

## Africa Mokili Mobimba

BY GARY STEWART

**T**wo men, separated by geography and nationality but united by their common humanity and love of music, stilled for a brief December moment the swirl of political chaos and economic desperation that soils the happiness of daily life in Zaire. Their lives had only touched each other in muted broadcasting studios of Washington, DC, where the stylus of a Voice of America turntable met the black vinyl grooves of Congo music. There, and in the pages of *The Beat* where the great guitar accompanist of African Jazz told a visiting journalist he didn't even have a guitar to play anymore [Vol. 12 #6, 1993].

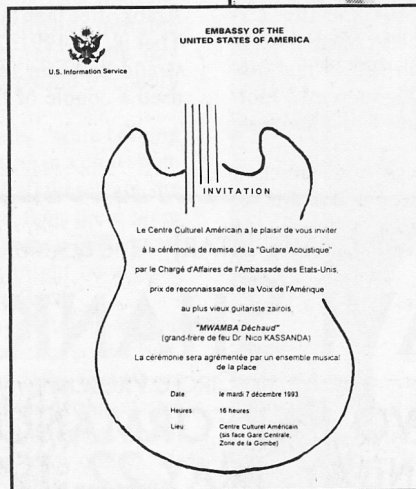
Still physically miles apart, the VOA's "music man for Africa," Leo Sarkisian, and Mwamba Dechaud, the guitarist "who made Lucifer and his 500,000 devils dance," met in spirit in Kinshasa's Centre Culturel Americain when a shiny, sleek acoustic guitar was presented to the guitarless musician.

Sarkisian, whose exquisite programs of African music and culture have graced the international airwaves for nearly 30 years, arranged for the new guitar to be shipped to Kinshasa through diplomatic channels. His colleague, Mary Carlin Yates, director of the American Cultural Center, together with the Zairean musicians' union president, Moniania ma Muluma, better known as Roitelet, organized the ceremony which brought together the remnants of Kinshasa's music establishment, Zairean television, and the local press to honor the great Dechaud.

"Humor, joie de vivre, love of pleasing the public—Mwamba Charles Dechaud is all of this at once when he picks up his guitar," said Chargé d'Affaires John M. Yates, currently the highest ranking American diplomat in Zaire, who made the official presentation. "He has," Yates continued, "produced a fabulous collection of 150 Zairean songs that Zairean men and women continue to dance to today." One of them, "Africa Mokili Mobimba" (Africa and the whole world), is perhaps the best known of any song ever to come out of the continent. Had



MWAMBA DECHAUD ACCEPTS GUITAR AT OFFICIAL CEREMONY.



Dechaud received his just rewards from this one song alone, he would be a wealthy man. But what the music business gives with the hand of adulation and celebrity, it crushes with the boot of corruption and deceit. Too many musicians have recorded Dechaud's

work but credited themselves or others to avoid making royalty payments. What money is legitimately paid can vanish in the sordid dealings between the bureaucracies that collect such fees. Dechaud and many of the older Zairean musicians receive virtually nothing for their creations, many of which, like "Africa Mokili Mobimba," sell almost as briskly today as they did 30 years ago.

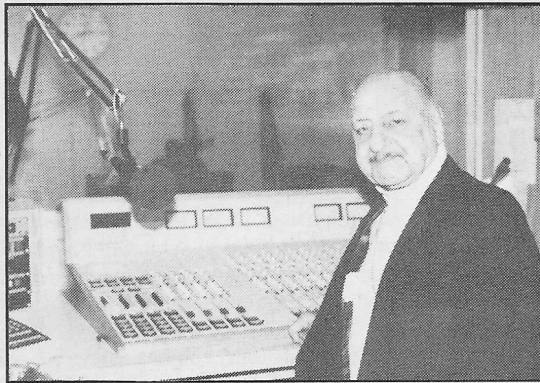
For Dechaud, the VOA guitar award marked the beginning of his fifth decade in the music business. He started as a teenager in the early 1950s singing with the celebrated guitarist, Jimmy. He moved on to join with his brother, solo guitarist Nicholas "Docteur Nico" Kasanda, and singer Joseph Kabasele to form the group African Jazz where he developed his reputation as a splendid rhythm guitarist. Dechaud and Nico created African Fiesta Sukisa in the mid-'60s and played together until Nico's death in 1985.

Dechaud keeps active today playing with a group of old-timers called Afric'Ambiance. After accepting his new guitar, Dechaud and Afric'Ambiance wrested the ceremony from the speakers' grip with a short set that featured "Africa Mokili Mobimba" and "Biantondi Kasanda" with Docteur Nico's son sitting in on lead guitar.

In length, at least, the career of Leo Sarkisian corresponds closely to that of Dechaud. Born in Massachusetts to parents who escaped the Turkish massacres of Armenians in the 1890s, he developed a love of music and language in surroundings that encouraged exploration of American culture and the Middle Eastern heritage of his parents. A paper he wrote called "World Music," perhaps one of the first coinages of the term, drew Sarkisian from his Greenwich Village studio, where he worked as a commercial artist, to the studios of Radio Recorders in Hollywood. Radio Recorders, one of the main recording companies for the record and film industries, was planning to expand its library of music from around the world, and Sarkisian looked like a promising recruit.

In 1953, about the time Dechaud was joining African Jazz, Sarkisian shipped out to Pakistan with a vehicle and the best recording equipment he could find. For a year in Pakistan and three more in Afghanistan, he systematically recorded the folk music of different regions of the two countries.

PHOTOS BY GARY STEWART



With Ghana's independence in 1957, followed by that of Guinea a year later, Africa became Sarkisian's next assignment. He worked with renowned musicologist Atta Mensah at Radio Ghana in 1958 and produced an album of local music called *New Sounds from a New Nation*. In 1959, when Dechaud and African Jazz were playing "Independence Cha Cha" for the participants in the Brussels Round Table Conference on Belgian Congo independence, Sarkisian packed his vehicle and drove north to Guinea. During the next three years he worked with Guinea's national radio and made field recordings from around the country. As many as 15 albums were eventually produced from his tapes.

Sarkisian joined the Voice of America in 1963 at the urging of Edward R. Murrow, President Kennedy's director of the U.S. Information Agency. He became the music director of the VOA's new African programming center in Monrovia, Liberia. A year and a half later, his highly acclaimed program "Music Time in Africa" made its debut. At first the show featured strictly traditional music from Sarkisian's bulging library of field recordings. Even after production moved to Washington, DC, following the Monrovia center's closing in 1969, Sarkisian spent as many

as eight months a year, up to the mid-'80s, making field recordings in Africa. "This gave me an opportunity to travel to every country on the continent," he says, except for Zimbabwe and Mozambique which were off limits to U.S. diplomats until they gained independence. "Ironically, I still get letters now from a radio station or ministry of information from one of these governments saying that, 'We just heard some traditional music from our country. Where did you get it? We don't have it, and we would like some.' And of course I usually try to send the music back to them."

Today Sarkisian produces two half-hour shows, one for traditional music, the other for pop. Since 1978 Rita Rochelle, who came to VOA from commercial radio and television work in St. Louis, Houston and Los Angeles, has hosted the program. Together they are

better known in Africa than most of the musicians whose works they feature. *Passport to World Band Radio*, a guide to short-wave radio programming, selected "Music Time in Africa" as one of the 10 best entertainment programs in its 1994 edition. Listeners vote with pen and paper showering Sarkisian and Rochelle with some 4-5,000 letters a month.

Thirty years after "Independence Cha Cha," external broadcasters like the VOA and BBC have become increasingly important to Africa. The continent's collapsing economic and political structures have ushered many of its radio stations down the path of destruction. "We are the lifeline. We are the conduit," says Rochelle. The importance of music in Africa is enormous, and its loss would be tragic, she says, "I would compare it to trying to exist without oxygen or blood in your system." More and more in Africa the vital juice flows through the speakers of short-wave radios, and from time to time through small human gestures like sending a guitar to a musician in Zaire.

*["Music Time in Africa" can be heard on short-wave radio (even in the U.S.) on Sundays at 1733 and 1933 GMT (12:33 p.m. and 2:33 p.m. EST) on frequencies 621, 11920, 11995, 13710, and 15410 kHz.]*



ABOVE: "MUSIC TIME IN AFRICA" PRODUCERS RITA ROCHELLE AND LEO SARKISIAN, WHO ARRANGED FOR THE SHIPPING OF DECHAUD'S GUITAR TO KINSHASA. RIGHT: DECHAUD AND BAND PERFORMED AT THE OFFICIAL GATHERING. FAR LEFT: THE INVITATION TO THE AFFAIR.