

# Toujours O.K.

**FRANCO** *and* **T.P.O.K. JAZZ**

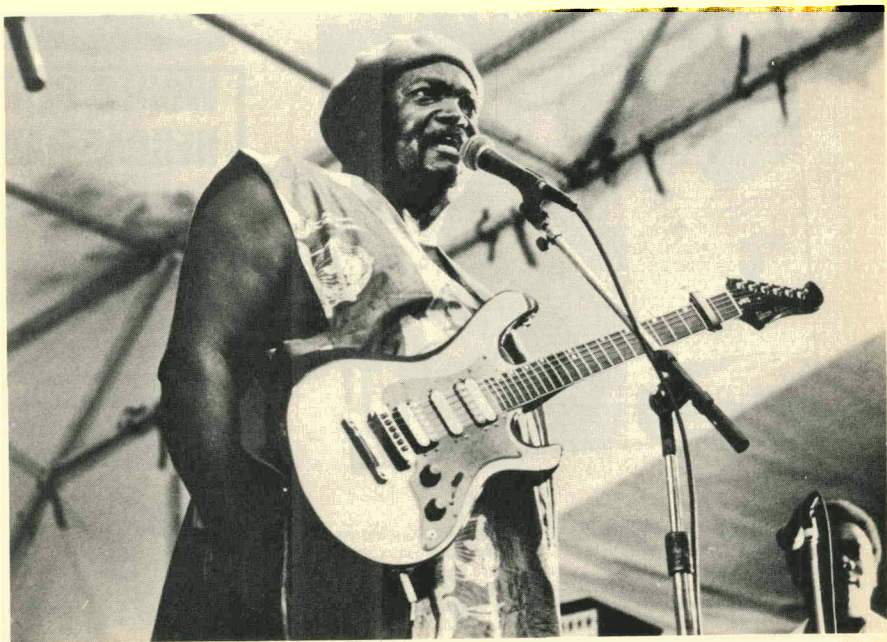
BY GARY STEWART

"Il est mort," say French speakers when someone dies. In October they said it about the leader of T.P.O.K. Jazz, Luambo Makiadi, known as Franco. He of rounded frame and booming voice, of flashing fingers against strings of steel, vigorous, robust, the picture of life died in Brussels at the age of 51.

He was called "the grand master," and it was true. One of the pioneers of modern Congo music, he recorded more than 150 albums and an uncountable number of singles. His ability to capture listeners—with words for those who understood Lingala or French and with an uncanny musical sensibility for those who didn't—coupled with a healthy dose of business acumen fashioned and sustained the seemingly perpetual music machine that was T.P.O.K. Jazz.

But Franco's three decades atop the world of African music have come to a sad and stunning halt. The good life that fueled his rapidly expanding girth had taken its toll. In the last year his weight plummeted. He failed to show up in March for a much-heralded reunion with his former singer Sam Mangwana at London's Hammersmith Palais, and he missed the band's summer American tour.

The truth of his illness is hard to come by. Close associates, band manager Nsala Man-





zenza and artistic director Dizzy Mandjeku, said this summer that he suffered from kidney and stomach ailments. Rumors circulated that he had AIDS. In an interview for *Africa International* quoted in the Paris newspaper *Libération*, Franco denied them.

"You know in Zaire, as soon as you're sick everyone is screaming AIDS," he said. "Whether it is cancer, malaria or dysentery, rumors are spreading—'Say, you've seen so and so, you've seen how much weight he has lost? Well, it's AIDS.' Even though they can have other sicknesses just as dangerous. As for me, I don't have AIDS. It is true that I have lost a lot of weight and that I presently weigh less than 100 kilos (about 220 pounds) even though I weighed up to 130 kilos (290 pounds), but the doctors have told me that I'm suffering from kidney problems. I am taking care of myself accordingly and everything will be all right."

Life's precariousness was hardly a matter for concern back in 1956 when Franco was something of a prodigy at the Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) recording house of Loninisa. He was 18 years old and part of a large stable of musicians that included some of the pioneers of modern Congolese music—Henri Bowane, Paul "Dewayon" Ebengo, Dessouin Bosuma and Vicky Longomba, all from the Belgian Congo (now Zaire), and Lando Rossignol, Daniel "De La Lune" Lubelo and Jean-Serge Essous from across the river in Congo Brazzaville.

For several years, since around 1953, the Loninisa ensemble had been cranking out records and a tidy profit for the studio's owner, a Greek businessman named Papadimitriou. But in 1956, six of the studio's musicians got hired to play at the O.K. Bar in Leopoldville, and O.K. Jazz was born. On one of their first records, "On Entre O.K. On Sort K.O.," made in late '56, the band introduces itself. There is Franco on guitar and vocals, Dessouin playing hand drums, De La Lune on bass, saxophonist Essous and singers Vicky and Rossignol. Dessouin recalls that two other Brazzavilleans, Celestin Kouka who sang and played maracas and singer Edou Nganga, were original members instead of Essous and Rossignol. Whatever the case, the tenure of Essous and Rossignol was brief. The six of Dessouin remembers soon became the heart of the band. On the strength of his musicianship and personality Franco emerged as the star.

"Not a pretty boy," wrote journalist Jean-Jacques Kande in 1957 describing the Congo's newest heartthrob. "Slightly taller than the average. Eyes the color of fire, sometimes laughing, sometimes dreaming. Hair cut any which way giving his physiognomy a very combative air. Very dark black skin. Thus appears the current number-one guitarist of the town of Leopoldville, the electric guitarist who makes the hearts of women spin. For them, his name is Franco, from his real name François Luambo. He wears plaid shirts and narrow pants cut cowboy style."



**CONGA PLAYER**  
DESSOUIN BOSUMA,  
AN ORIGINAL MEMBER  
OF O.K. JAZZ AND  
SAXOPHONIST ISAAC  
MUSEKIWA, IN  
WASHINGTON, DC,  
IN 1989.

Relying heavily on traditional folk elements for inspiration, the members of O.K. Jazz refined and adapted them to fit the capabilities of Western instruments and recording technology. Building on African rhythms and those like the rumba repatriated from Latin America, they translated into song the cares and concerns of the young, rapidly rising Congolese urban class. As Kande, echoing the thoughts of many of his countrymen, put it, passionate love songs like "Elo Mama" and "Naboyi Yo Te" "take you by the throat, twist your heart, electrify you."

Where Joseph Kabasele's African Jazz was developing the multifarious guitar sound of Nico, Dechaud and Tino Baroza, O.K. Jazz blended a single guitar with a saxophone. Isaac Musekiwa a saxophonist from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) joined the band in 1957. "I was playing the first part," he says, "and Franco was playing the second part on guitar. Guitar and sax." Sometime in 1958 Angolan guitarist Antoine "Brazzos" Armando was added, and O.K. Jazz began to refine its own strain of guitar interplay.

Politics—independence and the Congolese civil war—heavily influenced the band's evolution by forcing personnel changes and providing rich material for new songs. "Lumumba Héro National" praised the country's new prime minister in 1960, and "Liwa Ya Lumumba" mourned his assassination a year later. Diplomatic flareups periodically drove the Brazzaville musicians back across the river and opened spots for new talent. O.K. Jazz became a virtual music school, accepting, training or introducing dozens of artists over the years. Sam Mangwana, Wuta Mayi, Papa Noel, Michel Boybanda, Jean "Kwamy" Mossi, Kiamuangana "Verckys" Mateta, Joseph "Mojo" Mulamba and Niesha "Daliens" Zitani are only a few of the stars that have played with Franco.

Unlike most of his contemporaries who concentrated mainly on their art, Franco set out to ensure that he and his troops would benefit from their creations. In the early '60s he established his own publishing house called Epanza Makita to issue records and try to collect royalties. From 1961 he often recorded in Europe for Pathé Marconi and Fonior (owners of the

African label). When Fonior folded, he established his own labels, Edipop, Visa 80 and Choc Choc Choc. He owned Mazadis, a small two-track studio in Kinshasa, for many years, and he was a partner in Zaire's only record-pressing plant. He even had his own nightclub in Kinshasa, the 1-2-3 Club, where the band would play whenever it came to town.

Bravado born of success prompted addition of the initials T.P.—for Tout Puissant, or all powerful—to the familiar O.K. in the early '70s. A decade later the band had grown to become a massive entourage of more than 40 people. They were often in such demand that they split into two units to satisfy their commitments.

The band's sizes seemed to lengthen in proportion to its size (although longer songs were actually a result of improved recording technology, changing formats and the general trend in pop music around the world). The taut two- or three-minute gambols of the early days gave way to extended, laid-back ramblings like "Très Impoli" and "Mario." In live performance the band supercharged its hits into torrid, uptempo dance-floor grooves worthy of anything produced by the Paris soukous session bands. Fronted by Franco and singers Madilu System and Josky Kiambukuta with support from the sparkling guitars of Dizzy Mandjeku, Gerry Dialungana and Thierry Mantiuka, T.P.O.K. Jazz was a powerful outfit to the end.

Despite his illness Franco recorded a final album early this year, *For Ever*, with Sam Mangwana, but as his stamina slipped away, work became nearly impossible. There are unconfirmed reports that he managed to play a final date with the band in Brussels only a month before his death. When the end came Oct. 12, President Mobutu Sese Seko declared a period of national mourning in Zaire, and Franco's body was flown home for burial.

For the remaining members of T.P.O.K. Jazz, this is a time of sorrow and uncertainty. "From '78 Franco has prepared his orchestra to play without him," Manzenza said earlier this year trying to be reassuring about the group's future. "It is an institution," said Mandjeku, pointing to the band's success and longevity. But until now, T.P.O.K. Jazz has never been without Franco. ★