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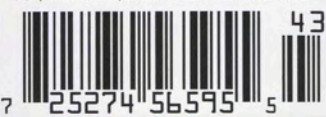
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TRENCH TOWN ROCK

Panamanian dancehall nices up the Spanish-speaking world

by Marlon Bishop

In most respects, Panama City's Avenida Central resembles any other seedy downtown commercial street in Latin America, packed with vendors and buzzing with exuberance. Every one hundred meters or so, there's a stand selling streetwear manned by a sixteen-year-old kid, nose buried in his BlackBerry and fingers flying. His rows of fitted baseball caps are just a front, for the real merchandise lies below: bundles of gleaming CD-Rs, each stuffed to the brim with pirated MP3s.

But the beat pouring out of his speakers isn't the expected and oft-dreaded *boom-chboom-ch* familiar to boulevards and barrios across the Americas. This isn't your neighborhood reggaeton. This is *reggae en español*: heavy-hitting, Jamaican-style dancehall chatted in Spanish, made by and for Panamanians.

In the '80s, long before Daddy Yankee implored the world to give him *más gasolina*, Panamanians began recording Spanish-language reggae, known locally as *plena* (no relation to the Puerto Rican folk genre). They translated Jamaican hits and sang over the B-sides; embraced Rastafari and grew out dreads; and waved pistols in the air and preached Black consciousness. In doing so, they planted a sonic seed that would eventually travel to Puerto Rico via the cultural superhighway of immigrant diaspora and sprout into reggaeton, forever changing the trajectory of Latin music.

Panamanian reggae never achieved a fraction of reggaeton's international success. Yet Panama is an important and underappreciated node in reggae history, one that continues to nurture a rich reggae culture to this day.

To be truthful, it's not just Panama. Reggae en español provides the soundtrack for the entire Caribbean coast of Central America, from Guatemala on down. The region—and its music—defies expectations about Latin America. The Spanish never really bothered to colonize it, repelled by thick jungles, malarial mosquitoes, and the threat of pirate attacks. Instead, the culture of the coast was shaped by American banana companies that arrived in the twentieth century and waves of Afro-Caribbean immigration. The result is a place where people live in New Orleans-style wooden houses, have English last names but speak Spanish, and are equally conversant in salsa and merengue, soca

and reggae. It's where the seemingly solid cultural wall dividing the Anglo-Caribbean and the Spanish-Caribbean becomes porous.

Nowhere is this more true than in Panama, where English- and French-speaking West Indians from Barbados, Trinidad, the French Antilles, and Jamaica came in large numbers to dig the Panama Canal, the majority of them arriving between 1880 and 1920. With so much of the world's shipping passing through the canal, commercial opportunities brought others: Chinese, Turks, Jews, Indians, Lebanese, and of course, Americans, who governed the Canal Zone, a ten-mile band of the isthmus, from 1903 to 1979.

At Superdiscos, a record store for national music tucked in an alleyway off Avenida Central, the variety of music on display is staggering. Side by side, you can find roots reggae, the *salsa dura* of native son Rubén Blades, cumbia-flavored *típico*, and Panamanian calypsos from Lord Cobra, to start.

In the '60s and '70s, the *combos nacionales* ruled live music in Panama, playing an unclassifiable mix of soul, funk, and jazz blended with Latin rhythms. In the late '70s, when reggae began to stir in Panama, the music that dominated the radio was Haitian *compás*, or in local parlance, *baitiano*.

"If you were at a party, and people didn't put on haitiano, it wasn't a party," says Jomel McDonald, aka DJ Megabyte, a DJ and producer who works with El Kid, one of today's stars. We're sitting in the studio of Radio Marbella in the Caribbean port city of Colón, the uncontested capital of Black Panama. The tranquility of the studio is a sharp contrast to the city outside. Crumbling from neglect and plagued by violence, Colón hardly resembles prosperous Panama City and its endless glass high-rises, just across the isthmus. The city has produced many of the country's musical talents and gold-medal prizefighters, but Panama's government never cared much for the English-speaking Black population, and it shows in Colón's potholed streets.

Here, on the fringes, reggae blossomed.

"It was open air, in a field, where they played the music," says Megabyte, speaking about the first reggae parties held here. "They didn't charge people to come. They didn't think to charge." The parties were held in the street, at Thirteenth and Bolívar, or at a place called El Ferrocarril (The Railroad),



an empty lot by the train tracks where they could spin reggae into the wee hours.

From the beginning, they kept an ear fixed on the happenings in Kingston. "We always listened to Jamaican music," says reggae artist Kafu Banton. "Always. We copied the style, copied the flow." Live, they sang over instrumentals from popular Jamaican records. Sometimes, they wrote original lyrics, but more often, they would loosely translate the Jamaican lyrics into Spanish. Even their Anglicized artistic names, such as Nando Boom, Chicho Man, Calito Soul, Aldo Ranks, and Reggae Sam, paid tribute to the stars in Jamaica.

As the scene grew, a sound-system culture sprung up to amplify it. The *discos móviles*, literally "mobile discos," ran parties between Colón and Panama City. Early MCs could make a few dollars here and there playing dances. Before Super Nandi and Rastanini pressed what was likely the first reggae en español record in 1984, artists recorded themselves onto cassettes and sold them to barrio bus drivers who were looking for a sonic edge over other drivers that worked the same routes.

"Reggae didn't get on the radio for a long time," says Megabyte. "The station owners said it was music for criminals. They didn't want anything to do with it." The first hit to break onto the radio came in 1985 with Renato's "La Chica de los Ojos Café" ("The Girl With the Coffee-Colored Eyes"). It was romantic and palatable to a wide audience, but most importantly it showed reggae's commercial potential. Once established in the mainstream, racier songs exploiting violent themes followed, such as Jam & Suppose's hit "Camion Lleno de Gun" ("Truck Full of Guns"). The accompanying video featured the van of Electro Disco, a popular sound system, filled with weapons instead of speaker cabs.

By the time Kafu Banton came up, reggae was already entrenched in Panama. "Since I was little," says Banton, "I could hear reggae on the radio station from seven in the morning until seven at night." Kafu was part of the second generation of artists who appeared in the mid-'90s and changed the sound. The new style was called "Reggae 110," named for the tempo of 110 bpm that it was produced in. The beat was faster, and violent lyrics gave way to *doble sentido*, or "double meaning" songs composed of thinly veiled sexual metaphors.

The 110 period was dominated by a producer named El Chombo, who put together CD compilations of Panamanian reggae for export. At age sixteen, Kafu won a local reggae contest to record a song on a Chombo production entitled *Cuentos de la Cripta* (*Tales from the Crypt*). Released in 1996,

the album was a big success in Central America, launching Kafu's career, among others.

Not surprisingly, New York has a hand in the Spanish reggae story too. Living near Jamaicans, Panamanian immigrants had direct access to the culture and got put on to dancehall reggae early on. Parallel to the scene back home, immigrants from Central America recorded reggae en español in New York, playing for pan-Latino audiences. One of them was El General, who left the Panama sound-system scene for accounting school in New York and ended up becoming the genre's biggest star, with hits like "Muévelo" and "Te Ves Buena."

It was also in New York that Ramón Bustamante, a Panamanian, produced a riddim imitating Shabba Ranks's "Dem Bow" for New York-based Jamaican artists Sleepy Wonder and Bobo General. The track was called "Pounder" and was a hit back in Panama. Its drumbeat became the pulse of Reggae 110. By some arcane, much-contested mode of transmission, the riddim made its way to the underground rap-reggae scene in Puerto Rico, where it became known as *dembow*. Slow it down from 110 bpm to about 90 or so, and you have the basic rhythmic identity of reggaeton.

After reggaeton blew up in 2004, and images of its commercial success reached Panama, many Panamanians felt cheated. This was *their* thing, yet these fair-featured Puerto Ricans were cashing the big checks. With CD piracy crippling what's left of the domestic music market, the sting has been particularly bad, and Panamanians are trying to understand why their music didn't take off internationally in the same way. It was producers like El Chombo's fault, for putting themselves on the album covers and not promoting the artists, some said. It was the artists' fault, said others, for writing about street topics instead of making radio-ready love songs. "If we had just invested the money to commercialize our music when we should have, maybe reggaeton wouldn't exist today," bemoans Megabyte.

"Puerto Rico is America," says Kafu Banton, with a shrug. "They got more tools, they got more options, they got more everything."

Some of the young artists of today's "third generation" have tried to make inroads in the international market with PR-style music, with some good results. But that's not the music that graces those CD-R mixes sold on Avenida Central, the music that makes Panama move. Long since reggaeton conquered the Spanish-speaking world, Panama is still listening out for the newest Jamaican club hits, flipping them *panameño* style, and partying to reggae, without the *ton*. ●