The artwork on Panama buses and “chivas” is a colorful expression of individuality

FREELove,” “HOT PANTS,” “Mr. Big Stuff,” may sound like titles for X-rated movies, but they’re not.

These, along with many proverbs, sayings and catch phrases, are names given to their vehicles by imaginative Panamanian bus operators as an expression of their individuality. Usually lettered on the rear of the bus in Old English script with fancy flourishes and capricious curlicues, the names are a part of the colorful decorations that makes Panama’s buses unique.

The more elegantly decorated buses have brightly colored paintings inside and out, ball fringe on the windows, religious figurines and fanciful touches which may include gaily dressed dolls or crocheted items.

Perhaps as a tribute to Panamanian womanhood—or to womanhood in general—a girl’s name is often painted on each of the side windows.

Naming buses is said to have started when the first self-propelled public conveyances made their appearances in the cities, during the second decade of the century. Those early vehicles, called “chivas” (goats) were nothing more than sedans or pickup trucks with the after end removed and replaced by a wood and tin body. They accommodated six or eight passengers on lateral benches and the entrance was at the rear.

The name “chiva” is said to be derived from the fact that the solid wheel vehicles jumped like mountain goats when driven over Panama’s cobbled streets.

Samuel Lewis, a retired Panamanian journalist and publisher, recalls that among the early pioneers of public transportation in Panama, circa 1911, was a Jamaican chiva operator who for reasons known only to himself, permitted no women aboard his rattletrap conveyance. He would drive down the street soliciting passengers and shouting: “Men Only!” But apparently his male chauvinism was no obstacle to success. Mr. Lewis says he prospered and soon bought a second chiva.

Operators gave chivas pet names to distinguish them from those of their competitors. Their efforts at originality produced some fairly spicy names and, at one point, the mayor of Panama ordered names removed from all public conveyances. The custom was later revived however and extended to the larger buses.

Some of the first chivas were chain-drive Ford pickup trucks operated by East Indians in turbans. Hindus were the principal operators of bus transportation in Panama before World War II.

In the beginning, there was no organized transportation and no large fleet operators. But enterprising individuals ran their own jitney service to take employees to work. Among the first was a Canal employee named Harry Conley who had a small bus in which he took coworkers from Ancon to the Administration Building and back during the 1920’s. But a great majority of bus operators in the years that followed were East Indians.

During World War II, when the number of workers in the Zone increased with the employment of additional personnel for defense projects, concessions were granted to some 20 bus operators to provide service in the Canal Zone, including military reserv-
A bigger than life-size portrait of Franco Nero, star of Italian Western movies, peers menacingly at tailgating motorists from the rear of this Chorrera bus. The actor also is featured in the interior decorations which include a cartoon reproduction over the mirror that says “Love is . . . to travel with Franco Nero every day.” The fancy sign on the rearview mirror says “I will always be for you.”

Bus paintings portray everything from comic strip characters to figures of Greek mythology. This bus, named “Prometheus in Chains,” features a painting of the titan atop the Caucasus as well as a scene of Panama City’s Balboa Avenue.

Teodoro “Billy” Madriñan has specialized in painting scenes on buses since the 1940’s.
operative known as the Cooperativa de Transporte Metropolitano, and a corporation called Corporación Unica de Transporte.

The evolution from the eight-passenger chivas to the gaily painted 50-passenger buses of today was gradual. Chivas made from cars and pickups were used until the early thirties. Then, in 1934, a Colombian, the late Froilán Arce, got the idea of buying 3-ton chassis and motors and building the bodies locally. Those chivas remained in service until after World War II. Then, in 1946, the first “busitos” made their appearance. These are the small, 16-passenger blue buses which at that time sold for $3,600 complete or $900 for the chassis and motor only.

In 1960, local operators began to import 24- to 30-passenger buses and, as the city grew and the demand for public transportation increased, 40- and 50-passenger buses costing $9,000-$10,000, were placed in service.

But throughout, the chiva has survived and is patronized by faithful passengers who usually ride the same one each day and know each other as well as members of a car pool.

Among the principal routes served by today’s chivas—mostly of 1952 vintage—is the one extending from downtown Panama along Balboa Avenue to the shanty town called Boca la Caja, east of Paitilla Airport. The ride to the end of the line costs 10 cents, but the chiva will take you as far as Santo Tomás Hospital for only a nickel.

One driver on this route, Juan Antonio Olivaíres, has been behind the wheel of chivas for 32 years. In addition to the Chiva he drives on the Boca la Caja route, he owns a small busito. As a small fleet owner—five buses or less—he belongs to an organization called El Tercer Grupó (the third group), made up of small independents who are not affiliated with either the cooperative or the corporation.

So there are basically three types of buses in Panama—the venerable chivas, the “busitos” and the larger buses. Though the earlier chivas were painted with bright and imaginative designs, most of the surviving ones are plain. The greatest profusion of artwork is now found on the larger buses. There are paintings of pastoral scenes, religious motifs, well-known landmarks such as the bridge that spans the entrance to the Panama Canal, the ruins of Old Panama, likenesses of film and TV personalities and even comic strip characters. A random sampling of buses along busy Via España or Central Avenue during rush hour can be an amusing pastime. One bus is named “Marshal Dilo”—phonetically honoring the character portrayed by James Arness in the TV series “Gunsmoke.” Others are named “The Fugitive” and “The Untouchable.” Still others bear phrases and sayings such as “Let’s Forget the Past”; “God Forgives, Not I”; “Forgive Them Lord”; “It’s All In The Game”, and “What You See Is What You Get.” A few of the signs are in English.

Many of the buses have been lettered and decorated by Teodoro “Billy” Madriñán, a former employee of the Panama Canal Dredging Division, who began specializing in the art back in the forties.

Billy says the custom of painting scenes on buses got started when one bus operator conceived the idea and it was later noted that tourists were stopping to photograph his bus. The idea caught on quickly and soon operators were competing for originality. As they did, the decorations became more and more elaborate.

The cost of bus decorations varies according to how elaborate they are. A simple scene on the back of the bus may cost anywhere from $15 to $25. A complete job, with paintings inside and out, lettering of names, phrases and girls’ names in the windows can cost up to $120.

Many Panama bus riders are likely to view with nostalgia the passing of this charming custom as the Panama Government prepares to modernize its public transportation system with shiny new buses which have large picture windows, but, alas, no expressions of individuality.

Some “chivas” do double duty. Those that come from the interior carrying produce, passengers and chickens are popularly called “Chivas Gallineras” (Chicken Chivas).

Paintings of Panama’s famous flat arch bridge and its historic cathedral along with a couple in typical dress help to publicize some of the country’s tourist attractions.