

Part two of a three-part series on the music of the French Antilles.

The Magic of

KASSAV

By Gene Scaramuzzo

Photos by CC Smith



When a group from a small Caribbean island manages, in just a few short years, to create a brand new style of music, to heighten the cultural awareness of its people, and to shake loose the music coming out of Africa, it's time for Americans to conquer their reluctance to check out foreign language music and see what is happening. The music is called zouk, the language Creole, its origin the French Antilles islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, and the group . . . Kassav'.

Kassav' is riding a peak of popularity, fresh from receiving a gold record for their enormous hit, "Zouk La Se Sel Medikaman Nou Ni," as well as SRO dates in Dakar, Abidjan, Bourkina Fasso, Angola and Gabon, highlighted by three nights of packed performances at the Zenith in Paris. At a recent free concert in Basse Terre, Guadeloupe, the group pulled in nearly 80,000 people, approximately 25% of the island's population.

Kassav's zouk, a blending of Haitian and Antillean rhythms with state-of-the-art technology, features a kicking horn section, synthesizers, six lead singers and plenty of percussion. For live zouk, add dancers, costume changes and informal, spontaneous choreography among group members. The overall effect of a Kassav' performance is a roller-coaster ride of quiet moments to climaxes of pure frenzy. And above all, it's always danceable.

The group's zouk has spawned an explosion of recording by a large number of talented Antillean musicians who, before Kassav', searched for musical inspiration from everywhere except their own culture. The success of zouk has turned these musicians' attention inward to begin utilizing elements of their culture that previously had been thought unacceptable, associated with slavery days. Elements like the beguine, mazurka and chouval bwa from Martinique, and gwo ka drums, ti bwa and Saint Jean rhythms from Guadeloupe are being incorporated into the pop songs found on today's Antillean hit parade.

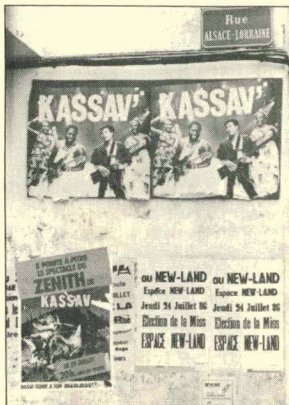
These African-rooted elements are being felt in the motherland too, especially in the francophone countries. The loping ti bwa rhythm which underlies much of Kassav's zouk, along with the jerky syncopation that characterizes much of the remainder of the group's songs, strike a responsive chord in Africa.

Zouk's internationalization is also taking place in the recording studios of Paris, where several Kassav' members have been in great demand for a number of years. The arranging skills of guitarist Jacob Desvarieux, the technical and creative expertise of keyboard player Jean-Claude Naimro and the rhythms of drummer Claude Vamur have made their mark on recent recordings and live performances of Cameroonian, Zairean and Ivory Coast artists such as Jacky Doumbe, Sam Fan Thomas, Bopol Mansiamina, Manu Dibango and South African Miriam

Makeba.

Early collaborations among these artists resulted more in technological changes than in musical ones, especially those in which Desvarieux was involved in the arrangement. However, albums have come out of Paris recently by African artists that either sing about zouk, are zouk-inspired, or are, in fact, zouk. Check the latest releases by Souzy Kassey, *La Vie Continue*; Nyboma and Pepe Kalle, "Zouke-Zouké"; Woya, *Kacou Ananzé*; Abeti, *Je Suis Fâché*; Nayanka Bell, *If You Came to Go*; and Ismael Lô, "Dioumaa."

With the degree of success and impact that Kassav' has experienced over the past few years, it is surprising to learn that this was not the original intention of the group's founder, Pierre-Edouard Decimus. Back in the mid to late '70s, he was one of the leaders of a very successful Haitian-inspired band, the Vikings de la Guadeloupe.



Despite the Vikings' success and many recordings, the experience apparently left a bad taste in his mouth because, after moving to Paris, he decided to get out of the music scene. According to a brief interview with Decimus (conducted by Vivien Goldman in the *New Musical Express* in July 1983), he had one more musical project in mind, "To make just one record the way I'd always wanted to, and then retire."

Teaming up with brother Georges, the pair enlisted the services of Desvarieux, who was just beginning to make a name for himself in Paris for his studio work with African and French pop artists. The result of this collaboration was the first Kassav' album, *Love and Ka Dance*. Since that time (late 1978), instead of quitting the music business, Decimus has overseen the production of nearly 25 Kassav'-related discs which have created an entirely new musical form, dubbed "zouk" by the Antilleans. The band's lineup has changed over the years from its beginnings as a strictly Guadeloupean unit to its present mixture of Guadeloupeans and Martiniquais. Initially all songs

were penned by the Decimus brothers, and backup musicians consisted of an ever-changing lineup of their friends.

Shortly after their debut as a performing band in Guadeloupe in late 1982, the names of many of the original backup musicians disappeared from the album jackets, replaced by Guadeloupeans Patrick Saint-Eloi, Claude Vamur and Cesar Durcin, along with Martiniquais Jean-Philippe Marthey, Jean-Claude Naimro and Jocelyne Bérourard. The transition began with Georges Decimus' first solo album and was complete by late '83 and the release of Desvarieux' first album (GD 016).

Although Kassav' continues to invite guest musicians to perform on their albums, onstage the lineup consists of the aforementioned musicians, along with Georges Decimus and Desvarieux, of course. In addition, the live show features two dancers, Catherine Laupa of Martinique and Marie-Jo Gibon of Guadeloupe, Cameroonian keyboard player Jacques Mbida, and a five-piece Parisian horn section.

Coverage of Kassav' in the French and Antillean media has centered mainly on the personalities of the members: Georges, the quiet one; Patrick, the heartthrob; Jacob, the titan in white overalls, and the like. The term "family of Kassav'" is thrown around constantly.

While I have no desire to file a "teen mag" type of report on the group, the fact remains that it is easy to get swept up in the aura of Kassav'. Good vibes and charisma abound, and when the band performs they share a camaraderie that welcomes the audience into the feeling of the moment as well. Marthey, Saint-Eloi and Bérourard, the front-line singers, elicit the most loving crowd response. Respect and awe are reserved for the creative genius of the musicians behind, who are in constant motion around the stage (Georges Decimus on bass, Desvarieux on guitar, Vamur on drums and Durcin on percussion). Even keyboardist Naimro has a synthesizer he slings over his shoulder and then dances to the center of the stage at just the right moments, to great effect. (The steel-drum sound in the outro to "Zouk La Se Sel Medikaman Nou Ni" is provided by Naimro in this manner.)

Pierre-Edouard Decimus has quit performing live with the band for the time being, devoting himself to keeping the touring unit operating efficiently. The Kassav' entourage is a potentially unwieldy affair, consisting of the band, a fashion show, and a "Tour de France" type bicycling team. Surprisingly, for its size, it operates very professionally.

Media coverage in the Antilles has also focused on the alliance between Guadeloupe and Martinique being forged by Kassav's mixed lineup. This is more significant than one might think as one of the unfortunate consequences of France's governmental involvement in the French Anti-

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les has been a gradual building of animosity between many of the two islands' inhabitants. The Martiniquais we encountered during our visit were quick to point out, unsolicited, the differences between themselves and Guadeloupians. The Guadeloupians were much less verbal about this; however, those involved in the separatist movement are seeking Guadeloupean independence, not Antillean independence. Kassav's alliance of Guadeloupean and Martinique, like their use of traditional Antillean rhythms and instruments, is working toward building a stronger Antillean identity as opposed to a Martiniquean, Guadeloupean or French identity.

Becoming familiar with Kassav's recorded output is a complicated affair which becomes more bewildering with the increasing availability of their catalog. As more of their albums surface in the States, undated and out of chronological order, Kassav has taken on the look of a band with unpredictable musical directions, varying from disco to soca to cadence to zouk. The musical evolution of the band from experimental pioneers to the creators of a new musical form can be lost in the confusion. Adding to the complexity, their catalog grows even larger considering that all the band's members perform on each other's solo albums, in effect making every solo album a Kassav' album. Even the style of solo albums remains in the Kassav' format. As Naimro explained, "We try to make solo albums a little bit different, but with the same zouk, since we know we'll have to play them live onstage as Kassav'."

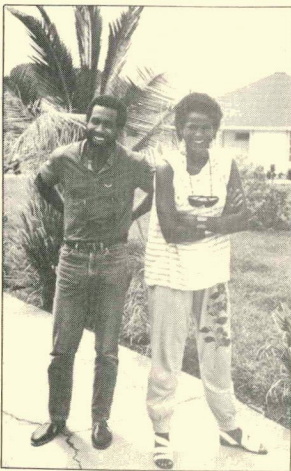
The last source of confusion surrounding Kassav's recorded output is the band's Parliament/Funkadelic-like alter ego, Soukoue Ko Ou. This name has been attributed to four discs which came out yearly for Christmas/Carnival time from 1981 to 1984, and which featured Pierre-Edouard Decimus and the early, ever-shifting Kassav' lineup.

When seen in the light of the actual chronology of Kassav's entire catalog of album releases (see discography), the group spent about four years searching for a distinctive style, hitting on it in late '83 with the first solo release by Desvarieux, which included the smash hit "Banzawa." Their success occurred just at the time they gained distribution rights over to the Georges Debs' label of Martinique, so consequently any Kassav'-related album on GD Productions is likely to feature their popular zouk sound.

Before "Banzawa," Kassav' technically consisted of the Decimus brothers, with Desvarieux as arranger. The records from this initial phase of their career were generally uneven attempts, ranging from moments of overcommercialization to hints of shining originality which foreshadowed

their future success. The lineup of musicians changed from album to album, but a core unit did exist, including a few who are still with the band today. The people who appeared most often on these early discs were singers Sylvia Drai and Jocelyne Mocka, keyboardists Georges Rodi and Robert Benzhim (Benjamin), horn players Alain Hatot, Tony Russo, Freddy Houssepian and Hamid Belhocine, drummer Philippe Drai, and ka drummers Amel Gammalame and Ismar Loche. As mentioned, several of these musicians — Rodi, Hatot, Russo, Houssepian, Belhocine and Sylvia Drai — still contribute to Kassav' recordings, although they are not part of the live show.

Of the pre-GD label productions (in other words, everything before late 1983), quite a few discs stand out in spite of their incon-



Kassav's Jean-Claude Naimro and Jocelyne Bérourard

sistency. I'm especially fond of their fourth record (*Kassav'*, 3A 210), the first consistently Antillean of the early releases, which includes great cadence cuts like "Eva," "Bolero," and "Lajan an Moin an Vouey an Pa Vouey." The jacket of this particular album credits only two names, Pierre-Edouard Decimus and Jocelyne Mocka, a singer who had appeared on every Kassav' album to that point. It is ironic that soon after receiving top billing on this fourth Kassav' album and even releasing a solo album with Kassav' backing him (*Greviss*, HDD 2402), Mocka's association with the group abruptly ended sometime in 1983.

The debut Kassav' disc, *Love and Ka Dance*, is interesting more for its historic value than the music. From a cultural standpoint, *Love and Ka Dance* and the second Kassav' album, *Lague Moin*, with their strong use of the gwo ka, are landmark albums which put into motion an Antillean pride that had almost been

quashed by European domination.

The gwo ka, a very important vestige of the African roots of the Antillean people, had become associated by Europeans and locals alike with the undesirable element of the islands. In addition, a prevailing European sentiment that it took no skill to play the gwo ka relegated the drums to non-instrument status and a consequent non-musician status to players of the drum. The use of the gwo ka on the early Kassav' albums signaled the beginning of legitimization, in the eyes of the people, of their roots. It is ironic that Kassav' has virtually abandoned the use of the gwo ka, both live and on record, while their success encouraged a large number of Antillean musicians like Sartana, Gazoline and Batako to heavily incorporate gwo ka into their music.

Another cultural landmark was the use by Decimus, on the first Soukoue Ko Ou disc, of the Saint Jean rhythm, a traditional Guadeloupean carnival rhythm. The Saint Jean rhythm was used earlier, on the cut "Kassav'" from *Love and Ka Dance*, but on the Soukoue Ko Ou record, *Noel Aux Antilles*, it's given a 15-minute workout. Although spirited, this first Soukoue Ko Ou disc does not take off like the second, entitled *Vacances*, which is truly excellent. *Vacances* features a cadence treatment of a Tabou Combo medley called "New York Ameliore" and one by the master of the tambour, chouval bwa star Dede Saint-Prix, "Hommage a DD." If I had to make a choice, I'd say that "Hommage a DD" is one of my favorite Kassav' songs.

From 1983 to 1984, as Pierre-Edouard and Georges Decimus gradually added the band members that brought Kassav' to its present lineup, the sound crystallized and the records began to be consistently good. Georges' two solo albums, *Nwel* and *La Vie*, are the first to credit such musicians and singers as Saint-Eloi, Naimro, Vamur, Bérourard and Marthely. Both are good albums that get very close to the current Kassav' sound, although they are very heavy on gwo ka. In fact, the gwo ka is more predominant on these two albums than any other Kassav'-related disc. ("Nwel," from the first solo album, was chosen by Globestyle Records for inclusion in their compilation disc *Dance! Cadence!*; in fact, I lean toward the first solo disc a bit more than *La Vie*.)

With the GD label Kassav' records, making distinctions among them becomes a matter of personal preference. Whether solo or group discs, they all feature Kassav' and their trademark sound. To my ears, some of these recordings break new musical ground while others rest on the laurels of already-proven success.

Highly recommended — in fact "must haves" for those truly interested — are Desvarieux's first solo disc, both of the Desvarieux/Decimus collaboration albums (GD 022, GD 035), and the last Kassav' release (GD 027). The first Desvarieux/Decimus record includes the song that

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and discuss matters of music with the musicians. And he directs the recording session.

Q: Do you feel that the producers help or hinder the musicians here?

A: Well, it depends. Right now, the producers don't really help the musicians. What they're doing is, since Kassav' is so successful, they're asking all the bands to sound like Kassav' so they can earn big money. And us, since we created the style, we're always searching for new ideas for each new record. And this costs a lot of money [in studio time].

The other bands come and listen to us, figure out what we did, and then go off and do the same. So they don't do any experimenting; they're reproducing. So it doesn't cost them any money. So the producers don't have to invest much money. They make a record inexpensively, and even if the record doesn't sell much, they still make money.

So right now it's not very good, because all the bands are trying to do the same as us. They don't sell as much as we do, in fact, much less. But besides the money, it's not very good for the music. Ten years ago when there were Antillean bands like Malavoi, Perfecta, Les Aglions, they were each doing their own style of music. But now you can hear 10 bands and they'll all play the same style. With 10 bands you have 10 times the same thing. You have Kassav' and nine more bands trying to sound like

Kassav'. So it's not very good for the music. **Q:** There are a few people in Guadeloupe, like journalist Fox Bravo and radio-station manager Freddy Marshall, who are really trying to promote the music. Are they helping?



Master zoukeur Desvarieux.

A: Yes. Freddy Marshall produced Kassav' in the beginning. But afterwards he had some troubles and couldn't continue. Now he works for the radio [Radio Caraïbe]. But he did a lot of things to help the music; now he doesn't produce anymore. It's a shame.

With Fox Bravo it's the same. He's another who did something for the music. He continues to promote the music by writing articles in magazines and newspapers and things like that. He does things. But, unfortunately, right now there's not too much creativity [for him to write about].

Q: Do you foresee that Kassav' will someday sing some songs in English for the American audience?

A: No, we don't speak English, so if we sing in English it's not going to sound right. Anyway, I don't think that language is really a problem. In the world there are not that many people who speak English, except for America and England, yet there are so many American and English records sold [around the world]. I think people listen to our music if they like the way it sounds, even if they speak English. I think it's the same everywhere: The music is a stronger language than the language itself. If it's in French, in Creole, anything... if the music pleases, the language isn't important.

Q: Some of the most popular Haitian bands, like Tabou Combo, sing songs in English.

A: Yes, but Tabou Combo live in New York and speak English now. But just because they sing songs in English doesn't mean that they sell records to Americans. If someday the music pleases Americans, they're going to buy it. It's not the fact that they sing in English that's going to change things ★

Kassav' Discography

Kassav'	<i>Love and Ka Dance</i>	CEL 6790	1979
Kassav'	<i>Lague Moin</i>	CEL 6791	1980
Kassav'	# 3	3A 205	
Kassav'	"Eva"	3A 210	
Kassav'	# 5	LM 6010	
Georges Decimus	"Nwel"	LM 6011	
P.E. Decimus	"Waya Se Sa Ki Peyi La/ Carnaval Ave Le Roi et La Reine"	LM 6019	
Kassav'	<i>Passeport</i>	Polydor 813	1983
Georges Decimus	<i>La Vie</i>	GP 4001	
Jacob F. Desvarieux	"Banzawa"	GD 016	1983
Jean-Philippe Marthey	"Ti Coq"	GD 017	
Kassav'	"Aye"	GD 018	1984
Patrick Saint-Eloi	"A La Demande"	GD 020	1984
Decimus/Desvarieux	"Yéyéle"	GD 020	1984
Jean-Philippe Marthey	"Touloulou"	GD 023	1985
Jacob Desvarieux	<i>Oh Madiana</i>	GD 025	1985
Jean-Claude Naimro	<i>En Balaté</i>	GD 026	1985
Kassav'	"An-Ba-Chen'n La"	GD 027	1985
Marthey/Saint-Eloi	"Ou Pa Ka Sav"	GD 034	1985
Decimus/Desvarieux	"Goree"	GD 035	1986
Soukoue Ko Ou	<i>Noel Aux Antilles</i>	NR 1150	
Soukoue Ko Ou	<i>Vacances</i>	NR 1153	
Soukoue Ko Ou	<i>Noel Aux Antilles Vol. 2</i>	NR 1156	
Soukoue Ko Ou	<i>Lentement Vol. 4</i>	NR 1158	1984



Dancer Catherine Laupa and keyboardist J.C. Naimro.

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really took Kassav' over the top, "Zouk La Se Sel Medikaman Nou Ni."

Of the latter two Soukoue Ko Ou discs, *Lentement Vol. 4* is downright bad, while *Noel Aux Antilles Vol. 2* is a joy. The same spirit head on the first *Noel Aux Antilles* disc is present on this one, but the music is much more successfully realized.

I hesitate to direct readers to just the few above-mentioned discs, but from a catalog of nearly 25 records, many might appreciate these suggestions. Readers with unlimited resources might want to go for the whole catalog; there's at least one gem on every record. Those who are drawn in by the exciting sound of Kassav's zouk will probably be ready to taste some of the hit records by other popular zouk artists. (Check the overview of the best in zouk in the last issue of *The Beat*, Vol. V #4) Sa ka zouké! ★