

**Africa's
Reggae
Superstar**

**ALPHA
BLONDY**

IS HE
THE NEW
BOB MARLEY?

By Stephen Davis

When Bob Marley died in 1981, I began looking around for someone to take his place.

I knew Bob's energy and mission were so strong that eventually some young reggae singer would pick up his sword and his shield and the heavy mantle of moral authority and reggae transcendence that Marley had laid down.

Even back then, I had a hunch that the new Bob Marley might not come from Jamaica. By the early 1980s you were as likely to hear reggae in Morocco or Singapore as you were in Kingston. Reggae was the music of enlightened international youth culture, and I knew there was some kid out there who was going to rise up and just do it.

Consider, now, the recent career of Alpha Blondy.

As far as I can determine, 35-year-old Alpha is the biggest reggae star in Europe and Africa right now. Concerts by Alpha and his Solar System band incite pandemonium, whether in Paris, Marrakech or Accra. Like Bob Marley, Alpha sings for the poor and dispossessed, yet he appeals to all classes of society on the deepest level. His music, a mélange of the soul of his native Ivory Coast with the bedrock rhythms of roots reggae, has an utterly Marleyesque feel to it and the same power to evoke feelings of topical rage and very human sentimentality at the same time.

So popular is Alpha Blondy in Africa these days that in Guinea in 1985 an opposition group took advantage of an immense crowd gathered for an Alpha concert to stage a coup, which proved to be a fiasco ending with seven people dead. In April 1986, he played a concert dedicated to peace between warring Mali and Burkina Faso that was credited with de-escalating tensions between the two neighbors. In July 1986 he played the Moroccan International Festival of Youth and Music in Marrakech and mashed down an audience of 10,000 Moroccan youth crammed into the ruins of the ancient Badi'a Palace and singing along with Alpha's hits — "Cocody Rock," "Jerusalem," "Apartheid Is Nazism," "Bory Samori" and "Rasta Poué." The following month the Solar System played two concerts in Ghana dubbed Reggae

Festival '86. Alpha appeared at the packed Accra Sports Stadium wrapped in the Ghanaian flag and sang for two hours without a break. During concerts in Moslem countries, Alpha makes a point to sing in Hebrew. In Israel, he sings in Arabic.

Like Bob Marley, Alpha Blondy is an anthemist with a mission. Alpha is an ardent Pan-Africanist and advocate of African unity, an ideology reflected in his band, which is comprised of players from the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon and the Caribbean.

His name reflects his heritage as an African student of Western ways. Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, stands for a beginning. Blondy was the name his old grandmother called him. "I was always fighting and she used to call me 'bandit'," he says, "but she had no teeth so it used to come out Blondy."

The following interview was recorded in December 1984 at the Paris home of journalist Hélène Lee. At the time, Alpha's second album,

Cocody Rock, had just been issued. Since then Alpha has released three more albums, become an international reggae star and emerged as a new African hero for the late 1980s. A sort of new Bob Marley, as anyone who listens to his records and analyzes his music will soon see. It's no accident that Alpha Blondy recorded some of his hardest music with the Wailers at the studio that Bob Marley built, Tuff Gong in Kingston. And how does Alpha Blondy feel these days?

His answer could describe the perfectly appropriate response in this new age of anxiety: "Paranoid, but optimistic."

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Stephen: Where were you born?

Alpha Blondy: I was born in the Ivory Coast in 1953, the 1st January, at Dimbokro in the center of the country. My family name is Koné, and they call me Seydou, Koné Seydou, which used to be my grandfather's name. I belong to the Jula tribe. My father's name is Yacouba, which is Jacob yunno, and my mother's name is Aminatta; her grandfather came from Mali, and her background roots come from the Futajalon, in the Fula area of Guinea.

Q: What's your earliest memory of music?

A: African folklore yunno, called yagba, which gets played in northern Ivory Coast, and gumbé, which is a kind of popular dance. And, strange, I found gumbé in Jamaical Gumbé is a very popular African folklore kind of style.

When I went to school, I was hooked on rock 'n' roll, like Deep Purple, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Beatles. We were all cultural mutants, part of the universal musical revolution of that era. I had a heavy rock 'n' roll collection. I was into Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, all those guys.

Q: Was that music played on the radio in the Ivory Coast?

A: Yeah man! It was the same craze all over the world. In Africa in the '60s and '70s we were crazy for anything Western. It was the years when many African nations were becoming independent, and music is so fundamental in Africa that any good music has a chance to become big. . . .

Q: What about African music of that era?

A: I was more into rock 'n' roll than Fela at that time. Why? Because I was oriented in the direction of Western culture. Because, for me, Fela was an African; so — big deal. But when I heard Jimi Hendrix, it was a new sound, and I was a teen-ager in a crazy state of mind.

Q: Do you play any instruments?

A: Well, I would say no. . . . You get to the point where you really have to make a choice, try to find a path where you can succeed the most. And I wanted to be an English teacher, so my parents sent me to America. I was kicked out of high school in the Ivory Coast after my mathematics teacher slapped me. She gave the class a job, heavy math, man! Believe me! Four hours of mathematics in a day, it drive you crazy. But I, as a scientist, I just check out the whole thing and did it in 30 minutes. So when I finished my root square of things I take it to the teacher and she gets mad, saying that I'm lazy and I don't wanna work. I said, look, mathematics is not magic yunno, you don't just imagine the

results, you got to know it, and I don't know it. Why should I waste your time and my time? She got mad yunno, and slapped me. I said, look baby, a woman like you I got a lot of at home, and slapped her face. So they had a meeting and suggested I pursue my studies elsewhere.

So I went to Liberia and spent a year in Monrovia studying English so I could go to America. First I had to learn to get used to the African pronunciation of English as spoken in Liberia. Then I went to Hunter College in New York, and a year later, I was admitted to Columbia University in the American Language Program. I stayed for two years. At the beginning of the third year I ran out of money and had a psychiatric problem as well, so I quit.

I was married in America, to a classmate yunno, and when you depend on your wife, man, believe me Steve, it's like a moral thing when your wife is paying for food and the rent and your job is to lay down and make love. You feel less than a man and you have to do something. So I worked as a messenger and am spending my free time playing a small drum and singing in Central Park — African songs, Bob Marley, my own songs mostly.

I wanted to be a musician, but I knew my parents wouldn't like it, because they would feel strange to see their son come to America, study, and instead of becoming a respectable English teacher, wanting to be a reggae singer and claiming to be a Rasta. They'll flip out. The African pride about success is a disease! After going to school in America, you cannot become a singer!!

So after I got out of Bellevue [Hospital in New York], I have to make up my mind. I have to decide what kind of thing I will do that will not damage my brain.

Q: Did you feel better when you got out of the hospital?

A: No. You see, the hospital don't cure nobody. That's what my doctor told me. His name was Dr. Spector. I said, "Do you think that I am crazy?" And he said: "Well, what I think is not important. It's what you think."

I said, "Well, thank you doctor, so I'm not sick." I had felt so sick when I came into the hospital that I had convinced myself that I was crazy. But now, I said, I'm gonna have to dry up my tears and grow up a little bit. I said to myself: I will not take it from nobody, and I will not die. . . . like that.

When you start doubting yourself, it's dangerous. But the problem was, I was on an angel dust trip. Somebody in Central Park gave me angel dust without telling me. Can you imagine that? Then they told me they never saw anybody smoke as much angel dust as me and still be able to reason. So I would say, Thanks God!

Q: There was much comment in the Ivory

Coast when you dedicated an album to the patients at the Bingerville Asylum in Abidjan.

A: Well, I left America, coming to rest in the Ivory Coast, and when I got to the airport there was police waiting for me, because in New York I had been ejected from the Ivory Coast's embassy. They refused to believe I was Ivorian because of my accent and my clothes. I got angry and told the ambassador that I was going to blow him out of there because I was more Ivorian than he was.

So they took me to the police station, and the policeman slap me, and I slap him too, so they kept me for a week and took me to Bingerville where the doctors, listening to me talk, knew that I was not such a psychiatric case and let me go. I dedicated the album to my brothers and sisters in the hospital because I don't wanna throw away that part of my life away, yunno?

Q: Do you think that reggae music has a psychotherapeutic effect?

A: I would agree with you. It's mysterious, but reggae helped me a lot. Music in general, but reggae especially. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't write books. I couldn't coordinate all my ideas; it wouldn't make sense. I couldn't make a political speech. All I could do was filter all that anxiety, pain and frustration and make music out of it. And the music that was synchronizing with my feeling was reggae.

At some point, I encountered reggae and Jamaica. I was playing African music, African folklore and rock 'n' roll — a kind of mixture. I learned that African folklore had been brought up in the islands, and reggae is from the métissage, that mixture. When the original folklore traveled from Africa to America, it became rhythm 'n' blues, jazz, soul music, samba and reggae. So for me, playing reggae isn't really changing anything. It just follows the natural progress of my cultural education.

Q: How did your career as Alpha Blondy begin?

A: I began to make songs in Liberia. I tried to write a book, but I started to do songs as a way of touching people. And the Bob Marley approach to that communications system was very tempting. I thought it might be the cure of my frustration.

My career fell on my head, but it wasn't an accident, it was waiting for me. When I left the hospital, I started playing in New York with some Jamaicans, who were very kind to me.

So I left America and I went back to the Ivory Coast, to Abidjan. I was unemployed, crazy, running around, sleeping from friend to friend. Then a friend of mine who worked for Ivory Coast



Alpha Blondy receives a certificate for his gold record from M. Deluz, president of Pathe Marconi. At left is Jocelyne Beroard, singer with Antillean group Kassav'.

Television told me that they were going to have a musical talent show called "Premiere Chance." I told him I wanna do it and he said, OK, get ready. The show happened and I did four songs, three of my own and Burning Spear's "Christopher Columbus." And people flipped out. It was a lot of work and a big challenge, and the children like it because of one of my reggae songs, "Bintu Wadde Widdle," about a girl that runs from man to man.

My first album (*Jah Glory*) was recorded in Abidjan on eight tracks in a day. Mixed the next day and on the market the week after. The title people liked a lot was "Brigadier Sabari," about a famous police raid in Abidjan called Operation Fist. You woke up in the morning and your neighborhood was surrounded by police. You walk out the door and they arrest you without justification and they beat you to . . . I mean, they beat you almost to death!

Q: Did that happen to you?

A: Yeah man! I got busted and beaten to death. I nearly died, yunno. Then they threw me into the police station for three days. I had to make a song out of that, because I cannot go to the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.) and talk about it — they would not allow Alpha Blondy in there. I don't have a radio station or write in a newspaper. I sing in Mandingo, French and English. I do not use heavy sentences or complicated philosophical structures, yunno. I just sing it as if I was talking to you, saying, Stephen, this is what's happening.

Q: "Cocody Rock" is still my favorite music of yours. Where is Cocody?

A: Cocody is in the central Ivory Coast, a place where you meet all kinds of people from all over the world — French, American kids, les coöperants, or young volunteers who work with our government. It's a rich district with a heavy mixture of people, a diplomatic zone. Your friend may be from Senegal, and there's a lot of what I would refer to as African Rastas, yunno. That's why the song says to get on the Zion Express.

Q: Does an African Rasta regard Haile Selassie as might an orthodox Jamaican Rasta?

A: No, no, no. I, as an African Rasta, do not consider Selassie as being a living god. I consider him to be a symbol with a biblical background, like King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as his ancestors. I believe in that. And I believe that he was the African who built the O.A.U., the first African consciousness of unity above political ideology and tribal consideration. For the first time, Africans gathered around a table and said OK, we're gonna build, we're gonna be united. And that's a mystical and biblical fulfillment, yunno.

But you are as much of a god as me, you see what I mean? All together, we make that big energy called God.

Q: Tell me about recording the song "Cocody Rock" at Tuff Gong studios in Kingston with the Wailers.

A: The Wailers were fantastic, because guys like them, to be able to make themselves small, to teach me, yunno . . . it made me feel very humble. Every musician wants to play big, but when a big man plays small to help a smaller guy, well, it touched me a lot.

Q: How did you teach them the song?

A: I put the first version of "Cocody Rock" on cassette. So they heard it a couple of times, and when we came into the studio [in mid-1984], Familyman Barrett tried three different basslines and gave me one to choose. That's the one that we recorded. And the session was so fast. Hey, those people are heavy! We got to the studio at 8:30, played them the song for the first time, and the rhythm track was finished by 12 o'clock.

They told me they liked playing with an African Rasta, and I was very happy and very proud. I felt that I had passed an important test.

Q: When you go back to your country now, you're a huge star, even subsidized by the government to some extent. What does your family think of you now?

A: My mother always let me do what I felt like doing. But her husband is another trip, a square-minded guy. "You got to be a teacher because in this family we don't allow no singers!" No artists, just a well-colonized guy, you see what I mean?

When my family heard that I gave two million francs for a charity to handicapped children, they saw that on tv and were smelling money. They said: "The crazy man has money! Let's help him before he loses it all." I said, "Please, leave me alone with my mental case and my money."

But in the Ivory Coast, the youth has no symbol to follow. And here come me, this guy from the ghetto . . . *

