Women Taking Risks

BY GAGE AVERILL

Last year at Carnival in Haiti, I stood on a makeshift stand with a group of teenage Haitian girls who were fans of D.P. Express, a popular Haitian mini-jazz group. When the D.P. float came by, loaded down with the all-male band and a large all-male contingent of friends and hangers on, the reviewing stand began to sway dangerously from the frenzy being generated by the 14-year-old fans. I had a few precarious moments to think again about how deeply gendered most of our patterns of music production and consumption are.

In Haiti, like most other areas of the world, popular music production is a "guy thing." The guy thing extends to the "serious" consumption of the music as well. By this I mean the groups of men that gather at the front of stages and pile on carnival floats and argue in earnest about the relative merits of one band or another. Women enter into the equation generally in less "producerly" ways, often treated as passive consumers, encouraged by fan clubs and album liner notes to develop crushes on cute bandmembers. Too often in discussions of (and articles on) Haitian music, they become invisible.

FARAH JUSTE HAS BECOME ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN AND MOST IMPORTANT ANGAJE SINGERS OF THE HAITIAN DIASPORA.

In dancing *konpa*, like most musics, the man controls his partner's movement with his right arm and sets the distance (if any) between the bodies. *Tèt kole* (cheek-to-cheek), *kole-kole* (glued together), *kole mabouya* (glued together, hips undulating) and *ploge* (plugged) all refer to close, male-dominated forms of dancing konpa. This doesn't mean that women have no say in the matter—there is a wonderful song and album cover by D.P. Express ("Baryè") that deals with a woman's resistance to male aggressiveness on the dance floor—only that men have unequal advantage in setting the terms under which musical courtship on the dance floor takes place.

In the realm of performance, women have been restricted to folkloric and romantic roles. There has been, in fact, a long line of prominent female artists who have occupied such roles. Many characteristics have been shared by these artists. First of all, they are vocalists. Instrumentalists were (and still are) too closely associated with disreputable dance halls and the like to be considered an appropriate occupation.

The special esteem in which these women vocalists are held is based on a perception of their close association with Haitian folklore, especially *vodou*, a religion with many female *servitè* (servants, in the religious sense) or *ounsi* (initiates), even female priestesses (*manbo*). This reinforces a common notion of women as carriers or nurturers of tradition, of being somehow closer to the roots.

As an extension of their involvement in religious folklore, many have become deeply committed political artists. The early folklore movement, represented by such vodou-jazz bands as Jazz des Jeunes, leaned—at least in the 1950s—toward François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his initial advocacy of political advancement for Haiti's black middle class. In the early 1970s, an oppositional or anti-Duvalierist folkloric movement took root in New York and other cities of the Haitian diaspora to build *kilti libete* (freedom culture) to aid in the overthrow of Duvalier. (I'll talk more about this movement in the next issue of *The Beat*). The recent *mizik rasin* (roots music) movement has an instinctive antidictatorial and propeasant stance. Folkloric and roots movements in Haiti have thus always been enmeshed in political doctrines and struggles.

Another trait that many Haitian female vocalists have shared is that they got their their start singing in church and school choirs. Almost all have been given honorific titles or nicknames, signifying their special niche in Haitian expressive culture. It is also interesting that almost all have spent significant portions of their professional careers outside of their homeland. Finally, all of them share a certain vocal quality to a greater or lesser degree (even though they all have individual styles), which combines a husky, full voice with a certain deviation from European standards of intonation and a marked degree of vibrato. This appears to be what many Haitians identify as a voice with a *gout du terroir* (taste of the soil).

The archtype and original model for this type of singer was **Lumane Casimir**, of whom, unfortunately, I have no recordings. In 1949, Port-au-Prince (Haiti's capital) celebrated the Bicentenaire (the supposed 200-year anniversary of the city) with an urban-renewal project along the waterfront and cultural presentations designed to attract tourism. At the newly built Théâtre Verdure, the vodou-jazz orchestra Jazz des Jeunes joined forces with the newly established Troupe Folklorique Nationale d'Haïti and Casimir for shows that

combined folkloric dance and music. These extrordinarily popular events attracted the few tourists that did come for the exposition as well as overflowing local audiences for years afterward. This combination of talents helped to fundamentally restructure Haitian middle-class and elite notions of a national identity, launching a craze for things "Afro-Haitian." Because of her seminal influence, Casimir has often been memorialized in songs by more recent women singers.

Although absent from Haiti for 30 years, **Martha Jean-Claude**, nicknamed the "Siren of the Caribbean," is often mentioned by older Haitians as the most memorable vocalist of her generation. Born in 1921 near Les Cayes, as a young girl she sang as a soloist in the Catholic cathedral in Port-au-Prince. While in her thirties, she ran into political problems with President Magloire and spent time in jail. Not long after, she and her Cuban husband took off for his island, where she has lived ever since. She formed the folkloric troupe Makandal there (with her daughters) and has had several leading roles in Cuban films. Songs like "Ezili Malad-O" and "Younn Sèl Badyo" combine a fierce political reaction to injustice with elements of vodou belief and practice. Since the overthrow of Duvalier, she has toured Haiti a few times. Jean-Claude's most available album and a good collection of her hits is ***Canto Popular de Haití*** (Pentagrama 053), a Mexican release of a Cuban recording that can be found in many Latin music stores.

The next female vocalist to create a major stir was **Marie Clotilde "Toto" Bissainthe**. Born in 1935, she developed a twin career as actress and singer and was perhaps the first modern Haitian artist to establish a strong career overseas. After first traveling to Paris in 1952, Toto ended up at the Ecole d'Art Dramatique. She performed in theater and in movies and embarked on a singing career, becoming known as the "Ambassadress of Song." In a 1961 appearance at the Rex Theater in Port-au-Prince, she recited poetry, gave dramatic performances and sang to widespread acclaim.

Still an active performer in France, she occasionally tours Haiti, often accompanied by the Widmaier brothers (of Zeklè). Toto can be heard most readily on a French release, ***Toto Bissainthe Chante Haïti*** (Arion ARN 64086). On "Rasanbleman," she sings:

M pral fè yon rasanbleman
Pou m konnen sak rive nan peyi mwen
Adye, vwe frè m
Nou tonbe nan yon deblozay
Nan ou tèt chaje ki mare ki makonnen

I'm calling together a gathering
To find out what's happening in the country
Aiii! My brother
We've fallen into a disastrous mess
Your head is burdened and things are all tangled up

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CARIBBEAN REVELS: HAITIAN RARA AND DOMINICAN GAGA

(Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40402, 1992)

I devoted two of my 1991 columns (Vol. 10 #3, 4) to Haitian *rara*, a type of peasant- and lower-class processional group active each year in the period before Easter. To me, the boisterous music of rara is the most interesting sonic event in the Caribbean. And the groups themselves—with their thick interweaving of politics, religion, secular celebration, baton twirling, combativeness, crossroads and cemetery rituals, and topical and derisive texts—grabbed hold of me from my first encounter.

The first recording I heard of rara was made by Verna Gillis in the late 1970s. It is not an exaggeration to say that the record dramatically changed my life. For some weeks, I struggled to figure out what was going on in the music, especially in the haunting cyclical patterns of bamboo and tin trumpets that laid the groundwork for exuberant collective songs. More than anything else, it was that one album that first drew me to Haitian music.

So, I am especially pleased to announce that the album has been remastered and released on cd by Smithsonian Folkways as ***Caribbean Revels: Haitian Rara and Dominican Gaga*** (SF 40402), distributed by Rounder Records. The rather extensive accompanying notes were rewritten by yours truly and reflect Smithsonian/Folkways' laudable commitment to providing a serious dose of information along with their sound recordings. Gillis' recordings have stood up well to time, and they are once again the only commercially available recordings of rara recorded on the streets of Haiti. (A studio recording by Mini Records called *Rara Grap Plezi* is out of print and has yet to be re-released.)

As I say in the liner notes: "This is not a complete regional sampler of rara styles. Nor can recordings from the 1970s—a period when the Duvalier dictatorship held sway—be fully representative of current practice after the overthrow of the Duvaliers, a period of unremitting political struggle in which rara has had a prominent role and during which it has been in continual evolution. But the spirit of rara, its musical structure and organization, and its joyous empowerment of the Haitian lower classes are qualities...that have persisted over time."

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Farah Juste began singing in 1960 at the age of 8 in the Chorale Saint Gerard in Port-au-Prince. After emigrating first to Canada and then to New York, she joined one of the emergent anti-Duvalierist cultural groups, Soley Leve (Rising Sun), performing in their theater wing and as a solo vocalist on two of their albums. She went on to become arguably the best-known, most important *angaje* (political) singer in the diaspora. "Lè Nou Libere Ayiti Li Va Bèl" (When We Liberate Haiti It Will Be Beautiful) became a movement anthem as did "Alelouya Pou Ayiti" (Hallelujah for Haiti). Farah has toured Cuba with Martha Jean-Claude and has returned regularly to Haiti since 1986. She lives in Miami, where she produces an annual patriotic concert on Haitian Independence Day (Jan. 1). ***La Voix Des San Voix*** (no catalog number, 1990) or ***Alelouya Pou Ayiti*** (Michga M-019) offer some of Farah's most moving and important work.

RISKY BUSINESS: RISKÉ IS THE FIRST ALL-FEMALE HAITIAN BAND.

Carole "Maroulé" Demesmin has had a varied career as a vocalist and activist. Her nickname comes from the title of her most famous song, a tribute to poor Haitian ox-herders. Although she was once criticized for performing at the Palais National when the Duvaliers were in power, she became very involved after the 1986 revolution in the movement to promote vodou, working with the Zantray organization and starting the group Timoun Lakay (Children at Home) to promote cultural, educational and economic development for Haitian children. She performs a tribute to Casimir written by the Boston-based poet Jean-Claude Martineau. I suggest her third album, ***Lawoze***.

Born in Port-au-Prince, **Myriam Dorismé** learned to sing in the cathedral choir and continued at secondary school (Saint Louis de Gonzague) and with folkloric choirs like Koral Gonbo, Kapitol and the Gwoup Guy Jean-Louis. She moved to New York with her husband in 1969, where she performs often, sometimes in tandem with Myriam Augustin.

Fédia Laguerre's very angaje album, ***Chante Une Nouvelle Haïti***, accompanied ***dechoukaj*** (the uprooting of Duvalierism) with a song called "Operasyon Dechoukaj" and earned Laguerre the nickname "La Reine du Dechoukaj" (the Queen of Dechoukaj). Although after Jean Bertrand Aristide's victory in the 1990 elections she released ***Operasyon Lavalas*** (Operation Deluge) to commemorate his political movement, she is more active these days as an evangelical singer.

There are may others I could cite who have contributed to this rich folkloric-political heritage of women artists, and I expect that some readers of this column will suggest a few names that should be included. Some, like Maryse Coulanges, aren't covered just because I know little of their careers.

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In the last few years, women have become increasingly involved as singers with such bands as Zin, Boukman Eksperyans and Rara Machine. Singers like Emeline Michel, Sandra Jean and Jacqueline Denis have recorded with backup from groups like Djakout, Zeklè and Caribbean Sextet.

But there were no all-women groups nor groups where women were involved significantly as instrumentalists. That's one reason why **Riské's** album, ***Alfabè*** (Melodie Makers MMI 1016), is such a welcome and pleasant surprise. The group's name means "to take a risk" and, at least in the context of Haitian attitudes toward women musicians, they have done just that. Sandra Jean, Gina Rouzeau, Valerie Cayo and Magguie Limage provide the vocals (with the addition of Sabrina Korlbjorsen in the studio). Rouzeau, on synthesizer, is the only instrumentalist listed, although synth and drum-machine programming was also contributed by the studio.

The liner notes say that in live performance the band uses all female instrumentalists. Therein lies the special appeal of the band, that the entire musical product is generated, at least in public performance, by women. Girl groups have a reasonably long tenure in the U.S., from all-women jazz groups of the 1940s to the Dixie Cups ("Iko Iko") to the Go-Gos to Scrawl, but there is no such history to build on in Haiti.

"Men nou, men nou, men nou!" Jean shouts at the beginning of "Celebre" (Celebrate!). More than anything else on the album, this chant jarred me. "Men nou" (here we are) is a standard shout in dance bands. Yet it's so closely associated with the guy thing that it stands out in full relief as a shock of a new arrival.

The album abounds with good dance music and a nice slow, French-style pop ballad or two ("Vanité"). The title track is a clever piece built around a French alphabet lesson with some jokes, self-references, even a political aside built in. Musically, it is reminiscent of the best of Jocelyne Berouard with Kassav', with its tight, punchy call-and-response vocal

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BITOTO

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1984, Madjo formed his own band, Zaiken, with other Zaireans in Nairobi. He arrived in the U.S. in December 1991.

Bitoto's sound is hard-driving soukous, playing is-it-live-or-Memorex covers of favorite tunes by Loketo, Kanda Bongo Man, Papa Wemba and Zaiko Langa Langa as well as originals, animated by the exuberant antics of the three singers. Lew's guitar solos add that special ambiance necessary to get the dance floor moving, and frankly, it's quite a surprise to realize those Diblo-like solos are coming from his white American fingers. Although he has played rock guitar since he was 14, Cohen only began experimenting with the African style two years ago. He has learned that "the critical difference in soukous is the *offbeat, syncopated rhythms*. You have to play the guitar like a drum—not a lot of inflection on the notes, everything is straight and level, but what you're doing is playing an exciting rhythm that ties into a bunch of other rhythms that people are playing."

For demo tape and concert booking, contact Bitoto c/o Lew Cohen, 2136 Boundary St., San Diego, CA 92104; (619) 284-7008.

—CC Smith

JAM AND WHINE

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"Crown Heights Justice" remains a mystery.

Strictly in terms of numbers, social commentary calypsos far outweighed jam-and-wine in the tents. Sifting their way through a plethora of nagging lectures, unwitty presentations and increasing vulgarity that left many calypso lovers in despair, the NCC judges chose 10 monarchy finalists (a change from the decades-old selection of eight) who, save for a few, were strongest on social commentary.

Watchman was among the best, placing fourth in the monarchy finals with "We Ain't Arrived Yet," a clever comparison of societal ills past and present and, surprisingly, one of the few '92 calypsos to refer to the "Discovery of the Americas" quintecentennial. Another such calypso was provided by rapso star Brother Resistance in "Columbus Lie" from his *Heart of the Rapso Nation* lp.

Undoubtedly, the steel bands provided some of the brightest moments of Carnival '92. Kitch's "The Bee's Melody" proved to be an instant classic, played by a multitude of both conventional and pan-round-the-neck/old-time steel bands. Most encouraging were more than a dozen conventional bands that beat original tunes, the majority of which were recorded early in the season as soca with vocals.

Look for "Steelband Coup" sung by Jerry Prudent of Rukshun, "Commess" sung by Ronnie McIntosh, "Pan in the Party" sung by Ian Joseph, "Steelband Paradise" sung by Russell Cadogan of Second Imij, "Panman Vibrations" sung by Richard "Nappy" Mayers, "Pan Is Mih Jumbie" sung by Ella Andall, "Savannah Party" sung by David Rudder and, of course, Phase II's "Jam Meh Up," sung by Frosty Brooks.

Exodus, an 11-year-old unsponsored conventional band that has never before been thought of as a championship contender, took the Panorama title with "Savannah Party" in an upset that left the big boys like Renegades and Fonclaire reeling and demanding an investigation into the system of Panorama judging. Even Kitch joined the fracas by suggesting that Renegades (*who had played his* "Bee's Melody") and Desperadoes "give it a rest" by not competing next year. (Phase II, by the way, took second place, with Renegades third, Fonclaire fourth and Despers fifth.)

Despite the protests, the Exodus victory should give a much-needed boost of confidence to the many other talented steel bands who have been overlooked in recent years because of the dominance of a handful. Other encouragement came in the announcement that an average of 30 to 40% of panists participating in this year's Panorama were between the ages of 11 and 18. With more years of experience under their belts, these youngsters, already highly skilled at reading music charts, offer promise of a solid future for pan, regardless of economic pressures.

As a final word, Carifesta V, the 5th Caribbean Festival of Arts and Culture that was announced in the last issue to have been canceled by host country Trinidad, has been refashioned by the CARICOM (Caribbean) nations and will take place in an as-yet-uncertain form in T&T August 22-28. ★

OUR MAN IN THE STREET

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The new wrinkle that Aguiton has added is that it would be televised internationally on a live hookup to Madison Square Garden and cinemas throughout the world. This approach has certain advantages in terms of access to the event for those not able to attend in person and the increased revenues that would accompany such a deal.

The danger is that while it's true that even the Savannah was originally chosen as the site for Carnival as a means of controlling the rebellious energy of the streets, Aguiton's plan removes it even further from its roots in the yard and from its existence as a national event that can be viewed or joined by visitors on its own terms rather than one being staged for an international tv audience. Whether any of these NCC plans will be realized is anyone's guess. Yet one thing that can be counted on is that the future of the event will be hotly contested in a country where everyone has an opinion about Carnival and participation rather than passivity is the (dis)order of the day. ★

HAITIAN FASCINATION

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lines punctuated by horn phrases and a light, compact percussion track. Another fine dance piece is "Kite Yo" (Let Them), although its saccharine-tinged bridge section has more in common with Zouk Machine than with the aforementioned Berouard/Kassav'.

The lyrics have a moralistic streak—protests against hypocritical friends, gossip, vanity, materialism and jealous competition between women—that, despite the rather limited pop sensibilities, at least begin to introduce what feminist academics might call women's "subjectivity," i.e., their voice as active participants in the world in contrast to their use as objects of men's interest in so many songs. All developments in pop culture have to be measured against the context from which they arise. Although there is a deep and rich tradition of female vocalists in Haiti, it is high time that a group like Riské took on the risk of defining a collective women's voice and presence in Haitian commercial music. ★

TECHNOBEAT

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wind intrude on the recording of a 12th-century litany (performed on overlapping psalteries, ancient zitherlike instruments) reveals not so much a New Age "let it flow" openness as the gnostic meeting point between Islamic surrender and Christian self-denial.

Kalesijski Svuci, *Bosnian Breakdown—The Unpronounceable Beat of Sarajevo* (GlobeStyle cd). Faster than a Turkish square dance. More powerful than a Gypsy polka. Able to defeat totalitarianism in a single Bosnian hoedown. It's the Svuci-men, of course, purveyors of the meanest post-traditionalist thrash this side of zydeco. Armed with fiddle, vernacular guitar (*sargija*) and electric bass, the most popular band of the Balkans' latest most-troubled locality transforms diverse urban, rural and ethnic sources into a feverish dancebeat chimera, whose *mercurial* East-West mood swings reflect a sad history of superpower tug-of-war. Fraught with exhilarating dissonance, discordant vocal harmonies and furiously sawing fiddles, this irresistible music stokes a fire of unbelievable antiquity.

Radio Orion, Johannesburg, South Africa (4810 kHz). A few years ago Radio RSA had so many outlets aimed at every corner of the globe, it was hard to avoid its deceptively sweet acoustic guitar theme. Now that the government has given up on selling bona-fide apartheid it's cut the network off at the knees, leaving a few regional megawatt outlets like Radio Orion's imitation of BBC Radio One. Forget *mbaqanga*, though. This is the home of elevator music and '60s pop, symptomatic of nostalgia for the Vorster era, I guess.

Bratsch, *Transports en Commun* (Griffe