



At times  
Remmy Ongala looks  
like a wild man, his  
bare chest draped  
with strings of cowries  
and assorted amulets,

his lower body swathed in brightly colored cloth. A wig of teased grass crowns the snaky dreadlocks that fall haphazardly about his head. On other occasions he's a Tonton Macoute, sinister, menacing, locks hidden under a wide-brim, flattop hat, his eyes staking out the crowd from behind the cover of dark glasses. A T-shirt and khaki trousers mold themselves to his well-rounded frame; a guitar rides his protruding belly like a high-strung AK-47.

Ongala's looks are striking but it is his music that commands serious attention. He sometimes strolls on stage alone at the beginning of a show, plucking his guitar while introducing the members of his Orchestre Super Matimila as one by one they take the stage to pick up the beat. When the band hits full stride, Ongala begins to sing with a surprising sweetness and clarity. His words, usually in Swahili, ride the repeating guitar riffs, melodious and intense. In a voice that sounds strikingly like Madilu System of O.K. Jazz, Ongala delivers a lyric as if he owns the words. Whether or not you understand his message, this is clearly a man of passion.

His music is a throwback to the late '60s and early '70s, a rootsy blend of Congo music and the rhythms of East Africa. Listen to Original Music's wonderful oldies collection *The Tanzania Sound* (especially Salim Abdullah with the Cuban Marimba Band, Hodi Boys, National

Jazz Band) and some early Franco (perhaps *L'Afrique Danse No. 6* from SonoDisc, which still occasionally pops up in African record bins) and you'll hear where Ongala and Super Matimila are coming from. It's a stripped-down sound, lean and agile, no drum machines, synthesizers or redundant players clogging and suffocating the music—a space for everyone and everyone in his place.

Sounding hauntingly like Franco, Ongala plucks his guitar, blending seamlessly with a second lead and accompanying rhythm guitar. Kick-drum and congas carry on for a generally absent bass while driving the music in a kind of slowed-down *benga* beat. A muted cymbal cracks in double time much as the maracas did two or three decades ago. And a saxophone, the Congolese guitar's most complementary consort, backs and fills and solos.

Ongala calls his music *ubongo*, the Swahili word for brain, because it is "music of the brain; it's heavy thinking music." Since he sings in Swahili, most Westerners must be content with the lilting musical quality of his voice. But it helps to know that the words nipping sweetly at our ears have a keen and powerful bite when their meaning is understood.

"I sing about things everyone should have in life that will give us all a certain equality," he says. "As for me and my songs, I always go to the world. The world is a prison, because there are also people who are proud of their lives and others who are always suffering...I've seen people who had a lot of money and they're all dead. They leave everything here on the earth."

"Many musicians sing about love, about life. It's always like that. And they don't sing about something that's going to make people [better], [about] what needs to be done in this world. So I try not to sing very much of love, [but] to try to illuminate the situation of the world."

At the time of his birth in 1947, poverty and inequality were everywhere in the old Belgian Congo (now Zaire), one of the most severe and

exploitative of Europe's African colonies. Ongala's family lived in the eastern part of the country in Kindu, about 200 miles west of Lake Tanganyika and the borders of Burundi and Tanzania (although he has also claimed Kisan-gani some 250 miles to the north). His beginnings, as he tells it, were extraordinary, a marathon of sorts, both distressing and magical.

Like thousands of other African men who fought for their colonial occupiers during World War II, Ongala's father returned home at war's end, married, and settled back into the life of his country. His wife became pregnant but the child died. A second pregnancy again ended tragically. In despair his mother went one day to see a local traditional doctor. "The doctor said it was the same child who arrives each time," Ongala relates. "So he said to my mother, 'The next time you are pregnant you mustn't go to a hospital. Come to talk to me, and I'll explain how to have the child.'"

When time came for her to give birth, she followed the traditional doctor's instructions and delivered the baby, who turned out to be Ongala, in the forest with the doctor in attendance. "I was born feet first with two front teeth. To us, there is a special significance when you are born with two teeth." It is, he explains, almost like an inheritance; one born in such circumstances can become a traditional doctor if he chooses. He was named Ramadhani Ongala Mtoro, and later when he decided to become a musician, he adopted the title "doctor" in remembrance of his auspicious birth.

The doctor warned Ongala's mother never to cut his hair, an admonition she rigidly followed for fear of losing her thrice-born child. His shaggy locks were a source of shame and ridicule but his mother remained steadfast. Only once, on her death, did Ongala take a razor to his head. Later, he says with a laugh, "when records by Bob Marley came out, I saw that he had hair like mine. So after that I felt all right. I became proud of my locks."

Music is an integral part of life in Africa; it accompanies the routine as well as the ritual. From the moment of birth Ongala was immersed in it. As a young boy, he quickly learned to play hand drums from his father who was a

REMMY ONGALA:

UBONGO

traditional singer and drummer. As a teen-ager in the early '60s, he taught himself to play guitar. The new urban Congo music style was flourishing during his youth. Radio and records brought the sounds of Kinshasa and the rest of the world to even the most remote villages.

Ongala loved listening to Cuban records—strange yet familiar African rhythms returning home from across the Atlantic. From Kinshasa rang the golden voice of Joseph Kabasele and the mellow rumba guitar of Franco. These, Ongala fondly recalls, were his

primary musical influences.

As his Franco-like guitar picking improved, he began to play professionally, getting gigs with assorted African jazz groups at local hotels in eastern Zaire. His big break came in 1978

*Continued on page 28*



PHOTO BY FRANCIS DRAPE

# MAN *has come*

BY GARY STEWART

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when an uncle living in the Tanzanian capital of Dar-es-Salaam sent for him to come join an ascendant band called *Orchestre Makassy*. He left Makassy after nearly three years to join *Orchestre Matimila*, a new band he soon made his own.

In the '60s and early '70s Tanzania succumbed to the powerful influence of Congo music, as did most of the rest of Africa. But in the middle to late '70s, as the once-prosperous East African Community disintegrated and Tanzania chose to follow the development prescriptions of charismatic President Julius Nyerere in increasing isolation, the music scene in Dar-es-Salaam was transformed.

As the country began to look inward, Nyerere set up a Ministry of National Youth and Culture to foster local styles of music and dance. But failed development experiments, the shock of rising world oil prices, declining prices for Tanzanian exports, and the war with neighboring Uganda which led to the ouster of the notorious Idi Amin, plunged the Tanzanian economy into decline. Important foreign currency necessary to finance imports, including musical instruments and recording equipment, began to dry up. A record-pressing plant planned in the '60s has yet to be set up although much of the equipment was purchased in the '70s. The Tanzanian Film Company, which is responsible for the country's recording industry, could barely maintain a rudimentary two-track recording studio. (For an excellent look at the recording industry in small countries including Tanzania, see *Big Sounds From Small Peoples* by Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, London, Constable, 1984.)

The result has been a largely isolated but self-contained and even flourishing local music industry. Radio Tanzania, unable to acquire foreign exchange to purchase imported records, began to stock a tape library of music it recorded with local bands. Live music replaced disco in many urban clubs. Ongala estimates there are at least 20 bands playing every night in Dar-es-Salaam. It is within this atmosphere that *Orchestre Super Matimila* developed.



The band got its name from a small village of a friend of Ongala's and its equipment from a local businessman with enough connections to navigate the country's import laws. They played as many as five live shows a week and began to record some of their best songs for Radio Tanzania. In addition to gaining valuable radio airplay, the tapes were often sent to neighboring Kenya for pressing into records, which in turn spread the band's reputation beyond Tanzania's borders.

But increasing fame failed to yield increasing fortune. "There is no copyright. There are no unions. I'm just beginning to sort that out," Ongala complains. "You send your tape to Kenya to make records, 2,000 records. He says to you, 'I'll put 1,000 out,' when in fact he's put 2,000 out. What can you do?"

What Ongala did was to give one of his tapes to an English friend who was returning to London after visiting Dar-es-Salaam. The friend passed the tape on, and it found its way to WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance). From that chance introduction, Ongala and his band were invited to join the 1988 WOMAD tour, during which they performed to wide critical acclaim. At the same time, the WOMAD record label issued an album of some of the group's best radio tapes from the early '80s.

The lp, *Nalilia Mwana* (I Cry for a Child), is probably Ongala's finest work (liner notes refer to "inferior" sound quality but that is an unfortunate exaggeration). It offers songs like "Sika

Ya Kufa" (The Day I Die) about the death of a fellow musician, "Ndumila Kuwili" (Don't Speak with Two Mouths), and "Mnyonge Hana Haki" (The Poor Have No Rights). "I think all the time for the poor, like 'Sauti Ya Mnyonge,'" he says citing a song that translates as the voice of the poor or underdog from an earlier lp, *On Stage With Remmy Ongala*.

On record he uses more vocal harmony than in live performance. A second lead and backing vocals appear on several songs. Harmonizing saxophones and even trumpets show up on others. But the sound of Ongala insistently spitting out his message over rolling, repeating, equally insistent guitars dominates the music.

Rave notices for his work with WOMAD led to the group's inclusion in the 1989 WOMAD tour and a brand-new album, *Songs for the Poor Man*, on WOMAD-affiliated Real World Records. Recorded in England at the Real World Studios, *Poor Man* is Super Matimila's first work in a modern Western studio. As always the messages are strong and passionate, as in a remake of "Sauti Ya Mnyonge," "Karola," which says "be careful in a world where you believe there is goodness," and the anticrist "Kipenda Roho."

Next to the anguish of poverty, the evil of racism is close to Ongala's heart. He is married to a white Englishwoman with whom he has three children. "In the world now, it's a new world," he reasons, "we don't have the old world that we had....My children, they're not

Continued on page 63

## HEY MR. MUSIC

Continued from page 33

arrival of a double-lp recorded at the Zenith in Paris, *Live Au Zenith* (Disc Esperance). Containing many of the group's greatest hits, this release captures their live groove. It's recorded on some kind of digital gizmo that, like all such gizmos, robs the music slightly of some of the warmth and emotion. Also, the sound of thousands of people going nutty out in the audience does intrude over the musical times. But it's the best Tabou Combo live record I have heard since *8th Sacrement*. Watch for it in the States on the Mini label.

**El Hamman** (Blue Moon Prods.) by Cheb Tati is certainly an interesting steamer. Engineered and mixed by Dennis Bovell, he plays on two tracks and brings the same scale of imagination to this rare release that he used on those great pioneering U.K. dub records. Although not as radical a mix as Rashid conjured up with the last Chaba Fadel/Cheb Sahraoui lp, this is a powerful and seriously eclectic instrumental mixup that allows Tati to sing his heart out both in a forceful and approachable vocal style. The lp could develop into a major dance-floor force.



Finally a new release from London is Dembe Konte, Kausu Kuyatch and the Jali Roll Orchestra's *Jali Roll* (Rogue). From the punning title you can tell those wild, wacky and creative boys of British/Middle European/African crossover, the 3 Mustaphas 3, are involved. They add a solid shuffling rhythm section to the kora groove, while London-based acoustic guitarist Abdul Tee-Jay gives body to the kora's lilt. All in all, a record rightly described as one of the most successful world fusions since *Songhai*.

Dave Hucker, London's preeminent club dj, holds forth six nights a week at El Tango, upstairs at Ronnie Scott's.

## BRAZIL BEAT

Continued from page 40

strongly as those of the favela she had adopted as her own. This samba captures all their feeling of both love and loss.

### The Book...

As it happens, Knopf published in February a book that fits perfectly with this column, *Samba* by Alma Guillermoprieto (\$19.95), which I have already praised highly in the *Washington Post*. The author is a journalist and was most recently South American Bureau Chief for *Newsweek*. In August 1987, she began visiting the Mangueira favela. Before long, she was deeply involved in the lives of dozens of people there who opened both their homes and their hearts to her. And she was just as deeply involved in the life of the Mangueira samba school and its preparations for the carnival coming in February 1988. The school had won first prize in the last two years, something accomplished previously by only two other schools in the history of carnival. The competition was fierce, the tension great, and Guillermoprieto could look forward to her own participation as a costumed dancer in the parade.

By the time carnival came around, several people had been murdered, many lives had changed, few for the better, and the ceaseless struggle—for jobs, money, food—continued as it always had. But, in the midst of cocaine trafficking, violence and poverty, the one constant remained samba, the dance and the music, and the ultimate expression of it, for the people of Mangueira, in carnival.

Guillermoprieto brilliantly captures all of it, the joy and the occasional terror, the squalor of daily life and the brief ecstasy of carnival, the exhaustion and the endless music, something like a five-month-long Reggae Sunsplash, without the luxury hotels and with a four-day parade at the end. To put it simply, I do not think a better book has ever been written about the place of music in the Third World and about its power to sustain a people. Samba, it makes clear, "suffers but doesn't die." ★

## REMMY ONGALA

Continued from page 28

white and they're not black, they're children. We come from the same Father. We're different, but we come from the same place...My children are the children of the whole world. My children are everyone's children...I can't work with that [racist] system." He sings about it in "Kipenda Roho": *What the heart loves/The*

## AFRICANA

Continued from page 35

life-saving program—also using popular music—in Zaire.

AID money provided technical support for Franco's popular *Attention NA SIDA*, which warned the Zairean people about the dreaded AIDS virus which, three years later, some have claimed ended the life of the artist himself. Under the same program, such groups as Zaiko Langa Langa have made radio and tv spots urging caution in sexual relations, marital fidelity and, above all, compassion for family members and friends suffering from the disease.

More recently, that project, which has a contract with Population Services International (PSI), sponsored a recording by Bobongo—"Maudit Virus." "You only live once. Beware, there is danger of death," the song begins. "We must remain faithful, there are no cures for AIDS..." The song urges "abstinence for youth, fidelity for couples," and includes the words of a person with the disease: "Bit by bit, the bird makes his nest. Slowly, gently, I fade away. My friends are abandoning me. If I'm ill, why flee from me? I need you to love me."

Elizabeth Liebow, a PSI employee familiar with the Zairean media project, claims that the program involved no effort whatsoever to limit family size and that their work with local musicians was under the strict supervision of the Kinshasa government.



The impact of the Ade propaganda drive has not yet been determined, but another well-known juju artist, in Washington to prepare for a U.S. tour in late spring, said privately he felt the record and the disclosure of its purpose would hurt Ade's career.

Others say the people might only remember more typical admonitions by Ade: "Making love is good after all, it can only result in a child" ("My Dear"); or "The child is the profit of life . . . May this child grow up, get married and have many children of his own" ("The Child"). ★

body follows/Love has no color/Love has no race.

And how is his message being received in the West? "Why shouldn't it be accepted?" he retorts. Why not indeed. After all it is music for the brain and for the feet and hips. If acceptance is not yet total, at least this dreadlocked, consciousness-raising African is beginning to get a hearing. ★