

LUAMBO MAKIADI 1938-1989

A REMEMBRANCE

BY ELIZABETH SOBO

Luambo Makiadi is dead.

The 51-year-old vocalist, guitarist and band-leader extraordinaire—best known simply as "Franco"—was Africa's premier musical ambassador for more than 30 years. While the deaths of other great performers have been tragic and heartbreaking, the loss of Franco is nothing less than devastating.

The news of his death came early Thursday morning, Oct. 12, after years of rumors and speculation that the much-loved musician suffered from AIDS. Ironically, it was Franco who took the lead in warning the African people about the dreaded disease in his 1986 album, *Attention na SIDA*. Early press reports said simply that he died in Brussels after "a long illness."

Franco was a giant from the very beginning. His early recordings in the 1950s personified the style which became the standard of that era throughout Central, Eastern and much of Western Africa. Gentle, lilting rhumbas like "Bato Ya Mabe Batondi Mboka," "Josephina" and "Da Da De Tu Amor" as well as uptempo cha-chas like "Linda Linda," "Maria Valenta" and "Alliance Mode Succès" were orchestrated with class and charisma not heard before or since. His bandmembers were many and loyal; some of his original O.K. Jazz group remained with him until his death.

By the mid-1960s, his sound had evolved to the exuberant Congo style that set in motion a trend that continues to this day. Early Franco compositions like "Mbongo Zi Ya Voni," "Libongi Lizongi" and "Fuala Mbombo Ngulu Kadia" still echo in the rhythms and melodies of modern-sounding Lingala-language recordings of the '80s. Other early chartbusters included "Quatre Boutons," "Polo," "Si Tu Bois Beau-coup," "Lumumba Héro National," "AZDA," "Matinda," "Course Au Pouvoir" and "Mado."

The present-day Franco style began to emerge in the late '60s and early '70s with songs

like his "Republique du Zaïre," made shortly after "Congo Kinshasa," as his country was formerly known, changed its name to Zaïre in 1971.

But Franco was not merely a highly polished musician who changed with the times. He was a leader, an innovator. The times changed with him.

Though he was not a well-schooled man, Franco was a genius. His lyrics expressed life as it affects everyone, not in an intellectual, subtle way, but rather in the language of the common people. He sang of the agonies of the family struggling with poverty, the woman who falls victim to her own vanity, the satisfaction of success, the once-trusting friendship turned sour, the value of honesty and the futility of pride. His songs evoked familiar vices like rudeness, greed and deceit in ways that are timeless and universal.

His criticism of human folly was as relentless as it was clever. Because of this, he was compelled to go briefly into exile in Brussels after recording his 1981 hit, "Tailleur" (Tailor). That selection, about a piece of cloth being entirely under the control of the tailor who makes clothing from it, was widely interpreted as ridicule of a certain government official with whom Franco had often clashed.

But Franco's influence was never limited to his native country. From his very first recordings, his music crashed the once-impenetrable language barriers of the continent. He made the Zairean style into a kind of international standard and created vast opportunities for an entire generation of Zairean artists. But it was Franco who was number one in Kampala, number one in Mombasa, number one in Luanda, Nairobi, Lusaka, Cotonou and Lomé.

Over the years, two distinct branches of music emerged in Zaire. One consisted of Franco and those who adopted his style; the other was led by another Zairean musical superstar, Tabu Ley Rochereau. The competition between the two was intense, but it never marred the mutual respect and genuine affection they shared for one another.

Although they worked to upstage each other's big hits, they cooperated behind the scenes. In fact, it was through Rochereau, almost 20 years ago, that Franco met his wife, the former Annie Mbili, who was then a member of the Rocherettes dance group that performed on stage with Rochereau's Afrisa International orchestra. When Franco became interested in the woman, Tabu Ley offered to let her leave the group, but only on condition that Franco cared enough to take her as his wife. The two were married in 1971.

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FRANCO

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It was partly through the efforts of Franco's wife that the two musical giants came together more than a decade later to make their historic joint album, *L'Evenement*. While Rochereau was on tour in Paris, she visited him and came up with the idea. That historic hit was followed by another collaboration, the *Choc Choc Choc* double lp.

As fate would have it, Tabu Ley was in the States when Franco died. He postponed a trip to the West Coast to return to Kinshasa for the burial.

I never had the chance to meet Franco personally. But like millions of people the world over, I can say truly that Franco touched my life in the most special of ways. There was the time when I had just moved far from home and friends, and I spent hours on the porch swing memorizing Franco's lyrics: *Likambo niniyo na ngai na ye? ... Okosi ngai, mama, yo na ye*

boboyana There were countless mornings in which I drove to work accompanied by Franco on the car cassette—*Libala oh libala. Babalaka kobala na Kinshasa, babalaka kobala na mokili* not to mention all the nights spent dancing to the latest from his T.P.O.K. Jazz.

Who can forget "Mario, nalembi yo . . ." or "Très Impoli"? And then there was "Missile," with vocals by his long-time sidekick Josky Kiambukuta. Of course, there was "Mbongo" from his live 1978 double lp and "Vaccination Ba Ya Soucis" almost a decade later, both featuring the voice of Simaro Lutumba. The simple, unforgettable sweetness of "Non" will remain with me always, along with "Très Faché," "Tokoma Bacamarade Pamba," "Liyanzi Ekoti Ngai Na Motema," "Nabali Misère," "Bina Na Ngai Na Respect" and so many more.

This is Franco's legacy. It will be ours forever. In that sense, Luambo Makiadi will never die.

TABU LEY ROCHEREAU'S TRIBUTE TO FRANCO



Franco is a monument. Franco was an all-around phenomenon. He was a cultural machine, a musical machine—not only in Zaire or even in Africa, but the world over.

Franco has left a mark on a generation...His name will be inscribed among the big names in African history. When I talk about the greats, I am talking about the great politicians, the great writers and the great artists. And he was the number one of all, the greatest African musician of all time.

He was one of those rare men in the world of culture who had a charisma in human relationships, who had a sharp sense of friendship, of collaboration, of advice, of brotherhood.

Franco never went to the great schools, he never went past primary school. But even I, who followed, who was his competitor on the scene—not his rival, but his competitor—I ask myself sometimes, if Franco had studied as I

did, and if Franco had gone to the university, I think he would have arrived at two positions: he would either be super extraordinary or he would have gone mad, because he had such great potential.

I think that if Franco is dead without having ever attained that education, he was a self-made man. Imagine, 30 years ago he could not even speak 200 words of French, but he became a man who could deliver such great oratory, who would read this great speech of Zairean music, who would arrive at the stadium where they do live interviews without a translator. He would answer spontaneously with the rapidity of someone who has studied a lot. He was a genius. He was a human God in the world of music who has disappeared.

(From an interview with Ibrahim Baki, Washington, DC)