

The

BY GARY STEWART

les Guitaristes

FREDDY DE MAJUNGA
DIBLO DIBALA
SOUZY KASSEYA
DALLY KIMOKO
BOPOL MANSIAMINA
SYRAN MBENZA
MASTER MWANA CONGO
RIGO STAR
LOKASSA YA MBONGO



Session men are the lifeblood of the Paris soukous scene. For 15 years or so, musicians of Africa and the Caribbean have flocked to this former metropolis of colonialism. Frustrated by deteriorating facilities at home, they sell their belongings, even their instruments, to scare up precious airfare. They arrive with little money, move in with friends or relatives, wash dishes, sweep floors and make the rounds of the studios, searching for a chance to play.

"We know each other, you know," says Cameroonian trumpet player Tete Fredo, who like many contributors to soukous isn't from the area of its birth. "If you came to Paris now, you are an African, good musician, you play once, everybody's going to know." Fredo played well enough to back nearly every musician living in Paris at one time or another, African or otherwise. Fredo, along with his partner, sax player Jimmy Nvondo, became the Sly and Robbie of Paris hornmen.

The session men work as individuals. When one has the makings of an album, he calls on others to record with him. The record is issued in the initiator's name and he gets the royalties while those who work on the session with him get a one-time payment. The principal on one session will likely be a backup on the next. Even big names like Kanda Bongo Man work this way. He is the star on his own lps, but often sings backing vocals—or even lead if the principal artist is an instrumentalist—on others' projects.

It is a matter of economics, says guitarist Rigobert "Rigo Star" Bamundele. "Life is a lot harder now and supporting a band is not an easy task. So most people tend to go as individuals,

do their own individual efforts and come with [their own] material rather than work as a group."

Rigo moved to Paris eight years ago after working 10 years in Kinshasa with people like Papa Wemba and Tabu Ley Rochereau. A guitar virtuoso, he has also become a much-in-demand producer and arranger. From his early '80s solo lp *Ringo Star* through Sam Mangwana's *Aladi* and Koffi Olomide's *Tcha Tcha* to this year's wonderful *Phénomène* by Mbilia Bel and Wemba's self-titled album, Rigo's contributions to soukous are impressive. "My telephone number doesn't change," he says, "they just call me."

Another fine session guitarist is Diblo Dibala. Diblo left Zaire in 1979, after honing his skills in such groups as Vox Africa, Bella Mambo and Bella Bella. After nearly two years of "adventure" in Brussels where he washed dishes for a living and played a rented guitar, he moved to Paris. "I really learned the hard way," he says. In Paris he rejoined Kanda Bongo Man, with whom he'd played in Bella Bella. Their first album collaboration, *Iyole*, in 1981 was a breakthrough for both men. For Kanda it has meant a measure of real stardom. For Diblo it has led to as much session work as he can handle and to the birth of Loketo.

As has happened with Loketo, Paris musicians do occasionally experiment by forming bands. One of the earliest attempts was Les Quatre Etouilles, the Four Stars, which brought together singers Nyboma and Wuta Mayi and guitarists Bopol Mansiamina and Syran Mbenga in 1982. The four had extensive experi-

Session Men



PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

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ence back home in Zaire playing separately with bands like O.K. Jazz, Lipua Lipua, Baby National and Lovy du Zaire. In Paris they work independently then join forces from time to time to record and tour. Lately another Zairean singer, Jean Papy, has appeared to replace Nyboma, so the stars may be changing.

About two-and-a-half years ago another group, called L.P.P. (Les Potes des Potes, or friends of friends), surfaced as a more or less stable session band. An international cast, L.P.P. includes three Congolese musicians—singer and dancer Pierre Belkos, bass player Remy Sahlonon and rhythm guitarist Mimi Kazidonna; Zairean solo guitarist Dally Kimoko; drummer Jean “Ty-Jan” Arcon from Guadeloupe; and singer-dancer-manager Evelyne “Sammy” Marlin from Martinique.

In addition to their studio efforts, the members of L.P.P. have worked as touring band for Kanda Bongo Man and are recording their own material released under the names of the individual members. First out was the lp *Ty-Jan* released last spring followed a few months later by Belkos' *Musique et Mode*. But L.P.P. may or may not be here to stay; it has lately shown signs of unraveling.

Two other standouts among the legions of Paris session men are the ubiquitous drummer Domingo Salsero from Central African Republic, whose work with Lovy du Zaire and Sam Mangwana's African All Stars paved his way to Paris, and Zairean bass player Andre “du Soleil” Kinzoni, who is perhaps the only one to rival Salsero for number of album credits.

In the old days in Kinshasa, studio owners

were pivots to the music's success. In Paris, it is the producers who succor soukous. One of the most successful was Richard Dick of the Republic of Benin. In the late '70s and early '80s his International Salsa Musique and Africamania labels produced some unforgettable records, among them the great *Ma Coco* by Zairean guitarist Pablo Lubadika Porthos. Tracks from that album later put the kick in Island's *Sound d'Afrique* series.

Another early producer was saxophone player Eddy Gustave of Martinique, who established the Eddy/Son label around 1980. Eddy/Son produced Rigo Star's *Ringo Star* lp and two best-sellers, *L'Argent Appelle l'Argent* and *Samantha* by l'Orchestre Bantous alumnus Pamela Mounka. Gustave continues in the business with Eddy/Son's successor Saxe.

Following in the footsteps of these pioneers came the Ivory Coast's Moumoumi Ouattara with his Afro Rhythmes label. Ouattara introduced Kanda Bongo Man and Diblo to soukous lovers with the albums *Iyole* and *Djessy*. Zaire's Loukelo Samba—alias L.M. Kiland when he's writing songs—launched the *Innovation* series, beginning with two standard-setting volumes: Bopol's *Pitie, Je Veux* and *Cherie Makwanza* by Julius Lukau. In the middle '80s the French husband-wife production team of Charles Maniatakis and Colette Lacoste gave us *Kamani Mado* from Kosmos and Mpongo Love's classic lp, *Femme Commercante*, one of the best Paris-produced soukous albums of all time.

As we head for the '90s two more producers have emerged to pick up the beat. Jimmy's Productions, owned by Benin's Jimmy Houeti-

FAR LEFT: VOCALIST PIERRE BELKOS WORKS WITH THE SESSION BAND L.P.P. (LES POTES DES POTES) IN STUDIO AND ON TOUR. LEFT: MUSICIANS CONSULT WITH PRODUCER RINGO MOYA (ON RIGHT OF BOARD) IN A PARIS STUDIO. CENTER: TETE FREDO, TRUMPET PLAYER FROM CAMEROON WHO IS MUCH IN DEMAND IN PARIS. RIGHT: GUITAR VIRTUOSO RIGO STAR.

no, is responsible for releases from L.P.P., Loketo and Loketo cofounder Aurlus Mabele. Senegal's Ibrahim Sylla with his Syllart Productions, perhaps today's most active company, has produced Les Quatre Etoiles, the Kass Kass collaboration of Syran Mbenza, Jean Papy and Passy Joe, Sam Mangwana's *Aladji* and *Moyibi* by Pepe Kalle and Nyboma, among others.

New albums are being released at a rapid pace, resulting at times in output of uneven quality. While nearly every musician aspires to be a star, a solid session player doesn't always make a first-rate composer or frontman. Like most artists, soukous musicians are experimenting, seeking to reconcile the elements of self-expression and public acceptance. They have come along way since the dawn of Congo music in the 1950s. For most Paris session men, the days of dishwashing are over. ★