

Lured downriver to work in the lumber camps and sawmills of the lower Maroni River, the Aluku have little by little formed shantytowns clinging to the town's riverfront, which only goes to show that the river remains the source of life for these people. Centers of poverty, these neighborhoods, nevertheless, constitute hotbeds of Maroon culture and political protest. Rastaman and obia-man, reggae music and feasts for the ancestral dead come together, worrying the neighboring Whites and Creoles.

—Pierre Grenand, Françoise Grenand, and Patrick Menget, *Ethnies*, 1985

THE NEW MUSIC OF FRENCH GUIANA

maroons

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KEN BILBY

For many North Americans, the name French Guiana summons up lurid images straight out of the Hollywood blockbuster *Papillon*:

Escaped cons trudge through jungle swamps and brave leper colonies in a desperate attempt to leave behind the horrors of Devil's Island. Yet most Americans have never heard of this overseas department of France, a small section of the Amazon basin wedged between Brazil and Suriname. Despite the presence of a high-tech rocket base in the space-age town of Kourou (used by the joint European space effort for its launches), French Guiana has yet to overcome the old stigma of Devil's Island, the infamous French penal colony with which it was once synonymous. Unlike the French Antilles to the north, it has never been seriously promoted as a destination for sun-loving tourists.

Most of French Guiana is still covered with lush, uninhabited rain forest. Its population of roughly 100,000 lives almost entirely in the coastal area, especially in the capital city of Cayenne. The legacies of colonization, slavery, and continuing immigration have made this small society one of the most diverse in the world, a diversity matched by a corresponding cultural and musical richness. Among its citizens are French Guianese Creoles (descendants of African slaves and Europeans), Native Americans (Arawak, Carib and Tupi-Guarani), Europeans (mostly French), Maroons (descendants of African slaves who escaped from the plantations of neighboring Suriname), South Asian Indians, Chinese, Haitians, St. Lucians, Brazilians, Hmongs and Javanese.

The mainstream of French Guianese music belongs to the French Caribbean tradition. Like Martinique and Guadeloupe, French Guiana boasts its own versions of such Creole ballroom music as the *creole mazurka* and *biguine*, alongside local Guianese drumming and dance styles more rooted in African traditions—*casé-cô*, *belia*, *camougué* and others.

Carnival is also typically French Caribbean. Residents say that Cayenne's carnival has a reputation for being the hottest in the French Caribbean, which explains why many Antilleans fly down each year to join in the party. Every carnival season, roving bands of masked musicians take over the streets during the day, while at night the costume balls—the most famous known as *Soleil Levant* (AKA *Chez Nana*)—are packed with revelers dancing till dawn to sweet Creole sounds that link this South American outpost, through the French Antillean connection, to the early jazz of New Orleans.

Wherever popular music in the Antilles goes, Cayenne tends to follow. Zouk has been ever-present in French Guiana, both on the radio and in the record shops, since it first emerged in the early '80s.



ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLENE RENDERIO

Radio France Outre-Mer has been beaming, via satellite relays, the latest sounds from the Caribbean, Africa and Paris to this part of South America for years. Most of the best-known local Creole artists and bands—Sylviane Cédia, Les Mécènes, Les Blue Birds, Wanted and Co., Azik-Ka, Wey Nov, Christian Senelis, V-80, Bouyon Wara—reflect this cosmopolitanism, at the same time retaining a strong local flavor in their music. A good example is V-80's recent effort, *Zouk Makossa*, which blends zouk, Cameroonian makossa, Haitian *compas* and French Guianese Creole styles on a single lp.

Alongside these Creole traditions, there is a strong appreciation for reggae, going back to the late '70s. For some reason, French Guiana seems to have given birth to a more active and fertile reggae scene than the Antilles. There are plenty of reggae lovers, and local record stores are well-stocked with Jamaican music, alongside many other Caribbean styles. There is also a small but growing Rastafarian community, and yearly celebrations memorializing Bob Marley have been held since the mid-'80s in the Cayenne area.

The '80s saw a profusion of local reggae bands. Most Guianese reggae artists have never been content merely to imitate the Jamaican product; instead, they have infused their reggae with an indigenous feeling. During the last decade, many of these bands composed songs that focused on social and political commentary and dealt with local and international themes (including the Rastafarian faith) in French Guianese Creole as well as in English. Among them were bands like Arouman, I-n-I, Black-Wood, Yanman, Batwel, New Burning, Guépard, Unity, Raché, Padna Partenaire, Universal Youth and Krucial Age (who are now based in Paris).

Reggae

Several of these names were designed to stress the bands' local cultural roots. *Arouman* is Creole for a type of local reed used to weave baskets and other indigenous crafts; *yanman* is "ignames" (yams), an African-derived staple of the Creole diet; and *batwel* means a wooden laundry beater, symbolizing the need to beat down the forces of oppression. For all of these bands, reggae has served as a means of expressing indigenous identity, loud and clear, and of opposing the French policy of cultural assimilation that has led to a devaluing of all things local.

Aside from these groups, whose members are mostly French Guianese Creoles, there are a few reggae bands composed of recent immigrants. Guyalucian Connection, for instance, has members originally from Georgetown (Guyana) and St. Lucia, and their music reflects this cultural heritage.

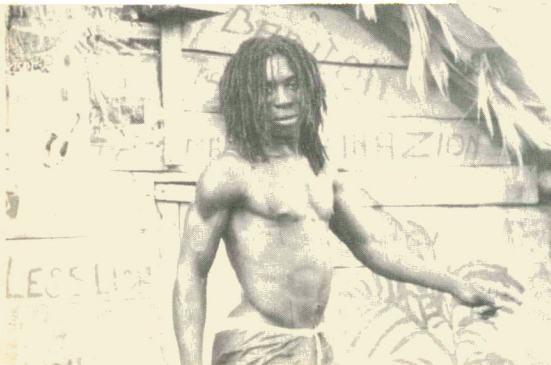
Most interesting of all is the special brand of reggae emerging among young Maroons in French Guiana. Many readers of *The Beat* will be familiar with the term Maroon through the Jamaican connection. In Jamaica, hundreds of African slaves fled the coastal plantations during the 17th and 18th centuries and formed rebel armies in the interior mountains under the leadership of the chieftainess Nanny in the eastern Blue Mountains and the chief Kojo in the western Cockpit Country. After waging a guerrilla war for nearly a century, these freedom fighters, who later became

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Below, a Rastafarian's house in the Aluku village of Komontibo. Below, left, a young Aluku Maroon with dreadlocks.



The Maroons have been viewed as guardians of the most authentic, best-preserved African cultural heritage in the Western hemisphere. It is not surprising that Maroon youths have wholeheartedly embraced the Jamaican sound, a music largely about black struggle and survival.



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known as Maroons, forced the British to make treaties recognizing their freedom in 1739. (Readers can find out more about their present-day descendants, who still live in separate Maroon communities and maintain a separate identity, by checking out Farika Birhan's article, "The Maroons: African Freedom Fighters in the Hills of Jamaica," in the August 1985 issue of *The Beat*.)

These independent Maroon groups provided a model of anticolonial resistance for such early Rastafarian prophets as Leonard Howell, who defied the British colonial power structure and founded his own separate Rasta commune called Pinnacle in the Jamaican hills in 1940. The Maroons have also been a source of inspiration for many Jamaican reggae artists.

Communities of Maroons similar to those escaped slaves of Jamaica grew up in many other parts of the Americas. Some of the largest, most powerful Maroon societies developed in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), where the vast, unsettled rain forests of the interior provided refuge from the slave plantations of the coastal region. Like the Jamaican Maroons, the Surinamese rebels fought successful guerrilla wars against the slave regime and forced the Dutch colonial masters to sign peace treaties in the 1760s recognizing their freedom. Their descendants, more than 50,000 strong, belong to six separate "tribes" or ethnic groups: the Saramaka, Ndjuka, Matawai, Paramaka and Kwinti, all of whom live in the interior of Suriname, and the Aluku (also known as the Boni), whose tribal territory is in French Guiana. Until recently, most of the Guianese Maroons have lived in relative isolation in the rain forest, and they still possess the most African culture in the Americas.

Traditional Maroon music in the Guianas includes a wealth of African-based drumming and dance styles, such as *songe*, *awasa*, *papa* and *kumanti* (related through common African roots to the Jamaican Maroon *kromanti* dance tradition). In the '70s, young Maroon migrants to the coastal towns created a new drumming style called *aleke*, drawing on an earlier style called *lonsei*. Like *lonsei*, *aleke* was often used to back topical songs. This style spread rapidly, and by the early '80s a new substyle of *aleke* drumming based on reggae rhythms (which had penetrated the rain forest on tapes and records) had emerged. Soon one could hear *aleke* groups in the most remote upriver Maroon villages performing such songs as Black Uhuru's "Shine Eye Gal" to drum accompaniment that sounded surprisingly close to Jamaican Nyabingi drumming.

It was only a matter of time before young Maroons got hold of electric instruments and amplifiers and started forming reggae bands. The two most popular Maroon reggae bands in French Guiana are Local Song (which has both Ndjuka and Aluku members) and Wailing Roots (who, with the exception of their drummer from Georgetown, Guyana, are Aluku). Both groups occasionally compose and perform songs in *zouk*, *funk* or *kaseka* (the urban popular music of Suriname), but their mainstay is reggae.

Local Song, formed in 1986, has a name with a message: It is time, the members say, to stop putting a premium on imported European culture and goods and to begin focusing more on things local and indigenous. Accordingly, most of their songs are in their own language, Ndjuka (although they sometimes sing in Creole, English or French). Before learning to play other instruments and deciding to form a reggae band, most of the members belonged to *aleke* drumming groups; some of them still participate regularly as drummers in traditional Maroon ceremonial events.

Local Song began by singing about social issues that formed part of Maroon daily life in coastal shantytowns: the difficulties of living on an urban fringe; the way of life left behind in the upriver Maroon villages; Rastafari and herb; the need for brotherly love and tolerance; the importance of educating the youth; and the ups and downs of relationships between men and women. They soon began to tackle international topics they felt strongly about, such as the situation in South Africa.

When civil war erupted in Suriname in late 1986, Local Song became a mouthpiece for the thousands of Maroon refugees who

fled to French Guiana (and who remain there today). Not long after the corrupt Surinamese government launched a brutal military campaign seen by many as genocidal—burning and looting Maroon villages, and killing and torturing Maroon civilians, including pregnant women and children—the band, who had relatives among the refugees, expressed the outrage of the local community with a series of songs commenting on the carnage. As one of the bandmembers put it in an interview at the time: "Music must change life in a big way. I'm learning music to call attention to our grievances by singing about them. Then others will realize what's really happening."

It wasn't long before others realized the extent of the atrocities. One of the band's more popular reggae songs, bearing the sarcastic title "Revolution in Saanan" (Revolution in Suriname), describes how Surinamese soldiers went on a rampage in November 1986, indiscriminately destroying homes and massacring innocent Ndjuka Maroons in the Cottica River region. "Maybe they think Ndjukas are animals," the song bitterly suggests in the Ndjuka language.

Another very popular number, "Jungle Commando," pays homage, with crackling drum-and-bass rhythms, to the predominantly Maroon rebel forces who helped evacuate the fleeing Ndjuka refugees across the border to the safety of French Guianese soil soon after the war began.

Although Local Song has yet to release any records (their wariness of local promoters has led them to turn down a number of offers), they often play at local dances and music festivals, and are especially popular in their home town of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni on the Maroni River (which forms the border between French Guiana and Suriname). Cassettes of their music have been copied and circulated around town and upriver, and even young Maroon children playing in shantytown alleyways can be heard singing tunes like "Revolution in Saanan."

Local Song is amazingly prolific, having composed scores of songs in Ndjuka, Creole and English. Some of the titles give an idea of the kinds of things they continue to sing about: "No Peace," "Babylon," "I-Jah," "Rastaman Live," "Mofina" (Poverty), "Feti Taanga" (Struggle Hard), "Ndjuka Libi Switi Libi" (Sweet Ndjuka Life), "Pitié pou Nelson Mandela" (Mercy for Nelson Mandela), "Respecté Gran Moun" (Respect the Elders) and "Soso Pina" (Nothing but Suffering). All are backed by rootsy, soulful and very danceable reggae tinged with traditional Maroon influences. Judging from the interest shown by local audiences and promoters, it is only a matter of time before this promising young band receives the wider recognition it deserves.

The other up-and-coming young Maroon band, Wailing Roots, has already begun to achieve such recognition. Most of the members grew up in traditional Aluku villages on the upper Maroni River, deep in the rain forest. After moving to Cayenne as teenagers, some of them joined a popular Maroon *aleke* band called *Blaka Lobi* (Black Love) as drummers. In 1984 they decided to form a reggae band because, says keyboardist and singer I-Ras (AKA Wah Dada): "So much of what is sung in reggae is about Africa, since Jamaicans too are descendants of African slaves." Guitarist and singer Claudias adds: "Reggae is one of those musics that puts forward what's currently happening in the world: war... and peace and love too. It tells all." The band wanted a style that was connected to their African roots and international in scope.

After several personnel changes, the band moved back upriver in 1988 to the village of Maripasoula, near the heart of Aluku tribal territory. Although there is no road connecting Maripasoula to the coastal area more than 200 kilometers away (the only way to reach it is by motorized canoe or by air), bandmembers wanted to stay close to their roots. In spite of the difficulties of travel between coast and interior, Wailing Roots continues to perform fairly often in the coastal towns of Cayenne, Kourou and Saint-Laurent, and their reputation continues to grow.

They recorded their first maxi 45, featuring "Play the Game" and

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Top left, Sapatia, a Ndjuku Maroon group performing in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni. Below, right, members of Local Song behind the aleke drums. Below, left, the Wailing Roots band.

WAILING ROOTS PHOTO BY HEUNG GARBIT



WAILING ROOTS

BLACK ALOUKOU

*Moin sé on Black Aloukou
I am a Black Aluku
Je suis un Black Aloukou*

*Oui, moin sé ti mouné esclave
tché a moin ka pleuré mize
oui, moin sé ti mouné esclave
disan ka coulé an sié moin
la po moin sicatrizé*

*Le moin ka songé a hié
disan ka coulé an sié moin
racine a nou reté deyé
nou pe pa retrouvé*

*Monte la haut Maroni
nou combatte pou nou joui la vi
Boni tiré nou di captivité
a présen nou en liberté*

BLACK ALUKU

(translation)
I am a Black Aluku
I am a Black Aluku
I am a Black Aluku

Yes, I'm a descendant of slaves
My heart wails with woe
Yes, I'm a descendant of slaves
Blood runs in my eyes
My skin is scarred

When I remember the past
Blood runs in my eyes
Our root remained behind
We couldn't find it again

Going up the Maroni River
We fought to enjoy life
Boni took us out of captivity
Now we are free

LOCAL SONG

JUNGLE COMMANDO

*Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando*

*Den Blackman san komoto fu Af-
rica
kon libi ini La Guyane city
da den Blackman e fight den seefi
fu a dollar
da a Jungle Commando e suku fu
puu
den Blackman ini a pina
tja kon libi ini Faansi country*

(translation)
Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando
Jungle Commando

The black people who came from
Africa
Came to live in the Guianese cit-
ies
The black people are fighting each
other for the dollar
The Jungle Commando is trying
to bring
The black people out of their suf-
fering
Bring them to live on the French
side

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"Lover's Music," in Cayenne's Studio SSS last year. Both songs rapidly became local hits. (The record jacket includes a dedication: "To the memory of the Aluku people.") Early this year they came out with their first lp/cd/cassette, *Feelings*, recorded in France. The album's eight tracks are in English, Creole, French and Aluku, and they vary from lovers rock and reggae-funk to tight, driving militant-style reggae.

While most of the songs are about partying or the joys and dangers of being in love, three tunes stand out, musically and lyrically, as explicit cultural statements. "Followers" establishes the band as "followers of Rasta." "Jah people," I-Ras intones with passion, "must come together as one, to fight all over the world for our freedom." "Séki I Chiking" (Shake Your Body), sung entirely in Aluku, compares the sensual pleasure of moving to good reggae with that of dancing to such traditional drum-based Aluku styles as *songe*, *susa*, *awasa* and *aleke*.

Perhaps the most culturally significant cut is the splendid "Black Aloukou." Sung in Creole so that all of French Guiana will understand the message and permeated with an earnest, bluesy intonation, it is both a tribute to the heroic ancestors who struggled against tremendous odds to win their freedom and an implicit antiasimilationist statement. The last verse commemorates the great 18th-century warrior and Aluku founding ancestor, Boni. Like Maroon leaders Nanny and Kojo of Jamaica, he is a towering figure in the annals of resistance to slavery in the Americas: *Going up the Maroni River! We fought to enjoy life! Boni took us out of captivity! Now we are free.*

Lyrics such as these prove that the members of Wailing Roots do not take the "roots" of their name lightly. The band intends to continue exploring ways of incorporating their cultural heritage into its popular reggae recordings, including possible experimentation with traditional Aluku drumming styles.

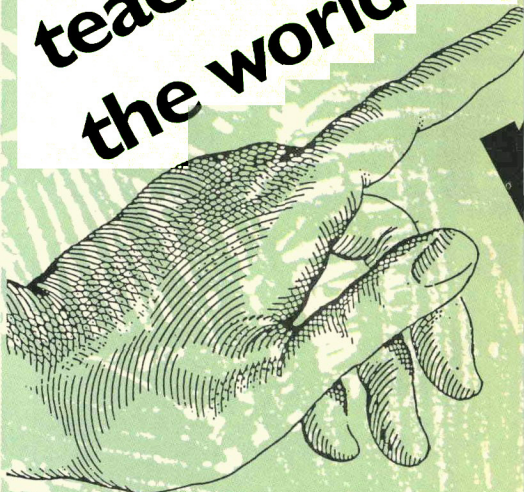
Yet there are some who see the inroads made by such musics as reggae and zouk as a threat; they believe that these new youth styles will displace the older, "tribal" styles handed down by the Maroon ancestors, which are among the most African musical traditions to have survived in the New World. To this attitude, I-Ras responds: "I find that it's not true, that's not what's going on. We live in a modern world now. No matter how far away you go, you find 'modern' things, you find things that are factory-made. But that can't stop you from playing awasa or kumanti. It's not the playing of reggae or zouk or funk that makes some of us forget about what belongs to us." Indeed, if they have their way, Wailing Roots' unique brand of reggae will help ensure that other young Alukus do not lose sight of their rich cultural heritage.

The music of Wailing Roots and Local Song can be seen as another example of the power of reggae to inspire and unite. In their hands, it has become a means for expressing their own concerns and promoting their own Maroon heritage, while helping them to build ties with Creole reggae musicians and fans in the coastal towns as well as with others of the diaspora.

The Maroons have been viewed by other Guianese people (and by many in other countries) as guardians of the most authentic, best-preserved African cultural heritage in the Western hemisphere. It is not surprising that Maroon youths have wholeheartedly embraced the Jamaican sound, a music largely about black struggle and survival. Filtered through their own cultural experience and the historical consciousness of their people, the reggae they create resonates with a special depth. Like Ivorian star Alpha Blondy, South African singer Lucky Dube and other non-Jamaican artists who have made reggae their own, Local Song and Wailing Roots show that there is a big difference between creative borrowing and imitation. Many more are likely to follow in their footsteps.

Ken Bilby is an ethnomusicologist who spent four years living with Maroons and learning about their music both in French Guiana and Jamaica. During 1987, he played keyboards with the Maroon reggae band Local Song. He is a researcher at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

teaching the world to



Clearly Caribbean, somewhat African and totally frenetic with tropical dance fever, punta rock is the kind of electrified yet traditional Third World rhythm that's feeding the world-beat market. The rhythm fills the dance halls and radio waves of the tiny Central American country of Belize.

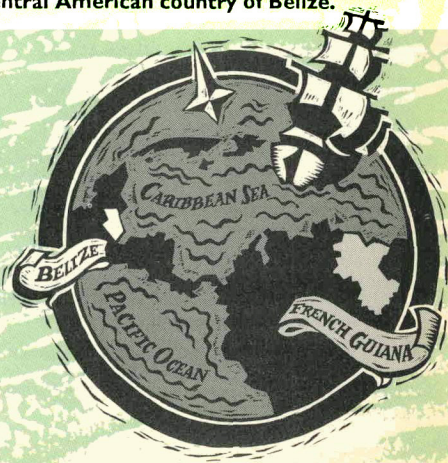


ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLENE RENDEIRO