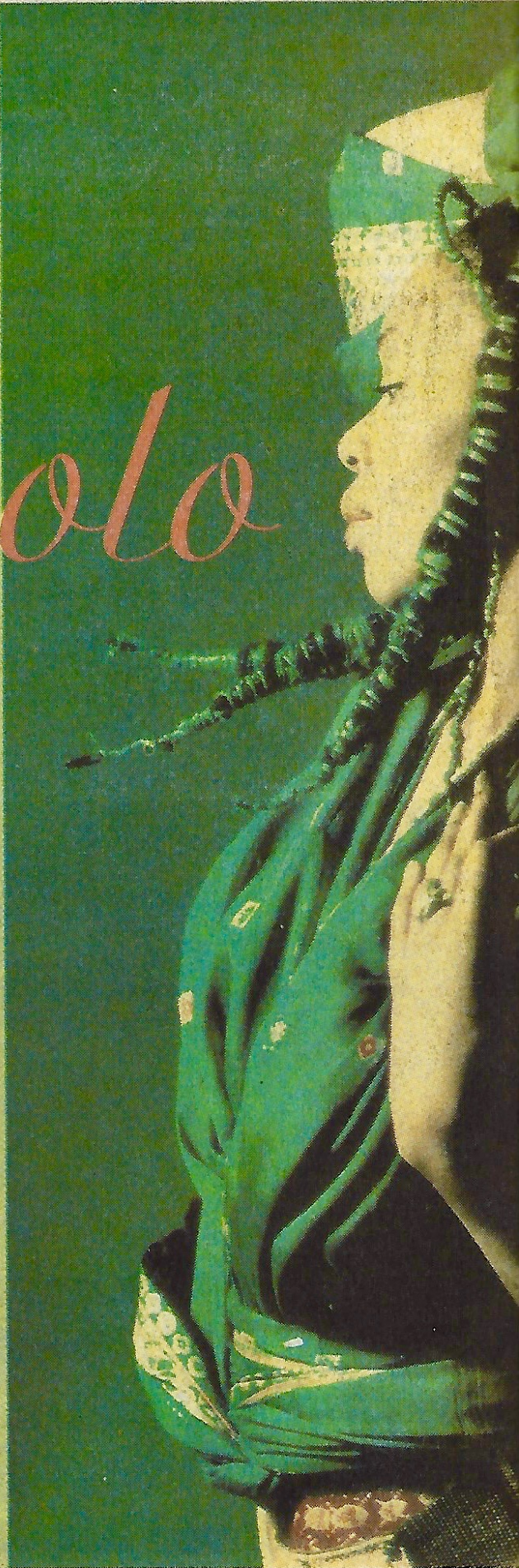


Sally Nyolo

By Steve Heilig ★ Photos by Pierre Terrasson

CAMEROON'S
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"I was singing since birth, because our Eton culture is based upon music. You wake up in the morning to music and it is there all day."

The voicemail from my editor was enticing: "Hey, I've got a blind date for you with a gorgeous young African woman who sings like an angel. It's set for next week. Call back for details."

Naive optimist that I am, I fell for it. "I'll be there," I replied, also via voicemail. "Just tell me when and where."

"OK, you're on," came the reply. "Her name is Sally, and she's kicking off a tour in San Francisco, right near your house. Just one catch, though. You have to interview her and write it up for us." Damn. Tricked again. But a deal's a deal, so I dutifully trudged down to the Justice League, currently the hottest club in town (the former Kennel Club and site of veteran *Beat*-ster Doug Wendt's late lamented world vee-jay Sunday nights). This relatively new spot has been adventurously booking all sorts of sounds, and actually I was pleased to be able to return and meet one of the best African divas on the world music scene: Sally Nyolo.

"Sally is expecting you," I was told when I entered the club. "But it takes her about an hour to prepare herself for a show. Do you mind talking with her while she's getting ready?"

I'd seen her likeness on the cover of her new sophomore solo cd, *Multiculti*. Amazingly, especially given that she was only halfway made-up and costumed, she looked even more striking in person: Green-wrapped super-thick and super-long braid/dreads, a vivid multicolored African dress, flashing eyes with glitter applied to her dark skin, and—go figure—a leather tool belt of the kind worn by construction workers. As they say in the fashion magazines, she made it all work.

Born in a small village in Cameroon, Nyolo's formative years were spent near or in the rainforest which has been the home of Baka and other Pygmy tribes, perhaps since the very first dawn of our species. Her contact with mystery and nature there has stayed with her and infuses her music to this day; her songs include not only stories of plant medicines and ecological warnings, but the songs of birds and other jungle creatures can be heard in her singing.

Nyolo moved with her family to France as a child and first came to the attention of the music world with the fledgling Zap Mama female vocal ensemble, which she joined in 1993. Prior to that she was a session backup singer, primarily for French musical stars but also with such African acts as Toure Kunda. With the increased visibility of Zap Mama, she toured Europe and the U.S. repeatedly, and contributed compositions to that group's second cd. Since going solo, she has released two albums of her own, with the new *Multiculti* garnering particularly positive responses, and her live shows are known for a powerful effect that is both musical and visual.

In person, Nyolo is effusive, warm, quick to laugh. She clearly is enjoying the role of frontperson, joking with her band members and the visiting journalist while she "put herself together." Eventually we managed to boot the other musicians and entourage from the dressing room and I was able to ask a few questions before her concert set, which indeed proved to be a real treat.

Steve Heilig: Let's start at the very beginning. When and where were you born, and how old are you now?

Sally Nyolo: Oh! wouldn't know that! [Laughter] You should ask my mother—she told me that if a woman tells a man how old she is, he won't marry you!

Q: Well then—never mind, next question! Let's start with the present time and move backwards. Tell me about the new record *Multiculti*. How is it different from your earlier music?

A: Well, it's still the same *bikutsi* rhythm base—but this time I tried to mix in other rhythms—reggae, jazz—and other languages. I'm very happy with it all, you know—I bet all musicians tell you that, but I mean it!

Q: Were these new languages for you to sing, or ones you'd known since childhood?

A: Some of these were new ones for me. I used to sing in French, in addition to my African languages, especially Eton, when I was in Zap Mama. Now I tried English and Spanish. In the new song "Multiculti" I sang in five languages. This was my second record and it was important to me to reach out in as many languages as I could.

Q: Where do you live now, and how did you get there?

A: I've lived in Paris for many years now—I don't know exactly how long, but ever since I've lived by myself. I moved to France when I was 13 years old because my father went there for his job. He was working for the embassy for a long time, but has moved a couple times since and now moved back to Cameroon to the village where I was born. I stayed in Paris with my mother.

Q: As a teenager, were you already aware that you would be a professional musician?

A: No, I didn't know I wanted to do music for my life then. But I was singing since birth, because our Eton culture is based upon music. You wake up in the morning to music and it is there all day. And *bikutsi* is not only a rhythm, but also a language. One of our traditional instruments, the *nkoule*, is a trunk of wood played with two sticks. It's just rhythms, but it's like a language—we can say to people far away in the forest anything we need to say—"send some help," "we need this or that," "we're making a party," "somebody died," or anything, and everybody is able to understand it.

Continued on page 40

SALLY NYOLO

Continued from page 39

When I left Cameroon, I discovered I had something musically more than many others, because I had learned the language of the percussion. But it has taken a long time to bring it all together to just my music, in my own language, my own inspiration. Before it was a language I only used to speak with my family and people. Everybody I knew could "speak" like that. That's why it's important to me now to keep my music based in bikutsi even when I am using other, newer languages.

Q: What did you do before Zap Mama?

A: Well, first I sang for other bands and singers for quite a few years. When I decided to do my music, I formed a band and recorded my first demo of 20 songs. In Paris I tried to find a bass player and guitar player—the same setup I have on stage now. I was working with six-seven years ago. It was most important for me to find a drummer who could play both the traditional sounds I knew and modern rhythms, and I think I was the only singer in Paris looking for exactly that combination. And it was in fact very difficult to find a drummer or percussionist who could play bikutsi—there wasn't anyone from Cameroon available. Now, my new bass player is from Cameroon but the rest of the band is not.

Q: Why not? Aren't there many other Cameroonians in Paris?

A: There are a lot of musicians from Cameroon in Paris now, but they are not from the deep forest—there are less opportunities to travel from there than there are if you live by the sea, and less chance that you will even dream that one day you will go far away. People from the deep forest tend to stay there, and even when they travel, they want to go back, like my father did. It's usually because they have land, and it's important for them to be there. So the bikutsi rhythms, which originally were the rhythms of the warriors, did not travel much either. I think that the only other bikutsi band to travel far was Les Têtes Brulés.

Q: Yes, and they had a very electric, modernized sound too.

A: Right. Originally, bikutsi was played on one kind of guitar only, along with voices. This guitar looks kind of like a *berimbau*, but has four calabashes and 10 strings. When a musician plays and sings, his voice resonates with the calabash. He can tell all kind of stories, it's a kind of rap, almost. It was forbidden for some time to play and sing like that.

So I had a band and a demo, and we played a lot of clubs in Paris. This was about five years ago. During the one year I was playing in Paris, one of my singers told me I should send my tape to Peter Gabriel. She gave me the address, but I didn't send it until she insisted again. So I did send it, and two weeks later my answering machine was full completely. He had tried to call many times, and said he loved the music and could I play at the WOMAD festival? So I went with my band and did three concerts. After the festival, he asked me to go to the studio with my band and record demos. I recorded a tune called "Djini Djome," which now has been redone for the new album.

Q: What happened with those demos?

A: Well, it was a funny thing. When I got back to Paris, I was asked to join Zap Mama, who were touring for their first album. Marie Daulne, their leader, said "We know you have a band of your own, but you'll have to leave it to tour with us because you won't have any time to do things on your own." That was true—the tour schedule had no day off! So I went to my musicians and said I really had to play with Zap Mama for now. So it took me three years of really being a part of Zap Mama, touring, recording the second album *Sabsylma*, and then on the run again, touring. And then two years ago Marie told us she wanted to change the direction of Zap Mama, but she wasn't sure how and needed time to figure it out. So I said to her I had to go back to my own music, and that was OK.

Q: And then you had to start over again with your own band...

A: I was out of Zap Mama at the end of December 1995, and

by the second or third day of 1996 I was back with my band.

Q: The same guys? How very loyal of them!

A: [Laughing] Actually it was some of the same musicians. It was very nice to be back I love to be able to do my own thing. Music is not only recording, or even playing on stage. It is life. I used to hear my mothers, and my sisters, when they want to say something, they would say it musically. And that was how we would compose, finding tunes to say something. To use music to express ourselves. That is why I am always so happy to go on stage. I am never ever tired. I can go play all night, all year long. My strength comes from people coming to see and hear songs from another place, another country. There is a bridge between those on stage and in the audience, and that is the music.

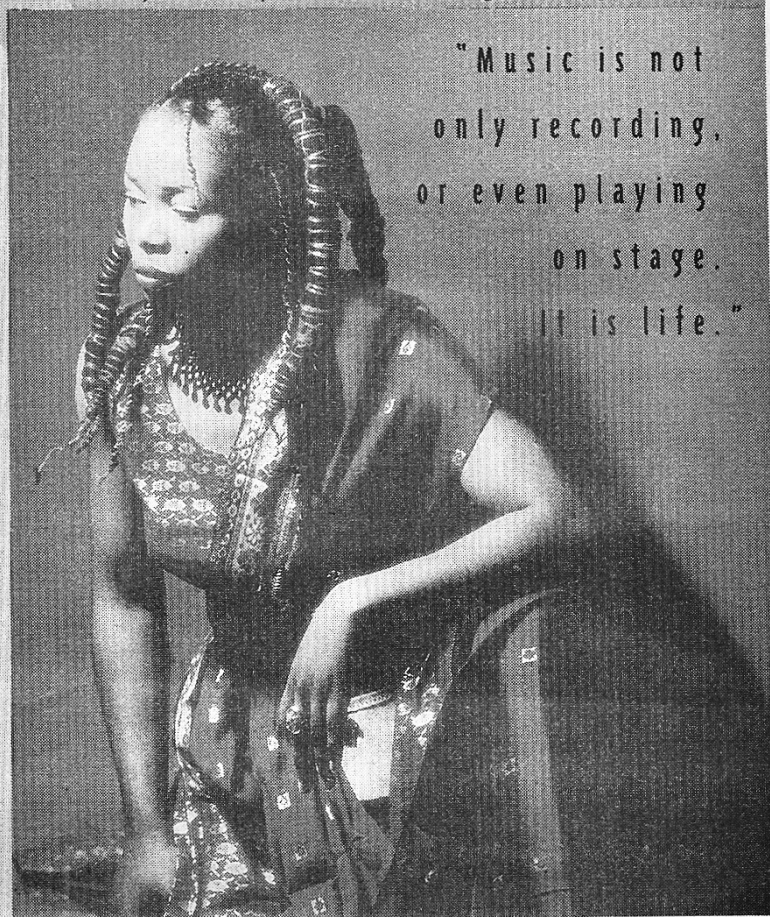
Q: Have you played back in Cameroon yet?

A: Not really as a concert. But four months ago, I went back with a French television crew to make a video of my return to Cameroon. I wanted to know if the rhythm we call bikutsi was still the same as when I was a child, and what I heard in my dreams. I had not been back for the music in many years. So I went to the deep forest, and I was so happy to be there.

When I arrived in the village, there were the village Baka Pygmies waiting. I said hello to everyone, and sat down and said I would play and sing for them. They came closer, and listened, and then, although they'd never heard the tune before, they started to sing with me! And they sang it with such power. This recording was put on a cd single in France but is not on the new album. Anyway, the rhythm was the same—we were playing the same language! I was there for seven days and nights and played music the whole time. I could see that the rhythm I am speaking about now, and playing, I could go back and speak with them as if I had never left, both in language and music.

Q: And now you can go back whenever you want, because you are having some success around the world.

A: Yes, but I don't know that! I am just doing this all of the time, touring, recording, and on and on! But it is very gratifying to have both this chance, and to be able to return to my own country. Each time I walk on stage I am very grateful. ★



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