

emeline



EMELINE MICHEL: Body and Soul

Emeline Michel is a singer/composer whose art is intimately connected with the country of her birth, Haiti. Considering her attractive stage persona, this is something increasingly rare in the context of the mainstream music industry where looks and image seem to be more and more forefront at the obvious expense of conviction and sincerity. Since the very successful 1992 release *Emeline 2* with its hit "Flamm," she has explored a variety of genres from a uniquely sophisticated Caribbean-flavored jazz, to French-style ballade, to the worldbeat feel of "A-K-I-K-O." These styles culminated in the superbly produced 1996 *Ban'm Pasc* which featured a Haitian/soukous fusion number, "Kote Moun," among its many styles.

The new album *Cordes et Ame* (Cheval de Feu) is currently being mixed and will not be in this reviewer's hands till next issue (that's the bad news). The good news is I've received an advance copy of the single "Pe Letenel" and it signals a new direction for Emeline. The tempo harkens back to an earlier musical era, with a hint of the *twoubadou* style of rural Haiti you might have expected from Coupe Cloue, overlaid with some nice piano and the delicately impassioned violin of Detroit-born Gwen Laster. The lyrics are a plea to the "Eternal Father" to bring sanity and salvation to a country slipping further into chaos, inspired by an armed robbery on the streets of Port-au-Prince suffered by Emeline and a group of musicians.

Born in Gonaives, Haiti, this lovely "goddess of mizik kweyol" has been pursuing her musical career for 15 years, studying in Michigan, then working in France and Montreal. In early February I was able to speak with Emeline by phone to discuss her recent musical projects and future plans.

Interview by Brian Dring
Photos by Robert Smith

Brian Dring: Going back to your early days for a minute, I understand you studied on scholarship at the Detroit Jazz Center. That must have been a great exposure to American music for you.

Emeline Michel: I studied voice with Micky Brennan and then I strictly studied jazz. I got the chance to see Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder. We did a couple of gigs at a juvenile home and the best student got to open for Stevie Wonder. When I came back I was fueled [with excitement] and had the inspiration to do my second album and that's where *Flamm* came from.

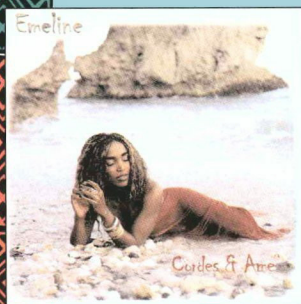
Q: What have you been doing since the release of your last cd, *Ban'm Pasc*, in 1996?

A: Because I am one of the few women active in the Haitian music scene, a lot of promoters have contacted me with offers and I've been doing quite a few gigs over the past four years. I have a few regular appearances I fly down to Haiti for every year, and I've been to Japan several times.

Q: Oh yeah, I saw a photo taken at Tokyo International Airport.

A: That was a scary tour because we did it with just three musicians [Haitian guitarist Jimmy Jean-Felix, Japan's leading female jazz pianist Michiko Tatsuno, and New York bassist Rigaud Simon]. It was a jazzy Caribbean jam session which gave the musicians a chance to stretch out and at the same time I had the opportunity to use more voice and emotion, because sometimes drums tend to cover the

Continued on page 42



vocals a bit. So we all had to give a little more, and I just went with it and enjoying the gift of being surrounded by such talented musicians.

Q: What kind of venues did you play over in Japan?

A: Mostly indoor events. There were a couple of new clubs that just opened up, and the Japanese are very informed and involved in Caribbean music, especially from Haiti. They are thirsty for anything cultural or ethnic so they really plunge into the music. It was five or six gigs over about 13 days total, and I'm heading right back there on Feb. 19 for a tour of five cities in seven days. Can you believe it? I'm gonna run Japanese sound!

Q: What happens after the tour?

A: The cd will have been completed by then since we are completing the overdubbing and mixing right now. So after that, I'll come back here [New York] to pick it up and bring it to Haiti for airplay. I'm just so impatient to actually get my hands on it!

Q: I really look forward to hearing it myself because I really liked "Pe Letenel" with its rural beat somewhat reminiscent of Coupe Cloue.

A: Yes, it's one of my favorites because it's not crowded, very simple instrumentation. It was written about a tough situation for that that happened during a very insecure time in Haiti when I went down there with some professional singers from Martinique and Guadeloupe [Tanya Saint-Vall and Kassav's Jocelyne Berard]. We were in a car and they just hijacked us and took everything we had—my passport and at least \$1000 U.S.

Q: And that kind of thing had never happened to you before, right?

A: No, and I think either we were followed or they didn't recognize us, because although many people suffer from the insecurity in Haiti, artists who all Haitians know and love tend to be protected. They took not only what possessions we had but left us traumatized; the incident left all the girls shaking. We'd just come from a tv show and they were saying how at home they felt. After the incident they all just headed back the next day. I was thinking "I'm through with this country" and it's my country. In one shot, the lyrics and melody came to me from this situation.

Q: How do the lyrics reflect your feelings?

A: I'm so tired of being jealous of the Dominican Republic which is the same territory occupying the other side of the island of Hispaniola! But ends up looking better than us because we've been flashing our flag saying "we're free and independent!" and what did we end up doing with our freedom? There's a line about "Santo Domingo bingo" because they got the first prize and here we are slowly dying from our own hands. The whole story is about "please God protect my life because I want to be home and live in my country."

Q: Having been raised in Montreal myself, I was wondering if you felt that living in a French-speaking environment both there and in Paris presented unique opportunities to your career.

A: That's difficult to say because each environment is different. Paris is such a melting pot with its African and Brazilian populations, but as open and curious as [people in the music industry in France] are to the music they have this stereotype concept of how you have to do Haitian traditional *vodou* music to keep your integrity, and I don't agree with this. So automatically they put you in a [musical] ghetto where you can't explore yourself as an artist.

Q: I know that a lot of your material is in the world-beat genre, for example the song "A-K-I-K-O."

A: Yes, and I do believe in *metisage*, what we call mixing different cultures' influences and allowing yourself to invent new rhythms. That's why I feel there's more possibility here in the States right now. Canada is another story because 80 percent of the music played by radio stations in Quebec has to be by local artists, and with the 20 percent that is left where do you place yourself between Jamaican, African, and all other outsiders?

Q: If you were born there it would be different.

A: And I probably wouldn't be doing that music anyway. That's why while I recorded this album, I went on a regular basis to Haiti. Whole songs were written near the water. I would rent a house for a month down in [the beautiful seaside town of] Jacmel and reunite with some of my old musician friends, because I think you tend to lose the flavor of the music when you leave for too long.

Q: So it's important for you to get back in touch with your country musically?

A: Oh yes. It reminds you how in Haiti you don't need a lot to have a song grooving. Nowadays people are so much into machines, which is great progress but when I go back I'm reminded of the essence of the music, that simple element, so tasty and so powerful.

Q: Speaking of that, when you write your own material do you compose on an instrument?

A: I have only a basic knowledge of the guitar but I have a good ear in the sense of knowing how I want the music to sound. Usually the lyrics and the melody come to me in one shot and so I just sing into a tape recorder. Then I get together with one of my good friends like a guitar player and say "OK, this is what I'm looking for." That's how it worked for "Mwen Pare" which will be on the new cd.

Q: Oh, that's "I'm Ready."

A: [Laughing] Great! I had that riff in my head for a long time and just woke up on Jan. 1st and said "that song has got to be on this album!" So I went to the studio with a guitar player from Martinique and just told him "OK, I can't play this one but just give me a flavor between Brazil and Cuba with a little swing on the solo and that captured the vibe that I definitely wanted."

Q: Wow, so this was only a month ago? You've done a lot since then.

A: Well, there's 14 songs on the new cd so there's still some overdubbing to be done. For example, on "Mateo" there's a very plaintive, almost dark cello part to be added, as what we call in French the *contrechant* [counter-melody] to my vocals.

Q: I heard you were signed to Sony back in 1997 [Ruffhouse/Columbia, a division of Sony] and they were trying to push you into a more r&b sound. Is that accurate?

A: Yes, the first three songs we recorded were fine until the producer had the idea of adding a hip-hop flavor to the record. I found myself in the middle of a big fight and I completely had to walk out. And now I say "thank God!" because this record wouldn't have gone anywhere anyways—it was just so artificial. The label wasn't happy with the results and they were sending me to different big-name producers like Wyclef [Jean], trying to change my whole personality into someone I wasn't. So I decided to walk out of the deal.

Q: And of all the material, could anything be saved?

A: I took only one song 'cause the melody and lyrics are mine. I rearranged it completely with some friends and it was recorded "live" with guitar, acoustic piano, violin and a drum played with light brushes. It's called "Let It Go" and I'm still debating whether or not I'll put it on the upcoming album. It's a beautiful song which tells a story...maybe as a bonus track, because it's so different from the rest of the album.

Q: I imagine that because Wyclef is well known and happens to be Haitian that the industry people would want to fashion you from the same mold.

A: Yes, it's like the fear of the unknown. Because of the path which he took, that's supposed to work for any other Haitian artist who follows. And if I fell into the trap I would be the one to suffer from such a choice in my people's eyes because it would be betraying them and my own integrity. This is not me.

Q: I understand that [black American violinist] Gwen Laster is featured on "Pe Letenel." How did she end up playing on your album?

A: She's from Detroit, not only a great human being but so talented. I was looking for a violin player and thought of trying a female player because it's a different energy. It was pure coincidence and now she ends up playing and traveling with us and even doing some backup vocals. There's a great chemistry there and I feel blessed by it.

Q: Who knows, maybe Someone somewhere is helping you.

A: Oh yes, I feel that strongly because I've waited very long to do this album and for some reason my way has been paved from the moment I began recording it. A lot of things that I've been dreaming about just happened.

Q: Does this album have a particular theme and did you have the intention of a return to the roots?

A: Well, the first song that launched my career in Haiti was done with just guitar and voice called "Ayiti Pey Souley." That was how I started off and I've felt like doing an album which retraced my early career, giving priority to the guitar. That's why I call the new cd *Cordes et Ame* [Strings and Soul] which besides referring to the strings of a guitar is also a play on words, as in French they say *corps et ame* meaning "body and soul." Peo-

Continued on page 73



*Above, Emeline Michel
performing at NYC's
Celebrate Brooklyn festival.*



ZOUK RADIO

Continued from page 35

Zouk, he continues, "is a music of politics, of passion, of pain and of history, which, at its base, makes you move. It's a mix—that's exactly what the word *Créole* means." The question is, he says, "how to mix in such a way as to keep yourself. What I would love," he says, "is for zouk artists to be conscious of their own reality, to write about that, and to really describe that in great detail, because the Antilles are not just coconut trees and the ocean. It's much more than this." He lights a cigarette, blows smoke out the cracked-open window. "There is more to *Créole* history than slavery," he says. "On my last album, I had a song that concerned incest," a hidden problem West Indians say is common all over the Caribbean. "I am of Guadeloupe," he stresses, "and I would hope for zouk to contribute to make a better world. It is up to us, and something we can do." He taps the cigarette into the ashtray and watches the interpreter as she explains to me his dream for this music, a collective dream, not one for personal glory.

Saint-Eloi jots down the names of three women zouk artists he respects, and one man, who died recently in an unfortunate accident: Tanya Saint-Val, Tatiana Mianth, N'jie, Gilles Florio. They are musicians one can hear on Zouk Radio, beautiful voices of the airwaves, the fruits of zouk's labor whose weighted words reflect the local scene—its tensions, its racial, sexual and gender politics, its nostalgia. They are polished and passionate, trying to sound like themselves, and not Kassav', seriously pushing the genre forward. Ironically, Kassav's success has stimulated a return to the use of the *gwo ka*—in jazz, in rap and in zouk—which is, wrote *The Beat's* Scaramuzzo in '86, "a very important vestige of the African roots of the Antillean people." All of this is a sign, says Saint-Eloi, that "things are positive." After all, he says, "you are here, aren't you? You have taken the music back to L.A." I tell him I saw Kassav' at the House of Blues in L.A., in '94. I tell him hundreds of people were zouk dancing and that the room was full of incredible energy. He smiles, a soft, tender smile.

Drummeaux says that plans are in the works to put Zouk Radio on the Net. "It's too expensive right now, but in the next year... *Zouk Rawdyo*, *Zouk Rawvoddyyo*, ... *No. 1 sur la musique antillaise*." Perhaps someday, as Kassav' continues to wistfully, one might sample the essence of Guadeloupe. Careful though, this *Créole* tempest blows strong, still.

The author wishes to thank Sydney Revue Sene for her careful translation of the interview with Patrick Saint-Eloi.

EMELINE MICHEL

Continued from page 43

ple are used to seeing me dance when I perform and tend to associate my music with a strong rhythm, and all I want to do now is open up and give more soul and nothing else—very pure and let the guitar take over. So that was the plan with this album and it's happening.

Q: I know that acoustic guitar is a very strong tradition in rural Haiti, as with Manno Charlemagne or Beethova Obas.

A: [Laughing] Yes, Haitians call that *guitare boite*

[box guitar]. Singing in a church choir is how I started back in Haiti and that's how you have to deliver, by touching people with just your voice. There's a whole rural music that we're losing touch with, somewhere between Coupe Cloue and Nemours Jean-Baptiste, where there's the *chacha* [maracas] and the deep sound of the Haitian conga that you can't get with Latin percussion. I felt strongly that I need to come back to that because I can't be Lauryn Hill or anybody else—I gotta be Emeline from Haiti.

Q: Emeline, je vous remercie de votre temps.

A: Je l'apprecie, infiniment.

[CD available from *Chatoyer Arts & Media* at (212) 678-7064. Thanks to Don Eversley for his assistance with this story.]

DANCEHALL DAY

Continued from page 46

the crowd. The only problem though, he was holding up progress for the groupies anxiously awaiting the duo's return backstage!

Beenie Man

This man is a born entertainer, and on top of that, his string of hits seem to triple his fellow djs for the night. The stage now appeared to be set with Beenie's stipulations, his boundaries and it was his office that he prescribed the right dosages of medicine for thousands on hand. We wanted a last healing: "The Doctor" tonic. Besides the dancehall hits like "100 Dollar Bag," "Tell Me" and a list too tempting to tease readers with, his entire show wasn't strictly dancehall. He sprinkled tap-dancing into his potion, a bit of soca with classics like "Tiney Winey" and "Dollar" to energize, and even added some charming swing music with "Nuff Gal," a song he said is one of his favorite compositions. Dancehall's most accomplished artist to date, Beenie wholeheartedly expressed "We honor Bob and his work... But tonight, this is dancehall, dancehall music, seen!" It was then into feverish tonic for us, on "World Gone Mad," "Bookshelf," and even past hits like, "Slam." The tired crowd was rejuvenated and relieved of their ailments at 10 p.m. operation time. Continuing for the next half-hour, he introduced new cuts off his upcoming album, as he performed "Haters and Fools," another favorite over "The Bug" *riddim*. After bringing out Barrington Levy at one point to help his medicine taste sweet, as usual, he saved the best for last. Not "Who Am I," which he bolted on his encore return, but in true showmanship fashion, he ended with Bob Marley's "One Love," an anthem some of the other artists failed to acknowledge within their content. But with dancehall reggae's expressive ghetto vibes, the experience of struggle and hardship doesn't make love the easiest credo to endorse.★

ROOTS AND CULTURE DAY

Continued from page 47

Next, the Firehouse Crew showed why they are counted among reggae's most exceptional backup bands, providing super-tight support first for Mikey General, who handily paved the way for one of Jamaica's brightest stars. Out came Luciano,

dressed in fatigues and ready to battle the forces of slackness and musical mediocrity. He immersed himself in his songs like the medicinal concoctions they are, at one point dropping to his knees for an interval of unhurried prayer. Live performance is clearly Luciano's greatest strength. He works the audience to just the right degree, never letting excessive theatrics overshadow the reality of a humble man on a musical mission.

Burning Spear has been on just such a mission for 30 years now, and though he never quite seems to wince that dour expression off his face when he's on stage, he's no doubt comfortable with his status as a reggae legend. He's a sage, a shaman, a medicine man. There's an anthem quality to his songs, and though nearly every one he sang in his headlining set was 20 or more years old, the audience was with him every second. When he finally launched into "As It Is," the opening track from his latest album, the transition from old to brand new was seamless. Spear *ix* roots reggae, and he ended the day in a manner which no doubt would have pleased that other reggae great born in St. Ann's Bay 55 years ago.

In the end, it was only the weather that stopped this from being a perfect day. But the many outdoor vendors who stood firm against the elements seemed to be of the same spirit as those who performed on the stage, refusing to be defeated by adversity and lovingly going about the work that needed to be done. No doubt all of those who were in attendance carried some of that spirit away with them as well.★

ALPHA BLONDY

Continued from page 50

The conflicted nation of Israel has figured in some of Alpha's most potent music. From his early anthem "Jerusalem," to "Yitzhak Rabin" (written for the slain Israeli leader because "anybody who worship peace deserve my respect"). Although he offers songs of encouragement and pleas for brotherhood, he avoids political commentary on the volatile Middle East. "As a musician, when a topic is very sensitive, I am afraid to say some nonsense. I really hope, deep in my heart, that in the process of peace the Israelis and Palestinians will get to know and forgive each other."

He also says, "I don't believe in geography. That's why, wherever I am under the sun, whether I am in America, or Paris, or Abidjan, I say to myself, for reference, 'I am living in the big Israel,' because creation began in Israel."

Alpha's fascination with "the Godly dimension of things" has led him to find signs and wonders in odd places. He is an avid collector of meteorite fragments. "The black stone in Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, is a meteorite. A meteorite teaches you things you would never suspect. Me, I have a piece which weighs 112 kilos. One day I was sitting with my wife and we watched the meteorite. And we thought we saw some marks on it that looked like Arabic. So we took a pencil and designed what we saw. Dig this—on the meteorite, in Arabic, it said: 'The star, my infinite Lord Jesus, who envelops the world and everything that follows...' In Arabic! That's why I don't want to get into no race business, no religion business. 'Elohim' means 'I am the multitude.' The meteorite don't lie.'★