

Lost Liberian 45s from the 1960s

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The 1960s were a time of optimism, relative prosperity, and rapid growth in Monrovia, the ocean-side capital of Liberia. For almost one hundred and fifty years the city had been the economic, political, and social hub of the 'Americo-Liberian' community, who had governed the country since July 26, 1847, when the independence of the Republic of Liberia was officially declared. ('Americo-Liberians' are the descendants of the freed African-Americans who crossed the Atlantic, in the 1800s, and settled in the 'Promised Land'; the name Liberia stands for 'liberty', and the country's motto is 'The love of liberty brought us here.') In the years since 1822, when a ship sponsored by the American Colonization Society, first landed in this natural harbor, Monrovia had become one of West Africa's more cosmopolitan cities. By the early 1960s, the city was home to an educated, budding middle-class of 'Americo-Liberians' who rubbed shoulders, in Monrovia's bars and ballrooms, with members of the city's Lebanese, Armenian, Greek, and American communities.

The urban dance music of the time reflected the Americo-Liberians trans-Atlantic cosmopolitanism. (In the early 1960s Americo-Liberians still had no interest in Liberia's 'African' music. The Liberian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, almost exclusively featured North American music.) At their frequent performances, at the Ducor hotel ballroom, at the Saturday Afternoon Club (a sea-side dancing hall in the Palmgrove neighborhood, generally called the SAC), or at the Mama Rena dancehall, bands like J. Richard Snetter's 'Melody 8 Dance Band' kept their fans entertained with a repertoire of American Soul and Country covers, Twists, Foxtrots, Cha-cha-chas, Highlife, and the occasional Calypso.



Recorded in 1963, 'Amour in Twist' is an instrumental dance number driven by a loping upright bass and the conga player. This song features a nice guitar solo and a charmingly sour saxophone break.

↪ [Melody "8" Dance Band 'Amour in Twist'](#)

The B-side, 'West Point Calypso' was composed by J. Richard Snetter, and features the vocalist Abrom Robinson, who sings of the dangers of Monrovia's West Point neighborhood, which was home to the city's nascent gangs.

↪ [Melody "8" Dance Band 'West Point Calypso'](#)

By the mid-1960s Monrovia was demographically and musically changing, as thousands of rural migrants, growing weary of working on up-country rubber plantations, started to move to the capital. These migrants brought their musical traditions with them, and once settled in Monrovia, soon discovered new musical styles. One of the first musicians to break away from covers of American songs and record 'Afro-Liberian' music was Morris Dolly, from Bomi County, not far from Monrovia. A member of the Golla ethnic group, Dolly was also one of the first artists to sing in several different Liberian languages. In 1977 he gained regional recognition, with the performance of his song 'Who are you baby?' at the Festival of African Art and Culture (FESTAC),

held in Lagos, Nigeria. Morris had another big hit in the mid-1980s with 'Osia', and passed away about five years ago.



This next song is a great example of his Merengue-Highlife music, a style that was inspired by the coastal palm-wine music of the Kru, and the Merengue guitar grooves that were introduced to Monrovia by Congolese musicians. (There is a neighborhood of Monrovia called Congotown, and there were several Congolese groups who performed in Monrovia throughout the 1960s, including the famous trio Ryco Jazz, and lesser-known groups like the Congo Star Band. Leo recorded a full set of the Harlem Band from Kinshasa performing live at the Roxy nightclub, in downtown Monrovia, which I'll feature at some point.) I love the guitar playing on this track, and I'm a sucker for any song with whistling.

👉 [Morris Dolly & his Sunset Boys 'Ngangama'](#)

Richard Walker was a member of Morris Dolly's 'Sunset Boys', and is also from Bomi County. His biggest hit was 'Kakaleka', a song he released in 1992. His recordings are less polished than Dolly's.



On these next two tracks he is backed by a great guitar player, bass and percussion. This 45 was produced, probably in the later 1960s, by Solomon's Music Center, which was a record store located on Mechlin street, near Broad, in the heart of downtown Monrovia.

↔ [Richard Walker 'Martha Cobo'](#)

↔ [Richard Walker 'Mullaa'](#)

Solomon's Music Center seems to have specialized in 'roots' music. Harris Sarko, from Nimba County in eastern Liberia, who started his career with the Liberian Police Orchestra, was one of the artists who created a gloriously rough style of dance music called 'Nimba Disco'. This was the kind of music that up-country migrants danced to at the 'Fence Affair' playgrounds, or at afternoon dances at the 'Booker Washington Institute'. This pressing is not the greatest, but it gives you an idea of how this group could drive an audience wild.

↔ [Harris Sarko 'Jiba'](#)

This last song is one of the most entertaining West African singles I have heard. As many CD compilations have demonstrated, there were many groups throughout Africa, in the 1970s, who were inspired by James Brown's music. And given its deep ties to the American south, it is not surprising that Monrovia was perhaps the first African capital to fall under the spell of the 'Godfather of Soul'. ("West Africa's 'James Brown'", as Sierra Leone's Geraldo Pino was nicknamed, brought his Heartbeats group to Monrovia for two years [1962-1964], before moving on to Nigeria, where his Afro-funk repertoire famously influenced Fela Kuti. Leo made the only recordings of the Heartbeats from this era.)



Unfortunately, I have not been able to learn anything about Amos Koon. Again, this pressing is pretty lousy, but the music is worth hearing. If you have ever played in a middle-school garage band, this loose recording should bring back memories.

↳ [Amos Koon 'Stage Dance'](#)

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