

SALSA SWING: LOS VAN VAN

Los Van Van is the leading dance band of Cuba, the land of dance-band genius. As the first musical group ever to cause riots at home, Los Van Van has come to rival baseball as Cuba's national pastime.

Formed 20 years ago at the request of Fidel Castro, who wanted to create a band to boost the morale of workers in the sugarcane fields, Los Van Van has only been known in this country via a handful of hard-to-find records. Now, however, the glorious Los Van Van sound has finally arrived.

Their latest album—the



group's first American release, on Mango Records—is called *Songo*, after the heartbreakingly smooth rhythm that the 14 members of Los Van Van have originated. Rooted in tropical blues, rumba, and ancient African drumming, the songs are usually about romance, mixed together with social commentary and some very serious magic. One song, "Que Palo Es Ese," likens Cuban spiritualism, derived from Africa, to the spirit of the revolutionary movements in Central America. The sound is brazen but still suffused with *sandunga*, as Los Van Van and their isle call a certain kind of honeyed rhythm.

The tradition that has given us mambo and cha-cha is clearly alive and swinging.

ELIZABETH HANLY

Led by composer Juan Formell, Los Van Van brings its Afro-Cuban salsa to the States.

GREG WATERMANN/PICTURE GROUP (LEFT AND CENTER)