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Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez and "Little" Louie Vega brought their record collection to life.

Roots Remix

Nuyorican Soul
Giant Step/Blue Thumb

BY ED MORALES

Nuyorican Soul, a landmark record that redefines the DJ-produced album, is a nostalgic attempt by one of this city's most prolific remixing teams, "Little" Louie Vega and Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez (collectively known as Masters at Work) to define at least part of the Nuyorican aesthetic: a new, inclusive urban language that is not quite Puerto Rican, not quite American, but revels in elements of both. Drawing on a long track record of hanging and spinning at clubs like Zanzibar, Paradise Garage, and Sound Factory, Vega and Gonzalez have put together an all-star cast of jazz-fusion, disco, soul, and salsa musicians to re-create, live in the studio, a DJ set that would normally be performed on turntables in a London club. This is a hip-hop record in the sense that it breaks down essential elements of African music and reassembles them; it's a jazz record in its symphonic Ellingtonian grandeur; but most of all it's about the coded European-African synthesis that is the basis of Latin Caribbean culture. It's a roots record for an audience not sure how to find them.

Two early cuts, "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun," and "It's Alright, I Feel It," share the same piano rhythmic figure, which functions the way a salsa tumbao would. (The Afro-Latin tumbao—think of the hook to "Twist and Shout," or "La Bamba"—gave the piano a way to absorb the latent melody in African drumming.) The shift of part of the percussive burden to the piano is a core element in Latin music, one here translated into modern dance music like house. After establishing this

key concept, *Nuyorican Soul* flaunts heady soloing by Hilton Ruiz, a stride pianist whose Latin jazz style reaches back to Jelly Roll Morton, and Eddie Palmieri, whose keyboard work filters Yoruban spiritualism through European surrealism. It isn't until much later that the serious disco ball starts turning, the vibraphone becomes hegemonic, and George Benson brings the whole enterprise to a stunning climax with his whole-necked Fender scatting.

Although Masters at Work first started working with salsa in their remix of Tito Puente's "Ran Kan Kan" on the *Mambo Kings* soundtrack, the *Nuyorican Soul* project didn't really take shape until the 1994 single "The Nervous Track" exploded out of London's Bar Rumba. A trance-y melange that layers a two-bar synth wall of sound over tribal breakbeats, Latin congas, and a sassy salsa horn sample, "The Nervous Track" and its successor "Mind Fluid" (available only on vinyl and cassette versions of this album) is a little like freeze-dried Brand New Heavies filtered through Art of Noise and Santana. If these tracks were hitting,

thought Vega and Gonzalez, why not do a whole album cataloguing basic components of their new hybrid? So MAW, more curators than composers, went about assembling a supergroup for a concept album patterned after Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* and Quincy Jones's '70s ensembles.

Nuyorican Soul unfolds seamlessly, a dream set on a perfect night at your favorite club. It celebrates with covers of Minnie Riperton's dashiki kitsch "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun" and Loleatta Holloway's "Runaway," and features rejuvenated tours de force by fading fusion

WORLD MUSIC
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stars like Roy Ayers and Benson, while the 31-piece Salsoul Orchestra is revived to back nostalgic vocalists like La India, Jocelyn Brown, and Lisa Fischer. The MAW magic draws on tight recording studio savvy, a perfect sense of DJ timing, and a heady use of high technology to create "natural" sounds, giving *Nuyorican Soul* the texture of vinyl in an increasingly digital music world. Risking rejection by a dance community whose most viable commercial expression are acts like Prodigy, Daft Punk, and the Chemical Brothers, MAW insists on turning the clock back in order to go forward.

"Little" Louie Vega is a quintessential Nuyorican. Growing up in the Soundview area of the Bronx, he was a prince in the royal court of New York salsa, the nephew of the legendary sonero Hector Lavoe, who with fellow bad boy Willie Colon, helped to define the early Nuyorican experience by imbuing a tropical music with an urban text. Vega, now 32, spent his late-'70s-early-'80s youth soaking in the house party aesthetic of his neighborhood, grooving on Quincy Jones, learning to scratch from Jazzy Jay at Bambaataa-style Bronx River jams, wondering how he was going to become the next Dan Hartman (you know, "Instant Replay" and all that). It was an era when jazz fusion was a much maligned, if wildly popular, music that appealed to Nuyoricans and other Latinos, who preferred sweet vocals and intelligible dance beats with jazz instrumentation. Summer house party DJs understood that Ayers, Herbie Hancock, Benson, and Earl Klugh fit nicely next to tracks by Fania salsa superstars like Eddie Palmieri, Colon, and Ray Barretto (all of whom had jazz leanings). Disco/soul divas ruled the dance floor and radio stations like 92KTU, whose most popular DJ was

the Spanish-inflected baritone, Paco Navarro.

If this all sounds like the background for a novel called *This Is Acid Jazz*, it's only part of the Nuyorican Soul story. The underground dance scene that MAW are major players in is a constantly evolving melting pot of styles from hip-hop breakbeats to Hi-NRG, jungle, and ambient. If Vega is the trad disco melodicist of MAW, the Brooklyn-bred Gonzalez is the percussive beatmaster. Most of *Nuyorican Soul*'s tracks begin with Vega and Gonzalez playing keyboard and bass-drum lines, respectively, then asking invited musicians to let loose on top of them.

Nuyorican Soul is a risky endeavor—it's like getting all your friends into one room and playing a compilation tape with your favorite music on it and hoping they all get into it, as well as enjoy each other's company. For Nuyoricans, Ayers's "Sweet Tears" and Cal Tjader's "Shoshana," mesh well with a cut-and-scratch Jazzy Jeff throwdown and a burst of bilingual diva-ism from La India. It's the kind of thing reminiscent of an early-'80s club in Times Square called Bond's, where you could see Kid Creole, "Rapture"-era Debbie Harry, and Arto Lindsay on the same night. But one night at Bond's, the Clash, whose "Magnificent Seven" became one of Vega's favorite sample sources, invited Grandmaster Flash to play, only to see him get booed off the stage by misguided disco-sucks kids. Ever since then it's been a struggle to tear down those walls. It's ironic that *Nuyorican Soul* is such a bigger deal in London and Tokyo, because it's just the kind of record that can bring some real healing to old New York wounds. **V**

Nuyorican Soul will be performed at the Hammerstein Ballroom July 25.

MANUEL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 59

with its combination of Indian hand gestures and pneumatic hip action—in Trini parlance, "winning"—can be beautiful as well as athletic. In its pervading sense of fun and outrageous sexiness, the dancing is the perfect complement to the music's spicy lyrics, catchy melodies, and the dizzying syncopations of the thumping and pumping dholak.

All this has been too much for a whole sector of Indo-Caribbeans, who denounce chutney as vulgar, mindless, and musically amateurish. CRITICS RAGE OVER CHUTNEY WINE, proclaimed the headline of one of many newspaper articles. For their part, chutney's defenders have hailed it as lower-class dynamism, female liberation, and, in its own way, a part of the lively cultural renaissance that has animated the Indo-Caribbean community since the '70s. Meanwhile, thousands of dancers, cheerfully indifferent to this debate, have gone on voting with their feet, hands, and hips at fetes, clubs, and weddings, everywhere from Guyana to Jamaica (Queens, that is), home to some 150,000 Indo-Caribbeans, mostly Guyanese.

Perhaps paradoxically, the cultural revival is happening at a time when Hindi is effectively dying out as a spoken language, and Hari, Vikram, and Maqsood have become Harry, Vick, and Max. So most chutney fans don't follow the song texts (just as well, say cynics), but love of the language remains; as one singer told me, "The hook is the Hindi lyric."

Nevertheless, the Trini trend toward hybridization is strong, in a country where you can buy *halal* pigtail (a Muslim equivalent of kosher bacon) and hear a Catholic sermon by one Father Mohammad. So it's perhaps inevitable that the rather sparse chutney sound has been jazzed up by dance-band instrumentation and the bouncy rhythm of soca (dance-oriented calypso). The soca beat mixes quite easily with chutney rhythm, and dancers don't seem to

mind that the dholak is drowned out by the drum machine.

The resulting hybrid—chutney-soca—has become the latest fad in Trinidad and the Indo-Caribbean circuit, and a Chutney-Soca Monarch Competition has become institutionalized as a parallel event to Carnival's calypso contest. Indians take particular pleasure in the fact that even Afro-Trinidadians jump up and wine to the new sound, and several creoles have even taken to performing it. In the course of its meteoric trajectory, however, chutney-soca is hybridizing so fast that the chutney elements are in danger of disappearing. Outside of the rural wedding circuit, English lyrics, synthesizers, and soca-style ditties have largely replaced the now "classic" format of harmonium, dholak, and Hindi texts.

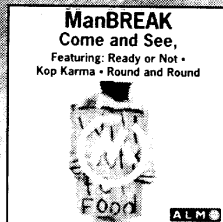
New York-based record producer and club owner Mohan Jaikaran takes some of the credit, as it were, for this development in his successful gambit to broaden chutney's audience. "We accomplished that, so now I can go back and play a bit. Come to the club next time and we'll have a live show and you'll hear some classic chutney."

The club in question is the somewhat erroneously named Calypso City (121-08 Jamaica Avenue, Richmond Hill), which features deejay mixes of chutney, reggae, and the like, along with occasional fetes featuring mini-stars brought up in Trinidad. Nearby Queens clubs Soca Paradise and Benab also target the Indo-Caribbean community. Meanwhile, Queens record producers market local and Trini chutney cassettes for three bucks apiece in West Indian groceries.

Aside from the core audience, Indians from India occasionally drop in at the clubs, and, according to unconfirmed reports, a few have even been seen to dance. But for the time being, in this hemisphere at least, it is the Guyanese and Trininis who are reviving Indian folk music and dance—albeit in a creolized form. In the process, Trinidad—the fabled land of calypso and Carnival—is already becoming celebrated, more inclusively, as the land of calypso, Carnival, and chutney. Check it out. **V**

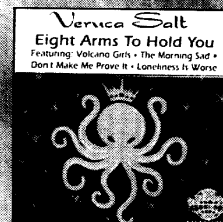
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July 29, 1997 VILLAGE VOICE 67