilfred Berry) and his Pana-Afro Sounds proved one of the most popular of the mid-to-late 60s, recording: "about 43 small records, LPs, I have five." Charismatic singer Leroy Gittens composed and sang the hit "My Commanding Wife."

Bebop and significantly, Cubop arrived in the post-war period. Jazz greats in Panama included composer and bassist Clarence Martin Sr., known to get down and play on his back as the crowd roared, Gladston 'Bar' Gordon on saxophone, singer Barbara Wilson, pianist Seth Rose, trumpet player Gene White, the list literally goes on and on. Bebop jam sessions at venues like Kelvin's in Panama City might feature drummer and dancer 'Zaggy' (Harold Berry) and his brother 'Ziggy', or the likes of 'Rubberlegs' (John McKindo) whose soulful mellophone heard on this compilation on the Freddy y sus Afro Latinos jazz guaguanco 'Maltrato'. Pianist Victor Boa (Victor Everton McRae), who later earned the nickname of the "High Priest of Jazz", split his time in the 1940s and '50s between small jazz combos such as the "Downbeat Five" and big band mambo, bolero and guaracha orchestras such as Armando Boza's famous "La Perfecta". Boza's mighty orchestra provided backing for the original *Sonero Mayor*, Beny Moré, at the Carnavales in Colon and later toured with him to Peru. ►



This page: The Exciters

► The Afro-Antillean experience in Panama was one of daily discrimination in pay, housing, and access to public resources. Afro-Antillean and Panamanian Mestizo "Silver Roll" workers in the U.S. Canal Zone made exactly half what a white "Gold Roll" worker made for the same job. Separate colored and white bathrooms and water fountains added daily insult to injury, and even in Protestant churches the faithful were separated by color. It has been said that the Canal Zone was administered as a 51st state, and one in the racist deep south at that.

Just across the street on Panamanian soil, the ruling Panameñista party denied Afro-Antilleans (also Chinese, Arabs and Sephardic Jews) citizenship as it leaned toward fascism in the 1940s: some party members dressed in the white robes of the KKK and called to "send the blacks home". Correspondingly, Black advancement groups such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA had many supporters in Panama; when Garvey was deported from the U.S in 1927, 50,000 people came to see his ship at Port Cristobal in Colon.

A new generation came of age in the late '50s, an era which saw new smaller and more affordable record players on sale, and the latest 45s of early doo-wop, soul and rock 'n' roll in dedicated record stores. Thus were the seeds of the soul-influenced Combos Nacionales sown: inspired by the Platters, the Ink Spots, the Drifters and Frankie Lymon, four- or five-man singing groups backed by a single guitar emerged with names like the Golden Boys, the Bell Tones, the Twilights, the Lyrics, and Ernie King and the Crowns. Some of these groups learned their trade alternating with touring musicians like Shirley Scott, Jimmy Smith, even Ella Fitzgerald and Billy Eckstine. Other groups based in Panama City included los Playboys, los Ron Coloniales, and los Skyliners, while los Astronautas of Gamboa in the Canal Zone would evolve into Panama's hottest funk-soul group, los Dinamicos Exciters.

The big Latin bands downsized in the 1960s, as latin jazz and early salsa bloomed. Victor Boa's orchestra, Maximo Rodriguez y sus Estrellas featuring singer

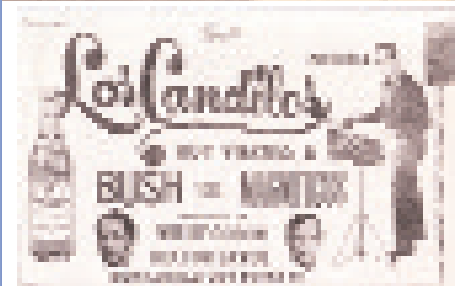
Manito Johnson and swinging pianist Mane Nieto and fiery Dominican-born latin jazz trumpet player Rafael Labasta's Orquesta played at jumping spots like the Rancho Grande nightclub or the Teatro Apolo. Panamanians such as trumpeter player Victor 'Vilin' Paz (a stalwart of latin jazz, recorded on Eddie Palmieri's Grammy-winning "Sun of Latin Music" LP, among others) and flautist/sax player Mauricio Smith (founding member of the Saturday Night Live band) went on to fame on an international scale; Cuban-born tenor sax player Jose 'Chombo' Silva, who lived in Colon before going back to Cuba to play on Cachao's descargas, on Cal Tjader's Ritmo Caliente LPs and with the Alegre All Stars, came back to Panama in the late 1960s to record the brilliant *Los Exagerados* descarga LP with Rafael Labasta.

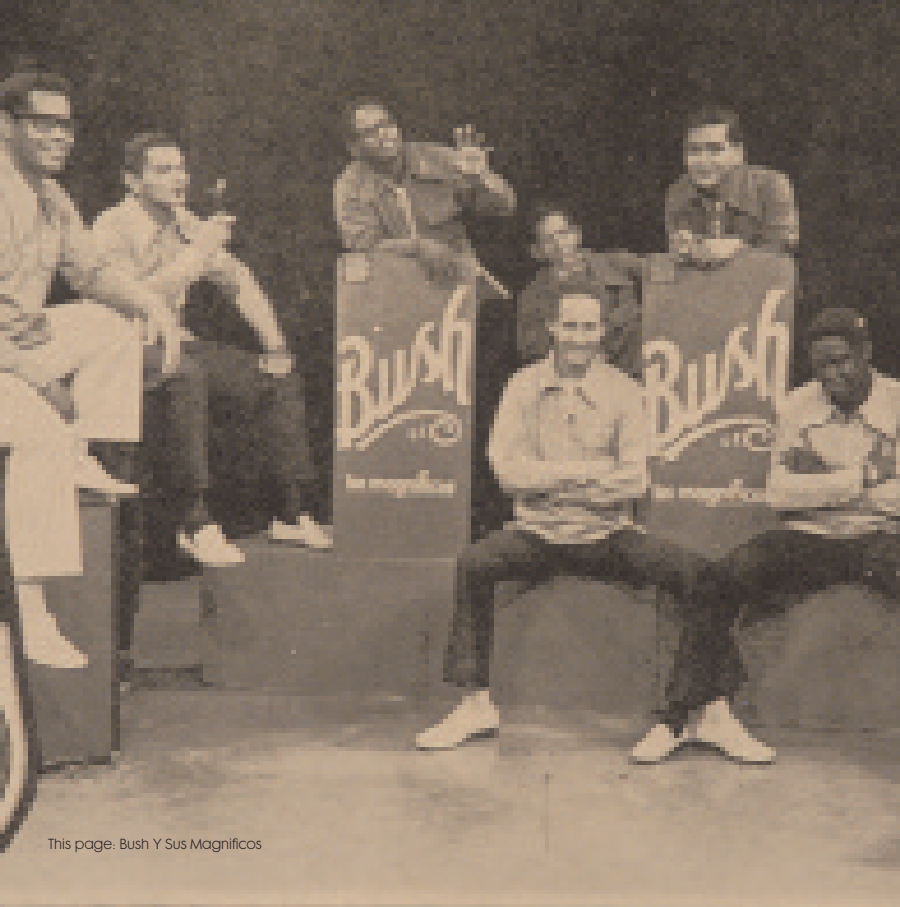
One of the most popular of all Panamanian groups throughout the late 1960s and early '70s was Bush y sus Magnificos, led by timbalero Francisco 'Bush' Buckley and featuring Anel Sanders on bongos, Harold 'Shazam' Patterson on congas and Luis 'Freddy' Anglin on bass. Freddy would go on to form two groups, Freddy y sus Afro-Latinos and Bolita's Tentacion Latina, both represented on this compilation. Another Panamanian musician who played with Bush early on was Ruben Blades, who had a number of hits with a local group called los Salvajes del Ritmo. Ruben's trajectory would later take him from Fania mailboy to an acknowledged spot as one of the great singer/composers of modern Latin music. Throughout this period, Panama stood right alongside Cali, Colombia and Caracas, Venezuela as important and especially fertile centers of urban Afro-Latin music. All the greats of the Tico/Alegre /Fania days knew if they could pass the crowds in Panama, they could make it anywhere.

By the late '60s, in addition to the facilities at Indica, S.A. in nearby Costa Rica, there were two record plants manufacturing 45RPM and long play records in Panama: Discos de Panama, S.A. (Padisco) and Discos Istmeños. Discos Istmeños was also the studio of choice at the time, and the entire Panamanian ►



Above: Freddy y sus Afro-Latinos





This page: Bush Y Sus Magnificos

► recording industry benefited greatly from the skills of native son Eduardo 'Balito' Chan, a brilliant recording engineer trained in Italy. Balito produced and recorded for Padisco's Taboga label, for the combo-dedicated Sally Ruth and Loyola labels, for Discos Istmeños' own label and later for Panavox records, a division of Ducruet and Ducruet, S.A. In addition, Onda Nueva had an interesting roster of combos recording in its own studios, as did the still extant Tamayo records beginning in the early 1970s.

As in much of the world, the late 1960s proved a time of radical change for Panama and its many cultures. A 1968 revolt led by lieutenant colonel Omar Torrijos ousted President Amulfo Arias, a guardian of the elite who had first come to power himself by coup in the late 1930s. The "dictatorship" that followed until 1981 (when Torrijos was killed in a possibly suspicious airplane accident) was populist in practice: the power of the unconscionably wealthy few was curbed, and new opportunities opened up for Panamanians of all colors and cultures. At the same time, the Afro-American Black Power movement had instant repercussions among the Afro-Antillean youth, some of whom began to blow out their afros at the risk of being pulled off the street by a police officer and shorn in the closest barber shop. The musical creativity that blossomed during this period was staggering: somewhere around fifty individual groups, often grouped together as the *Combos Nacionales*, appeared in the 1967-1975 period. Equipped with new, electrified instruments, the younger generation listened closely as the music coming over U.S. Army Radio and arriving in the record stores changed: new sources of inspiration included Richie Ray and Eddie Palmieri, the Chi-Lites, the Temptations, and the Four Tops, Santana, Curtis Mayfield and James Brown. Entrepreneurs such as the Heres Brothers (Jacobo and Moises), who ran the *Palacio de Musica* stores in Colon and Panama City, functioned as incubators for a number of important Combos, providing instruments and paying for recording sessions at Discos Istmeños' studios. Almost overnight, the Panamanian

public seemed to have found a music that represented their diverse tastes and experiences: favourite groups such as the Silvertones, the Festivals, the Exciters, the Beachers, the Mozambiques, the Soul Fantastics and the Goombays appeared on local television and were booked for engagements all over the country. As lovers of all colors were glued together on the dance floor, the *Combos Nacionales*' roster proved the cement for a generation's progress from Afro-Antillean, Chinese, or Latino to simply Panamanian. The *Combos Nacionales*' mix of latin rock guarachas, doo-wop calypsos, tropical funk and true latin soul defies categorization even today: the Festivals' great soul singer Kabir (Ernie King) told me that "Every band had their own unique sound, but what we found was they all had the same feeling. Ironically we still have no name for that feeling. Every other country can name their stuff, the bachata, the mambo, the valenato, the salsa. We are still waiting for someone to name what we did." Volume 1 of *Panama Sounds* includes a diverse cross-section of the incredible music created in Panama in the late 1960s and early '70s, with emphasis on funky soul and the latin jazz descarga. Bear in mind when listening to them that we are lucky to have the recordings we do have of some of these artists, such as Victor Boa and John 'Rubberlegs' McKindo, as recording was often seen as a way of promoting live performances and little more ●

This compilation has been assembled with deep respect for the art of the Panamanian musician, whose labours deserve more attention in the coming years.

Liner notes and research – Roberto Ernesto Gyemant
Compiled by Miles Cleret and Roberto Ernesto Gyemant