

pepe kalle

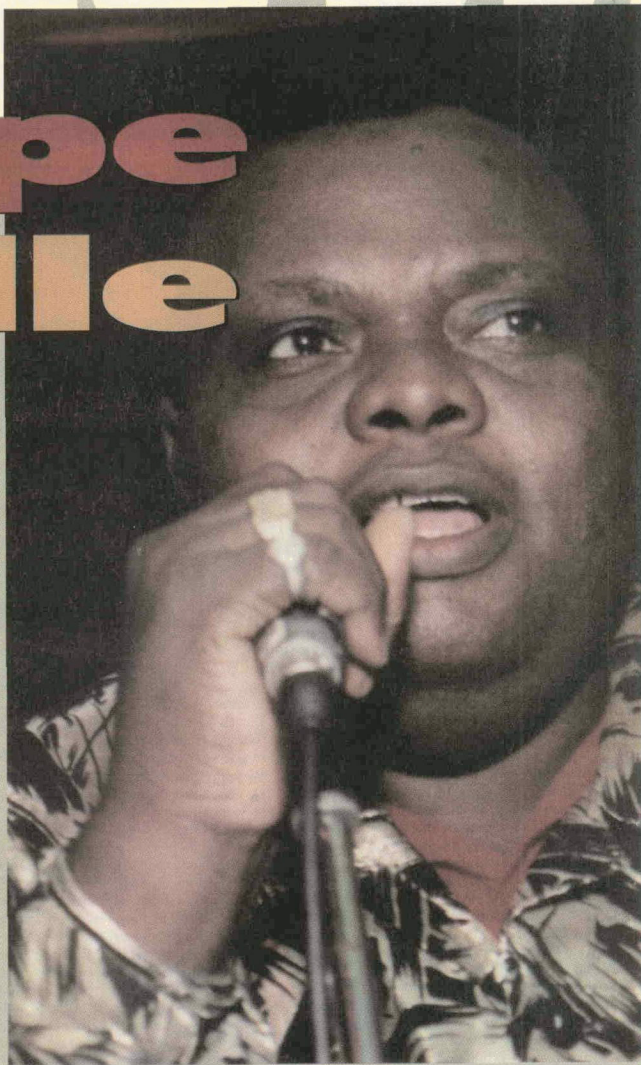
1951

1998

By Gary Stewart

The elephant has fallen. Ponderous Pepe Kalle, the giant man with the gentle soul and generous gift for rhyme and rhythm, died of a heart attack in Kinshasa early Sunday morning Nov. 29. According to wire service reports, the 46-year-old Kalle, the first among equals of the group Empire Bakuba, was stricken around 10 p.m. Saturday night at his home in the Congolese capital. He was rushed to the nearby Clinique Ngaliema where he died just after midnight.

As one of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's biggest stars, both in physical size and personal popularity, Jean Kabasele Yampanya "Pepe Kalle" had endeared himself to the generation of fans who came of age with Congolese "youth bands." Such bands—the most popular were Zaiko Langa Langa and Orchestre Bella Bella—formed in the late '60s and early '70s as



Remembrances of Pepe Kalle from two musicians who knew him well and worked closely with him.

Guitarist Lakassa Kasiya, better known as Lakassa Ya Mbonga, was present at Pepe Kalle's debut with Africa Choc and recorded with him frequently throughout the years. He remembers Pepe Kalle's good humor and prodigious appetite:



Lakassa Ya Mbonga

"First, I want to say that the whole family of musicians is in mourning for Pepe Kalle. It is like an elephant has fallen. He was a born musician. He was always joking—on stage, and in the studio.

"One day we were in the studio, and they brought us some food; and for him there was something special, because he took at least two chickens, himself, and a loaf of bread—not a baguette, mind you, like in Paris, they have the small baguettes, but a big loaf of bread all for himself, and he put this at his feet, and he ate it, very quietly, two whole roasted chickens, until they were finished. And then, what does he do, but he takes the last piece of chicken like this, and says, 'No, you're not going to get this,' and then he swallows it; and everyone laughs. And then he drinks two whole bottles of Coca-Cola, like someone who has really eaten well. So, then he calls this Nyboma, 'Now, let's go to the studio and sing!'"

Nyboma Mwan Dido was a close friend and colleague of Pepe Kalle since their childhood in Kinshasa, and deeply feels the loss of his singing partner and companion. They first met at age 14 as schoolboys, at karate practice, years before their musical careers coalesced. They both began their singing careers under the wing of producer Verckys, at the Vève studios, and reunited over the years to record a total of five singles—Pamelo Okomela, Ngambo, Kaninda, Sola, Mbuta, and Rosa Mama—and five albums together: Moyibi, Zouké Zouké, Roger Milla, Gerant and Hommage à Emoro. They had a natural rapport as vocalists. Pepe Kalle's sardonic, baritone harmonizing instinctively with Nyboma's high sweet tenor.



Nyboma Mwan Dido

Pepe Kalle was enormously popular all over Africa, not just in Congo. I asked Nyboma, how do you explain his popularity, why did everyone love him so much? His response: "He was a nice person. Pepe Kalle has a good heart. He's a very simple person, but everybody wants to know... this man is big, is tall, and he sings like that—I call this a phenomenon.

"I am so, so sorry about Pepe Kalle. When I talk about him I want to cry. The last time I talked to Pepe Kalle was when I went to Paris in September. I called Pepe Kalle in Kinshasa and we talked for one hour on the phone. He gave me the program—he was coming to Paris in November. December, he going to go to the U.S., in January he was going back to France, and he was going to stay in Paris to make a recording with me. But God said it is not going to be like that, and he took my friend, my brother."

Asked to comment on Pepe Kalle's position in the music and his legacy, Nyboma replied: "We won't forget the big voice, big musician, from Congo, from Africa, and from the world. I never sang with somebody like Pepe Kalle who knew me so well, who I know so well, that when we sing I know that if I do that, Pepe Kalle going to do something about the feeling. I know when I change, he's going to change, he's going to follow me. I never sang with anybody like that. I have sung with Tabu Ley, but Pepe Kalle is a phenomenon."

I wanted to know if he had any fond memories of his singing partner. Nyboma recalled: "When Pepe Kalle was playing with Bella Bella, every time I go see Pepe Kalle in Barumbu, Pepe Kalle would bring me back to Ngiri-Ngiri—it's far—we walk—not take car, we walk. We walk, but we singing. We sing, we sing, we sing, we don't even know where we were, until we got back to my house. But then I said to Pepe Kalle, now, I'm going back to bring you home. We do that—I walk Pepe Kalle back to Barumbu. When we get there, Pepe Kalle say, no no no, now I go back, bring you, because—it was exciting just to sing, to sing. And the last time he say, bon, we going to stop in the middle—OK, this is the middle—bye bye, bye bye. And we parted halfway.

"If I think about that, I say to myself, My God, why do you do something like that, you take my friend, so early!"

—CC Smith

a youthful alternative to older groups like African Fiesta and O.K. Jazz which had pioneered the Congolese rumba.

Pepe Kalle joined the youth movement in a neighborhood band called African Choc where he began to refine his powerful singing voice. With help from Afrisa drummer Seskain Molenga, Kalle embarked on a professional career in 1972 at the age of 20 in the employ of Kiamuangana Matera, the producer known as Verckys. At Verckys' Editions Vève, Kalle and others from African Choc played on several recordings with Molenga that were released under the name Les Bakuba.

Kalle also sang backing vocals on recording sessions for various groups in the Vève stable and joined another young singer, Nyboma Mwan Dido, alongside veteran Soki Vangu in the front line of Orchestre Bella Bella. When Bella Bella bolted from Vève in 1973, Kalle and Nyboma stayed on to front a new band called Lipua Lipua. Several months later Kalle and singers Matolu Dode "Papy Tex" and Joseph "Dilu" Dilumona left Editions Vève to form their Orchestre Empire Bakuba.

The new band built its following by bridging the gap between the old and new styles of popular music that washed in relentless waves across Kinshasa. Kalle sang smoothly like the great Joseph Kabasele (no relation) whom he claimed as a mentor. Where groups like Zaiko dropped horns from the lineup, Empire Bakuba usually kept them in. But like the day's other youth bands, Empire Bakuba rocked in comparison to the elders. The quality of its music and its enormous popularity propelled Empire Bakuba into the first ranks of Congolese bands in the early '80s.

Empire Bakuba was prolific in the studio, churning out at least four albums a year throughout the '80s and early '90s. Although Kalle professed to be apolitical, his song "Article 15 Beta Libanga" deftly portrayed the difficult life in Mobutu's crumbling Zaire. "Beta libanga," beat with a stone, that is, work hard, do what you must to live.

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PEPE KALLE

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Other Kalle compositions like "Dadou," which spoke of family problems brought about by an absent father, addressed the vicissitudes of urban life. "Zouké Zouké," a party song recorded with Nyboma, rollicked at the pace of Paris soukous and Caribbean zouk. Kalle's embrace of break-neck Paris soukous helped to win its acceptance back home where initial reaction had been decidedly cool.

Kalle worked seriously at his music but was quick to see life's humorous side. He remarked more than once that he loved contrasts, a predilection that moved him to squeeze his six-foot-something, 300-plus-pound frame into a Volkswagen Beetle and to hire a dancing dwarf called Emoro to perform with the band. Emoro himself died of a heart attack in 1992.

In an industry where bands seemed to change personnel on a weekly basis, Empire Bakuba distinguished itself as Congolese music's most stable group. The core trio of singers worked together for nearly 25 years, although Kalle's last album, *Cocktail*, was recorded as a solo while Papy Tex cooled his heels in Brussels and Dilu was said to be working for a Kinshasa bank.

Despite bleak conditions in Zaire/Congo during Mobutu's last years and under the faltering regime of Laurent Kabila, Pepe Kalle continued to reside in Kinshasa, refusing to join the mass movement of the music's stars to Europe. "He was the only musician... who never had a problem with anybody," said Tabu Ley in Kinshasa. "He was the man who could reconcile two musical generations."

Veteran Congolese journalist Achille Ngoie, who covered Empire Bakuba from its inception, remembered Kalle as a man of the people. As Ngoie told it, Kalle could be on stage in the middle of a song and, seeing a person in the audience he hadn't seen for years, work a greeting to that person into the song. "He was an extraordinary person. He had an elephantine memory."

Upon his death Kalle received the praises of government ministers and the common people as well. His body lay in state at several locations throughout the city where he lived and worked. More than one million people were reported to have paid their respects at his funeral at the Palais du Peuple and along the funeral procession's route. Pepe Kalle was buried on Dec. 6 at Gombe Cemetery, joining the growing pantheon of Congolese music stars who died much too young. ★

Pepe Kalle

Larger Than Life

Pepe Kalle visited the West Coast for the first time in February 1998, invited by IMA Records for a month-long tour with "Rigo Star's African Revue," a band that included guitarists Rigo Star and Syran Mbemba, along with singer Abby

Surya. I was fortunate to interview him at that time, as well as see him perform on four occasions. He was a marvelous entertainer, and, although his role was as a guest artist accompanying Rigo and his band, Pepe Kalle immediately dominated the stage. It was clear that he was the one everyone had come to see, and you could feel the outpouring of affection from the audience.

He had many definite ideas about taking soukous in a new direction, and was very much aware that a change was necessary to revitalize the popular music of the Congo. Many of the ideas he discusses here are realized in his last release, *Cocktail* (Ets. Ndiaye).

CC Smith: Last night, you were guest vocalist with Rigo Star's band—it was his band, not yours.

Pepe Kalle: Yes. I was invited to come on tour with his group.

Q: Did you miss having your own band?

A: Well, you know, I am a professional. A professional, wherever he goes, he feels like a fish in the water. Last night, you saw me on stage. I came on to play, and somehow, I was at ease, at ease with everyone: Rigo! Jean Claude! Abby! Then, I directed—like I was with my own group. I played the Grand Master of the stage. That's how an artist should be, and that is professionalism. You don't have to always be with your own group to express yourself well.

But here are other things that in my own group that the musicians know, that these artists don't know. Happily, I had with me the little dancer [Dokolos], and with him I communicate well. It went well, I am very content. I'm very happy that Rigo thought about me, to bring me to his record label, saying he would invite a great professional, a great connoisseur, someone he could continue to work with.

Q: Normally, in your group Empire Bakuba, how many musicians are there?

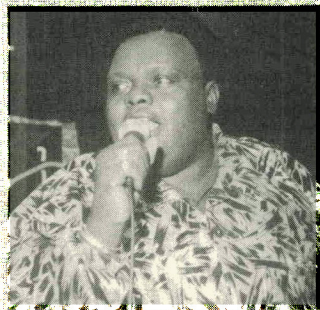
A: Usually, when Empire Bakuba is home in the Congo, you'll see 20 or 30 musicians, but for a tour, they cannot all come. I have to choose who will come on tour—10 or 15.

Q: On stage, what is the presentation, how does the show go?

A: For an Empire Bakuba show, I have six female dancers, three male dancers, Dokolos and Jolie Bebe, the two little dwarfs, and another one, very fat. Then we add the artists who will back us—17 or 18 musicians.

Q: Why do you like to use the dwarfs in the show?

A: Since I started out this business with Emoro—I had only one dwarf then—he himself got in touch with me, while we were in Kisangani. I accepted. Since his passage, at my side, when



PHOTOS BY ADE JAMES

Interview by CC Smith