



## AFRICA

### TO THE HEART OF THE CONGO:

# SEARCHING FOR THE ROOTS OF SOUKOUS

By Gary Stewart

**T**IMES ARE TOUGH IN THE CRADLE OF CONGO MUSIC. KINSHASA AND BRAZZAVILLE, THE TWIN CAPITALS ON THE CONGO RIVER THAT GAVE BIRTH TO AFRICA'S FAVORITE MUSIC, ARE SUFFERING THROUGH A CONVULSIVE FIT OF WITHDRAWAL FROM THEIR ROLES AS COLD WAR PAWNS AND FLIRTING WITH WESTERN-STYLE DEMOCRACY ON THE REBOUND. THEIR MUSICAL PROGENY PROSPER IN PARIS, BUT THOSE AT HOME STRUGGLE TO KEEP THEMSELVES AND THEIR MUSIC ALIVE. FOR A MONTH THIS SUMMER, BETH RAPS, MY PARTNER AND FRENCH INTERPRETER, AND I TRAVELED TO CENTRAL AFRICA TO SEE THE PLACES AND MEET THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED CREATE THE MUSIC WE HAVE COME TO CALL SOUKOUS.

#### SATURDAY, MAY 29

Spent the night at a small downtown hotel after arriving in Brazzaville minus our bags, which didn't make the connection in Paris. A check with Air France finds they got here this morning on the next flight. To our great surprise they give us CFA3,000 (about \$12) taxi fare to go out to the airport to collect them.

After reclaiming our luggage, we begin to search for our friend Jean-Serge Essous, the great saxophonist, founding member of OK Jazz and leader of Les Bantous de la Capitale. We first met Essous in Paris in 1992. He's now back home at the request of Congo's new president, Pascal Lissouba, to try to invigorate the flagging Congolese music industry.

We find Essous and some friends gathered around the television set in his suite at the Hotel N'Soko in Brazzaville's Plateau des 15 Ans area a short distance from the airport. They are viewing the results of one of his first projects since his return, a video aimed at unifying the country, which is in the throes of difficult political tensions. President Lissouba, in office only a scant seven months as Congo takes its crack at Western-style democracy, has endured a series of political crises, the next of which promises to play out June 6 in a second round of elections to determine winners for 11 seats in the country's 125 member legislative body. In the first round, held on May 2, Lissouba's "presidential movement," a multi-party coalition, won 62 of the 114 seats in which there were clear winners. Essous's video features prominent Congolese musicians like Kosmos, Pamela Mounk'a and Nino Malapet, coming together with a message that says in essence, if we can do it, the various factions in the country can do it too. We'll see it played over and over again in the next few days.

Essous, a man of action, insists that we move to his hotel, then escorts us to a neighborhood bar called La Belle Epoque. Walled compounds seem to be the favored housing configuration in Brazzaville, and La Belle Epoque, a bar in an ordinary house, is typical. A six-foot wall runs along the street at the front of the house. Tables and chairs are spread out along it right next to the street like a sidewalk cafe without the sidewalk. Every seat is taken as people crowd around tables covered with plates of broiled fish and bottles of Ngok, the local beer.

Inside, the front parlor bulges with partying couples, its tile floor worn through to the cement from the shuffle of dancing feet. A room off to one side houses the bar behind which a dj tries to dredge up the remaining notes from the ever-deepening grooves of scratchy 45s that have survived, much worse for the wear, for a good 20 to 30 years. Despite the fading fidelity, these classic Congo music gems are still recognizable. This is a bar for the older crowd,

THE WORLD  
IS YOUR  
OYSTER

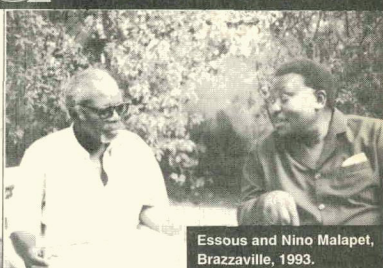




# AFRICA



Young pioneers: Jean-Serge Essous and Lando Rossignol, Kinshasa, circa 1957.



Essous and Nino Malapet, Brazzaville, 1993.

PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

PHOTO COURTESY OF SATURNIN PANDI

Essous explains, and clearly he is one of their favorites. Everywhere we go people rush up to shake his hand and tell him about their favorites among his many hit songs.

Nino Malapet, Essous' longtime friend and fellow saxophonist of Les Bantous, is presiding over a front table. We scrounge chairs and join him and his friends for beer and fish and plenty of talk. I have to pinch myself. This is like sitting around a table in a Harlem bar with Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

## SUNDAY, MAY 30

The Plateau des 15 Ans, so named because African soldiers who served in the French army for 15 years or more were given plots on the Plateau, lies in Brazzaville's Moungali district. After a plate of great fish and chips, Essous takes us on a taxi tour of some of the city. From Moungali, we drive down Avenue de la Paix toward the Congo River into the Poto-Poto district. Brazzaville looks very prosperous. The crowded streets are well maintained and the shops full of merchandise. Banners at the traffic circles advertise Ngok and cigarettes and the coming of Wenge Musica from Kinshasa on Saturday night.

We pass one of Poto-Poto's main landmarks, a grand cathedral named for Saint Anne built in colonial times to serve this heavily Catholic city. Next to the cathedral, behind a seldom-used stadium, sits a memorial to Félix Eboué of French Guiana who, in Chad, became France's first black colonial governor, and later as governor-general in Brazzaville, administered the whole of French Equatorial Africa. In the grassy area in front of Eboué's imposing likeness, animal herders from Mali and Burkina Faso graze their sheep and haggle with potential buyers.

From Poto-Poto we drive through the Bacongo district out to the beginning of the treacherous cataracts that impede the immense Congo River as it rushes toward the Atlantic. We pull into a picturesque bar and restaurant called Les Rapides. A great sound system pounds out music for a sparse Sunday crowd. It's a beautiful setting, looking across the vast river to the skyline of Kinshasa beckoning in the distance.

Over a chilled Ngok, Essous tells us there are other Congolese bands besides Les Bantous de la Capitale. A faction of Les Bantous, including Pamela Mounk'a and Edo Ganga, broke off a couple of years ago to form Bantous Monument, and a few younger groups are coming along. But these days it's difficult to find live bands playing anywhere. In the '60s and '70s, Essous explains, there were many dance bars like Chez Faigmond and Congo Bar that booked bands. But the big dance bars have closed and smaller clubs play only records. Today's groups usually perform only for les spectacles, large, well-publicized concerts.

## WEDNESDAY, JUNE 2

We go for dinner at a Senegalese restaurant called Chez Thiam near the grand mosque in Poto-Poto. Over steaming plates of fish and jollof rice, Essous tells us that on Friday three bands, including Les Bantous de la Capitale, will be playing for a political rally as momentum gathers for Sunday's elections. The restaurant has a roving guitarist who is very young but knows all the old songs. He wanders over to our table, and he and Essous sing duets.

After dinner we walk a few blocks to number 29 rue M'Bakas, site of the legendary nightclub Chez Faigmond. The original building, now called Espace Faigmond, is still a club, smaller now, and without live music. It's been 20 years since Essous visited the place. In the old days, on nights when African Jazz with Docteur Nico and Le Grand Kalle would play, rue M'Bakas would be choked with cars and people scrambling for a spot to see the action. "For us," says Essous, "Brazzaville began and ended here."

## FRIDAY, JUNE 4

We've been waiting with anticipation for the day's political rally so we can see the bands play, but as the hour comes and goes we realize something is wrong. Finally we get word from one of Essous' entourage that the government has canceled the rally due to "security concerns."

A short time later the same guy tells us that Edo Ganga and Michel Boybanda are downstairs. We gulp down the remains of our sardine sandwiches and rush down to meet two more Congo music greats. Edo is a tall, wiry, distinct

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**ROOTS OF SOUKOUS** *Continued from page 53*

guished-looking man with thinning gray hair. Michel looks young and strong, probably in his early 50s. We explain what we're up to and both men agree to sit for interviews in the coming days.

A short while later Essous joins the four of us in the hotel garden. I show them some photos of early Congo bands that I've managed to dig up, and the three musicians begin to reminisce. Essous tells of being in Franco's office one day and Franco getting a call on his "red phone" from President Mobutu himself, he was that closely connected.

They laugh about the lengths to which bassist De La Lune and singer Célestin Kouka would go to when dressing up. They must have been the first *sapeurs*. De La Lune would wear big, baggy pleated pants up around his lower chest just like they were wearing in Paris. Célestin would meticulously groom his hair, taking two hours in front of a mirror to get it just right. He would attend to each strand and then comb them into place with a great sweeping motion making a part on one side. Finally he would tie a handkerchief around his head, spread it over his hair, and lightly apply a hot iron. These guys were way ahead of Papa Wemba and Pierre Belkos.

**SATURDAY, JUNE 5**

Michel Boybanda comes for his interview this afternoon. He's very talkative, and we go on for nearly two hours as he tells stories about his days with Franco and OK Jazz. In the evening, Essous and I take a taxi downtown to La Congolaise nightclub to get a look at Wenge Musica. The place is deserted, locked up tight. Many supporters of the opposition live in this area, so it appears the government canceled the show.

**SUNDAY, JUNE 6**

Election day. "Ville morte." No cars on the street; no businesses open. From our hotel room we hear a couple of bursts of gunfire and what sounds like return fire. There's a polling station nearby. We only go out to find food.

**MONDAY, JUNE 7**

The city appears to be back to normal today. No election returns yet. It will take several days to gather the ballots and count them. Edo comes by for his interview in the morning. Lots of good stuff on tape, stories of the days of Loningisa and the origins of OK Jazz.

After Edo leaves, Essous takes us to the home of Célestin Kouka in Baongo. Célestin greets us dressed in a frayed T-shirt and old trousers. His celebrated hair is gray now, and he has a bald spot on top. It's hard to imagine him as a young sapeur spending hours in front of the mirror.

**TUESDAY, JUNE 8**

We go to the recording studio with Essous this morning. I thought it would be IAD, the government-run studio, but it turns out to be Studio Saturne, owned and operated by an architect named Edouard Satou. On the way we drop by Freddy Kebano's house. He's going to do some keyboard tracks as a guest artist on Les Bantous' new album project. Freddy has his keyboard and other equipment, so he's going to come in another taxi.

Studio Saturne is way out past Baongo near Les Rapides. The taxi leaves the main road and heads down to the studio a couple hundred yards from the river. Inside Satou's house we can see his drawing tables and stacks of blueprints. Off to one side of the

parlor someone operates a cassette duplication machine. Three cassettes every three or four minutes, he says. A couple hundred in a good day.

Next door, the studio is still under construction although all the essentials are in place, and it has been operational for some time. Just inside we find ourselves in the control room where most of the equipment is located. A 16-track mix-

ing board, speakers and a remote box for the 16-track recorder are installed in the center of the irregularly-shaped room. A nearby rack holds two cassette decks, a DAT machine, equalizer, amplifier and several effects units. In the middle of the front wall, a window looks into the large studio room that contains an isolation booth and an array of instruments and microphones.

We walk back out to the main road to look for Freddy. Soon his taxi pulls in and heads down the road toward the studio. We walk back munching peanuts and talking. The taxi that has delivered Freddy passes us as it returns to the main road. As we round the last corner we hear Freddy yelling for us to stop the car. It has left with his accessory bag. Essous takes off at a run, but clearly it is too late.

Beth and I meet the very distraught Freddy at the studio gate. All his cables, his diskettes, "all my sounds are in the bag," he moans. The longer we wait, the more Freddy calms down. He begins to tell us his story. He taught himself to play guitar despite his parents' disapproval. As he got older, he learned to play keyboards and got further and further into the music. Now he has his own 8-track studio and works with many artists on their various projects. He doesn't care much for the Congo/Zairean sound any more. "There's nothing new," he says. He's quite taken with Western artists—he mentions Chick Corea—people who innovate and experiment.

Essous returns with no success. The taxi is long gone. They decide to see if they can hook up Freddy's keyboard and digital sampler with whatever cables the studio can come up with. The receptacle end of a scrounged power cord won't fit the prongs on Freddy's sampler. Satou's assistant strips the ends of a couple short lengths of wire, hooks them on the prongs protruding from the back of the sampler, and jams the other ends into the cord's receptacle. He plugs it in and, *voilà*, power to the sampler. The sound cables are a match. Freddy can make music with his keyboard, albeit without his diskettes. He works for over an hour laying down tracks for the first two songs with a crisp, clear piano sound. I for one am grateful he can't get at his diskettes. Then miraculously, the taxi driver appears at the door with Freddy's bag. The gloom lifts. Freddy has his sounds back and a much better attitude.

The work is long and tedious. Freddy listens to passages, selects a sound, takes suggestions, then improvises something to fit. He's really talented and very serious about his work. Other members of the band, Nino Malapet, Ricky Simeon, Lambert Kabako, wander in and out. Freddy nibbles on a sandwich and sips a Primus beer while he works his keyboard. Satou handles the controls throughout. "I don't drink. I don't smoke. This is what I do for enjoyment," he says.

Finally around 6 o'clock, seven hours after he began, Freddy finishes his work. Everyone seems satisfied with the day's production and gives thanks for an honest taxi driver who undid what could have been a major disaster.

**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 9**

Kosmos comes to the hotel for an interview. Célestin Kouka is due at 3 p.m., but he never shows up. He lives in Baongo, an opposition stronghold, so maybe he couldn't get out. Opposition leader Bernard Kolelas went on television last night to call for a campaign of "civil disobedience" to force Lissouba to hold new elections. Everyone we meet is talking politics and seems genuinely worried.

**THURSDAY, JUNE 10**

We've met a young music promoter named Alain Lascony-Balloux, who claims to work for Koffi Olomide, Zaiko Langa Langa, Pepe Kallé and various other artists. Today he takes us to meet some music-business people over on rue M'Bakas near Espace Faignond. First stop is the shop of a Senegalese named Amadou N'Daiye, who is the main cassette dealer in town. N'Daiye conducts business from behind a counter where stacks of cassettes from Congolese, Zairean and other African artists are stored. Off to one side, a tv plays African music videos. N'Daiye hedges his bets. He deals in clothing, shoes and other merchandise to insulate himself from fluctuations in the music market.





Lascony tells us that when a tape first comes out it sells for around CFA1500 (\$6), but as its popularity declines it can sink as low as CFA500. Most releases have a shelf life of about three months. Artists often bring out three or four albums a year, so the market is almost constantly saturated with new product. Pirates often undercut the legitimate issues thus making pricing all the more tenuous. We run into Dindo Yogo, a former Zaiko member gone solo. He gives us his new cassette. I give him a copy of *The Beat*.

From N'Daiye's, Lascony escorts us over to Espace Faigmond to meet another music operator, one Norbert Bokilo. We follow a narrow passageway alongside the building, then climb a winding set of stairs into a noisy, small L-shaped room. The old Chez Faigmond has been partitioned off for several different uses, so the club is only a fraction of its former grand self. It's hard to imagine Essous' Negro Jazz and Kabasele's African Jazz playing here. Lascony tells us that Congolese like the ambience of a small, crowded place.

The sound booth sits on the left as we enter. We greet Bokilo, who spins the records inside. A long bar extends along the left wall beyond the booth, pointing to a small dance floor surrounded by tables full of partying Brazzavilleans. It's only about 5:30 in the evening and the place is jammed. They open around noon and play until four or five in the morning every day of the week. After a quick drink courtesy of Bokilo, he tells us to meet him at his shop across the street where it is easier to talk.

The shop turns out to be Bono-Music, one of the best stocked music stores I've ever seen in Africa. It carries a large selection of vinyl and hundreds of cd titles, both African and American, but only a few cassettes. Bokilo aims for the high end of the market. CDs sell for CFA10,000. That's \$40! He says they sell plenty. Bokilo is also a producer, and he shows us a couple of Zaiko Langa Langa vinyl lps sporting the Bono-Music label to prove it.

Back at the hotel, Essous fills us in on the day's political developments. The opposition is contesting the election results that have been filtering out. It seems the presidential movement has won seven of the 11 seats, giving it a clear majority in the legislature. Essous fears there may be more trouble.

#### SATURDAY, JUNE 12

Off the Avenue des Trois Martyrs in the Ouenzé district we visit the home of Saturnin Pandi. The great drummer for Les Bantous is 60 years old now but still healthy and vigorous. His house turns out to be a museum for the band. Stashed in the parlor he has two or three bags of photographs and a stack of old 45s from the STENCO Record Company days. Pandi tells us he didn't sleep much last night because he was sorting things to get ready for us. He starts to pass around the packages he has prepared. They are full of wonderful old photos and documents including stationery from the early recording houses of Essengo and Papadimitriou. Photos show the teenage Essous and his pal Rossignol (who would later collaborate in the formation of Rock-a-Mambo), Groupe Diabouva from around 1954, an early formation of OK Jazz, plus several shots of Les Bantous.

Five hours of beer and stories and interviews

later, we emerge into the settling dusk. Pandi walks us down to the main road where we can find a taxi. It looks like there's more political trouble brewing. Someone has cut down a huge tree to block traffic. A few vehicles skirt through the sand around it, but there are not many taxis running now and all are occupied. Things changed abruptly during our five hours with Pandi. We flag down an occupied taxi and negotiate with the driver and his passenger to share a ride back to the Plateau. The normal CFA500 price has jumped to CFA700. As we leave Ouenzé we notice that the electricity has gone off all around us. Shops are closed and few people remain on the streets. It's kind of spooky.

#### SUNDAY, JUNE 13

There is some activity in the streets, so it looks like it's safe to go out. Nino Malapet is supposed to come for an interview this morning. Outside, our favorite corner shop is closed. Down on the main road the patisserie is closed too. One of the shops run by Mauritanian merchants has opened, however, so we buy some cheese and a jar of strawberry

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Saturnin Pandi,  
drummer for Les Bantous,  
in Brussels, circa 1962.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SATURNIN PANDI





African Jazz veterans Manu Dibango, Docteur Nico, Roger Izeidi and Tabu Ley Rochereau reunite in Kinshasa in the early '80s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROGER IZEIDI

## ROOTS OF SOUKOUS *Continued from page 55*

jam for our petit dejeuner.

Morning wears into afternoon, and Nino still hasn't shown up. Essous thinks he's probably afraid to go out. Almost nothing is open today. It's another ville morte. Barricades made of tree limbs and scraps of boards block many streets. Radio news reports say that Libya's ambassador to Congo was killed by soldiers in Brazzaville early this morning. Apparently he refused to stop at a military check point and the soldiers opened fire on his car.

In the evening Beth and I lie in bed chatting about plans for our crossing into Kinshasa. Around 9 o'clock the crackle of gunfire sends us scrambling onto the floor. It sounds like it's right outside the hotel, but downstairs nobody seems too alarmed. The night watchman says it came from a couple of blocks away. Some comfort.

### MONDAY, JUNE 14

Things don't appear to be back to normal, but at least the neighborhood patisserie opens up. Outside, few taxis ply the streets. We hear there's no gas in town. The train tracks have been sabotaged, so supplies of gas and food from the Atlantic port of Pointe Noire can't make it into Brazzaville.

We share a taxi into town—the price has jumped to CFA1,000—to check with the American embassy about travel to Kinshasa. Downtown looks like a quasi ville morte. Many businesses and most offices are closed. The American consul warns us that because of crime Kinshasa is a much more dangerous place than Brazzaville, although politically Zaire is more stable at the moment. They are considering evacuating non-essential embassy personnel and Peace Corps volunteers from Congo in the coming days.

Back at the hotel, the tension and uncertainty start to get to us. Kinshasa stories are scary enough but now Brazzaville seems to be falling apart too. What if we go to Kinshasa and then Congo closes the border? How will we get out then? Maybe we should just pack

it in and go home now. But we're so close to all the musicians I've wanted to meet, I feel I've got to at least try to see them. We don't make any decisions yet. We don't get much sleep.

### TUESDAY, JUNE 15

We're not quite as tense as we were yesterday. We go off to the patisserie, but it's closed today. Petit dejeuner consists of bread and cheese from a small shop that dares to open across the street. We are edging closer to deciding to go to Kinshasa despite the horror stories. We share a taxi into town to make one final assessment of the situation.

At the U.S. embassy I talk with an American doctor who usually makes a Wednesday crossing to Kinshasa to attend to the needs of embassy staff there. He seems nervous and distracted. When I tried to reach him earlier by telephone, his secretary told us he was over at Swissair. Maybe he's trying to get his family out of the country. He tells us that the Congolese ferry isn't running now because of the trouble in town, so he won't be making the crossing this week. He doesn't know if the Zairean ferry is operating and suggests we go to "the beach" to find out for ourselves.

Down at the junction leading to the beach armed soldiers search cars and harass pedestrians. One of them sits in a chair on the corner getting his shoes shined. We make the mistake of asking him if this is the correct road to the ferry terminal. He jumps up and demands to know where we're going. Next he wants to see passports. Then he wants to search our bags. Finally he lets us pass and we go on down to the terminal. An official there tells us the Zairean ferry is still operating. He assures us we can cross tomorrow if we want to.

We leave the terminal to head back to the town center. As we approach the soldiers at the junction, shots ring out. Everybody scatters. We scramble up an embankment and hug the ground behind some bushes near a wall. Cars squeal past us in reverse as the firing





of automatic rifles continues. We can't see what's happening, but gather they're firing in the air to scare someone. They have succeeded with us.

After several tense moments, cars begin to edge forward again, and people begin to pick themselves up off the ground. It's not clear what happened, but nobody bothers us as we walk past. The same soldier is still sitting in a chair getting his shoes shined.

Back at the hotel Essous agrees that we should try to make the crossing tomorrow. Last week he sent an emissary to Roitelet, a bass player from the early days of Studio CEFA and president of the musicians' union of Zaire, in an effort to smooth the way for us. He gets busy writing other letters for us to carry along to help make introductions.

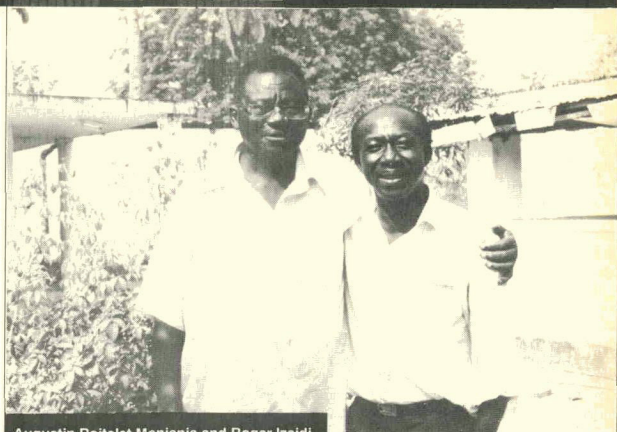
We eat our last dinner of sardines and bread over placemats made of pages torn from an *Air Afrique* in-flight magazine. A white fashion model peers from behind the black pleated collar of an absurd Paris fashion creation to tout Ystais perfume from Givency. A go-getter type in crisp business suit boards a welcoming van for the ride to his \$150 a night room at the Novotel. He's a *jeune cadre dynamique*. Maybe I'll use that line on Zairean immigration authorities tomorrow. Occupation? *Jeune cadre dynamique*.

### WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16

Beth is sick this morning. Maybe it was last night's food, maybe the tension. We leave the hotel at 8 o'clock anyhow. Out in the city it's still a quasi ville morte. Heading for the beach down Avenue de la Paix, our taxi weaves through remnants of barricades that had been thrown up to block traffic. Closer to the center of town we begin to see armed soldiers at street intersections. We get stopped and searched at the junction where gunfire scared us half to death yesterday.

It looks like things are happening at the beach. Lots of travelers gather round lots of luggage. ONATRA, the Zairean maritime company, is open and selling one-way ferry tickets for CFA6,500. For a small "fee" the official who gave us information yesterday eases our way through passport and customs formalities. Beth lies down on a large heavy-equipment tire in an effort to appease her stomach.

Around 10:30 or so we see the ferry steaming toward us from Kinshasa. It's really two ferries bound together somehow. Why? we wonder. It's hard to tell. The ferry nestles up to the dock and disgorges its cargo. Our queue begins to inch forward. The little shelter with curtained openings marked "hommes" and "femmes" that I thought housed toilets for our traveling convenience turns out to be yet another hurdle between us and the ferry. Apparently we are to be individually questioned and searched. Suddenly our savior from previous formalities appears. He takes our passports and tickets,



Augustin Roitelet Moniania and Roger Izeidi.

PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

flashes them appropriately as we slalom through the remaining officials, and leads us into an air-conditioned cabin on board the ferry where Beth can lie down. We thank him profusely and promise to come see him when we get back. Right now I've got to save some bribe money for the other side.

While we wait for departure, a loud cheer goes up outside as a small motor boat speeds away in the direction of Kinshasa. We are told that it carries Monseigneur Laurent Mosengwo, chairman of the High Council of the Republic, a parallel government formed in opposition to Zaire's president Mobutu.

Finally the ferry sounds a couple of blasts on its horn and slowly slips away from the dock. Clumps of green vegetation float past as we chug along on our 20-minute crossing. From time to time a large white bird surfs by on one of these grassy vessels. What a life!

It's bedlam as we dock at the Kinshasa wharf. Passengers struggle up the ramp with their bags while blue-suited cargo handlers race down into their midst trying to get first crack at the ferry's cache of bags and cartons. We follow a man and woman whom we've met on board. They have promised to help us navigate the formalities. True to their word, they adroitly maneuver us through with only a minimum of hassle. One official gestures to us as if to say "buy us some beer." I give him CFA1,000 and tell him to split it with his two co-workers. That seems to be satisfactory.

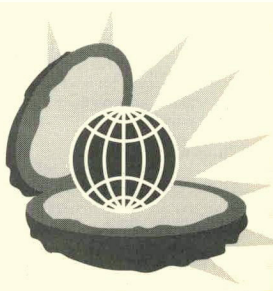
Outside we meet a taxi driver named Willy who, for 30 million zaires, will take us to a seminary near Matongé, the heart of Kinshasa's night life, where we are told we can find cheap lodging. The zaire, Zaire's currency, is on a headlong free fall that must be unparalleled in modern times. One dollar, which couldn't purchase one zaire when the money was first

issued back in the '60s, now buys 4,400,000 of them. Willy's 30 million zaire taxi ride is costing us about seven bucks.

As we drive along we see many abandoned shops, perhaps victims of one or the other pillage. Events here are now marked by their relationship to the premier pillage or the deuxième pillage, or some other catastrophe that has occurred in the last three years. But despite its incredible problems the city still seems to function, as much from necessity as design. There are even cops out directing traffic.

Unfortunately the seminary can't house us. The rector directs us to the Mission Catholique Nganda in the Kintambo district. It's quite a distance from the center of town and will make getting around more difficult. But they have clean, affordable rooms, food and a quiet, secure compound.

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FRIDAY, JUNE 18

On the way into town we see a guy selling newspapers. The headline on one says that Qaddafi has retaliated against Congo for killing his ambassador by killing the Congolese ambassador in Tripoli (this, like much of what happens in the Zairean press, later proves to be untrue). Over at the U.S. embassy we meet with the consul. Just as we are gaining confidence that things are normal and we'll be okay, she tells us terrifying stories about the second pillage that happened this past January. A lot of killing took place in the square across the street from her office two blocks away from the main embassy building. She says she narrowly escaped being shot as she fled the scene in her car. She doesn't think we should even be in Zaire, but especially not in Kintambo. There's lots of crime there, she tells us, robbery, car hijackings and the like. Soldiers are supposed to be paid on the 20th, she adds for good measure. That's two days from now. When they don't get paid, they get nasty.

We summon up our courage and take a taxi to Franco's old nightclub, the Un-Deux-Trois. Roitelet, the president of the musicians' union, has an office there. The place is a mess. With its faded paint and broken windows, it looks abandoned. Inside, the main club is still intact, but it's being used as a evangelic church. A preacher's pulpit and a five-piece band playing religious music sit on the stage where Franco once performed. The auxiliary bars upstairs are completely abandoned. OK Jazz has to rehearse at the Zenith, a new club down the street. Upper floors of one wing of the building still house the band's offices and one for the musicians' union.

After a short wait, Roitelet comes up the stairs. We give him Essou's letters and tell him what we're up to. He agrees that we should move out of Kintambo, but says we needn't worry about the soldiers. He doesn't think there will be any trouble. Gerry Dialungana, a guitarist who I met when OK Jazz came to the U.S., wanders in. He's very surprised to see me again. It's decided that we should go to a Protestant hostel near the center of town to arrange for lodging there.

On the way downstairs, we meet Madilu System, le grand ninja of OK Jazz, coming up. Outside, leaning up against his Mercedes, stands Franco's successor, Simaro Lutumba. As we continue along in search of an empty taxi, Gerry calls out, "Josky!" We look over and sure enough, there's Josky Kiambukuta leaning against a wall talking to someone. "Here," says Roitelet, "we don't separate ourselves from the public like they do in America. We like to be with the people." The musicians, he says, "see what's going on in people's lives and put it into the songs."

Once we rearrange our lodging, we taxi out to Limite, an industrial area of Kinshasa where many of the city's wealthy live. During colonial times this was home for Europeans. The taxi leaves the main road and gently rolls down an increasingly narrow and rocky street. On the

Two generations of Zairean musicians: Gerry Dialungana, Mwamba Déchaud and Augustin Roitelet Moniania.



PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

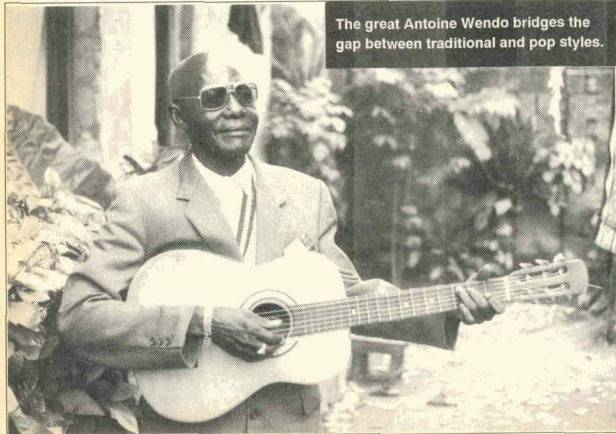
right sits Franco's house, a walled compound containing what appears to be three two-story buildings—a large center house flanked by two smaller ones. If not architecturally remarkable, it's at least ostentatious enough for a great star like Franco.

Finally the road is too bad for the taxi to continue. We get out and walk down the rocky lane toward the former home of Docteur Nico. Beth looks at me and exclaims, "Where's your bag?" My heart jumps. I turn and yell at the taxi that's starting back up the road. The driver hears and stops. I'd put my bag with my tape recorder, camera, money, everything in his trunk and in my state of euphoria had forgotten all about it. A few seconds more and my entire trip would have gone down the drain. The driver realizes why we yelled. He apologizes and says he would have come back for us when he discovered what had happened.

Down at the end of the lane, we come to Nico's compound. Inside sits a well-kept main house that Nico's children, we are told, now rent out. Behind the house is a large grassy area overgrown with weeds. "This is where his body was laid out for viewing," Roitelet says. Beyond that, in the rear corner of the compound, sits a small two-room house. Here Nico's brother and collaborator, Mwamba Déchaud, the great guitar accompanist, now spends his last days. Thin and frail, Déchaud rarely goes out any more. Roitelet calls out greetings and ushers us in to meet a 60-year-old man who looks more like 80.

The small parlor room is dimly lit by two open windows and the cloth-draped door opening. Déchaud gets up from the chair where he's been sitting with his ear cocked against a large radio-tape player. Old records and photos of Nico and their mother hang on the wall opposite the door.

Déchaud seems to understand French but prefers to speak Lingala. Roitelet translates my questions. Déchaud doesn't talk very much. Often he'll answer with a simple yes or no. It doesn't make for a very satisfactory interview,



The great Antoine Wendo bridges the gap between traditional and pop styles.

PHOTO BY GARY STEWART





Franco's old equipment truck awaits another call to service.

PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

but it is an incredible experience just meeting the man. Déchaud doesn't even have a guitar to play any more. He asks if we can send one from the States. I tell him I'll try my best. He puts on a suit jacket to pose for photos, then it's time to leave. He walks us to the compound gate. "Don't forget the guitar," he says earnestly with a pining, almost desperate look in his eyes. I assure him I won't.

#### SATURDAY, JUNE 19

We've spent our last night in Kintambo and this morning pack for our move to the hotel downtown. A priest who's going into town agrees to take us along. On the way, we meet a huge petrol queue outside a Mobil station. We've been seeing these at every gas station for the last two days. The station owners want to raise prices, but Mobutu's government won't let them, so they ration gas or simply refuse to sell altogether. The priest needs gas. He pulls off to one side of the queue in front of a soldier who's surveying the chaotic scene before him. Our car is immediately besieged by guys with plastic containers of gas. They call them "Qaddafies" here. They sell petrol when the stations don't. The cost: 15 million zaires for five liters, well above the regulation price. It's the parallel market in action right under the nose of the law who couldn't care less.

Roitel meets us at the hostel, and we go out in search of a taxi. "Transportation situation is very difficult." We hear the phrase uttered over and over again. "They steal cars in Zaire and sell them in Angola," Roitel told us yesterday. "They steal cars in Zambia and sell them in Zaire." Most of those that aren't being stolen or transported to another country should have retired from the battle years ago. Two out of three belch clouds of acrid smoke as they sputter about. Our eyes burn as if we were in Los Angeles or Mexico City.

Many taxis ply a fixed route disgorging and picking up passengers like a bus. Others call themselves "taxi express" and for a price will take you anywhere you want to go. We have

the gate a large, very comfortable looking house sits on the right. On the left there's a long low building sectioned off and rented out to small businesses. Behind that is the office of Roger Izeidi. Roger, a veteran of Kabasele's African Jazz and a longtime producer, is quite recognizable although he's now 30 years older than the pictures I've seen. He is a short man, still slim and spry, and as full of energy as I'd imagined. He still works

in the music business although he has left the pop side to produce traditional groups. Roger's whole compound was looted by rampaging soldiers during one of the pillages. The tv, phone, some fixtures, all were stolen. Roger was shot in the foot and needed surgery to repair the damage.

After our interview, he takes us next door to Mazadis. This is the studio and pressing plant, built in the late '50s, where many classic Congo music recordings were made. Following Zaireanization of foreign-owned businesses in 1973, the government turned the whole complex over to Franco. Now it sits idle. During the week someone comes in to open the doors. Today only a watchman looks on. Franco's old equipment truck sits forlornly off to one side. The tires are flat now. It isn't used any more.

been told to be very cautious about taxis and not to board one with male passengers. The unwary are often kidnapped by groups of men, driven to an out-of-the-way spot, and relieved of all their valuables.

We catch an express out to Limete near Franco's house and turn off the main road to the left this time. Down a paved side street past warehouses and various other commercial concerns, we get out near yet another walled compound. Inside

#### MONDAY, JUNE 21

Today's the day we're supposed to meet both Wendo and Verckys. The tireless Roitel picks us up at the hostel. So far there's no trouble from the soldiers. We wonder if they've been paid on time. It's a rough morning for transportation. Fewer and fewer taxis are on the road. Petrol queues go on for blocks. Those who want to drive have to deal with the Qaddafies. Roitel the expert manages to find a guy who'll take us to Wendo's for a reasonably inflated fare.

Wendo is a tall, courtly gentleman with a shiny bald head. He meets us at the gate of his compound dressed in a crisp, brown suit and wearing a medal around his neck. He is one of the more prominent transitional figures in Congo music who bridges the gap between traditional and pop styles and is the subject of a just-completed documentary film done by a European filmmaker. A companion cd of recorded old hits is in the works as well, but curiously, Wendo didn't play the guitar on it. The producer only wanted him to sing. As we sit in his parlor, Wendo politely answers my questions and then goes outside to pose for pictures.

Verckys turns out to be as elusive as Wendo is accessible. His office sits atop a four-story building near the center of Matonge. There's a lot of muttering and whispering among his staff when we tell them we have a 4 o'clock appointment. They usher us into his office and serve us drinks, but it turns out that Verckys, like Elvis, has left the building.

His office is an impressive space, the

*Continued on page 79*



Legendary Congolese vocalist Pamela Mounka.

PHOTO BY GARY STEWART



## ROOTS OF SOUKOUS

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walls and ceiling paneled with dark tropical wood. A sultan's sofa and two matching chairs flank a wooden coffee table at one end of the room. Opposite them a television tuned to CFI, a French overseas service, competes for attention with loudspeakers from across the street. Verckys' large semicircular desk dominates one end of the office. An overstuffed executive's chair sits empty behind it, and two smaller versions for guests sit in front. On the wall above the sofa hang two photos of Verckys receiving awards from President Mobutu.

We have been told that Verckys was pillaged, but there is no sign of it here. Apparently his recording studio and record pressing factory still operate, and he now publishes two newspapers that are laid out on sophisticated computers just outside his office door. He has also become heavily involved in a new political party. Many irons in the fire and apparently no time for us. We give up after nearly two hours of waiting.

### TUESDAY, JUNE 22

Gerry Dialungana picks us up at the hostel and takes us on a walking tour of Matongé. We visit a couple of record shops which sell only cassettes now, except for a few used vinyl lps. Cassettes can be bought for the equivalent of around five or six dollars, but most shops don't have much of a selection. What they do have comes from Mr. N'Daiye over in Brazzaville. It seems he has the cassette market sewn up. One reason stocks are so low, I suspect, is that dealers have to buy with CFA or another scarce foreign currency since the zaire is worthless.

Matongé is crowded with lots of shops and little bars, but a goodly number of storefronts stand empty. We are told that this area got hit hard during the pillages. We wander through the Rond Point Victoire, a large traffic circle in the center of Matongé, to the famous Vis-à-Vis nightclub. It has gone out of business. The building remains, but it's empty inside, except for a few piles of sand apparently meant for some future renovation. Gerry tells us the Maison Blanche is out of business too. Suzanella, the owner, died several months ago. Franco's former manager, Manzenza, and a partner tried to run it for a while but quit, leaving a pile of debts.

Some new clubs, including the Zenith where OK Jazz rehearses, have sprung up to replace the dying veterans, but in general the club scene has declined in direct proportion to the rest of the music business. Only five major bands make their homes in Kinshasa today: OK Jazz, Pepe Kalle and Empire Bakuba, two factions of Zaiko Langa Langa, and Wenge Musica. Zaire's hottest star, Koffi Olomide, also spends part of his year in Kinshasa. A couple of newer groups, Les As and Equinox, struggle for recognition but haven't yet built much of a reputation. Studios, too, have declined in number and quality. Verckys still operates his, but most artists seldom record there because he demands too much control. The venerable Studio Star still has only two tracks. OK Jazz crossed the

river to IAD in Brazzaville to record their next release.

Back on the Rond Point we pause at a monument to musicians who have died, a statue of uplifted hands rising from a tall, rectangular base around which small plaques containing the names of the honorees should be mounted. But most of the plaques are missing now. They were stolen in the pillaging.

We are supposed to interview Simaro at 2 o'clock, but he's meeting with the band. Around 5:00 he has time to see us up in a parlor off Franco's old office. Simaro is very courteous and well-spoken, short and to the point. The fifth floor has no electricity, and as the sun sets in the window behind Simaro, he gets harder and harder to see. I have to strain to make out my notes. After an hour the room is pitch black. We decide to call it quits. People light matches in the stairwell as we feel our way down. Finally around the second floor the lights are on. Perhaps the church pays its electric bills but OK Jazz doesn't.

### WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23

This will be our last day in Kinshasa. We're running low on money and remain frightened by the possibilities of more violence as the politicians battle it out on both sides of the river. We haven't heard anything about conditions in Brazzaville since we left. If things haven't improved there, closing of the border is still a real possibility.

Kinshasa has made a big impression on us. This vast city, said to be more than 40 miles from end to end and jammed with ever-increasing millions of people, resembles an animal carcass being picked clean by buzzards. Pillaging and neglect have pushed the city to the edge of collapse. Zaire's politicians learned well the lessons of their colonial mentors. With a generous assist from Western cold warriors, they have appropriated the country's labor and resources even more boldly than the foreign occupiers. In a just world, the Kissingers and Crockers of America and the Europeans who preceded them would be herded onto a Congo River ferry and dropped off at the Kinshasa wharf to cope on their own with the nightmare they created in Central Africa.

### THURSDAY, JUNE 24

Our crossing to Brazzaville proves uneventful. We pass through Kinshasa formalities with little trouble. Back on the other side things appear to be gradually returning to normal. Soldiers still patrol the streets, but barricades have disappeared, and most shops and offices seem to be running normally. There is gas in town; taxis are plentiful once again.

### SATURDAY, JUNE 26

With the crisis momentarily cooling down, the Baongo district has opened up once again. We take advantage of the break to go see Pamela Mounk'a. A large, portly bear of a man, Pamela seems robust except for a decided limp. When I suggest we go outside to take pictures,

he makes his way to the door with great difficulty. His feet are swollen to at least twice their normal size. It's a result of his diabetes, he tells us. He was hospitalized in Paris in the late '80s, but they couldn't do much for him, he says. He's being treated in Brazzaville by a local herbalist. He fears if he returns to Paris for treatment, the doctors will want to amputate his feet.

Pamela wants to continue in the music business but more on the production side and less as a performer. He remains a pillar of Bantous Monument, a breakaway faction of Les Bantous de la Capitale. But he finds it difficult to operate from Brazzaville, because no reliable distribution system exists to market music outside the country. It's a complaint we've heard many times.

### TUESDAY, JUNE 29

We manage to snag a long interview with Guy-Léon Fylla, thanks to his nephew, a Brazzaville newspaper publisher who we met in Paris a couple of years ago. Fylla talks for two very interesting hours about the music's birth and growth. Now 65, Fylla was something of a mentor to younger musicians coming up in the '50s. These days he is better known for his marvelous paintings.

### WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30

On our last day in Brazzaville, we head downtown in search of an appropriate gift for our incomparable host Essous. Now that the barricades in Baongo have come down, Essous can get through to the studio again. He has been working night and day to mix the band's new album, so we haven't seen much of him lately.

In the evening at the N'Soko we finally get to interview Nino Malapet. He talks for an hour about his career and role in the band. Then we say goodbyes all around and get some rest up in Essous' room. After a last dinner of rice and sauce in the hotel garden, it's time to leave. Check-in at the airport is unbelievably smooth. No chaos, no bribes. Interview tapes get a reprieve from the X-ray machine thanks to Beth's eloquent pleas. We are on our way to Paris.

Gary Stewart, author of *Breakout: Profiles in African Music and frequent Beat contributor*, is working on a book on the history of the music of Congo/Zaire.

