

## **Ordinary Guy: The Ballad of Joe Bataan (from *Under the Streetlamps*, Fania 2008)**

*Liner notes by Oliver Wang*

Latin boogaloo/bugalú exploded out of New York in the mid 1960s, at a time when America struggled to make sense of the social tumult and divisiveness of the times. Bugalú represented a potential for unity and cooperation as its English lyrics and R&B-derived rhythms melded in with the chattering syncopation and energetic flair of Afro-Cuban music. Who better to represent that fledgling movement than East Harlem's prodigal son: Joe Bataan. A teenage gangster turned ambitious bandleader, Bataan helped lead a wave of young, hungry musicians and *cantantes* who would change the face and sound of American and Latin music.

It's only fitting that *latin con soul* - a style based around cross-cultural exchange - would become so deeply associated with Bataan. Here was the ultimate embodiment of American cultural mixture. His father, Peter Nitollano, came from the Philippines while his African American mother, Marie Seldom, was from Newport News, Virginia. In New York, they met and in 1942, gave birth to Bataan Nitallano.

Growing up around 106th and Lexington, Bataan settled in with East Harlem's Puerto Rican ("Nuyorican") population. He didn't simply "pass" however - he became such a fixture in the neighborhood that by the age of 15, he was leading the Dragons, a local Puerto Rican street gang. Bataan developed a reputation as - in his words - "a neighborhood tough guy" who wasn't big in stature, but was fast on his feet and nice with his hands.

However, days on the street lead to years in the clink. Bataan did a pair of jail stints, including a few years spent at West Coxsackie Reformatory in the early '60s. Despite the surroundings, Bataan described the experience as "probably the best thing that ever happened to me," earning his high school equivalency there and coming out with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. His energies shifted towards music.

Even though he didn't grow up in a musical family, his youth was suffused in the sounds of everyone from Frank Sinatra to Frankie Valli. However, few had the kind of impact as another "Frank" - Harlem's own R&B star, Frankie Lymon and his group, the Teenagers. Lymon had a tremendous influence on Bataan's generation. Lymon's doo-wop style "wasn't something that had originated before we were born," explained Bataan. "This was something new and it was a part of us and our music." Bataan and his friends would practice singing in apartment hallways, using their natural echo chamber to replicate the studio sound of Lymon and the Teenagers.

In 1964, Bataan decided to form his first band. As he tells it, he walked into a rehearsal, filled with young teenage hopefuls: "I stabbed a knife into the grand piano and told everyone that I was going to be the leader." Thus was born the Latin Swingers, whom Bataan describes as "the youngest band ever in Latin music." Included in his line-up were the brass power duo of Joe "Chickie" Fuentes and Ruben Hernandez on trombone, Louis Devis on bass, and Eddie Nater on the timbales.

As the band began to make its rounds, Bataan had a business card that read “Call Joe or Bataan” and promoter Federico Pagani mistakenly thought his name was “Joe Bataan” and with that error, Bataan had a stage name that’s stuck with him for forty years hence. Pagani also set the Swingers up with their first important gig, a weekly night at the Tropicoro Ballroom in the Bronx.

To read the rest, pick up *Under the Streetlamps*, the new Joe Bataan anthology on Fania Records.

