



Interview with "Zoukmaster" Jacob Desvarieux



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Singer/songwriter/guitarist/arranger Jacob F. Desvarieux is in the forefront of a musical revolution that is sweeping the francophone countries of Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. His trademark sound of crystal-clear recordings with multiple synthesizers and other electronics coupled with natural percussion instruments and vocals first began to appear in the recordings of African artists made in Paris in the '70s. His arranging and guitar playing during this period built the foundation on which Kassav' was later constructed.

Although Kassav' was originally the brainstorm of Pierre-Edouard Decimus, the concept was not brought to fruition until Decimus teamed up with fellow Guadeloupean Desvarieux, who provided the state-of-the-art sound which blew away the Antillean people.

Even with the group's increasingly busy touring schedule, Desvarieux continues to devote as much time as possible to his first love — the recording studio. Besides putting the finishing touches on the next Kassav' disc, a solo effort by Jocelyne Bérourard, he's been busy arranging and playing guitar with a large number of popular African artists who want to assimilate the Kassav' sound (and the Kassav' success) into their music. More and more records are appearing on which Desvarieux has laid his magical touch. It's truly a musical revolution happening right before our ears.

From a man with such credentials and imposing physical size, one might expect to find an unapproachable, preoccupied attitude. But Desvarieux's pleasant demeanor and preference for staying in the background serve to make him an even more impressive human being. When we met with him in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, the band was experiencing a sort of homecoming, getting the opportunity to visit with family and friends while also putting in several performances around the island. On one particularly beautiful morning, we had the following conversation.

Interview with Jacob F. Desvarieux, Guadeloupe, French West Indies, July 1986. Conducted by Gene Scaramuzzo and CC Smith.

Translation by Brigitte S. Gomane.

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Jacob Desvarieux

BEAT: Is it true you were raised in Africa?
DESVARIEUX: Yes, I was there when I was 12 years old; I lived for two years in Senegal. That's where I started to play the guitar. I had a guitar, but I didn't know how to play. My neighbor was playing in a band, but it was 1968 and life was difficult over there, so he was playing in a band but he didn't have a guitar. So he was taking my guitar and using it to play. Since he was teaching all his little brothers how to play music, I wanted him to teach me, too. I learned a song and I continued after that.

After that I went to France and we formed a band in school, a small band, just for fun. I continued to play until the point when it was either go to school or make music. And I continued like that. Then after that I went to Paris, because before that I had been in Marseilles, in the south of France. In Paris I started to do studio work, playing on records with different people. One day I met Pierre-Edouard Decimus, who was looking for an arranger. He wanted to make a record, so somebody introduced him to me. I said okay, but we didn't do the record at that time. We talked a lot, and six months later he came back and said he was ready to make the record. He said he'd like to make Antillean music, but in a style that would sound like American disco, that could be listened to in discotheques, on the radio, etc., like any other music.

The idea was, at that time, when people went into the discotheques they couldn't hear Antillean music because the records didn't have a good sound. We didn't have the technology; we didn't have the means for the technology. Because, you see, here there are 300,000 inhabitants. And with 300,000 inhabitants, you can't sell a lot of records. That's why the producers can't put much money into a record. So we had to find a way to do a record that would be as good as any other music, and which could eventually be sold beyond the Antilles. So we started to work on that and we made the first Kassav' record. It was a bit successful in the Antilles, mainly because it was a new idea.

At that time there was mainly Haitian music here. There was *only* that. There weren't many Antillean groups because they weren't successful when compared to the Haitian music. When you looked at the hit parade of records sold, you'd find 30 Haitian records before you'd find one Antillean record.

Q: What year are you talking about?

A: 1978-79. So we did that first record and it was slightly successful. It sold approximately 5,000 copies. But the idea pleased the media — the radio, tv, the journalists, the intellectuals. It was successful because it was Antillean music ... it was local.

But it was also better made than other Antillean discs. The instruments and vocals

were in tune, and there were more sounds, like synthesizers and things like that — all the things that were not heard in Antillean records. When Antillean bands did records, the instruments were always out of tune. So our record was an evolution, and that pleased the media. So then we made a second disc and a third disc, and gradually they were more and more successful, until around 1983 when we started to have really big success.

Q: Was this success due to a particular song?

A: Yes. I made a record called "Banzawa." It was a solo disc (Jacob F. Desvarieux, GD 016), and it was at this point that things really took off, because it was with this album that Africa started to discover Kassav'.

In Africa there are a lot of people but there are also many pirates who make pirated records and cassettes. But since there are a lot of people, we still managed to sell a lot of records and to become known. And we started to become known in France also, which consequently raised record sales. After that, all the older records began to sell. Shortly after this, we made "Zouk La Se Sel Medikaman Nou Ni," which broke all barriers and sold 100,000 copies. We got a gold record, and that was the first time a band from the Antilles received one. So that's what really launched the group and enabled us to tour everywhere.

Q: Who gives the gold record award?

A: The producer. There's an organization called SACEM which determines that a group has sold 100,000 records. At this point the producer asks for a gold record, but it's the producer who pays for it.

Q: Guadeloupian record producer Henri Debs says that he has never given a gold record. Is it solely his decision?

A: Until now there's been just one group who *perhaps* sold enough records — Les Aiglons. But I don't know, it's only Debs who knows. Nobody knows how many records have been sold, plus there are so many pirated discs, and those don't count. But to my knowledge there's no band in the Antilles that has sold 100,000 discs.

Q: We have a record by (Zairean artist) Bopoli Mamsiama which you produced. Have you done many other discs with African artists?

A: Yes, at one time I did a lot. And other members of Kassav', like (keyboardist) Jean-Claude Naimro and (drummer) Claude Vamur, also played on many African discs, because at the time when we were in Paris we were doing a lot of studio work. There were not many Antillean groups recording in Paris; there were mostly African groups and also French artists who were doing disco and things like that. We recorded a lot.

Q: So the blending of Antillean styles with African music happened in Paris, not in Africa?

A: Right. In Paris. Because you see it's not really like the music here. At the beginning

there was the African music; African people came here in slavery. There are still some little things that are African here, but they've evolved differently. And when we played on African records we saw a bit of the connections that exist in the musics. The African music is more elaborate in terms of rhythm. But when it comes to harmony, there's not much. Since we were also playing European music, French popular music, etc., we were able to find a kind of music that on the one hand would have the rhythm of black music and on the other hand the harmony of white music.

Q: We find strong similarities between the makossa of Cameroon, Congolese music and your music.

A: It's normal, because the people who are in the Antilles come from those regions of Africa. In the beginning, when there was just traditional folk music, that folk music came here through slavery. But it has evolved differently here. It's like the European folk musics have evolved differently in America. But in the beginning, they were the same thing. The similarities you may hear between our music and makossa were there since the days of folk music. It's not because we've listened to makossa now and copied it; it's because it was already like that in our folklore.

Q: When you play the guitar, do you play in specific African styles, like highlife or Congolese?

A: I don't know, it's a bit of everything. In fact, I the beginning I wasn't playing Antillean music at all; I was playing rock. My first experience playing Antillean music was with Kassav'. So I tried to find a compromise style between what I already knew and what I needed to do. Sure, it's a compromise between a lot of things because Antillean music is also a mixture of many things. You see, when you listen to the folk music from here, it's a mixture of African musics and European musics. There were Spanish here, and English, French ... it's a mixture of all of that. In the music of Kassav' sometimes the piano player plays in a Cuban style, the bass player plays funk, the guitar highlife ... so you see you have a lot of things. It's like when you see the people on the street; to say exactly where they came from ...

Q: Do producers Henri and Georges Debs exercise much control over their artists' music?

A: Henri Debs, yes, because he's a musician. At the beginning of his career he was a musician, and only later did he become a producer. When he produces a record, he's in the studio listening and he says what he thinks is good and bad. Georges Debs is not a musician; he's a financier. But he comes to the studio too, but just to see what's happening ... just for kicks, really, to have a good time. But he doesn't know at all about recording. What he knows how to do, once the recording is finished, is how to take the finished tape and sell it. It's his business to sell the discs. Henri Debs, he's a musician. He can come into the studio

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 Aiglons, 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'	Love and Ka Dance	CEL 6790	1979
Kassav'	Lague Moin	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'	Passoport	Polydor 813	1983
Georges Decimus	La Vie	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	"Véléle"	GD 020	1984
Jean-Philippe Marthey	"Touloulou"	GD 023	1985
Jacob Desvarieux	Oh Madiana	GD 025	1985
Jean-Claude Naimro	En Balaté	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	Noel Aux Antilles	NR 1150	
Soukoue Ko Ou	Vacances	NR 1153	
Soukoue Ko Ou	Noel Aux Antilles Vol. 2	NR 1156	
Soukoue Ko Ou	Lentement Vol. 4	NR 1158	1984



Dancer Catherine Laupa and keyboardist J.C. Naimro.

KASSAV'

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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! ★