

HOT! HOT! HOT!

FANIA RECORDS AND THE RISE OF SALSA

BY ERNESTO LECHNER

THE WORD SALSA is actually an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of clearly distinctive, but equally addictive Afro-Caribbean rhythms

and dances: the mystically tinged rumba, the elegant *danzón*, the sinuous cha cha cha, the joyful *guaracha*, the explosive mambo and, most importantly, the earthy *son*, the island's quintessential song format.

The origins of the term are the subject of debate among the more obsessive aficionados. Some go back to a 1933 recording by Cuban bandleader Ignacio Piñero and his Sexteto Nacional named "Echale Salsita," which uses the sauce word as a metaphor for the dance-friendly flavor found in the music. Others credit an obscure Venezuelan radio DJ who used the term to describe the new school of Afro-Cuban music coming out of New York, via the legendary Fania label, and Puerto Rico in the '60s.

Founded by impresario Jerry Masucci and bandleader/flautist Johnny Pacheco, Fania gathered the most talented musicians of the time under one roof, blending the percolating combustion of Afro-Cuban rhythms with the swing of big-band American jazz and the gritty, inner-city vibe of r&b.

denying the cathartic power of the earlier, more traditional examples of the Afro-Cuban canon. But seminal efforts by the likes of Pacheco, Rubén Blades, Héctor Lavoé, Willie Colon, Larry Harlow, Eddie Palmieri, Celia Cruz and the Fania All-Stars (the label's own mega-orchestra) took the entire genre to another level by adding to it a modernist approach, social commentary and an omnivorous taste for outside influences.

The Fania movement influenced *salseros* all over the Americas, who started creating their own version of the new sound, fusing it with their local folklore. When Fania collapsed in the mid-'80s and a new, watered-down style by the name of *salsa romántica* took over the airwaves, it was Colombia that assumed the reign of quality tropical music with artists such as Joe Arroyo, Grupo Niche, Fruko y sus Tesos and the Latin Brothers.

But the insipid *salsa romántica* craze didn't last. It was replaced in the '90s by a return to the more organic, hardcore sensibility of the '70s, with the four geographical super powers of salsa (New York, Puerto

The Fania catalog represents the apex of tropical music, the standard against which all subsequent efforts continue to be measured. There's no

Rico, Colombia and Cuba) releasing their share of noteworthy recordings.

In the last 15 years, a new generation of Cuban musicians has cultivated a more extreme style known as *timba*. Using their conservatory-earned skills, these artists perform salsa at the speed of light, adding strong doses of American hip-hop and r&b. Groups such as Los Van Van, Bamboleo and the excellent NG La Banda have divided fans with the aggressiveness of their sound. Some consider their efforts the anathema of tropical music, while others applaud their creative restlessness as a sign of exciting new salsa sounds to come.

HÉCTOR LAVOÉ

Salsa's shooting star

ERNESTO LECHNER—Because of his mercurial charisma and appetite for self-destruction, Héctor Lavoé was as much of a rock star as salsa has ever known. Those who were lucky enough to see Lavoé in concert before his untimely death in 1993 will tell you that it was an unforgettable experience.

Ironically, only hardcore *salseros* are aware of Lavoé's importance. Casual Latin-music lovers are more familiar with the work of his producer and songwriting partner, trombonist Willie Colón, whom Lavoé met after moving to New York from his native



Rubén Blades

Puerto Rico in 1963. Young, streetwise and eager to impress, the duo was exactly what the recently established Fania label was looking for when it released Colón's appropriately titled debut, *El Malo* (The Mean One).

Between 1967 and 1974, Lavoé recorded a string of hits as the featured vocalist in Colón's orchestra, his throaty, thickly textured vocals gracing such cuts as the gritty "Calle Luna Calle Sol" and the bouncy carnival anthem "La Murga." Lavoé's joyful presence also added an extra bit of spark to the supergroup the Fania All-Stars.

In 1975, Lavoé recorded his excellent solo debut *La Voz*, which crackled with the singer's new creative freedom. Tunes such as the euphoric "Mi Gente" and the darkly morbid "El Todopoderoso" showcased the Lavoé aesthetic in full blossom: The music overflows with flavor and swing, while the lyrics betray Lavoé's deep knowledge of Puerto Rican slang, as well as his deliciously cynical view on life and love.

Whereas his career was blessed with success, Lavoé's personal life was a horrible succession of tragedies, including the death of his son at age 17, the brutal murder of his



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mother-in-law and a heroin addiction that eventually resulted in his infection with the HIV virus and his death of complications from AIDS at age 46.

Lavoé's persona as the famous salsa singer, happy on the outside but psychologi-

essential listening:

1 TITO PUENTE, *DANCE MANIA* RCA INTERNATIONAL. It's hard to believe so many hits can fit on one single album. 1958 saw Puente at his creative peak, recording these 12 three-minute gems with a big band that functions like a well-oiled machine.

2 FANIA ALL-STARS, *LIVE AT THE CHEETAH VOL. 1* FANIA. Fania's own collective of superstars delivers a raucous concert, including Cheo Feliciano's tribal "Anacaona," and a 16-minute version of "Quitate Tu" with improvisations by everyone involved.

3 RAY BARRETTO, *THE MESSAGE* FANIA. Before becoming a full-time, Latin-jazz devotee, Barretto had one of the hottest salsa combos in the business. Sung by Adalberto Santiago, "Arrepiéntete" encapsulates the Fania sound in all its glory.

4 WILLIE COLÓN, *THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY* FANIA. This 1975 release boasts vocals by Lavoé, Colón and Blades. There's a wistful, nostalgic air about this record, especially on the Brazilian flavored "Cua Cua Ra, Cua Cua" and Blades' "El Cazangero."

5 EL GRAN COMBO, *30 ANIVERSARIO: BAILANDO CON EL MUNDO* COMBO. Puerto Rico's venerable salsa institution celebrates its first 30 years in the business. A prime example of the island's brand of salsa, frothy and elegant.

6 CELIA CRUZ AND JOHNNY PACHECO, *CELIA & JOHNNY VAYA*. This old-school-meets-new-school pairing is a grand triumph. In the hands of producer/bandleader Pacheco, Cruz shines like a shooting star. The feverish "Quimbara" gives an indication of her supernatural vocal powers.

7 GRUPO NICHE, *SUTIL Y CONTUNDENTE* SONY DISCOS. The more commercial side of Colombian salsa at its rustic best. Tracks such as "Miserable" and "Atrevida" are enhanced by the smoky vocals of Tito Gomez and the pop-friendly hooks of prolific composer Jairo Varela.

8 MANNY OQUENDO & LIBRE, *MEJOR QUE NUNCA* MILESTONE. Salsa's most underrated band delivers yet another serving of its deep, sensuous sound. Oquendo's timbale solos are uniquely powerful and emotional.

9 LA INDIA, *LLEGO LA INDIA VIA EDDIE PALMIERI* RMM. A sassy Nuyorican diva with a voice of steel, India released her debut album under the tutelage of keyboard wiz Eddie Palmieri. The combination is electrifying.

JOE ARROYO

RED LIGHT MEANS GO At age 10, Colombian singer Joe Arroyo was already performing the salsa hits of the moment at a whorehouse in his native Cartagena. Customers and prostitutes alike were very impressed with this working-class black performer and his booming, syrupy voice. When the police happened to raid the place, the whores would hide the young singer in their bedrooms.

It was a matter of time before Arroyo was discovered by the Colombian music industry, always in search of new talent in the tropical arena. Sure enough, in 1971, when he was only 14, Arroyo was enlisted as vocalist with Fruko y sus Tesos, an orchestra created by record label Discos Fuentes with the purpose of emulating the Fania sound. Led by the talented bandleader and multi-instrumentalist Julio Ernesto Estrada, aka Fruko, the group boasted two other formidable vocal talents: Wilson "Saoko" Manyoma and the late Piper "Pimienta" Díaz.

Fruko y sus Tesos was the perfect vehicle for Arroyo to master his vocal skills. Throughout the '70s, the band was a veritable factory of hit singles, and many of them were performed by Arroyo: "Manyoma," "El Caminante," "Nadando" and, in 1975, the self-penned "Tania."

In 1981, Arroyo founded his own orchestra, La Verdad and began experimenting freely with many kinds of music. He treasured the folklore of his land (which includes tasty local styles such as *vallenato*, *cumbia* and *gaita*), and felt a strong affinity to all things African. Better yet, he had an instinctive understanding of the many dances to be found in the Caribbean. When the above-mentioned genres weren't enough to satisfy his voracious appetite, he invented his own—"joe-son"—a sparkling blend of son, calypso and merengue best exemplified by his mega-hit "La Noche."

Sadly, Arroyo fell prey to the excesses associated with the salsa lifestyle, including a much-publicized addiction to alcohol and drugs. Inevitably, his voice suffered the consequences, turning his live performances of the last few years into hit-and-miss affairs. At 46, Arroyo looks considerably older than his real age. His charisma, however, remains unchanged, as does his prodigious talent for composing quality tropical music that transcends its genre. The singer is, perhaps, the only *salsero* who continues to release an album of new material a year without ever lowering his remarkable musical standards. —ERNESTO LECHNER



COURTESY OF DISCOS FUENTES

Essential Listening: FRUKO Y SUS TESOS, *GRANDES EXITOS DE SALSA VOL. 1* DISCOS FUENTES. All the Fruko hits you need in one single package, including the poignant "Tania" and the fiery medley "Mosaico Santero" with Arroyo and Saoko alternating on vocals. **GRANDOS EXITOS** DISCOS FUENTES. "La Noche" and "Rebelión" (a historical account of slavery in Colombia) are some of Arroyo's spiciest hits with La Verdad. Manic and intense. **HARD TO FIND BUT WORTH HEARING: *CRUZANDO EL MILENIO*** SONY DISCOS. You'd swear this slice of classic salsa was recorded sometime in the '70s, but the year's actually 1999, proving that Arroyo has lost none of his brilliance. —ERNESTO LECHNER

cally bankrupt on the inside, was perfectly encapsulated in "El Cantante," a song written by Rubén Blades, which Colón convinced him to give to Lavoé. When it came time for Lavoé to record it, Colón did the unthinkable, enlisting a string section for a memorable instrumental passage that adds a majestic, mournful atmosphere to the song. To this day, "El Cantante" is considered by many to be salsa's greatest anthem.

Since Lavoé's death, countless salsa acts have covered his songs, making it painfully obvious how difficult it is to emulate his one-of-a-kind, guttural delivery. Of the many post-mortem tributes out there, none can match the emotion in Colón's 1995 cut "Homenaje a Héctor Lavoé." To this day, Colón's voice breaks whenever he remembers the lifelong friend with whom he changed the course of salsa forever.

Essential Listening: *DE TI DEPENDE* FANIA. A superlative date from 1976, including the classic "Periódico de Ayer." Here, both slow and upbeat numbers are equally torrid. **COMEDIA** FANIA. The breathtaking "El Cantante" alone is worth the price of admission. Other delights include the openly misogynistic "Bandolera," with a smoking piano solo by Gilberto Colón Jr. **HARD TO FIND BUT WORTH HEARING: *W/ WILLIE COLÓN VIGILANTE*** FANIA. Together, Colón and Lavoé experiment with extended compositions and elaborate arrangements. Their most experimental album is marked by a strong r&b influence. —ERNESTO LECHNER

RUBÉN BLADES

Latin everyman

ERNESTO LECHNER—Whereas Héctor Lavoé was the definitive salsa singer, Rubén Blades was the genre's ultimate songwriter, a bril-

MARC ANTHONY, *TODO A SU TIEMPO* RMM. Before achieving crossover success, Anthony recorded this majestic 1995 salsa album, which includes the wonderfully melodramatic "Hasta Ayer."

LOS VAN VAN, *LLEGO ... VAN VAN* ATLANTIC/CALIENTE. 30 years after its inception, Juan Formell's orchestra continues to define the sound of modern Cuba. The combination of syncopated polyrhythms with sweeping violins and trombone is intoxicating.

NG LA BANDA, *EN LA CALLE* QBADISC. The best timba band in the business delivers its most cohesive set, with funky workouts such as the anthemic "Los Sitios Entero." No doubt about it, bandleader José Luis Cortez was definitely onto something.

SONORA CARRUSELES, *HEAVY SALSA* DISCOS FUENTES. After an extended creative draught,

Discos Fuentes returned to action in the late '90s with Carruseles, a group whose noble mission is to resurrect standards of the past with tighter, faster arrangements. The sound of the future.

HARD TO FIND BUT WORTH HEARING:

BENY MORÉ, *MARACAIBO ORIENTAL* RCA INTERNATIONAL. Cuba's foremost *sonero* shines on these sessions recorded between 1956-58. Moré's timing is impeccable on smoldering boleros such as "Por Qué Pensar Así."

MACHITO, *YO SOY LA RUMBA* WEST SIDE. Machito and his sister—vocalist Graciela—had a unique talent for expressing the sheer joy of Afro-Cuban music. This 1965 date is a particularly bubbly example of their lighthearted touch. —ERNESTO LECHNER



liant thinker who revolutionized Afro-Cuban music by combining infectious melodies with lyrics that cast a poetic, often sarcastic glance at the vicissitudes of modern life.

Born in Panama, where he would eventually return as presidential candidate, Blades moved to New York in the mid-'70s, following his dream of becoming a *salsero*. A job in the Fania Records mailroom led to a guest spot in *conguero* Ray Barretto's band. It was only a matter of time before stellar producer and

trombonist Willie Colón discovered the young man's potential and decided to produce Blades' debut, 1977's *Metiedo Mano*.

The record was vibrant and refreshing, Blades' voice sounding uniquely poignant, and Colón's production guaranteeing an authentic salsa spirit. Songs such as "Pablo Pueblo" talked of the downtrodden people of Latin America. This theme would recur often in Blades' work over the years.

The Blades/Colón collaboration came to

full fruition on 1978's classic *Siembra*, which included the seven-minute mega-hit "Pedro Navaja" and was, until recently, the best-selling salsa album of all time. Everything came together on *Siembra*: Blades knew how to swing, but at the same time he was a masterful storyteller, creating vivid tableaux of Latin American magical realism.

By the early '80s, the singer signed to Elektra in a bid for creative freedom. He replaced his big band with a jazzy sextet

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED When Oscar D'León worked as a driver in his native Caracas, he would entertain himself by playing drum patterns on the steering wheel of his taxicab. A man of humble origins but boundless ambition, D'León taught himself to play the bass, was a founding member of his country's quintessential salsa combo, La Dimensión Latina, and eventually became Venezuela's most popular and influential singer, regardless of genre.

The roots of this miraculous success story lie in D'León's unabashed passion for tropical music, specifically the classic big-band sound of Cuba in the '50s, when macho singers like Beny Moré reigned supreme. D'León had no qualms about imitating the style that he loved. Being Venezuelan, however, he brought to the mix the typically South American salsa aesthetic, which calls for faster, tighter arrangements, airy and acrobatic at the same time. Thus, many of D'León's recordings of popular Cuban songs (Orquesta Aragón's cheeky "Calculadora," Celia Cruz's smoldering "Melao de Caña") have become the definitive versions of these tunes.

During the '70s, the trombone-heavy Dimensión Latina gave D'León plenty of room to grow and experiment. The singer performed on his trademark upright bass, and harmonized with the combo's other key vocalist, Wladimir Lozano. He also started writing songs for the band. One of them, "Llorarás," a throwaway idea that he brought reluctantly to the group, became La Dimensión's biggest hit, and D'León's all-time anthem.

Eager to gain complete command of his musical direction, D'León created his own outfit, La Salsa Mayor. In 1978, he released the group's ultimate manifesto, an eponymously titled double-LP set loaded with honey-sweet boleros and flavorful salsa tunes. Up until the early '90s, D'León was pretty much invincible, recording numerous hits that still form the core of his impressive live show.

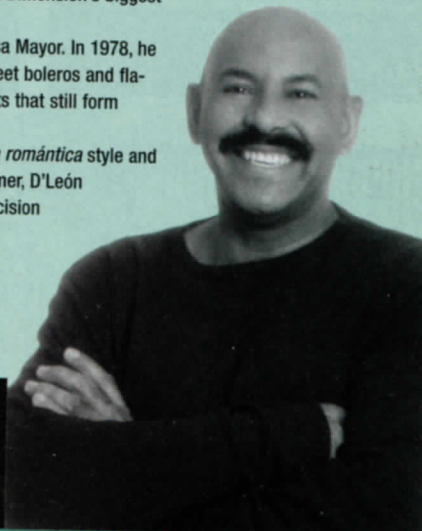
By the mid-'90s, however, the singer had succumbed to the influence of the watered-down *salsa romántica* style and the hits stopped coming. But his live show did nothing but improve. An obsessive-compulsive performer, D'León has absolute control of both his audience and his band, merging one song into the next one with precision timing and enviable stamina.

Persistent D'León fans were rewarded in 2000 with *Doble Play*, a marvelous return to form that found D'León reunited with Wladimir and honoring the warm, old-fashioned sonics of the old Dimensión school. All the while, his marathon shows remain the very best in the business.

—ERNESTO LECHNER

Essential Listening: *OSCAR Y SU SALSA MAYOR* BALBOA. D'León's monumental solo statement contains only a couple of hits, but the 15 selections here reveal the most soulful side of his complex musical persona. **EN VIVO!** RMM/UNIVERSAL LATINO. The fans had been clamoring for a properly recorded live set, and this two-disc affair culled from a show at New York's Copacabana delivers the goods. **W/ WLADIMIR, DOBLE PLAY** UNIVERSAL LATINO. When they harmonize together, D'León and Wladimir sound bewitching. Their version of Arsenio Rodríguez's bitter ballad "La Vida es un Sueño" says it all. —ERNESTO LECHNER

OSCAR D'LEÓN



named Seis del Solar, and released his all-time masterpiece, the concept album *Buscando América* (Searching for America). Here, the gritty stories revealed a more cynical yet still hopeful Blades. Miraculously, he was able to enlighten without sounding preachy, telling complex stories while delivering some of the spiciest salsa in the business.

Blades was never able to match the brilliance of *Buscando América*, but all of his Elektra albums offer their share of intriguing tunes. During the '90s, he gradually abandoned his salsa roots, searching for a universal pop language similar to that of a Sting or a Peter Gabriel. As a result, most of this output sounds somehow tepid compared with the Afro-Cuban splendor of the past. Blades also increased his involvement in politics during this time, ultimately running for president of Panama in 1994, on the ticket of his own Movimiento Papa Egoro party; he came in second place.

And Blades is currently proving all of his critics wrong with *Mundo* (Sony Discos/Columbia) a spectacular return to form that fuses Celtic, African, Brazilian and Afro-Cuban idioms for a soulful feast that nourishes the mind and the soul. (For feature coverage on *Mundo*, see next month's PULSE) ◆

Essential Listening: w/ WILLIE COLÓN, SIEM-BRA FANIA. It's only his second solo album, but Blades is already in full control of his powers. The anthemic "Pedro Navaja" and the disco satire "Plástico" would forever change the face of salsa. **BUSCANDO AMÉRICA** ELEKTRA. You can dance to the music and shiver at the sheer emotionality of the lyrics. Blades' volcanic love for Latin America doesn't obscure the sharpness of his social criticism. **RUBÉN BLADES Y SON DEL SOLAR ... LIVE!** ELEKTRA. Blades in concert is even better than Blades in the studio, as this smoldering live record can attest. "Ojos de Perro Azul" is particularly illuminating. —ERNESTO LECHNER

BREAKING EVERY RULE Because of his unfailingly eccentric vision, jarring aesthetic choices and penchant for constant sonic excess, Nuyorican keyboardist Eddie Palmieri, better than any other artist in the vast landscape of Afro-Caribbean music, fits the definition of genius. Indeed, when you take a look at his prolific discography in the salsa and Latin-jazz genres, it is hard to believe that a single man is responsible for such a kaleidoscopic wealth of quality material.

The younger brother of another talented performer, the late pianist and bandleader Charlie Palmieri, Eddie began his musical training as a *timbalero*, before switching to piano and developing his trademark sound: furious, dissonant and percussive.

After a stint with the orchestra of legendary singer Tito Rodríguez, he formed a trombone-heavy outfit by the name of La Perfecta in 1961. At this point, his musical ideas were somewhat restrained compared to the wild experimentation that would soon follow. From the very beginning, however, Palmieri's take on Afro-Cuban motifs overflowed with flavor, and he quickly became a favorite among New York's dancers, performing at the infamous Palladium night club alongside the bands of Rodríguez, Machito and Tito Puente.

By 1965, Palmieri was raising the temperature in his music with "Azúcar," a classic single, defined by an electrifying piano line that simply dared you not to shake your hips to it. A year later, he teamed up with vibist Cal Tjader for a couple of classy Latin jazz albums.

It was in the '70s that Palmieri really blossomed as a composer and salsa anarchist. 1975's *The Sun of Latin Music* unveiled the pianist's two latest discoveries: electronics and 19-year old powerhouse singer Lalo Rodríguez. The combination was exquisite, and Palmieri improvised recklessly with established musical formats. One moment, he'd be the elegant classicist, caressing our ears with the formal beauty of a *danzón*. Then again, he'd quote the Beatles and grab your ears with a couple of noisy, psychedelic chords.

This creative streak continued until the '80s, when the appearance of the *salsa romántica* fad, which Palmieri hates with a passion, forced him to retire into the safer world of Latin jazz. It was an irreparable loss for the salsa genre, which made his return in 1998 all the more triumphant. Since then, the pianist has continued to innovate and dream up new projects. The resurrection of La Perfecta in the year 2002 is only the latest chapter in a career that will hopefully continue delivering thrills for years to come. —ERNESTO LECHNER



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Essential Listening: AZÚCAR PA' TI TICO. The classic Palmieri sound of the '60s, with the rock-solid Manny Oquendo on timbales and a host of notable players. "Azúcar" simmers with sensuality and tension. **W/ LALO RODRÍGUEZ, THE SUN OF LATIN MUSIC** VARESE. The opening "Nada De Ti" is a pungent, straight-ahead salsa number. After which the mischievous Mr. Palmieri proceeds to demolish our expectations of what tropical music is supposed to sound like. **EL RUMBERO DEL PIANO** RMM/UNIVERSAL LATINO. The old master teaches today's snotty *salseros* a few lessons on swing dynamics. He also introduces Hermán Olivera, the best salsa singer of the new generation. —ERNESTO LECHNER

FURTHER LISTENING:

- RUBÉN BLADES, *CANCIONES DEL SOLAR DE LOS ABURRIDOS* (Fania), *ESCENAS. AGUA DE LUNA* (both Elektra).
- ROY CARMONA, *LA CONQUISTADORA* (Vaya).
- WILLIE COLÓN, *THE BIG BREAK* (Fania), *HECHO EN PUERTO RICO* (Sony Discos).
- CORTIJO Y SU COMBO, *BAILE CON CORTIJO Y SU COMBO* (Seeco).
- JOE CUBA, *STEPPIN' OUT* (Seeco).
- CHEO FELICIANO, *WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIEND* (Vaya).
- THE BEST OF LA LUPE* (Tico).

- MACHITO, *ASIA MINOR. INSPIRED. TREMENDO CUMBAN!! CHA CHA CHA AT THE PALLADIUM* (all Tico).
- MELCOCHITA, *EL RETORNO DE MELCOCHITA* (Levesque).
- GRUPO NICHE, *HISTORIA MUSICAL* (Combo), *CIELO DE TAMBORES* (Sony Discos), *ETNIA* (Sony Discos).
- JOHNNY PACHECO, *PACHECO Y SU CHARANGA* (Alegre), *CAÑONAZO* (Fania).
- CHARLIE PALMIERI, *EL GIGANTE DEL TECLADO* (Alegre), *ELECTRO DURO* (Musical Productions).
- EDDIE PALMIERI, *MOZAMBIQUE* (Tico), *CHAMPAGNE* (Tico), *UNFINISHED MASTERPIECE* (Musical Productions), *EDDIE PALMIERI* (1981, Barbaro), *EP* (Fania).

- LA SONORA PONCEÑA, *EXPLORANDO. LA ORQUESTA DE MI TIERRA. JUBILEE* (all Inca).
- RICARDO RAY/BOBBY CRUZ, *EN FIESTA NAVIDEÑA* (Fonseca).
- ARSENIO RODRÍGUEZ Y SU CONJUNTO, *MONTUNEANDO 1946-1950* (Tumbao).
- TITO RODRÍGUEZ, *EL DOCTOR DE LA SALSA. LIVE AT THE PALLADIUM* (both WS Latino).
- FRANKIE RUIZ, *ORO SALSERO* (Rodven).
- LOS VAN VAN, *SONGO* (Mango), *DE CUBA* (Caribe Productions).
- TONY VEGA, *HOY QUIERO CANTARTE* (RMM).