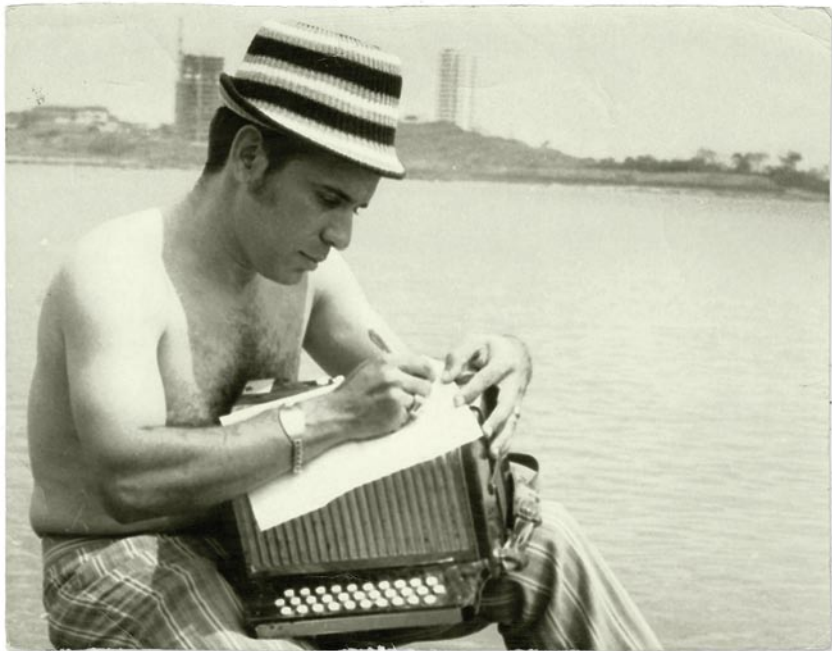


# panama!3

Calypso Panameño, Guajira Jazz & Cumbia Típica on the Isthmus 1960-75



This is the third of three CDs/LPs in the Panamal series. Presented below are some notes on these recordings. More contextual information about Panama may be found in the liner notes for the first Panamal CD/LP.

Colón, in Panama, is one of the few cities in Latin America of which the travel guidebooks say, "If you walk down the street, even in broad daylight, you stand a good chance of being mugged." It's not quite like that: you should always know what neighborhood you are going into in just about any city of the world, and if you are fool enough to walk around with gold or other valuables in a neighborhood you don't know, well, you probably deserve to have your wealth redistributed. Colón is very poor, jobs are scarce, and the nearby free-trade zone seems hermetically sealed from the outside world. It strikes you as a city that has been ignored by the powers that be, and most Panamanians would agree that this is true. Central Colón today looks a bit like the South Bronx in the '80s dropped into the tropics: rows of buildings with gorgeous 1940s facades rotting and in dire need of paint, interspersed with buildings that look painfully bombed out; all kinds of kids playing out in front of them amidst the rubble.





Little Frankie Greaves

It wasn't always this way. From the 1920s well into the 1960s, Colón was like a little Havana, with a lively, glittering nightlife: plenty of theaters, bars, dancehalls (and cathouses for the sailors and soldiers on leave). It boasted a solid middle class, mostly Afro-Antilleans from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Martinique, along with the typical Panamanian smattering of Chinese, Jews, Hindus, Mestizos, Arabs, Spaniards, Greeks, and every other ethnicity that ever took to the high seas in search of a better life. So strong was the Afro-Antillean presence along the Caribbean coast (reaching up to Limón, Costa Rica) that when Marcus Garvey was deported from the US in 1927, 50,000 people gathered to see his prison ship when it stopped at Port Cristóbal in Colón.

On one of my trips to Colón, I was accompanied by DJ Omar from Pueblo Nuevo in Panamá City. Omar has a ready smile and knows people everywhere. Among our stops was Tommy's shack, recognizable by two huge speakers sitting out front, blasting rare soul bits and early ska from the '60s, along with more cleanly recorded '70s and '80s soul classics, the occasional Fania-era salsa and quite a bit of rump-shaking soca. People bring Tommy their old vinyl, and Tommy, god bless him, records them and throws them away. Trust me, no form of blandishment or threat offered will get him to change this horrible quirk of his personality. I have tried too many times. But he's got it all on CD, and if you can convince him not to apply the "crackle cleaner" on his computer, you can be sure to hear things you have never heard before.

This is where I first heard *Juck Juck* by Sir Jablonsky, featured on *Panama! 2*, and the haunting *Masters Are Gone* by Sir Valentino, featured on this compilation. I think that's also where I heard the Silvertones' low-rider oldie *You*

*Call Me By My Name* (which no one who has ever driven a low-rider has ever heard, unfortunately), as well as their tender *Ñaqa Quinda*. This last song raised a polemic in the late '60s when the Kuna Yala Indian nation demanded that the song be removed from the airwaves because it talked about sexual relations in their language. It's a lovely song really, where a girl says, "If you marry me, we can go to your place and Ñaqa Quinda," and all the musicians who sang it argue that they meant it as a love song. Either way, it's a soul song sung in a Native Amerindian language: cool.

The Silvertones—who were the composers of *Ñaqa Quinda*—were made up exclusively of Afro-Antillean musicians (the same band that did the brilliant, funky *típica* fusion *Tamborito Swing* on Volume 2); the song was popular among the Afro-Antillean youth of Colón. And thus we come to the point of my essay: the brilliant array of cultures





that lived together and mixed in Panama in the 20th century, with Afro-Antilleans as the cultural lightning rod.

Although *Ñaca Quinda* does not specifically refer to a relationship between a black man and a Kuna woman, one is struck by the number of songs that do refer to—or rather celebrate—cross-cultural love affairs, which are a beautiful thing, in my opinion. Lord Panama, perhaps the dominant figure among bilingual Spanish/English Calypsonians, has a lovely song called *Lolita Mi Cholita*, in which he talks about meeting his girlfriend, a *chola* (in Panama, a *chola* is an Indian from the interior), dancing with her and falling in love. In a nice riposte, *típica* star Yin Carrizo and his Conjunto Viva Panamá sing *Mi Chomba* (a *chombo* is a black Antillean, as opposed to a *come coco*, or colonial, Spanish-speaking black). The song is about Yin meeting, dancing and falling in love with a beautiful black girl. Both songs take place in an environment of curious, festive discovery. Both are a long way from Janis Ian's *Society's Child*. (By the way, don't go around calling people *cholos* and *chombos* in Panama: both were originally derogatory terms that enforced discrimination, and have only recently begun to be re-appropriated and invested with pride).

You may recall from Panama! 2 that Lord Jablonsky "Jucks them in English" and "Jucks them in Spanish." This compilation features a number of beautiful songs that display the multicultural diversity of Panama in general and the multilingual abilities of the Afro-Antilleans specifically. Lord Cobra, the recognized dean of the Panamanian Calypsonians, sings *Colón, Colón*, in which the *coro* is sung in Spanish: "*Colón Colón, venganse para Colón*" ("come to Colón"); and the stanzas trade off in Spanish and





English. Lord Panama's early, big band *calypso* madness *Fire Down Below* is also sung in both Spanish ("Fuego Abajo") and English, as he urges his *vecino* ("neighbour") "Llama los bomberos, te digo apurate pasiero/ mira como sube la candela, y yo ni tengo solo una manguera" ("Hurry up buddy, call the firefighters/ look at the flames rise, and I only have one hose").

But the centrepiece has to be Frederick Clarke's *Chombo Pa' La Tienda* ("Chombo goes to the store"). Recorded for Loyola records in 1969 with the band Soul Apollo, *Chombo Pa' La Tienda* has a ridiculous Panamanian soul beat that almost sounds like a Latin blaxploitation soundtrack. The song was a hit on the radio, but if you look at the LP cover (an image of which is included in these notes), you will see a red box which warns that the LP is prohibited from radio play: probably because of the adult themes and language used by the performers Chombo and Pin ("Why didn't I bring a bale of barbed wire to tear up my insides to keep your damn father off").

According to Exciters' drummer Ray Adams: "Back then the common people would buy the food they needed every day." I have seen this in Panama recently: it is certainly a way of life for people who do not have enough money to stock up, who lack refrigeration in a place where there is an abundance of tropical bugs that can quickly spoil any stored goods. "The common man could empathize with Chombo getting sent to store," add Ray. Others noted that the dialogue, if rough, is a pretty fair estimation of what it sounded like when the Antillean mothers chided out their children.

In *Chombo Pa' La Tienda*, the Chombo character (who also appears in a later song *Chombo en Navidad*) is sent to the corner store



by his mother, who gives him a specific list of items to buy: "five cent *ñame*, ten cent *yuca*, five cent for the lighter, five cent flour, five cent corn meal, forty cent codfish and five cent potato" ("Potato again?"). Forebodingly, she warns him: "And don't forget to bring back me *quatah* change." Chombo goes to the corner store in the *barrio*, which like all corner stores in Latin America to this day, are run by fully bi- or tri-lingual Chinese immigrants.

Chombo switches into Spanish: "*Oye chinito*," says Chombo, calling the man Chino, as all people with epicanthic folds are called in Latin America, regardless of their nationality: "*despachame rapido, me quiero ir de aqui*" ("send me off quickly, I want to get out of here"). He then translates his mother's patois list into Panamanian Spanish, as a nickel becomes a *reál* and codfish becomes *bacalao*: "*un reál de ñame, dos reáles de yuca, un reál de aceite, un reál de harina de pan, un reál de harina de maiz, ocho reáles de bacalao, y un reál de papa; y no olvide del vuelto*; and don't forget the change." When he gets home, his mother asks what happened to her change, with the punch line being that, "a dime stay in my pocket." When his mother threatens to beat him, he stalls her by saying, "you know what the boys call you" ("What them a call me?")... leading to the climactic bridge which says "tremble-ah, tremble-ah, your body's trembling", meaning that his mother drinks too much.

Of course, the violence and hardness in Chombo's mother's voice reminds us that the common experience in a marginalized Panamanian *barrio* was often full of stress and poverty. Still, the glory of Panamanian multiculturalism shines through: the engineer and producer Balito Chan, who recorded most of the songs from this era in Panama, speaks excellent





Orquesta de Armando Baza

English and patois. Ray Adams speaks a beautiful formal Spanish, as well as perfect English and patois. I have seen and heard seven-year-old Chinese boys switch from hardcore ghetto Spanish to shopkeeper Cantonese in the blink of an eye, and listening to older Antillean women speak Spanish with their thick Jamaican and Bajan accents is a linguist's delight.

Volume 3 of Panama! includes another diverse cross-section of the incredible music created in Panama in the late 1960s and early '70s. The dominant figure among a group of brilliant Calypsonians in Panama was Wilfred "Lord Cobra" Berry, an artist I wish I had had the chance to interview. It is to him that this compilation is dedicated.

**Roberto Ernesto Gyemant**

San Francisco, California  
July 2009







01 **Fire Down Below**  
**Lord Panama and The Stickers**

Taken from the Panix 45 (002) - ca.1964  
Written by George Allen  
*Calypso* (3.00)

This recording is hanging on by its teeth as far as fidelity goes; the drummer is barely audible, the horns phase in and out of ornate synchronicity with each other, and the guitars are a wash of jangling distortion. It's a combination that technically shouldn't work, were it not for the pure charisma of the whole ensemble. As noted by a good friend it's a brilliant interpretation of a popular Antillean hook, and is all the better for the "Spanglish" lyricism contained within. Fire! (WH)

02 **Samba Calypso**  
**Orquesta de Armando Boza con Manito Johnson**

Taken from the Grecha 45 (45-5041) - 1961  
Written by Armando Boza  
*Samba Calypso* (2.41)

Armando Boza's Orquesta was one of the best big bands in the Caribbean basin in the 1950s, up there with Beny Moré's and Bebo Valdes' Orquestas. According to singer Manito Johnson, his idea was for Boza to do a new arrangement of the calypso classic *Hold 'Em Joe*. The song was recorded in 1961, with Boza's Orquesta having just returned from a tour of Colombia, and features Red George on clarinet. (RG)

03 **Bilongo**  
**Papi Brandao y Sus Ejecutivos**

Taken from the Grabaciones Brandao 45 - 1971  
Written by Rodriguez Fife  
*Guaracha* (3.08)

Of all the versions of *Bilongo* in the world, there is nothing quite like the first hit of this song entering the room through a loud sound system. Sound engineer Balito Chan and bandleader Papi Brandao spent some time discussing how to implement the bass in *típica* music, and this is the result. Brandao's interpretation of Afro-Cuban music is always on point, *Bilongo* being one of his best in my opinion, despite the absence of his charismatic accordion playing. From the late '70s, Brandao went on to run a mobile disco sound system, making extended edits of his earlier recordings to play in his DJ sets. (WH)

04 **El Pajaro Zum Zum**  
**Ceferino Nieto**

Taken from the El Estilista 45 - 1970  
Written by Papi Arosemena  
*Típica / Guaracha* (2.55)

Once again the great Ceferino Nieto comes with a burning *típica* version of a classic Cuban *guaracha*. You may recall from Panama! 2 that Ceferino did the hot remake of Los Exagerados' *Panama Esta Buena Y...Ma*. Here he takes on *Sun Sun Babae*, immortalized by Cuba's Conjunto Casino in the 1950s (Tito Rodríguez also has a classic version from the same period) and covered by hundreds of bands since then. In a country full of excellent accordion players, Ceferino has to be the hottest. (RG)

05 **Moving-Grooving**  
**Little Francisco Greaves**

Taken from the Segraves 45 (5905) - 1969  
Written by Franklin Greaves  
*Soul* (2.57)

In the plight of the modern music lover, searching through old record collections to find something that catches the ear can be an off-unrewarding experience. The day that Francisco's handclaps rattled through the speaker of my portable turntable was a good day in a week of dust, endurance and mosquito-bitten searching for records. This is a limited-press record from a very young Little Frankie Greaves with big brother Franklin Greaves on guitar. Frankie Greaves also had a big hit in the mid '60s with the sweet soul *Necia De Mi Corazon*. (WH)

06 **Up Tight**  
**Los Silvertones**

Taken from the Discomundo 45 (D-001) - 1969  
Written by Ricardo Bermudez  
*Son / Boogaloo* (3:18)

There is something about a *montuno* played on a cheap '60s guitar that I will never tire of. Lacking the multi-coloured tone of a piano *montuno*, instead, the guitar possesses a gutsier, electric polyrhythmic sound, with the sonority of African guitar bands of the time, like Rail Band or Ry-co Jazz. In *Up Tight*, a *boogaloo* gone "Panama style" is combined with some fantastic soloing and a little of Gershwin's *Summertime* added for good measure; and in Panama, the measure is always steady. (WH)

07 **Shingalin en Panama**  
**Orquesta Los Embajadores con Camilo Azuquita**

Taken from the Gussy 45 (GO1) - 1967  
Written by Camilo Azuquita  
*Shingalin* (2.55)

In an era in which Panama was a key destination and stage for any Latin band worth their salt, it's hardly surprising that the *shingaling* invaded its shores rather quickly. *Shingaling* was a dance made popular in the same period as *boogaloo*, mostly performed by post-orchestra combos and *conjunto* outfits. This Los Embajadores recording is an early *shingaling*, still based around a large orchestral sound: just listen to those horns!! The lead singer is Camilo Azuquita, who is among the best-known Panamanian singers internationally, along with Ruben Blades, Miguel "Meñique" Barcasnegras and Gabino Pampini. (WH)

08 **Chombo Pa' La Tienda**  
**Soul Apollo with Fredrick Clarke**

Taken from the Loyola LP (ELD 15017) - 1971  
Written by Frederick Clarke  
*Calypso* (3:15)

The historical *calypso* tradition of tall tales, wit and oral storytelling has been a useful aid in both commenting on and understanding Panama's complicated social structure. It's evident, listening to this song in 2009, that theatrical embellishment in music is slowly becoming a lost art. It's also easy to see why Chombo became so popular: it's just a pity he never made television! (WH)

09 **Carretera Al Canajagua**  
**Amalia Delgado con El Conjunto Inspiracion Santeña**

Taken from the Artelec 45 (LU-1081) - ca. 1966  
D.R.A.  
*Cumbia* (2.58)

In the early '60s, rural music from Panama's Santos region underwent the same electric renovation that you can find in the early blues of the southern states of America. Acoustic guitars were given pickups and overdriven through small makeshift amplifiers. At this stage, the bass line, for lack of a bass player, was improvised by the right-hand thumb of the guitar player. In 'Road To Canajagua' the band exceed the normal *tipica* sound in a clash of polyrhythm, cowbells, *zambumbia* (shaker) and cycling accordion patterns. (WH)

10 **20 de Enero en Ocu**  
**Yin Carrizo**

Taken from the Grabaciones 'Viva Panama' 45 - 1968  
Written by Yin Carrizo  
*Cumbia* (2.54)

I find *tipica* percussion so utterly different from any other percussion in the Caribbean and Latin America, and this song is definitely a little *tipica* percussion showcase. Yin Carrizo, one of the biggest *tipica* stars, is from Ocu on the Peninsula of Azuero, the folkloric interior heartland of Panama. On this track, you can really hear the part of a *tipica* song called the *rumba*, which is roughly analogous to the *montuno* in a Cuban *son* or *guaracha*: it starts when the singer says, "El 20 de enero me voy pa Ocu, Para la fiesta de San Sebastian," and is marked by the steady, insistent cowbell. (RG)

11 **Chevere Que Chevere**  
**Maximo Rodriguez y Las Estrellas Panameños**

Taken from the Lou 45 - 1966  
Written by Carlos Guerra  
*Guaracha* (3.35)

Maximo Rodriguez, who is both a talented bass player and by this time an excellent vocalist and arranger, recorded this great interpretation of *Que Chevere*. A song originally written by Carlos Guerra & Orquesta Sonoramica of Venezuela in the early '60s, Rodriguez turns up the tempo and adds his trademark, heated *tumbao* to spice up an already heavy composition. This is definitely the song that never dies, a perfect last song for any club with overbearing or impatient door staff wanting to turn off the sound system for the night. (WH)

12 **Gua-Jazz**  
**Ralph Weeks with The Telecasters**

Taken from the Star's 45 (02) - 1971  
Written by Felix Wilkins  
*Guajira Jazz* (2.54)

This is a short song that really showcases the sheer versatility of Panamanian musicianship. It's a rampant *descarga* that leads into a kind of up-tempo *guajira*, with a wonderful performance on flute (most likely the Panamanian jazz great, Felix Wilkins) and near-frenzied rhythms on conga and bell. Ralph Weeks is most noted for singing with The Exciters' combo (check *Let Me Do My Thing* on Panama! Volume 1). (WH)

### 13 **Me Lo Dijo Una Gitana** **Panaswing**

Taken from the Sally Ruth 45 (SR 091) - 1972  
Ismael Rivera  
*Bomba Cole* (3.29)

In this totally Panamanian version of a song by *El Brujo de Borinquen* ("The Puerto Rican Wizard"), Tony Vargas' Combo Panaswing take on Ismael Rivera's salsa classic with that special, swinging, Antillean guitar touch. The hook to this song "*Son buenas, que buenas son las mujeres; cuando quieren*" ("They are so good, women are such a good thing; when they want to be") is now a basic saying in the folklore of the Latin American dance-floor. Vargas refers to Ismael's extended stays in Panama in the early '70s - The Black Christ of Portobelo was the inspiration for his epic *El Nazareno* - when he says "*El Brujo de Borinquen estuvo en Panama, chico.*" (RG)

### 14 **Lloraras** **Beby Castor con Los Juveniles**

Taken from the Sally Ruth 45 (SR161) - 1975  
D.R.  
*Guaracha* (3.26)

Originally penned by Oscar D'Leon, this track was a massive hit throughout Latin America. It talks of a man betrayed by his lover and how, with time, she comes to realise her mistake: *Lloraras* means "you will cry." A good friend of mine often jokes that *Lloraras* is a kind of unofficial Costa Rican national anthem. Electric tres and guitar interplay alongside slightly off-kilter trumpets. I like to think this of this as a "combo" approach to the song, played in a small format group but to great effect! (WH)

### 15 **Llegamos Ya** **Los Mozambiques**

Taken from the Taboga 45 (TABOGA 476) - 1973  
Written by Ernesto Atherley  
(3.42)

I am so happy to be able to present a song by Los Mozambiques, still one of the most popular of the *combos nacionales*. Their 1970 LP *El Presidiario* ("The Convict") was a smash hit, and is *available* from top to bottom. The sad title-song was big all the way up into Costa Rica, where people joined me singing it word for word in the *barrios* of San José. Golden-throated singer Carlos Martínez (their other excellent lead, Jaime Morell, does not appear) holds forth, explaining that although people say that Los Mozambiques are gone, think again: *Llegamos Ya* ("Here we are"). Los Mozambiques were a guitar-led combo, but added two trumpets on this hot track. They split into two separate groups soon after this recording. (RG)

### 16 **St. John's Guaguanco** **Los Salvajes del Ritmo**

Taken from the Taboga 45 (T.G. 079) - 1968  
Vladimir Vassilief  
*Guaguanco* (2.46)

Los Salvajes del Ritmo do an excellent cover of *St. John's Guaguanco* from Vladimir Vassilief's 1968 *New Sound in Latin Jazz LP*, with beautiful sax and trumpet harmonies. Interestingly, the 45 version of this song is completely different from the version on their LP (both are impossible to find). Los Salvajes were led by pianist Carlos "Tuti" Delgado and *conguero* Roberto Cedeño, and featured a young singer named Ruben Blades. Blades left Panama in 1968 for New York City, where he recorded the underappreciated *De Panama à New York LP* with Pete (Boogaloo) Rodríguez's Orquesta. Blades returned to Panama to finish law school soon after, then moved to back to the big apple in the early '70s to begin his ascent as one of the greatest Latin music singer-composers ever. (RG)

### 17 **Colón Colón** **Lord Cobra**

Taken from the Tamayo LP - 1971  
Written by Wilfred Berry  
*Calypso* (3.03)

Lord Cobra is the master of the lovely, sombre *calypso*, and this song is dedicated to his hometown. With typical Colonnense pride he notes that "We from Colón, we always getting the *concalón*" (the tasty part of rice at the bottom of the pot) but also asks, prophetically perhaps, that his city "*Merece un poquitín mas de atención*" ("deserves a bit more attention"). Colón is definitely a unique place, mostly because its people are so creative; or as drummer Zaggy says in the promo video for Panama! 2, "C.P.T.R." means "Colón People to R...!" (Ask someone from Jamaica how to end that sentence, for me to do so here would be uncouth. (RG)

### 18 **Trigueñito y Solo** **Conjunto Panama**

Taken from the Artelec 45 (1007) - ca. 1962  
Papi Arosemena  
*Tamborera* (2.44)

This is delicious, classic, big band *tamborera* by Papi Arosemena's Conjunto Panama. Although he does not appear on this song, Ruben Blades got his start with Papi's outfit. The song speaks about a Panamanian from the interior who has everything he needs: a farm, animals...but is missing a woman to share it with. I always enjoy pointing out that *tamborera* is a prehistoric form of the *reguetón* beat: not for nothing do historians assert that *reguetón* originated in Panama. (RG)

### 19 **Bamboo Dance** **Black Czar**

Taken from the LP Calypso in Panama - ca. 1958  
D.R.  
*Calypso* (2.59)

Listening to Panamanian *calypso*, generally speaking, most song-forms can be categorized into two camps: joyous, major-key songs that tell of a merry time, romance or sexual encounter or celebration, which are never short of a cunning double-entendre or two. In the other camp are more melancholic, minor-key songs where the protagonist alludes to the mysterious, a lost love or a tale with a bitter or often tragic end. My taste tends to gravitate towards the latter, mainly due to the passion and feeling that abound. Here, Black Czar, a lesser known Calypsonian, retells a standard tale of a night at a dance where he is bewitched by an old lady "twisting her body 'round like a snake." (WH)

### 20 **Parido Calypsonian** **Lord Cobra and His Sugar Tone Band**

Taken from the Tropelco 45 (TRO-2) - ca. 1968  
Written by Wilfred Berry  
*Calypso* (3.02)

We've purposefully focused on Panamanian *calypso* in this volume, a topic that deserves more serious research in the coming years. For any investigators up to the task, this song provides a useful roster of stars. Lord Cobra announces the founding of the *calypso* political party, whose members include Lord Delicious, Lord Kontiki (who will be a corporal in Chiriquí), Lord Melody, Lord Bemba (in the *barrio* of Calidonia), and Sir Jablonsky as minister of finance. In a nod to Sparrow, who always sparred with the Panamanian calypsonians, Cobra places him as the Governor of Trinidad. The First Lady is Miss Trixie, while the President is none other than Cobra himself. *Que viva mi partidol!* (RG)

## 21 Masters Are Gone

### Sir Valentino con Combo Esclavos Alegres

Taken from the Padisco 45 (P-001) - 1969

Written by Val Reid.

*Lamento Calypso* (3.19)

I remember how hot it was in Colón the day I heard this song. I was sticky and tired, it was getting dark, we had been looking for records and history all day. Then all of a sudden, when the song came through Tommy's speakers, it was like I had a rush of energy: I knew I had to find this song on vinyl. It took two more trips, but here it is: Sir Valentino's gorgeous *gospel* calypso, complete with the strumming and plinking ukuleles and guitars of his Combo Esclavos Alegres (Happy Slaves Combo). (RG)

## 22 El Raton

### Los Invasores

Taken from the Onda Nueva 45 (ON1219) - 1972

(D.R)

*Guajira* (3.27)

Here are Los Invasores with a great version of the modern *guajira* made famous by Cheo Feliciano fronting the Joe Cuba band. The song talks about a man who sleeps around and gets ratted out by another man: the *raton*. In true Panamanian style, guitars replace the piano. Although he does not appear on this song, Kabir of Los Fabulosos Festivals was an early member of Los Invasores. (RG)

## 23 Carmen

### Los Silvertones

Taken from the LP *Los Silvertones* on CBS (LPP-001) 1970

Papi Arosemena

*Jazz Soul* (3.44)

Can we just agree right now that this is a heavy, heavy song? Did Mulatu Astatke from Ethiopia move to Panama at some point? People have pointed out to me that one of Los Silvertones' saxes always seems to be just a bit out of key: deliciously so. Carlos Allen of Los Silvertones told me that *Carmen* was supposed to be in two parts, with the second part being a wicked *guajira*, as alluded to at the end of the song. Part two was never recorded. (RG)

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