

MAZEL TOV, MIS AMIGOS

JUAN CALLE AND HIS LATIN LANTZMEN

Bei Mir Bist Du Schön Merengue... *Yesset, Yesset Cha-Cha-Cha... Havah Nagilah Cha-Cha-Cha... O, Mamma! Mit Ich Parliert Samba... Die Grüne Kanne* Merengue... *Beltz, Mein Steteln Beltz Pachanga... Papirrossen Munde* *Vus Du Vitet, Dus Vill Ich Olch Cha-Cha-Cha... Glück Du Bist Gekommen Tzu Shpatt Pasadable... Balgloch (Bub-Hohkt) Pachanga... Frallach-o-Nacht* Merengue.



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TOV,
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**IDELSOHN SOCIETY
FOR MUSICAL PRESERVATION**



At the Idelsohn Society, our mission is to recover incredible recordings that have been lost to history. This digital

platter you hold in your hands is another brilliant, shiny nugget recovered from the used record bins and remastered to tell a challenging, complex, yet intriguing Jewish story from the recent past that has already been written out of history. Like many other albums we have found, very little factual data has been preserved about its creation. While searching for the pieces of this release's puzzle, all that turned up was the master in the vaults of the company that released it, the legendary taste-making Jazz label, Riverside Records. No documentation of the recording session remains. Most of the musicians who made it are no longer with us.

What speaks through this forgotten history is the shining voice of musical vision and the tale it tells of two communities colliding through a jazz hybrid in the cold-war pre-psychedelic, post hard-bop age. Juan Calle is a *nom de plume* and his Latin Lantzmen only existed as long as it took to record the album. But as recordings tend to do, this one, with its mash-up of the Jewish and Latino musical traditions, tells a mighty story in sound — one of American

hybrid identity and the porous boundaries between communities, fostering the mixing and matching that makes this country great.

The album was recorded at a time of dreams and challenges. 1961 was a year in which President Kennedy created the Peace Corps but also advised every American family to build a bomb shelter. *West Side Story* thrilled audiences and won Best Picture, Berlin became divided. America lagged behind the Soviets in the Space Race, but Ray Kroc bought out the McDonalds brothers and opened up over 200 restaurants in California alone. In this time of hope, fear, confidence and confusion, it only seems appropriate that a gaggle of musicians would enter a studio and break down the barriers of cultural identity and create a celebratory sound that is equally Jewish, Latin and American. We present to you *Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos*, forgotten grooves from an age of changing national identity and the beginning of a new world order.

Please keep sending us the records you find across the nation.

www.idelsounds.com



JOHN CALI

Courtesy of American Banjo Museum

PRELUDE TO A RUSE

In 1930, the Ukranian operetta king of Second Avenue Alexander Olshanetsky and his actress wife Bella Meisel wrote “Glick, Du Bist Gekommen Tzu Shpait,” a heartbreaking showstopper for the Yiddish musical *Del Letser Tants*. The play told the tragic story of an arranged immigrant marriage that becomes an unexpected jailhouse romance, set in Sing Sing prison and brought to life on the stage of the Prospect Theater in the Bronx.

“I do not want to think now what fate will bring me tomorrow,” a condemned man sings to his new bride, “So long as I have at least one moment when fortune is in my hand and I get to dance the last dance with you.”

Olshanetsky and Meisel could never have imagined that over thirty years later, this dramatic last dance would become a scorching pasodoble, the official

dance of Spanish bullfights, on a little-known LP that tried to introduce the Yiddish Theater to the Latin ballroom in the thick of the Civil Rights era — *Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos*.

Such is Jewish life in America.

Yiddish theater tunes and Latin dance tempos were about the only things straightforward about *Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos*. The 1961 Riverside Records album by the cryptically named band Juan Calle and His Latin Lantzmen, surely goes down as one of the greatest ruses of 20th Century American pop music, a forgotten masterpiece of cross-cultural disguise and masquerade.

So let's get the reveal out of the way.

Neither Juan Calle nor his Latin Lantzmen were actually Lantzmen, and only some of them were actually Latin. Juan Calle was John Cali, an Italian-American banjo picker and radio veteran best known for his work with the Vincent Lopez Orchestra and a string of solo banjo outings. His Latin



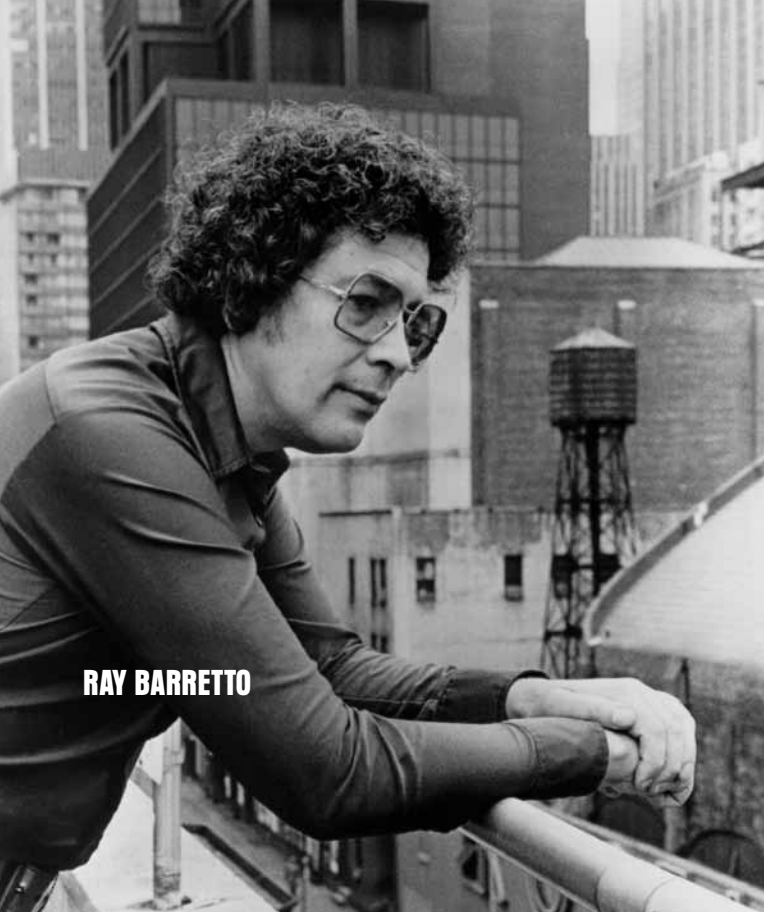
DOC CHEATHAM

Tom Copi / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images

Lantzmen included some of the biggest names in 50s and 60s Latin music — conguero Ray Barretto, timbales guru Wilie Rodriguez, pianist Charlie Palmieri — playing alongside African-American jazz greats Clark Terry, Doc Cheatham, Lou Oles, and Wendell Marshall. The sole Lantzmen were Yiddish vocalist Ed Powell, who appeared in the 1957 Ziegfeld Follies but whose credits mostly seem to point to steady work as Riverside's in-house engineer, and reed multi-tasker Shelley Russell. The latter was such a Lantzmen that, as the original liner notes told it, his background included “playing at many a Jewish wedding.”

It's become something of a truism that the history of Jews in American popular music is a history of masquerade. From Leiber and Stoller writing songs as if they were black men and women to Bob Dylan's Woody Guthrie masks and born-again-Christian masks, from Milton Mesirov becoming 40s jazzman and pot king Mezz Mezzrow to Alfred Levy becoming 50s mambo percussionist Alfredito, passing and disguise have long been key aesthetic weapons of the Jewish musical arsenal. Without Jews playing non-Jewish music, without Jews assimilating into the sound cultures of Latino and African American life, without Jews becoming musical Zelig, it's hard to imagine what American pop would sound like.

Which is why *Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos* is such an anomaly. On this session, it wasn't Jews wearing masks, it was African-Americans and Latinos masquerading as Jews, coming together at New York's Plaza Sound Studios in the name of an only-in-America fusion: “Yiddish favorites in Latin tempo.”



RAY BARRETTO

Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images

FROM SHA SHA TO CHA CHA

If you believe the original liner notes, the impetus was purely economic, the Yiddish-Latin fusion album as guaranteed hit-maker:

If a vote were taken to determine the two varieties of music with the deepest and widest appeal of all, the chances certainly are that it would result in a landslide victory for the infectious rhythms of the Latin beat and the heart-warming melodies of Jewish popular and folk song. Many Yiddish songs have become not only hits but long-lived favorites of the entire American public...And by now it is taken for granted that every few years another South American dance craze will sweep the United States.

It's easy to understand Riverside's logic. Yiddish tunes had certainly found their way onto Swing bandstands and the dollar-sign rich Hit Parade

before (the Andrews Sisters antiseptic version of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” was a national smash in the thirties) and while the audience for anything Yiddish was dealt a drastic blow by the Holocaust, there were still plenty of people — young and old — eager to connect and re-visit a once thriving language and culture (witness the slew of 60s Yiddish instructional LPs).

The ongoing appeal of Latin music was easier to measure. You could nearly chart the history of the 20th century according to new Latin Crazes — rumba and tango in the 30s, mambo in the 40s, pachanga in the 50s, boogaloo in the 60s. Which is to say nothing of the long history of the Latin-Jewish mergers that *Mazel Tov* was indirectly echoing, a tradition that dates back at least to the 1920s.

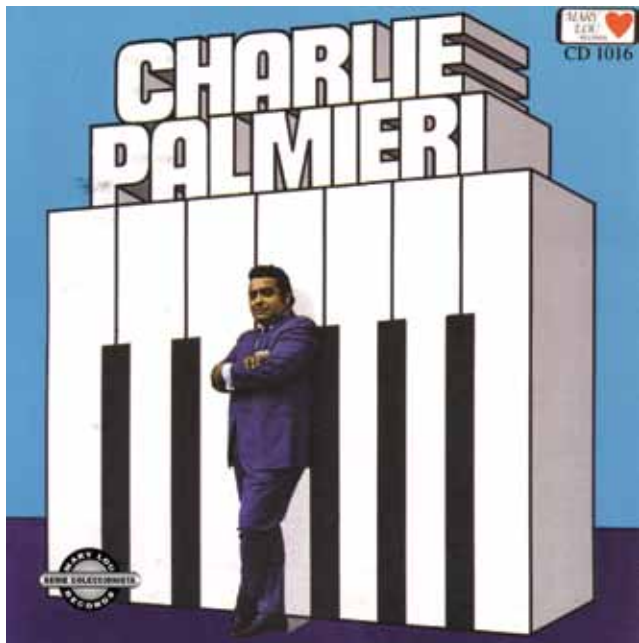
Humorist Harry Golden once said that the history of Jews in America is the history of “sha sha” (Yiddish for hush hush) becoming “cha cha.” And he was onto something. Dialect comic Irving Kaufman unleashed “Moe the Schmo Takes a Rhumba Lesson,” bawdy balladeer Ruth Wallis declared “It’s A Scream How Levine Does The Rhumba,” and Yiddish comic Willie Howard put on a sombrero to become “Tyrone Shapiro The Bronx Caballero” in the 1935 film *Rose of the Rancho*.

In the 40s and 50s Latin music of all stripes became the preferred soundtrack to Jewish-American leisure time, when Irving Fields turned “Autumn Leaves” into “Miami Beach Rhumba” during a live gig at Miami’s Fountainbleau Hotel, and New York’s Palladium nightclub became

a Jewish “mambonik” paradise when it instituted an all-mambo policy in 1949. Jewish Latinphilia was so widespread that Mickey Katz sang about his grandmother being on “an Afro-Cuban kick” and Sy Menchin and His Steven Scott Orchestra could imagine Jewish seniors grabbing for their maracas when they released *My Bubba* and *Zaedas Cha Cha Cha*.

As the capital of Jewish leisure, the Catskills hotels and their “Borsht Belt” entertainment circuit became key laboratories of the Jewish-Latin mash-up. It was here that cigar-smoking ragmen napped poolside while their wives took mambo lessons from Latino dance instructors, and ballrooms were lit up by top Latin dance bands. Puerto Rican pianist Johnny Conquet memorialized the scene on his 1958 album, *Raisins and Almonds Cha Cha Cha and Merengues* (set at a fictional Catskills show at the “Merengue Manor” resort), as did timbale king Tito Puente, who released an actual live set that same year straight from the headquarters of the Sour Cream Sierras, *Cha Cha With Tito Puente at Grossinger’s*.

On the more popular of the Jewish Latin Craze records, the formula was usually the same: take a Yiddish or Hebrew chestnut and re-think it according to the tempos and rhythms of Latin dance music. Latin-Jewish records were not about the loss of Jewish tradition and the adoption of something else; they were about the preservation of Jewish tradition through the encounter with something else, through the open and eager adaptation of new styles and languages — the past enthusiastically reshaped to fit the contours of the present.



Mazel Tov, *Mis Amigos* followed suit, but because of the Lantzman's all-star lineup of leading jazz and Latin players, the results were far more

musically vivid than many of its Latin-Jewish ancestors, laced with flashes of jazz improvisation and *montuno* vamping.

“Papirossen,” Herman Yablokoff’s classic Yiddish Theater ode to an orphaned cigarette peddler, usually sounds mournful no matter if it’s played as a sad *doina* or a joyous *freilach*. On *Mazel Tov*, its roots in a Bulgarian folk tune barely show and it’s converted into pure dance floor frolic, done as a blazing, quick-step mambo that even sneaks in a lute solo from Cali. Nellie Casman’s 1922 hit for the Yiddish stage “Yosel, Yosel” had already become popular as “Joseph! Joseph!,” a crossover swing era smash for the Andrews Sisters and Glen Miller, but the Lantzman stick with the original Yiddish version only to turn it into a cha-cha. “Havah Nagila,” a Hebrew favorite more than a Yiddish one, also gets the cha-cha treatment, and “Die Greene Koseene,” the classic 1920s Abe Schwartz ode to a greenhorn cousin on the Lower East Side, conjures different 1960s New York immigrant worlds with its makeover as a Dominican merengue.

The only *Mazel Tov* song that doesn’t re-invent the glory days of the Yiddish Theater is Russell’s stand-out original composition, “Freilach-a-Nacht,” a seemingly standard clarinet-driven Eastern European dance number that is quickly exploded by conga breakdowns, a meditative trumpet solo, and a Palmieri piano run that sounds like it was directly lifted from his pioneering charanga-and-beyond 60s sides for the Alegre label.



CLARK TERRY

Herman Leonard / Redferns

THE RIVERSIDE MYSTERY

By 1961, idiosyncratic concept albums like *Mazel Tov* were common for Riverside, a label once known strictly for its commitment to showcasing the best in American jazz. Founded by Orrin Keepnews and Bill Grauer in 1952, Riverside launched its catalog with albums by Louis Armstrong and Johnny Dodd and quickly earned a solid reputation as a home for some of the most trusted and adventurous names in the post-bop cosmos, from Cannonball Adderley and Bill Evans to Wes Montgomery and Thelonious Monk.

By the end of the decade however, the label began to expand in the face of mounting commercial pressures and launched the Riverside 7500 Popular Series, which instead of Monk navigating “Brilliant Corners” or Randy Weston conjuring “Zulu,” was mostly the home to a grab-bag of niche titles that included *The First Cuban at the U.N.*, Sam Makia

and His Islanders' *Lure of Hawaii*, Vic Obeck's pre-aerobics outing *Isometric Exercising*, and a recording of the U.S. Merchant Marine Glee Club.

The series' crazy quilt roster was a perfect home for *Mazel Tov*, even though label co-founder Orrin Keepnews has no recollection of ever putting it out.

"I know I had nothing to do with its creation," he recently wrote in an e-mail. "There were occasionally some pretty whimsical projects on the quite eclectic and pretty occasional Riverside pop music series."

For its jazz titles, the label often relied on what Keepnews has called the "Riverside Repertory Company," a rotating stock of players hired by session to sit in on each other's records. Many of *Mazel Tov*'s key participants were part of this go-to bench of musical contractors. Willie Rodriguez was a Riverside regular, as was Clark Terry, who was the label's lead jazz contractor in charge of signing up musicians for many of its orchestral session dates. Barretto had already released his own Riverside album, *Pachanga With Barretto*, as had Cali, a collection of polkas for banjo that he called *Hoopla!*

How the rest of the Lantzmen were assembled, though, is hard to say. The Riverside vaults offer little clue to the session's history and memories of the 1961 recording session are few and far between. All that's really left is the album itself, which might have begun as a marketing goof, but

lives on as a playful invitation to blur the lines between jazz, Latin, and Yiddish, to hear Jewishness in a cha cha, merengue in a jazz solo, an entire lost world of Yiddish culture re-born on a pachanga dancefloor.

Or in the words of the original notes,

So, amigo, whether you be a lover of latin rhythms or jewish melodies or merely partial to unusual and irresistibly danceable music, may we say: mazel tov- and happy listening.

The Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation: History sounds different when you know where to start listening.

“Make your ear like a funnel...” — Rabbi Yohanan, Babylonian Talmud.

“Abre cuto guiri mambo” — Arsenio Rodriguez, from the Congo saying “open your ear and listen to what I’m going to tell you.”

We believe that music creates conversations otherwise impossible in daily life. Our goal is to incite a new conversation about the present by listening anew to the past. We will do this by unearthing lost classics from the archive, sounds that are languishing in thrift store crates across the nation. The stories that accompany them have yet to be told: hybrid identities, eclectic communities, racial dialogue and pioneering musical style. This is music that forces listeners to ask themselves anew, who am I, what have I inherited, and what am I going to do about it?

We will do that with no museum stuffiness. This is music you might actually want to throw on at a party, music that will make you laugh, will make you think, stuff you probably have never heard before and will definitely not find on any Jewish music compilation your Hebrew School teacher gave you to get in touch with your roots. Our approach is new school, secular (but we hear the spirit when it calls), multicultural, progressive, irreverent, obsessive, self deprecating, and urban. The label is helmed by Jews who grew up on new wave and punk, know what a dub-plate is, and put mambo, Tupac, and

The Ramones on the same iPod playlist, and who believe, more than anything, that history sounds different when you know where to start listening.

The Idelsohn Society would love to hear any memories you have of any of our other artists. Be in touch at www.idelsounds.com and see our other albums and gift cards at www.idelsohnsociety.com.

The Idelsohn Society is helmed by Courtney Holt, David Katznelson, Josh Kun, and Roger Bennett and supported by the thousands of individuals who have mailed in their vinyl records to our archive via www.idelsounds.com.

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**HISTORY SOUNDS DIFFERENT
WHEN YOU KNOW WHERE TO START LISTENING.**