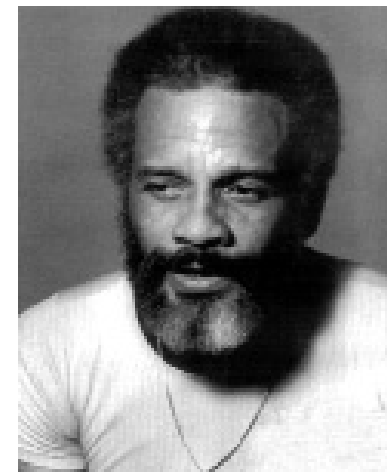
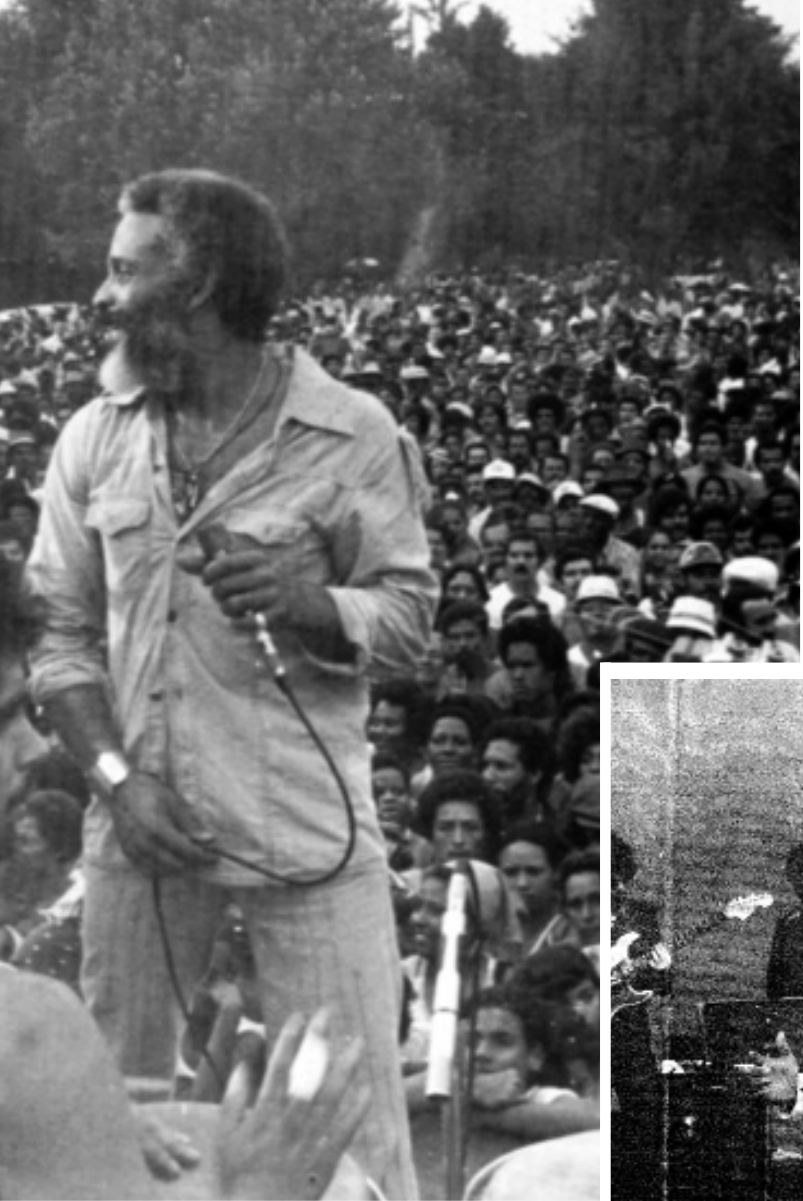


¡Ecuá Jeí! Ismael Rivera, El Sonero Mayor

(A Personal Recollection)

AURORA FLORES



ISMAEL RIVERA



Top left, in New York at the Loíza Festival. Middle right, on Venezuelan television, circa mid 1970s. Top and bottom photographs courtesy of Izzy Sanabria. Reprinted, by permission, from Izzy Sanabria. Middle right photograph courtesy of Aurora Flores. Reprinted, by permission, from Aurora Flores.

CORTIJO y su COMBO con ISMAEL RIVERA



Cortijo y su Combo—rising to the top. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez.

He walked the path of pain and suffering singing joyful, soulful, rhythmic songs that touched hearts and inspired minds. A five-foot-ten, *caramelo*-colored, Puerto Rican prophet of Boricua soul, fondly called “Maelo” by his friends and *El Sonero Mayor* (the “Master Singer”) by his contemporaries, Ismael Rivera was a natural.

Maelo began to sing once he reached “the age of reason,” and reason made his voice fly, dodging in and around the *clave* with a facility that could only have been a gift from God. But reality also told him he was born in one of the poorest sectors of San Juan, one of five surviving siblings (seven others did not make it). Very early on, his father told him stories steeped in roots of slavery; he sang out of love for an island that remained enslaved in her own right. Maelo wrapped this love around him for protection during a difficult time, when he had to fight for respect and work for survival from youth into manhood. From deep in the belly of poverty sprang a joy and celebration of

life that was infectious, a priceless potion of release and cleansing of the soul from the daily pain of existence.

One day, six-year-old Maelo announced to his mother, Margarita (Doña Margó), that he would learn a skill to support his family. He ran off to play rhythms—banging on paint cans while shaking baby bottles filled with beans. He made good on his promise. He shined shoes after school and ran errands before becoming a skilled bricklayer and master carpenter.

Rivera explored finger-poppin’ *claves* through the snap of his fingers while his hands labored over bricks and mortar; Maelo’s noontime *coros* resounded through the *cangrejero* ‘hood of Santurce, where he and boyhood buddy Rafael Cortijo would hustle gigs for the tribal *areitos* that released the soul at sunset. He met his partner, Rafa (Cortijo), when he was eleven years old in elementary school. The family frowned on the friendship, quipped Doña Margó, because “Rafa was so black he looked

blue and always walked around with those damned drums draped around him.” But fate had been sealed. Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera were about to make music and history together.

Cortijo encouraged the young crooner, instilling confidence in him as a performer even while he labored on the construction sites. He would recommend Maelo to bands that needed singers and brought him along to play bongos with the *conjunto* of Moncho Muley and many others when the pair began playing professionally on the San Juan scene. And it was Cortijo who brought the young Maelo to the attention of Lito Peña, at a time when the Maestro was looking for a vocalist who could sing the native *plena* music of the Island’s poor for his big band, La Panamericana.

“Yo soy Maelo de la Calle Calma”

“El Charlatan,” Maelo’s first hit with La Panamericana, rocked the Island. “Añoche en el baile, charlatán, le diste a mi Lola” was heard from every radio, home, social club, and dance hall throughout Puerto Rico. Defending the honor of his girl from an abusive charlatan was a theme that everyone could relate to and one that catapulted the young singer into Island-wide stardom by the mid ‘50s. With the money he earned from this initial hit Maelo bought his mother a house on Calle Calma, building the facade with his own hands.

Paving the way for Cortijo’s success, composer Rafael Hernández returned to Puerto Rico in 1947 a conquering hero at a time when Puerto Rico was hungry for heroes of Afro-Boricua descent. By the ‘50s and ‘60s Roberto Clemente and Peruchín Cepeda made the big leagues, representing Puerto Ricans, particularly black Puerto Ricans, with honor. While the civil rights movement was still a few years away from being formally signed by then President Johnson in 1964, Puerto Rico was already brimming with black power.

The feeling among the Island’s blacks was one of elation, as if a liberating explosion had hit the island.

By the late ‘50s, Cortijo y Su Combo con Ismael Rivera became the first all-black band to be featured regularly on television and radio on *El Show de Medio Día* and *La Taberna India*. Their front line and brass section danced and jibed to the native Island rhythms infused with brassy, jazzy lines, and commercial instrumentation.

Cortijo incorporated Afro-Cuban *montuno* lines and vamps on the piano with jazz licks on the brass over the indigenous *bomba* rhythms of the Island, played on Cuban *tumbadoras* rather than the Island’s native *barriles* (drum barrels). Maelo’s rapid-fire *someos* (improvised vocal phrases) staccatoed over melodies, building layers of rhythms while playing catch with the *clave*. Improvising street phrases and singing in unison with the percussion, *tres* or *cuatro* solo, Maelo danced, jumped, and played the *clave* while holding the audience in the palm of his hand.

“Someone opened the cage and let all the blacks loose,” Doña Margo once said. Indeed, Cortijo and Maelo’s performances had a liberating fury that crescendoed into an exhaustive ecstasy. Their music was an electrifying release.

Singer/composer Bobby Capó wrote hits for them, as did Pedro Flores, Don Rafael Cepeda, and Doña Margó. Don Cepeda, the guardian of *Boricua* *bomba* and *plena* rhythms, had been singing tunes to the duo for years, polishing their native-born knowledge of the genres.



The great duo, Cortijo and Maelo. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez.

**Witinila... uye, uye:
breaking cultural chains**

During an interview in the summer of 1976, Cortijo once said he took the rhythm of Boricua blood, dressed her up in her Sunday best and paraded her around the world for everyone to see. He loved her, and you could feel it. When he was about to record his first album, Cortijo made a point of recording his beloved bombas and plenas first, at a time in Puerto Rico when the Afro-Cuban conjunto sound was the big seller.

Bomba and plena were seen as an exclusive, insular rhythmic mystery steeped in an unmentionable black religious ritual of music and dance, protected by folklorists and academics who analyzed the music to the exclusion of the *pueblo*. The older folklorists were

entertaining audiences at the highest levels of professional musical acumen. Cortijo's replacement of barilles for *congas* had less to do with authenticity than with recorded coherence. Clearly the tauter skin over the narrower circumference of the conga drum carried the rhythmic patterns farther than the wider skin needed to fit the head of the larger barril. The *pandero* rhythms were swapped by the congas as well with the *requinto*-talking pandero played out on the *quinto* drum. As far as Cortijo was concerned, it is the skill and precision of the *indio* and not the choice of arrow that hits the target. The bomba was now needed for a newer insurrection, a cultural one inclusive of both black pride and Boricua identity unifying the lighter-skinned *jibaro* with his black coastal cousin.



Cortijo y su Combo with Arsenio Rodríguez—"El cieguito maravilloso."
Photograph courtesy of Rafael "Ralpb" Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael "Ralpb" Méndez.

never satisfied with the genre's loss of authenticity decade after decade; they were always critical of the dance and musical styles of the generation after them. Yet music, like people, evolves and changes with time, and Cortijo's vision went beyond banal criticism to encompass global acceptance of a form of music inherited through his enslaved ancestors. The music was capable of retaining its power of resistance while

local island perspective with urban stories and current events that were global in scope. "El Satelite" focused attention on the US/Russian space race when the Russians launched a sputnik into the universe. "El Negro Bembon" tells the tale of a black man killed simply because his lips were large; the song's repetitive refrain insists, "eso no es razón" (that's no excuse). Cortijo's wake, as described in Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's

They hit the bullseye.

Not only was Cortijo y su Combo a hit from its first recording on, their daily appearances on television, radio, festivals, dances, and concerts were testament to a popularity unprecedented at that time. Cortijo's band played bomba, plena, mambo, *guracha*, cha-cha, *oriza*, calypso, *mozambique*, *merengue*, *samba*, and *bolero* within a context of Puerto Rican pride and rhythmic creativity not duplicated since. Their themes went beyond conformist lyrics of living large and embraced



Cortijo y su Combo in New York.
Photograph courtesy of Rafael "Ralpb" Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael "Ralpb" Méndez.

book, *El entierro de Cortijo*, reflected the unifying power and crossing of cultures, classes, races, and places that his *sancocho* of music had on the pueblo. Cortijo had created a recipe with a taste, *un bocaito* for everyone, and isn't that how we, as island people eat, with everything on the plate instead of separated into neat, American TV dinnerstyle compartments?

One of Don Cepeda's sons, Roberto Cepeda, recalls how proud his father was of these initial recordings. "They brought the music of the poor out of isolation. It went from marginalized ghettos onto radio, television, records and movies," Roberto comments. The old man would sing bombas to them, Cortijo would then transform the various rhythms of bomba—*yuba*, *cuembe*, *cocobale*, *holandes* and *lero*—into the more fast-paced bomba *sica*, making it commercially appealing to a dance crowd used to a Cuban *conjunto* sound. Don Cepeda and Maelo would sing the coro together while Cortijo quickened the foundation's rhythmic pace. Maelo would start on the verses, improvising and scatting parts of the

African Congolese phrases into the improvised "mambos" (instrumental interludes) of the tunes. During these meetings, Don Cepeda's many children would gather around Maelo, who always had his pockets filled with candy and trinkets for them.

De Colores

Maelo loved children. He believed that all children should feel love and joy, no matter where they came from. He recalled a party in his honor at the start of his career at a five-star hotel in Puerto Rico. Maelo rented a van and gathered all the kids from the block. When the promoter of the party saw those scruffy children in the lobby he began to chase them out. Maelo stepped in and said, "These are my guests, and this is my party. I want them treated just like any other visitor at this hotel." They all sat at Maelo's table.

Maelo was the same with beggars. It didn't matter what they wanted the money for. I watched him take desperate people to eat a meal, peel off dollar bills to strung-out junkies with outstretched

hands, and buy groceries for the sick and elderly. I once asked him why he would throw his money away on someone who was just going to get high with it. “If you’re going to give—don’t look at where it’s going—just give it away and don’t look back. That’s what it’s about.” That’s what Maelo was about.



Ismael and Celia Cruz at Madison Square Garden, circa 1970s. Photographs courtesy of Aurora Flores. Reprinted, by permission, from Aurora Flores.

I was a music correspondent for *Billboard Magazine* when I met Maelo. He was my neighbor, but more important, he was my friend. He came into my life at a time of loss and heartache. Maelo’s fatherly warmth toward me had a healing affect. I was a young writer

searching for cultural answers while digging for roots, and Maelo became my mentor and maestro. He lived up to the challenge, digging out old recordings while introducing me to key musicians like Don Rafa himself. He invited me to sing coro in his and Cortijo’s band. We’d discuss music, myth, history, and Puerto Rico, explaining rituals, defining terms and ceremonies. He and Cortijo would work a lot on the surrounding islands, alternating with calypso groups. He sang in English back then, and he laughed when he told me that they didn’t like his accent in English.

Maelo would school me on the bands that toured Puerto Rico, all of them wanting to perform wherever Cortijo was playing. The bands included La Sonora Matancera who, being on the same label, performed with Maelo’s group around 1958. We were going through old photographs of his when he pulled out an 8x10 black-and-white photograph of a very young Celia Cruz with Maelo’s arm around her. They both looked very young and were dressed elegantly, cozying up to one another. Wide-eyed, I asked, “Maelo, did you date her?” With a sly look on his face he answered, “We dated for a little while, but she told me she was a serious girl and wanted marriage, and you know, Aurorita, that I’m just a *títtere*.”

Doña Margó was visiting Maelo the summer of 1978 when

I met her in the apartment he kept on 108th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. She was such a pretty lady with strong opinions that embraced the passion and love she had in her heart for her son, her music, and her flag. A writer and poet herself, she gave me a poem she recited



From left: Cortijo, Ismael, Tony Chiroldes, Martín, Beny Moré and Sammy Ayala. Coro singer Sammy Ayala remembers Beny Moré saying that the young Maelo was a “Sonero Mayor” because of his unique way of playing with the clave while singing. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez, Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez.

extemporaneously. It immediately brought tears to my eyes, and my mind made a mental record that remained with me throughout the years: “Me duele el corazon destila sangre, y un grito se me ahoga en la garganta, de no poder gritar a cuatro vientos, que quiero libertad para me patria” [My aching heart is dripping blood, a scream drowns in my throat, when I cannot shout to the four winds, that I want freedom for my country].

I met, talked and hung out with friends, children, and many of the ladies that Maelo wooed and loved. He was a ladies’ man for sure, often comparing women to candy—all good with different flavors—but I met him in a introspective time in his life when he was able to have platonic friendships. Sometimes I felt as if he were confessing things to me he could not tell another man or a woman he was intimate with for fear that he would be judged by them. But it was tough being his chronicler. He would bring me to the apartments of various women he knew, and at first, I could feel the cold, penetrating looks of suspicion piercing right through me. Not being a street kid, many times I was terrified by the unspoken hostility, but Maelo would always give them a look that said, “Don’t even think it,” introducing me as his student and friend. We’d all end up having dinner together.

El Sonero Mayor...porque vacilo con la clave y tengo sabor

Backtrack to 1955. Maelo and Cortijo were the talk of Latin music. They tore up the Palladium, ripped up the *carnavales* and fired up Colombia and Venezuela. While rehearsing at Roseland for a gig at New York’s Palladium, Beny Moré heard Cortijo y Su Combo. They were to share the stage that night and Beny was about to rehearse with a band that was not his own. Once he heard Cortijo, he asked the Palladium’s promoter to pay the boys because he wanted to be backed up by the Puerto Rican combo. By 1958, Beny toured Puerto Rico with Cortijo noting Maelo’s singing, he passed the torch of vocal greatness to the young Boricua proclaiming him “El Sonero Mayor”—The Master Singer—a moniker later used as a marketing tool when Maelo went solo.

Meanwhile, Cortijo y Su Combo had broken through the Condado color line, the black barrier in Puerto Rico that allowed only lighter-skinned musicians to play. Cortijo increased the pay scale for black musicians, in particular drummers, paying them equal to what “schooled” musicians were paid. He also secured the all-black band lodging in the same five-star hotels they played, something unheard of at that time. Singer/composer Bobby Capó,



First New York tour, rehearsing at the Club Caborrojeño, mid 1950s. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralph” Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralph” Méndez.

who was light-skinned, would arrange and secure the hotel rooms for Cortijo and his band members. Once the rooms were confirmed, there was nothing management could do to ban the “brothers” from resting after their gig. Indeed, Capó played a pivotal role in the success of Cortijo y su Combo. It was Capó who had an influential position on radio and television, and it was also Capó who took their demo to the Seeco recording label that gave the group their break. A handsome crooner and composer, he had already felt the sting of racial exclusion when Xavier Cugat told him he was just one shade too dark to sing with his orchestra. He also had first-hand knowledge of America’s Southern hospitality, having toured with Katherine Dunham. So it was with great pride that Capó chaperoned Cortijo onto stages where all-black orchestras had never set foot before.

Las Tumbas

After nine years of hit after musical hit, Maelo took one of his worst hits at the San Juan airport in 1962. As Sammy Ayala, one of Cortijo’s coro singers and friend of Maelo put it, “it was a coup d’etat.” Someone informed officials at the airport that the band was carrying drugs.

Maelo, Cortijo, and some of the other band members were indeed carrying, but Maelo stepped forward and took the rap for everyone, asserting that all the drugs were his. He was arrested, handcuffed, and paraded for all the media and the public to see. Owing to the large quantity of drugs found, he was charged with trafficking, trying to smuggle drugs into the Island.

Maelo served some time in San Juan’s notorious Oso

Blanco jail. After that, things were never the same. Since it was a federal offense he was taken to and tried in the States. His lawyer was an American whom he didn’t even understand. Maelo was sentenced and sent to a penitentiary in Lexington, Kentucky.

While in prison, Maelo formed a band with other prisoners who were into music. He composed, sang, and played, reflecting on his life on the Island while observing the life of a black man in the South at the start of the civil rights movement in America. Most of all, he missed his friend, Cortijo.

Back on the Island, the Cortijo Combo floundered. Puerto Rico was outraged at the nerve of these *negros*, condemning their *bon vivant* lifestyle at the height of their success. According to Cortijo and Maelo, pianist Rafael Ithier bolted first, organizing El Gran Combo. Later, former members of the band went their separate ways, starting their own combos.

Maelo served about four years in prison. He returned to the Island in 1966 to record a comeback album with Cortijo, *Bienvenidos*, utilizing the Tito Puente orchestra as backup with the King of Latin music himself on coro. But neither Maelo nor the recording were welcome; sales were flat. Promoters did not want to hire them. Puerto Rico would not forgive him.

El Negrito de Alabama

Maelo spoke to me about his annual pilgrimage to Panama where he touched and felt the pain of the Black Christ of Portobelo—El Nazareno.

El Nazareno moved him... inspired him... helped him stay away from heroin for sixteen years. He recalled the first time that he danced with the devil: in the *arrabales*. In the ghetto. It was a common rite of passage. A dare. A badge that made you into a man. In New York it got worse. At the Palladium it was a test of musical prowess. “A macho trap,” he agonized. “How ‘bad’ could you be under the influence and still perform. That was the measure of manhood, of musicianship.” He knew it was a lie. He felt it deep in his soul, and his heart ached with despair. Tears ran down his cheeks as he recalled the torture of self-inflicted drug abuse.

The Puerto Rico rejection wounded him deeply. Maelo returned to New York, broken-hearted and self-destructive. He recorded *Lo último en la avenida* with master percussionist Kako. By 1968 he formed, Ismael Rivera y Los Cachimbos.

The trail of hits began once more. But this time, Maelo hit with a vengeance.

Rivera had found El Nazareno. His career and voice reached its peak. He performed at a Tico-Alegre All-Star

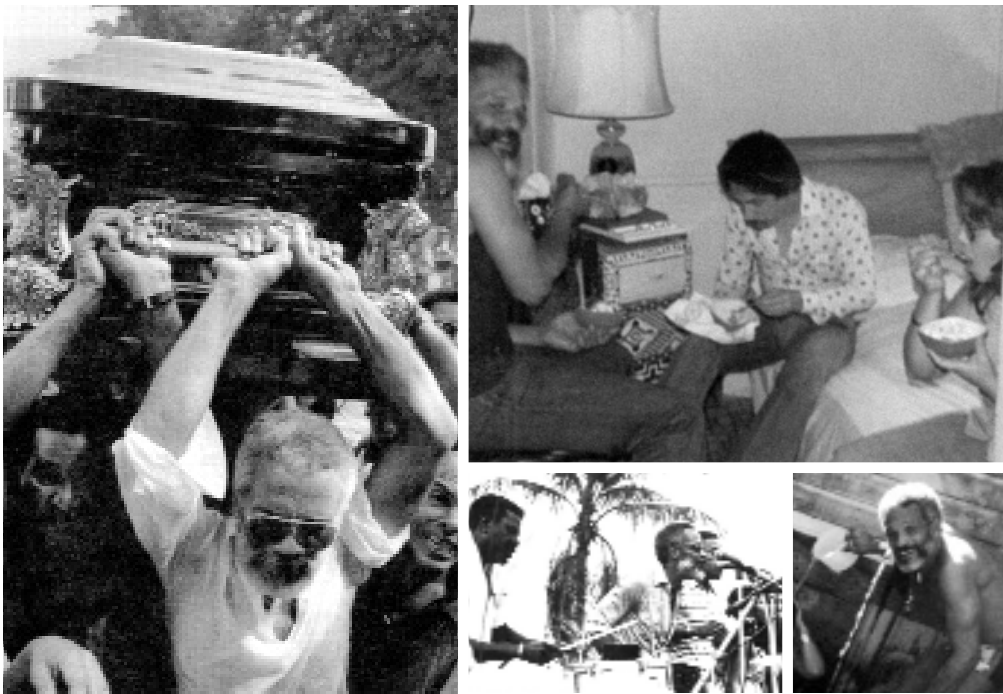
concert in Carnegie Hall headlining along with La Lupe, Yayo El Indio, Vitín Avilés, and the Alegre All-Stars. He sang “Mi negrita me espera,” a tune in tribute to his mother that expressed her anxiety when he started playing all-night gigs. He recorded Rafael Hernández’ classic “Cumbanchero,” where he underscores his musical mastery with the words “A mi me llaman el Sonero Mayor, porque vacilo con la clave y tengo sabor”

[They call me the Master Singer because I party with the clave and I have swing] in a rat-tat-tat, percussive, word-playing soneo, drenching audiences with sound like hard rain falling on a hot tin roof. The Hernandez standard became forever his. His band was tight with a sound that now expressed a Puerto Rican/New York reality. This was a more laid-back music, with recordings such as “Traigo de todo,” “Soy feliz,” and “Dime por qué.” There were also tunes about prison, “Las Tumbas” sprinkled with Spanglish street phrases that punched through the solid wall of instrumentation like a heavy-weight at a prize fight, *venía por la maceta*. Maelo was clean. He was strong. He was El Sonero Mayor.

In New York, he wrapped himself around the anonymity of the poor, the *lumpen*, the forgotten. He formed a family nucleus with Gladys Serrano, his companion of 25 years whom he called Gladiola. They had a child, Carlito, but Maelo also raised her eldest son Rodney, whose birth father was another great Puerto Rican vocalist, Daniel Santos. His eldest son, Ismaelito, Jr., from his first wife Virginia (they were never divorced) would come to stay with them in New York during summer vacations. In fact, many were the children



Tocayos, Ismael Quintana and Ismael Rivera at a recording session for La Lupe’s Stop I’m Free Again album, circa late 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Chico Álvarez. Reprinted, by permission, from Chico Álvarez.



Left, Carrying Cortijo. Photograph courtesy of Luis Ramos. Top, At La Janet's house (from left, Maelo, Frank Ferrer and Aurora Flores). Bottom, Cleaning up in Portobelo, Panama. Center, Cortijo, Maelo and Maelito in Puerto Rico. Photographs courtesy of Aurora Flores. Reprinted, by permission, from Aurora Flores.

who called him “Papa Maelo.” His apartment, was always filled with children. I once watched him counsel a troubled teen who was self-destructing. Maelo was emphatic about the boy returning home, finishing school, and getting a job. For dramatic affect he pulled out an old shoeshine box from the closet and showed him how he used to shine shoes when he was his age, emphasizing humility as nothing to be ashamed of. He had decorated the foyer of his apartment with wood paneling and maple *banquitos* where he and the boy were sitting and talking. Maelo was proud of his carpentry skills, and talked of them to the young man, telling him how he made his own clave sticks out of wood he found in the streets.

I traveled with Maelo and Gladiola to Panama in 1978 for the yearly pilgrimage to Portobelo on October 21st, where he carried El Nazareno. At the airport, we were met by Panamanian officials who treated Maelo as an arriving dignitary; he was an ambassador gracing their country with his presence. We were

escorted to the hotel in the capital city of Colón and treated to sumptuous dinner parties at the homes of top officials. Maelo was truly loved there.

Despite the fanfare, Maelo was itching to get on with the spiritual tradition. He went into detail as to how the ritual would take place as he showed off the beautiful lilac with gold trim robe he wore for the event. “We walk 17 kilometers to get to Porto Belo. There are no cement roads and everyone travels into the small coastal town by foot. I wear the robe while walking and think about how *el negrito* will help me. I think of his words of love for everyone and about forgiveness for all the evil in the world. The people gather at the Church of San Felipe. They pray, they make promises, they cry, and they sleep there. I join the men carrying the platform that supports the [life-size image of] El Nazareno.”

I watched with Gladiola as the men carried the huge statue around the town, three steps forward and two steps back to the beat of the drums that prefaced the procession. The figure stood above

the ocean of people that formed the procession, seeming to walk above the heads of the crowd. We stood transfixed in the rain, holding candles that did not go out. A crucifixion was reenacted. Tears streamed down devout faces as the pain of Christ washed over us like a wave. After it was over, we found Maelo near the steps of the Church where barbers were shaving and cutting the men’s hair. He showed us the bruises on his shoulder from the platform, and I asked him why he was cutting his hair and beard. “I grow it all year as part of my promise to El Nazareno, and then I leave him my strength so that he can continue to help me.”

Maelo carried the wooden cross bearing the black face of Christ everywhere he went. When he was recording “Las caras lindas” for Fania Records in 1978 I saw him make the sign of the cross, take El Nazareno from around his neck, put it on the music stand, put the “cans” (headphones) on his head, pick up his *clave y pa’encima*. Ruben Blades, Héctor LaVoe, and Yayo El Indio (*casi na*) did back-up vocals watching in awe of the *albañil* who traded bricks for words in the construction of songs meant to soothe the souls of the forgotten. Maelo quoted from scriptures and prophets and I thought, if Christ walked the earth today, Maelo would be one of his disciples. It is not what goes into a man that defines his character, but what comes out. What came out of Maelo was real.

Maelo’s recordings were punctuated with references to saints and sinners—San Miguel Arcángel and El Nazareno—and underscored with calls to the deities of African spirits, *¡Ecuá Jeí!*, for empowerment. He did not enjoy pretense or suffer fools gladly; he was strong yet sincere about his weaknesses and compassionate about humanity. He was never sarcastic or arrogant with his public, demanding and getting respect in return. Although he had many women,

they all knew about each other and not one would even think of making a public scene. At gigs, he was usually accompanied by an entourage of friends from the ‘hood who, he quickly informed club owners, managers and promoters, would have to be treated with the same regard afforded other patrons, or else he’d leave. And though his circle of *compadres* were mostly people who shared the same pain of poverty he had known so well, he was able to hobnob with powerful, celebrated, and influential people as well as an inexperienced little kid like me. In an interview with a television reporter, he was asked whether he was anxious about winning a Grammy now that Palmieri had won one, to which he replied, “Grammy, Hammy, what’s important is the music.” He was genuine, expressing the joy and pain of life on a very real level.

Piedras en mi camino

Maelo’s voice had dropped several keys by the time he recorded *De todas maneras rosas* in 1976. The phrasing was still driving, the flirtation with the *clave* was impeccable, but the range was fading. Margarita’s boy didn’t know it then, but polyps were beginning to take hold of his vocal chords. His 1978 tribute concert at Madison Square Garden was a musical disappointment. He began to indulge in vices with a drive that on some deeper level numbed the reality of his failing voice.

At the end of 1982, Cortijo died of cancer. The visionary who brought black musicians into the limelight of stardom had passed. Cortijo, the maestro who marked a new trail of fusion in Puerto Rican music; the maestro who incorporated the native *bombas* and *plenas* of Puerto Rico into the Afro-Cuban mix; the same maestro who later, with the early ‘70s recording of *Time Machine*, was to fuse elements of rock, jazz, and *nueva trova* in a mixture celebrated

from Cuba to Spain (that remains unrecognized today)—Cortijo would no longer be seen at the race tracks or clubs of New York and Puerto Rico. He would no longer be seen at his timbales with his bottom *bemba* pouting in concern. Cortijo was gone.

The Island was shocked. Maelo was devastated. He went to Puerto Rico to mourn his brother and say goodbye. Tears flowed as he spoke to his compadre in what seemed to be a secret language of Spanish, English, and African. He carried his buddy's coffin as he carried El Nazareno but this time, in pain and penance through the streets of San Juan to the cemetery. Once there, he knelt, made the sign of the cross and prayed before the masses at the San José cemetery in Villas Palmeras. He returned to New York destroyed, his spirit broken. He abandoned the words of El Nazareno and began to dance with Satan once more. His voice was never the same.

El Incomprendido

Two tumultuous New York years passed, with Maelo literally lost in the streets of El Barrio. He went barefoot; he was crazed and confused. The once mighty warrior of Puerto Rican soul was seen picking from garbage, looking for quarters in phone booths, and searching for solace in a lonely basement. I ran into his *timbalero*, Rigo during this time. I was a mother by now, but I still was looking for my mentor. Rigo took me to the basement where Maelo was staying, but as I waited outside I had a sinking feeling that I would not get to see him again. A few slow minutes went by before Rigo came out to tell me that Maelo did not want me to see him the way he was. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I went home.

After several dark incidences, Maelo ran into a preacher friend who took him to his farm in Connecticut, where Maelo found the words of El Nazareno once more.

His *tocayo* and friend, vocalist Ismael Miranda, sent for him to clean up at his ranch and return to the home of his mother, Margarita.

Juntos, Otra Vez

Maelo found comfort in the bosom of the mother who was his muse. He began throat treatments in 1985 in a heartbreaking and hopeless quest to find his voice. But in his heart of hearts, he knew it was futile. He would often say, “Cortijo had the key and when he died, he took it with him.”

Doña Margó would say her son sang for her, for the artist that she could never be because she was black and a woman. And indeed it was some of her tunes that shook the hit parade in Puerto Rico and New York in the early years: “Ingratitudes,” “Máquino landera,” and “Bombón de canela” among others. But Maelo sang for everyone, especially the poor of his barrio. When he belts out “Yo soy Maelo de la Calle Calma

cantando pa’ ti linda musica,” he brings the song back to the block he grew up in. He and Cortijo took the music of the slaves of Puerto Rico, slaves who jumped ships from Haiti, Cuba, and other islands and who played the bomba music with its roots in the Congo and made it a commercial hit in the New World. He was working on a final recording (that would be finished by his eldest, Ismaelo Jr.) “Carabalí y Congolia,” in May 1987 when a heart attack struck, jolting him into his mother’s arms (“Mi negrita me espera”) on the patio he built for her with the money from his first hit.

In New York, I left my five-year-old son with my mother so I could attend the funeral. I had to see Papa Maelo once more. When I reached the community center at the housing project of the Llorens Torres complex, the area was packed with fans and mourners. Drummers Giovanni Hidalgo, Cachete Maldonado, Roberto



Cortijo y su Combo in Puerto Rico. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez.



Cortijo, Machito, Sammy Ayala, Maelo and Roi at the Palladium. According to arranger/musician Ray Santos, when Cortijo performed at the Palladium they sold out more than when Puerte, Rodríguez or Machito performed there. Photograph courtesy of Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael “Ralpb” Méndez.

Roena, and many others played tribute to El Sonero. Inside, the Center was brimming with people, family, women and children. He always told me not to be afraid when I walked with him and so I walked alone and made my way through the humid heat and crowd.

I approached the coffin, kneeled and talked to my teacher and mentor who taught me so much about life. I remembered walking in Panama through El Chorillo with him. I asked him why the women's arms had eruptions as if the skin were bursting through. "*Ay bendito Aurorita*," he answered. "Those women are prostitutes, and if they don't make enough money, their pimps cut up their arms. They never go to hospitals." He explained that many of those women had no formal education, and this was the only way they knew to support their children and families. He told me I should never judge the plight of another human being. At that point, a dusty old man with no teeth yelled out, "¡Salsa!". Maelo and I stopped. The skinny old Black man hugged and kissed him. Maelo introduced me as his niece. The old man began to snap his fingers in clave and to sing a coro. Maelo harmonized with the coro lifting his voice in full song, finishing the tune with improvised phrases. He told the old man he would use it in his next recording.

I remembered jogging around Central Park's reservoir with him. I was young and lazy and he would push me to finish around the track shaming me into running by saying, "You're only 26, I'm 49—if I can do it so can you." Then he'd break into song. After the run, we'd go to his Panamanian girlfriend's apartment on West End Avenue. La Janet would make us fresh juices from carrots, oranges, and watercress. I remember the smell of the hot farina he loved to eat and the many discussions he held in his apartment and in the vest pocket park on 105th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Somehow, the *rumberos* would always know when he was there, and they'd come out to

jam with him. Maelo never refused. But when the rumba was over, he'd play a bomba, a plena, and tell them they had to know their roots first. They had to preserve the music that held the life source of the people of the earth. They had to conserve it, maintain it, and never forget it.

I cried as I knelt and prayed over him. He had made millions throughout his career, and he gave it all away just as he gave everything to his public and to his music. As the casket was closed, I spotted Sammy Ayala. I asked him to let me carry the coffin with the other men. Being a Nuyorican, I was aware that this was a traditional guy thing and that he might get offended, but I didn't care. I was there for Maelo, but I really didn't know which side of the place I belonged since there were the women from Puerto Rico on one side and the women from outside of Puerto Rico on the other side. He moved over and gave me a little space and said, "Seguro Aurorita si tu eres familia." We carried him outside to where the crowd and the hearse waited.

We never made it to the hearse. The throngs of people and pleneros took him on their shoulders, parading him the same way he carried El Nazareno. Even the governor of Puerto Rico showed up in a *guayabera* and took his turn carrying Maelo to the cemetery. Thousands gathered and I could barely see the final rites when I spotted Kako coming through the crowd of colors, ages, races, nations, and professions that packed the burial grounds. It was all a blur to me. I just wanted to say my last farewell to a man who treated me with more respect and equality than any corporate president, lawyer, or "educated" fool. I felt the look of pain on Kako's face and opened my arms to him. He cried, "Aye, Aurorita," sobbing something inaudible in that *cuembe* Spanish they spoke, before weeping inconsolably in my arms. Rigo also stood next to me, along with Roberto Roena, and we all watched and wept as he was laid to rest beside his longtime friend and brother, Rafa Cortijo. *¡Que descansen en paz, ecua—jei!*

DISCOGRAPHY

ON 45 RPM: [OUTTAKES FROM ORQUESTA PANAMERICANA]	"Cha Cha in Blue" (1955) "La vieja en camisa" (1955) "Yo no bailo con Juana" (1955) "Quimbombom" (1955)
LP WITH ORQUESTA PANAMERICANA DE LITO PEÑA:	<i>Orquesta Panamericana</i> (Ansonia 1290)
LPS WITH CORTIJO Y SU COMBO (UP TO 1962):	<i>Cortijo Invites you to Dance</i> (Seeco 9106) <i>Baile con Cortijo y su Combo</i> (Seeco 9130) <i>Cortijo y su combo</i> (Seeco 9160) <i>El alma de un pueblo</i> (Seeco 9326) <i>Fiesta boricua</i> , Cortijo (Rumba 5519) <i>Cortijo en Nueva York</i> , Cortijo (Rumba 55515) <i>Bueno ¿y que?</i> (Rumba 55534) <i>Quítate de la vía Perico</i> (Rumba 55548) <i>Danger Do Not Trespass</i> (con Rolando La Serie) (Rumba 55552) <i>Los internacionales</i> (Marvela 92)
LPS WITH CORTIJO (AFTER 1966):	<i>Bienvenidos/Welcome Cortijo y Rivera</i> (Tico 1140) <i>Con todos los hierros</i> (Tico 1158) <i>Juntos otra vez</i> (Coco 113)
LP WITH KAKO:	<i>Lo último en la avenida</i> (Tico 1215)
LPS WITH HIS OWN GROUP (LOS CACHIMBOS):	<i>De colores</i> (Tico 1174) <i>Controversia</i> (Tico 1196) <i>Eso fue lo que trajo el barco</i> (Tico 1305) <i>Vengo por la maceta</i> (Tico 1311) <i>Traigo de todo</i> (Tico 1319) <i>Soy feliz</i> (Vaya 35) <i>Eclipse total</i> (Tico 1400) <i>Feliz Navidad</i> (Tico 1404) <i>De todas maneras rosas</i> (Tico 1415) <i>Ésto sí es lo mio</i> (Tico 1428)
RECORDINGS WITH OTHER GROUPS:	<i>Live</i> , Fania All Stars (Fania 515) ["Cúcala" (duet with Celia Cruz) and "El Nazareno"] <i>Live at Carnegie Hall, Vol. 1</i> (Tico-Alegre All Stars 1325) ["Sale el sol" and "Dormir contigo"] <i>Latin Connection</i> , Fania All Stars (Fania 595) ["Bilongo"]
COMPILATIONS:	<i>Ismael Rivera: El Sonero Mayor</i> (Seeco 9320) <i>El Sonero Mayor, Vol 2</i> (Seeco 9353) <i>Compilations: Eclipse total</i> (Tico 1400) <i>Ismael Rivera con Cortijo y su Combo</i> "Sonero #1" (MP 3164) <i>Cortijo y su Combo con Ismael Rivera</i> (Tico 1406) <i>Llaves de la tradición</i> (Tico 1419) <i>Oro</i> (Tico 1433) <i>Maelo</i> (Tico 1437) <i>El único</i> (Tico 1442) <i>Legend</i> (Música Latina 58) <i>Maelo: The Fania Legends of Salsa,</i> <i>Vol. 8, 2 CD Set</i> (Fania 739)