In most parts of the world, the music called “folk” is buried in the memories of a few elder inhabitants, while the younger folk dance and sing to radio and juke box tunes. To some extent, of course, this also true of the Caribbean area; it is still possible to dredge up precursors to the calypso in Trinidad, while in Puerto Rico such game-songs as bomba are increasingly hard to find. But, to an astonishingly large extent, “folk” music here is being created on the spot, and is apparently no less of the people for having living composers.

PLENA is a case in point. This music, which takes its name (meaning “full”) from the unrestrained manner in which the leader shouts out his lyrics, was first heard near the south coast city of Ponce some time after World War I. It is an infectiously square rhythm, set off by pistol shot retorts on the pandereta, a tamborine-size drum slapped by calloused fingers in syncopated off-beats, and characteristically featuring improvisation on the sinfonia, a small, sweet-toned relative of the accordion. The words, like those of calypso, usually deal with real events or persons. “Santa Maria” (Band 1) was recorded in Ponce. It is a kind of secular prayer or supplication to the Virgin Mary and refers to Her succor in time of disaster such as hurricane or earthquake.

The native West Indian instrument known as the STEEL BAND is only as old as the 50-gallon steel oil barrels of World War II, but already its origins are shrouded in mystery. Trinidad claims its invention, and Trinidad bands remain Caribbean champions of wild leaping rhythms; Antigua claims it, and its bands, trained in the cooler northern clime, are the cleanest and most musical of all. Steel bands of lesser talent are appearing in all the islands, and even in the U.S.A.

A steel drum, or “pan”, is made by chopping off one end of the big barrel and then dividing the other end into segments by indenting pie-shaped outlines with a cold chisel. As the metal skin is stretched by the hammering, each segment takes on a note—sometimes the builder himself cannot tell which note will be where—which, when tapped with a rubber-tipped stick, gives off a more or less pure tone. There are four sizes of pan in use: the melody or “ping-pong” pan, with as many as 28 notes; the seconds; the baritone or guitar pan and the bass “boom” with only three or four notes.

The Federators, who hail from the northerly islands, belong to the most musical steel band tradition. In addition to the pans, they play only the rattling gourds called
maracas to augment the rhythm. All of their selections are native to the West Indies (Bands 2, 12).

The Puerto Rican guaracha is at least 100 years old. During its heyday it was to the poorer islanders what the danza was to the well-to-do. The four examples here are played by Paquito Lopez Cruz and his group; Mr. Lopez is a distinguished folklorist and professor, and his rhythms are authentic. The numbers:

1) Las Gallaretas. (Band 7) These are beautiful white birds, somewhat larger than doves, which frequent river banks. The song invites us to come and see them as they congregate where native women are washing their clothes in the streams. And, in the chorus, to look at the pretty brunette.

2) Trigeña Hermosa. (Band 13) Why is your memory so short? You have forgotten how much you loved me. I still love you just as much.

3) Sña Maria, la Colora. (Band 9) Madam Maria, the redhead, has a grinder for making flour out of the yucca. Run and get it, or all this yucca will go to waste.

4) El Cañon. (Band 3) The Cañon is a name assumed by an old time cobbler, and he used to sing this song. It is a song of parranda, during the Christmas season, which implores food, sweets, or, in this case, drink, before the singer will leave.

A PASILLO is from Colombia where, as in other parts of the Southern Caribbean, musicians like to mix up rhythms of three and two beats. “Porque te quiero, quiereme” (Love me because I love you - Band 5), is a pathetic amorous plea, here sung by Gustavo Bausa.

The VACCINE is another comparatively recent creation of the inventive Caribbean music makers. Each instrument is a tube of bamboo several inches in diameter and up to three feet long. It is blown like a trumpet, through a hole in one end, and each instrument has just one low, hooting note. Each player must therefore blow at the correct instant to help construct the complex rhythm. He also taps the barrel of his instrument with a stick, and a regular drummer may be on hand to help out. The rhythm played by vaccines on this record is called the Ra-Ra (Band 6).

BOMBA is a drumming, singing and dancing game that goes right back to Africa. It is still played by the Negroes who live along the coasts of Puerto Rico, in this case the residents of Loiza Aldea. In the old days, a bomba would start at dawn and continue unabated until sundown of the second day. The words of this one, so often repeated
by chanter and public, are in approximate Spanish, but often they are phonetic
descendants of African dialect whose meanings the singers themselves never knew.
The drums are heavy and barrelshaped, and the players often straddle them. The
drumheads are goatskin, and are tightened by applying fire. (Band 8).

“Franjas de Agua” (Band 10) means roughly “patterns of water”. It is a mazurka,
one of the dance rhythms imported from Europe and bent to the demands of genteel
Puerto Rican society of the late nineteenth century. It conjures up pictures of gentlemen
in cutaways and wasp-waisted ladies dancing into the dawn.

The music of Haiti throbs with deep and mysterious rhythms, most of them akin
to the MERENGUE, or in its original Haitian French spelling, the MERINGUE, a
highly popular dance rhythm in the U.S.A. Unlike Puerto Rican music, which can
come to life with the simple swish of a guiro—or even without it, with the twang of
a guitar—practically all music in the Negro Republic is founded on drumming. The
basic drum is the tall, graceful “conga” drum which is made to speak by fingers and
palms of both hands. The pulse is generally sweet and gentle, with an infectious bounce
unlike any other drumming in the world. “Choucoune” (Band 11) is of undetermined
origin, but like folk music of the other islands, turns up whenever popular music is
played. “Choucoune” is one of Haiti’s all-time favorites; the word is the name of the
tall, conical straw hat, and the significance here is that it is worn only by the favorite
mistress of wealthy planters. When she wears it to town, every salesman in the market
gives her credit.

A DANZA resembles the polite rhythm of the European waltz and mazurka, but
it has a gentle sway and richly sentimental melody that make it distinctly Puerto Rican.
Many danzas have words, others were composed for a motley orchestra featuring two
bombardinos (baritone horns) and others, like “Vano Empeno” (Hopeless desire—
Band 14) were originally for piano solo. This beauty was composed by Juan Morel
Campos (1857-96), Puerto Rico’s most famous composer, who has come to occupy
a place in the island’s legend comparable to Stephen Foster’s in the U.S.A. It is played
by two mandolins and a guitar. The second mandolin improvises harmony, much like
the tenor in a barbershop quartet.

Notes by Carter Harman
BOMBA:
Music of the Caribbean

1. SANTA MARIA .................................................. 3:30
   Pleneros Ponceño
2. GRENADE JUMP-UP ........................................... 3:00
   The Federators Steel Band
3. EL CAÑON ...................................................... 2:54
   Colon Sisters and Paquito Lopez Cruz Ensemble
4. BADJAN MAMBO ................................................ 2:10
   The Federators Steel Band
5. PORQUE TE QUIERO, QUIEREME ............... 4:14
   Trio Armonia — Gustavo Buasa, vocal
6. RA RA NO. 2 ................................................... 2:30
   Vaccines Petionville
7. LAS GALLARETAS .............................................. 2:45
   Colon Sisters and Paquito Lopez Cruz Ensemble
8. BOMBA ........................................................... 2:50
   Ensemble from Loiza Aldea
9. SIÑA MARIA, LA COLORA .................................... 2:53
   Colon Sisters and Paquito Lopez Ensemble
10. FRANJAS DE AGUA ........................................... 2:50
    Trio Armonia
11. CHOUCOUNE .................................................... 2:55
    Trio Chanteclair
12. BEEF ISLAND MERENGUE .................................. 2:15
    The Federators Steel Band
13. TRIGEÑA HERMOSA ......................................... 2:38
    Colon Sisters and Paquito Lopez Ensemble
14. VANO EMPENO ................................................ 3:00
    Trio Armonia
BOMBA:

Music of the Caribbean

1. SANTA MARIA 3:30
2. GRENADINE JUMP-UP 3:00
3. EL CANON 2:54
4. BADJAN MAMBO 2:10
5. PORQUE TE QUIERO, QUIEREME 4:14
6. RA RA NO. 2 2:30
7. LAS GALLARETAS 2:45
8. BOMBA 2:50
9. SINA MARIA, LA COLORA 2:53
10. FRANJAS DE AGUA 2:50
11. CHOUCOUNE 2:55
12. BEEF ISLAND MERENGUE 2:15
13. TRIGENA HERMOSA 2:38
14. VANEO EMPENO 3:00

MCD 61355

Unauthorised Public Performance or Copying Prohibited. Made in U.S.A.