



When the celebrated Zairean guitarist Mose Se Sengo, AKA "Fan Fan," set out from Kinshasa on his travels in 1974, he was given the title "Intrepid," but even he could not have guessed how far he would journey and how varied his fortunes would be.

By Graeme Ewens

It is over 20 years since he left home at a peak moment in his career and, although he became a star in Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya, only now can he truly say he has arrived in the West. The critical success of the 1995 album *Hello, Hello* (notably beating Salif Keita in *The Beat's* Poll of Polls) and this year's extensive European tour have brought Fan Fan the kind of respect he was used to receiving back in Africa.

Although Zaire is a wonderland of guitar magicians, surprisingly few guitarists have found success as bandleaders. The legendary Franco was one of those; and he was Fan Fan's boss and inspiration for many years. A native of Kinshasa (then Leopoldville), Fan Fan draws on the rhythms and dances which motivated Franco and the O.K. Jazz school of music. During the 1950s popular Latin rhythms were combined with roots music—from the *maringa*, a local equivalent of palm-wine music, to the *agbwaya*, an early version of Congo rock 'n' roll pioneered by Franco's mentor, Dewayon. This was rebel, teenage music which provided a springboard for Africa's greatest musical contribution and its most enduring popular art form.

The young delinquents were known as "Watama," an identity which is at the root of the O.K. Jazz style. The nickname "Fan Fan" was taken from the swashbuckling French film character Fan Fan La Tulipe, and refers to Mose's prowess in mock battles with neighborhood kids, including Sam Mangwana and Verckys Kiamuangana, both of whom went on to become illustrious members of O.K. Jazz and solo stars.

Fan Fan was lucky to have access to a guitar at home and he first plied his trade as a teenager during the early 1960s with Rickem Jazz. He later played with the Jazz Barons (an after-hours jamming band with Franco's brother Bavon Marie-Marie on guitar) and Orchestre Révolution (with Kwamy, Mujos and Brazzos leading a breakaway from O.K. Jazz). Despite many defections, Franco's O.K. Jazz was the top band in the country and in 1967 Fan Fan was recruited as second lead guitarist and deputy for Franco, the "Congo Colossus" whose music informed and excited the newly independent African countries.

With a fingerpicking style that could match the hard, metallic attack of Franco, his main role was as the boss' deputy, filling in during songs when Franco was offstage chatting or doing business, and taking the soloist's role at rehearsals. On some occasions the two soloists would play together, but mostly they alternated. This gave Fan Fan the chance to shine with the full force of the band behind him and, in Franco's absence, he inevitably attracted his own crowd of fans with the fast, unrelenting drive of his compositions and arrangements. Franco acknowledged his importance in 1972 in the song "Testament," a paean of praise (and a glorious composition) which was coupled with Fan Fan's own hit song "Djemelasi." During a period when Franco appeared to lose interest in the band, Fan Fan became acting bandleader and was tipped to take over the operation. Instead, inspired by the success of the record, he decided to cut out on his own and seek his fortune elsewhere.

Never short of collaborators, Fan Fan released several records under his own name, often with

colleagues from O.K. Jazz, including the Nigerian saxophonist Dele Pedro (see the *RetroAfrica* cd *Belle Epoque RETRO7CD*). In due course with ex-O.K. Jazz musicians Youlou Mabiala (vocal), Francis Bitchoumanou (bass) and Simaro Lutumba (rhythm guitar), he formed the original Somo Somo. The name, which translates roughly as "Double Dread," was a catchphrase popularized in "Djemelasi." The band was popular but short-lived, as the other musicians were tempted back to O.K. Jazz. Fan Fan was also invited to return, but pride and principles ensured he went his own way. He briefly joined Vicky Longomba's *Lovy du Zaire* (yet another O.K. Jazz breakaway) but could not tolerate the leader's hypocrisy and soon quit.

In 1975, against the advice of friends and colleagues, Fan Fan embarked on his worldwide travels. With a passport arranged by Kabalele, the godfather of Zairean music, he took the Somo Somo name, repertoire and inspiration east to Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and eventually, London and Paris.

He stayed for almost a decade in Tanzania, where he married. In Dar es Salaam during the 1970s the most popular bands were formed by Zairean musicians who sang originally in Lingala, and later modified the music to fit the inflection of the Kiswahili language. Originally performing as a solo artist at the New Africa Hotel, Fan Fan went on to become band leader of Orchestre Makassy, with whom several hits were recorded, and later Orchestre Maquis—both legendary names in Tanzanian dance band circles. He then founded Orchestre Matimila, where he was joined by the eventual leader Remmy Ongala. Moving up to Kenya in the early 1980s, he re-formed Somo Somo and recorded a series of albums which reflected his travels and his response to changing cultures. Several of his compositions from that era can also be found on *Belle Epoque*, including the song "Chama Cha Mapinduzi," in praise of the Tanzanian independence party, with lyrics based on the words of the country's first president, Julius Nyerere.

It is hard to overestimate the popularity of Zairean music throughout Africa, or the ambivalence which often greeted it from jealous patriots in neighboring countries. Zaireans spread across the continent, forming bands wherever they stayed. For a while, East Africa was particularly fertile ground but as cultural protectionism took hold, it turned into a stagnant backwater. Cut off from his French-speaking roots, Fan Fan was now more used to Anglophone cultures, and the natural escape was via Britain, rather than France where many of his contemporaries were settling.

A collaboration in Nairobi with the English pop star Robin Scott included the crossover attempt "Jolie Africa," with vocals by the South African Doreen Webster. Scott gave Fan Fan the opportunity to travel to London in 1983. He arrived just as African music was getting a foothold in pop culture and, reunited with Webster, he recruited the first lineup for the "multiracial" version of Somo Somo. There was a small but enthusiastic market and the fledgling London label, Stern's, released his first

THE FAN FAN CLUB: Mose Fan Fan and Somo Somo Ngobila



PHOTO BY ELISABETH SCHIEDER RIESCHIN

U.K. album to an interested audience. The band was good, but could never meet the leader's expectations; they just did not have the shared experience necessary, and neither did the English instrumentalists understand the African "system." For his second record, he traveled to France for the first time in 1986 and hooked up with several fellow countrymen to record an underrated album, *Paris*, that had high production values, and was also more authentically Zairean.

Although Fan Fan had difficulties finding musicians to meet his requirements, his hard-driving guitar style and whirlwind dance action blazed a solo trail on the British circuit many years ahead of the soukous invasion. But when top-line bands started arriving in London from

Paris and direct from Zaire, Somo Somo became considered a "local group" and interest waned.

Fan Fan was deeply moved by the death of Franco in 1989. He had visited the Grand Maître on his death bed in Belgium, touching base after 15 years with a man of whom he said "even if he wasn't always a nice guy, everybody loved him." In Belgium he re-established contact with old colleagues and produced an album by Bana O.K. (the O.K. Boys). Following the Grand Maître's death, a core of musicians had stayed on in Europe, including a horn section led by Rondot Kasongo, guitar accompanists Thierry Mantaika and Petit Pierre, and Franco's female discovery Baniel Mbambou, joined for this album by the vocalist Malange de

Louendo. Veteran guitarist Papa Noel was also recruited and the album paid homage to their late, inspirational leader. As many of the musicians did not have papers to travel, this formation was unable to tour, and after a short time Rondot also sadly died.

In 1993 Sam Mangwana toured England with Les Quatres Etoiles (4 Stars) as his backing band and he invited his old friend to play with them. Surprisingly, it was the first time Sam and Fan Fan had shared a stage, having been members of O.K. Jazz at different times. This reunion inspired all the musicians to work together again, and the collaboration led eventually to the Paris recording sessions for *Hello, Hello*. It was the first time since arriving in Europe a dozen years before that Fan Fan had a band who truly understood his music and what he wanted to do. It is a powerful lineup featuring some of the top names in the business—namely those illustrious guitar and vocal wizards Les Quatre Etoiles—Syran, Bopol, Nyboma and Wuta Mayi—with rhythm acts Miguel Yamba and Komba Mafwala—and guests including old friend Esby Bambi on saxophone and the ex-Trio Madjesi vocalist Saak Sakoul. By chance Fan Fan happened upon his old colleague from the original Somo Somo, singer Youlou Mabiala, who jumped straight to the mic for two songs. During the mixing in London, Sam Mangwana arrived to sing a track.

In the cd notes, Fan Fan dedicated the new incarnation of Somo Somo to "Those past musicians who endured and resisted the colonial mentality and culture—especially Paul Kamba, François Bosele, Antoine Mundanda, Adou Elenga, Henri Bowane, Paul Dewayon and Wendo Kalosoy, the last survivor of a generation. Not forgetting the Grand Maître, Luambo Makiadi 'Franco.' Their past work continues to inspire the future of Congo-Zairean rumba music through the spirit of Somo Somo Ngobila."

Ngobila was a great warrior and player of the *ngoma* talking drum, a native of Kinshasa whose rhythms were bequeathed to the glory of Zairean music. "This new material recalls and revives the great days of the maringa (palm wine) beat which was the mother and father of soukous, and one of the pillars of the megalithic music of the Kongo people," Fan Fan explains. "For the first time in African music history listeners around the world can savor this new interpretation of the typical sound of tropical maringa, genuine *kebo* from the hot landscape of Africa."

The album was well received in England by both Westerners and Africans, although the "blues man" image presented on the cover confused many Zairois who could not identify

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artists, including Martiniquan singer Tanya St. Val and the above-mentioned Zshéa. Antilles Mizik producer Jeff Wainwright—who has developed a seemingly productive partnership with Pasquet—adds a couple of lyric texts as does longtime Coupé Cloué sideman and singer Assad Francoeur. There's a reprise of the voodoo ceremonial song "Nou Rive Nan Lakou A" (previously on the *Live at Berkeley* album) and some jazz and pop standards. If you find Islamic-style chanting over a Haitian voodoo *yanvalou* rhythm an intriguing notion (as I do), try "Allah Ou Akbar" (God Is Great)—it's a very effective song. Not everything on the album is to my taste, but there is surely enough fine material here to justify the purchase. Ten years after we first met (and had a long talk about what's needed to get Haitian music out to larger audiences) Dadou Pasquet is still stretching out in different directions to make it happen—in search of a music without frontiers—and he's still making some awfully good music in the process. [*Antilles Mizik*, (305) 595-7925] Magnum Band, Zshéa, Boukan Ginen, maybe even (posthumously) old Ti Paris, crossing the divide in a world without frontiers. As Zshéa says "Se kompa, fierte pa nou—se respè nou mande pou yo." (It's kompa, our pride—we're asking for respect). ★

STELLA CHIWESE

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Stella shares his sentiments. "Mbira is an instrument that should be played by everybody," she states. "It is the source to nature and everybody needs that. If you go to the earth, go with mbira. So, for me, wherever I am invited to go and play mbira, it means what is happening there needs to be taken right to the Creator."

Stella's current endeavor, in conjunction with the Magdalena Project—International Network of Women in Art, involves organizing a "Festival of Women's Voices," that will bring women musicians, artists and cultural workers together in Harare in August 1997. It is the outcome of a seed that was planted in 1993 when Stella founded Mother Earth Trust—A Network of Female Artists in Zimbabwe in an effort to improve the conditions for female artists in her country. The inspiration to create this organization came from a dream. "I was standing in the middle as the powers of the earth—which give us healthiness, and food, and water, and the nice sun—were going down," she says. "There were killings, volcanoes, diseases, and a lot of wind. It had turned to be so ugly. But on the other side came the voices of women—singing. And, after hearing the women's voices, the Earth said, 'Let me hold on for a while and listen.' So, if only we would gather as women, and sing. . . . If it's your song—which is right next to you—don't think about how to sing it. Just sing! There can be songs for everything, songs for when you are looking after the baby, songs for when our elders grind the meal, songs to pray for the rain, songs to pray for what we really want in life. . . .

because I think we all know that there is a Creator."

As I write this article, Stella is preparing for that festival in Harare with a smaller one in her home village of Mhondoro. "We are going to gather a few people," she explains, "to get in touch with sharing together, sharing ourselves and hearing the voices of the earth, the spirits, and how best we can do it for the earth." From there, utilizing a grassroots approach to organizing, Stella expects the healing spirit that emerges in Mhondoro will generate a growing interest among women artists throughout the world to gather for the larger festival next year.

When I acknowledge her for being a positive role model for other women who want to play mbira, someone who opened a door for them, inspired them to go through that door and explore their potential, she replies humbly, "I don't think that I am the first [woman who played mbira]. I think there must have been other women somewhere." But she beams with joy when she talks of how things have changed. "Now there are little girls who are playing. Mbira is blooming. I'm so happy! I don't mind what people say, 'Oh, now this Shona mbira is being played by the English, the Chinese, the Americans.' No, this is not like that! If you get off [skin] color, there is just a skeleton there. A human being is a human being through the spirit."

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it with the contemporary scene, where musicians use disc packaging to show how well dressed they can afford to be. Once they had listened to it, however, many of the younger Zairois who don't remember the *belle époque* of 30 years ago realized that Fan Fan was still able to do the business. Even the production of *Hello, Hello* met the criterion of being a "new sound" with its subtle use of squeezebox effect and contemporary "animation" from Niawu.

Last year Fan Fan also renewed his connection with Tanzania when he played with Shikamoo Jazz, recalling the glory days he spent in East Africa. Invited to Dar es Salaam by Ronnie Graham, he was signed up to motivate the band of veterans as a member of the East African Legends tour of Britain with Funde Konde and Bi Kidude. The mutual respect that

flowed between him and the musicians of Shikamoo (which appropriately means "respect") gave him another morale boost. Also, for the first time since leaving Africa, he was able to play a full three-hour set at the WOMAD festival. A live album from the tour is scheduled for release on RetroAfric later in 1996.

A 1995 warm-up tour of U.K. clubs by the new, authentic *Somo Somo* Ngobila (witnessed by the editor of this illustrious journal) capped a busy year for Fan Fan, which he has followed up with an even more active 1996 that has taken the band through Germany, Holland and Scandinavia. Ngobila is something of a super-group now; Pablo Lubadika sat in on bass for some early gigs, while Sam Mangwana joined for some major festivals in July. It could be next stop U.S.A. if there is anyone out there listening.

Currently available:

Mose Fan Fan and *Somo Somo* Ngobila, *Hello, Hello* (Stern's STCD 1065)

Mose Se Fan Fan, *Belle Époque, 1970-82* (RetroAfric RETRO7CD)

Graeme Ewens is the author of *Africa-Oye! (Da Capo, New York)* and *Congo Colossus (distributed by Stern's U.S.)*, a biography of *Frano* which details the ups and downs of O.K. Jazz and its illustrious musicians, including Fan Fan.

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