

# The Music of Sierra Leone:



By Gary Stewart



PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

**F**REETOWN, Sierra Leone—Down at the foot of Macfoy Lane near the heart of the city, voracious tropical undergrowth reclaims crumbling foundations of old British military barracks, while a few yards away the waters of Whiteman's Bay lap at the rocky shore. The sound of a loping bass and Nyahbinghi drums drifts from an unseen tape player in harmony with a warm onshore breeze. Seated nearby in the shade of a mango tree, a small group of Rastafarians passes the pipe and reasons together.

Like their brethren in Montego Bay and Kingston, these sons and daughters of Africa in Congo Town on the western edge of Freetown, seek relief from the slave mentality imposed by European colonialism and its homegrown successor. The meter and the message of reggae is big on these West African shores, where connections to the Caribbean abound.

For centuries inhabitants of these lands had been herded onto slave ships anchored in Whiteman's Bay and other inlets along the Sierra Leone River to begin the heinous voyage to sugar and tobacco plantations in the West Indies. As the abolitionist movement gained ground in the late 18th century, a new colony free from

Left: The Rastas of Whiteman's Bay, Freetown, (from left) Kathos Jibao Mattai, Musa Sei, Lamin Joaque and Aruna Deen, the artist who created the portraits on exhibit. Below: Label from a Bassophone 78 rpm shellac disc, probably from the '50s.

slavery but governed by the British was founded at Freetown. Many Africans who escaped from slavery in the Americas and others recaptured from slavers on the high seas by abolitionist forces were settled in this new "province of freedom."

In the early 1850s a missionary named Sigismund Koelle, who had gone to Freetown to teach Greek, Hebrew and Arabic at the newly established Fourah Bay Institution (soon to become Fourah Bay College), documented 160 languages and 40 dialects in Freetown—people from up and down the coast and across the continent, as far away as Malawi and Mozambique.

A new Creole culture and language—both called Krio—developed within this omnifarious mix. The language, with its English-based vocabulary and African grammar, bears a strong similarity to Jamaican patois. Jamaica also contributed its rebellious Maroon population to Sierra Leone at the end of the 18th century when many were deported by the British, first to Nova Scotia and then again to Freetown. Liberated Africans came from other Caribbean islands and the United States as well, bringing with them traces of the old Africa and the New World.

Much of the colony's music was generated by a plethora of self-help societies or companies (*compin*) which formed for the mutual benefit of the members. Some gathered for burial and wake-keeping, others centered around marriage or birth. Tarancis societies were based on Temne ethnicity, although the Mandingo people later started their own versions. Hunters, carpenters and members of other vocations organized compin. African, Muslim and Christian religious groups formed. Men's and women's societies, both secret and open, took their places alongside the others. Many had rites and rituals; most had music. The mainly percussion and vocal sounds of these groups melded with the music of British West Indian army regiments stationed in Freetown, old folk songs and sea shanties of Kru sailors and the hymns of Christian missionaries.

One of the most enduring styles to emerge from this mix was *goombay* (*gumbe*) which takes its name from the goombay drum, a square frame built like a stool with a skin stretched over the end where the seat would normally be. It is tipped on its side and the player sits on the frame while beating out the rhythm with his hands. Some scholars believe

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it originated in Nigeria and re-emerged among slaves in the Caribbean who then carried it back to Sierra Leone. A typical goombay ensemble adds a bass box, in the old days a large wooden box salvaged from shipments of kerosene tins or bottled beer; a carpenter's saw, bent to produce the desired pitch and scraped with a wooden stick; and a triangle. The goombay drummers sing about well-known events, sometimes composing on the spot, while the other group members respond. It is still important, says Freetown musician and producer Chris Durning, because "up till today, a typical Krio wedding without goombay is no wedding. . . . As soon as people begin to congregate the goombay will refuse to stop to

play, because the more they play people throw money at them."

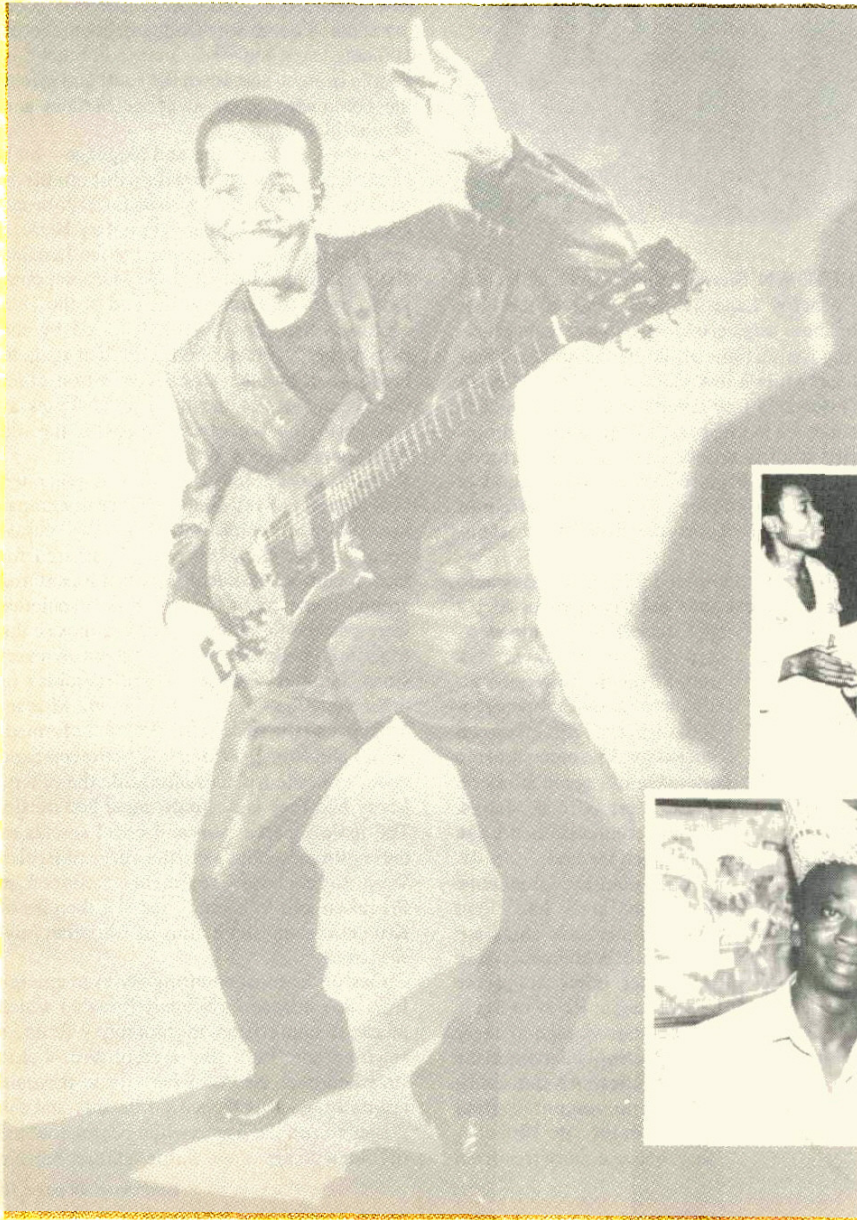
A more recent evolution of goombay is a street music called milo jazz. Milo (pronounced my-low) got its name from a popular brand of cocoa powder—the empty tin was used like a drum as part of a group's percussion array. But unlike the goombay ensembles who follow set rhythmic patterns and whose cumbersome drum and bass box confine them to one place, milo groups are both improvisational and portable and are often seen parading around Freetown. A bugle or harmonica usually accompanies a milo band's conglomeration of small drums, shakers and triangle. Milo's most famous practitioner, Olofemi

Israel Cole, goes by the name Dr. Oloh. Like the goombay musicians, Oloh and the other milo bands sing stories about events in Sierra Leone.



ack in the 18th century, Freetown, with its well-established colony and large natural harbor, became a major port of call for ships plying the West African coast. Increased commerce brought guitars, mandolins, accordions and horns from Europe. In the early 1900s they were joined by gramophones and records and eventually radio. By the 1930s a modern music scene was developing, with styles ranging from solo palm-wine guitar, of which S.E. Rogie later became a great exponent, to swing dance bands like Ralph Wright's Blue Rhythm Band.

From before World War II and on into the 1950s another Caribbean connection also took hold in Freetown. Whether it arrived with the old West Indian regiments, as some have claimed, or on the new shellac 78 rpm records, as others say, calypso caught the fancy of many. Sierra Leone's own calypso king was a singer named Ali Ganda. Sounding vaguely like Atilla the Hun, with the same New Orleans feel but a little more uptempo, Ganda chronicled events in West Africa like "The Queen Visits Nigeria." When in London on a study course he penned "Give Me Back Me



Far left: Abdul Tee-Jay keeps Sierra Leone's music alive in London. Inset, top: Ebenezer Calender's Maringa Band. Calender at center with guitar. Inset, bottom: Guitarist/composer Stanley Kabia.

CALENDER BAND PHOTO, ABOVE, RECORD LABELS PP. 45 AND 47, FROM SIERRA LEONE MUSIC (ZENSOR MUSIKPRODUKTION, 1988), COMPILED BY WOLFGANG BENDER.

PHOTO BY IAN ANDERSON



Rice" in reaction to his new English diet. Unfortunately Ganda could often be found closing down the bar at Brookfields Hotel across from the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service where he had risen to head of programming for television. He succumbed to the bottle in 1964 at the age of 37.

Another, more authentically Sierra Leonean and largely Krio music evolved during this same wartime pre-independence period. It took its name from the *merengue* of the Dominican Republic but sounds more like a blend of the calypso of Atilla the Hun and Ali Ganda and the palm-wine guitar of Rogie's predecessors. Called by its Krio pronunciation, *maringa* (sometimes spelled *maringar*), it serves the same function as calypso and goombay, telling about events as they happen. In fact there is such an affinity between the rhythmic patterns of *maringa* and goombay that players of each style often accompany each other.

Maringa groups usually include at least one guitar, often supplemented by a banjo, mandolin or second guitar; a wind instrument, most commonly a tuba, to play the bassline, plus trumpet or flute; and percussion pieces, small drums, bass box if there is no tuba, and triangle. Like the milo jazz groups, *maringa* bands are highly portable so the players can take to the streets.

Freetown's most famous *maringa* player was guitarist Ebenezer Calender, whose work and the era in which he lived are celebrated in a new compact disc from Original Music called *African Elegant*. Calender was the son of a Krio mother and a father from Barbados who had come to Freetown with one of the West Indian regiments. He played with a goombay group in the late '30s and taught himself guitar. Following World War II he began to record his songs in the small studio Decca had opened in Freetown's east end. A prolific songwriter, Calender also recorded for a number of small local entrepreneurs like the pioneering Jonathan Adenuga whose Nugatone label gave many Sierra Leoneans their first shot at making records.

*African Elegant* presents 14 Calender songs, remastered from old 78s, including three of his most famous, "Fire Fire Fire," "Lumley" and "Lilie Pepper and Lilie Salt." Along with Calender the cd contains eight other selections from the same era, singer/banjo player Famous Scrubbs and two Taraneis societies among them.

Like calypsonians, *maringa* players usually tell about events or humorous personal situations. One song puts Calender in the role of philandering husband advising his girlfriend to "Go Home and Come Tomorrow Night" because "the rain is coming now, and my wife is at home." In another comment on family relations he teases: *You cook jollof rice/You no give me deh/You cook big fofofo/You no give you mother-in-law deh.* Scrubbs expresses surprise at seeing a "Woman Conductress" on the bus and sings about "equal work for equal pay" for Freetown's women. The heyday of Freetown society resounds in this wonderfully

odd and engaging collection. Put together with Original Music's impeccable taste and attention to quality, *African Elegant* is mellow as a cup of palm wine, spicy as a ginger beer.



Following Calender's death in 1985, a musician known as Dr. Loco has tried to carry on with a group he calls the Calender Survival Jazz. Goombay groups still place their stamp of authenticity on Krio weddings. Dr. Oloh's Milo Jazz band parties on. But the pop bands that elbowed Calender, Rogie and their other elders aside in the rollicking '60s have all but died out. Sierra Leone's recording industry, undermined by a declining economy and under attack from music pirates, collapsed in the late '70s. Most members of the two greatest bands, Super Combo Kings and Afro National, emigrated and play together no more. The Heartbeats, Ticklers, and Sabanoh 75 dissolved years ago. One of the country's best composers, Stanley Kabia, author of many of Afro National's most memorable songs and guitarist with the Invisible (sic) Five studio band and a later group called Muye Power, returned to the merchant marine. Singer Abou Whyte, another Muye Power alumna, finds little work in today's Freetown. The explosive Dr. Dynamite sells a less incendiary commodity: stationery. Big Fayia records occasionally in Côte d'Ivoire, but earns a living entertaining tourists with his troupe of traditional dancers. What little Sierra Leonean music that makes it onto compact disc or cassette these days comes, for the most part, from London.

Of the old-timers only artful palm-wine veteran Rogie has managed to find new life abroad. From the '60s, Soundcasters' singer Bunny Mack and the Heartbeats' Francis Fuster continue to record and perform in London. But so far in the '90s, grabbing the most attention is a new generation of Sierra Leonean exiles for whom Freetown's musical flowering is but a fond and distant memory from pre-adolescence.

The best-known purveyor of Sierra Leone's new London sound is guitarist Abdul Tee-Jay. Abdul Tejan-Jalloh was a young Freetown schoolboy in the days when Super Combo and Afro National battled for musical supremacy. He picked up guitar listening to these great bands and the Congo music recordings of Dr. Nico. In 1974 he left Freetown to study economics in the U.S. and wound up in London five years later. With academics more or less behind him, Tee-Jay and another of the new generation, Mwana Musa, put together a group called African Connexion which recorded a variety of songs but leaned toward crossover grooves like "Dancing on the Sidewalk." Once divorced from African Connexion, Tee-Jay drifted toward more rootsy stuff like his B.A.D. production "Saluna."



PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

Singer Abou Whyte of Muye Power.

Ten years after he arrived in London Tee-Jay found his musical path with a new band he named Rokoto ("to dance" in Krio) and a new album, *Kanka Kuru*. In a 1989 interview with *Folk Roots* magazine he explained that for his Rokoto sound he "started writing Sierra Leone songs using old folk songs and developing them. So that's the base of it. I can't ignore soukous, I can't ignore highlife, but everything I play should be based on Sierra Leone music."

Abdul Tee-Jay's newest, just out on Rogue Records, is a nine-song sizzler called *Fire Dombolo*. It leads off with "Rokoto Jazz," one of the best African tracks of the '90s—so far at least—a great instrumental billed as a "marriage of highlife, soukous, makossa and milo." It sets a high standard, but Rokoto manages to reach its level again on a couple of other tracks. "Ansu," the story of an adolescent boy, "Salimatu," a girl whose dowry (in Sierra Leone, money given by a prospective husband to the future bride's parents) is too high, and a love song to "Sara Douala" all click nearly as well. Tee-Jay's lyrics, although brief and often repetitious, echo the storytelling character of Calender's *maringa*. Musically Rokoto recalls the early '80s Paris productions of Richard Dick and Eddy Gustave along with snatches of Super Combo and Afro National, up tempo yet not as frenetic and monotonous as the TGV soukous of Lokoto and Matchatcha.

Like it or not, African music of the '90s—at least that which reaches the West—will be for the most part made by artists living outside the continent. As Ebenezer Calender's *maringa* captured the essence of 1950s Freetown, consciously eclectic sounds like those of Rokoto and their Parisian counterparts closely mirror first-world melting pots and the struggle for an African identity in exile. Both are signposts on the road of Africa's evolution.

[*African Elegant* is distributed by Original Music, 418 Lasher Road, Tivoli, NY; (914) 756-2767. *Fire Dombolo* and *Kanka Kuru* are available from Rogue Records, P.O. Box 337, London N4 1TW, England; (081) 340-9651.]





*S.E. Rogie and Everetta Davies recording a radio commercial in Freetown, Sierra Leone, around 1964.*

**S.E. ROGIE**  
**THE 60s' SOUNDS OF S.E. ROGIE**  
 (Rogiphone, R2, 1986)

**S.** E. Rogie strikes again with his second album release of the year, *The 60s' Sounds of S.E. Rogie*. Like his first album, *African Lady*, this new disc is a re-release of old material, but there the similarity ends. These *60s' Sounds* are some of Rogie's best songs lifted from the original master tapes recorded in West

Africa in the 1960s.

Rogie is Sooliman E. Rogers from the southern part of Sierra Leone. He learned to play guitar in the folksy "palm wine" style while working as an apprentice tailor in Freetown, the country's capital. As he became proficient with the guitar and the sewing machine, he took his act on the road, sewing by day and entertaining at night. By the late '50s the guitar had won his full-time attention, and with the help of a local record shop owner, he began recording his songs and releasing them on 7", 45

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rpm "Rogiphone" singles.

It is from these recording sessions, held in Sierra Leone and Liberia, that the 10 tracks for *The 60s' Sounds* have been taken. My favorite, "Please Go Easy With Me," is an insinuating rhythm with Rogie's voice and acoustic guitar engaged in a tantalizing tug of war for the lyric lines. "Baby Lef Marah" and "Man Stupid Being" are sparkling tunes featuring electric guitar and bass and some witty lyrics sung in English and Krio, the language of slaves repatriated to Freetown. The album also includes "My Lovely Elizabeth," Rogie's all-time biggest seller. "Elizabeth" has been covered (and ripped off) by many African bands over the years and was a mainstay on BBC and VOA record request programs.

As is the case with most impoverished independents, Rogie's music isn't always in your local record store. Helping to remedy this situation are Bayside Record Distribution Company of El Cerrito, CA, Rough Trade of San Francisco, the African Music Gallery of Washington, DC, and Original Music of Tivoli, NY. Further information is available from R&G African Project, P.O. Box 3065, Berkeley, CA 94703; (415) 237-7075. *The 60s' Sounds of S.E. Rogie* is a welcome infusion of African roots into a synthesized, funk-over pop scene. Such wonderful music deserves a far wider hearing than it is likely to get.

—Gary Stewart

- DUBBY BRODIE**  
**POP NO STYLE**  
 (Disc 99 International, 9901-BR, Netherlands, 1985)  
**DUBBY BRODIE & THE JOURNEY LIONS**  
**WAKE UP/CAN'T STAND IT**  
 (JL Productions Inc., NR 16507, 1986)

**R**eggae is always bringing forth new talent, and Mandeville, Jamaica-born Dubby Brodie's recent self-produced records are evidence of that. The young bassist/singer plays music that echoes his name — inna dubwise stylee, ready for maximum volume and late-night dance-floor gyrations.

*Pop No Style* serves up six cuts. The first side is all instrumental X-ray music, except the title cut, a chance for Brodie to showcase his vocal abilities. Standout players include lead axemen Hutchie and Lee and

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AFRICAN BEAT

## The Life and Death of S.E. Rogie

BY GARY STEWART

It's hard to imagine a world without S.E. Rogie. Having worked with and written about Sierra Leone's affable singer-guitarist from time to time over the last 10 years, his presence—although lately sporadic and a good distance across the Atlantic—seemed to me to be one of life's few reliable constants. Despite the warning signs of high blood pressure and last spring's open heart surgery, the 60-something Rogie appeared

fit enough to sail smoothly into old age like a cup of palm wine on the palate at the end of a hard day.

But that's not the way it happened. Rogie died in London on July 4 from the combined effects of a stroke and heart attack, suffered in Estonia nine days earlier following his performance during a WOMAD festival. Death came amidst the second flowering of a career that had seen its first bloom in West Africa in the '50s and '60s, a decade and a half of near-dormancy

in the United States, and a move to London in 1988 where a wealth of concert dates and recording contracts brought him his current celebrity.

S was for Sooliman, E for Ernest, and Rogie a nickname for Rogers, a family name that came to Sierra Leone in the days of slavery and the repatriation movement that brought freed slaves home to colonies in West Africa. Rogie was born in the 1920s—he never knew the exact date—among the Mende people in southern Sierra Leone. Always self-motivated and largely self-taught, he left his parents at an early age and moved to Freetown where he learned typing, tailoring and ultimately, music. By the mid-'50s he was an accomplished enough musician to record songs at Freetown's best-known studio, Adenuga & Jonathan. Using earnings from those first sides and with the help of a wealthy patron, he purchased recording equipment for himself and launched his own Rogie and Rogiphone labels.

With his wonderfully mellifluous baritone and folksy palm-wine guitar, Rogie, backed by a couple of pick-up percussion players, cut a series of records that carried him to his first peak of renown. His most famous song, "My Lovely Elizabeth," based on his own broken romance, moved him into the international arena in 1962 when EMI picked it up for worldwide distribution. Around 1965 he added electric guitars to his acoustic sound and formed a band called the Morningstars with whom he recorded some of his best material, including "Baby Lef Marah" and "Man Stupid Being." By his own admission, however, he squandered the fruits of stardom. His indulgence in easy ladies and abundant booze consumed cash faster than it flowed. By the end of the '60s Rogie found himself shoulder-deep in personal crisis. He gave credit to a spiritual awakening for the renewed sense of self and purpose that pulled him from his depression.

Rogie left Sierra Leone for the United States in 1973 and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area where his gentle palm-wine music crashed head-on into the barriers of America's top-40 mind-set. Despite several new recordings and years of live performances, he never rose beyond the level of local cult figure. His most enduring contribution of the period took the form of an African cultural program of music, lecture and slides that he presented to adults and schoolchildren in the Bay Area. Not until 1986 when he released an album of his 1960s hits did a wider audience again beckon.

S. E. ROGIE, SIERRA LEONE'S PALM-WINE PATRIARCH.



PHOTO BY EMMANUEL NAODO



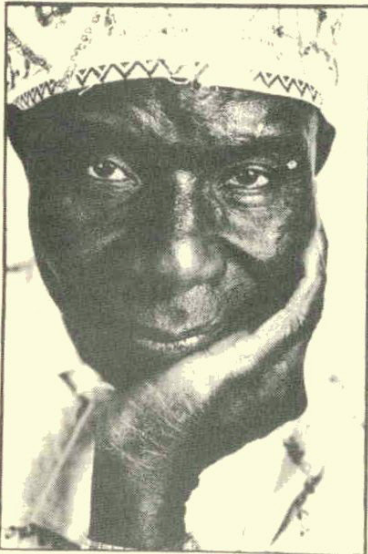


PHOTO BY STEPHEN LOVELL-DAVIS

Copies of *The '60s Sounds of S.E. Rogie* sent to London fell into the hands of BBC disc jockey Andy Kershaw, who couldn't keep them off his turntables. The Kershaw connection led to a record deal with London's Cooking Vinyl and a promotional tour of the U.K. These successes convinced Rogie to stay in England where his career once again took off. More recordings for the Workers Playtime label and tours with the WOMAD festival followed. He concentrated on performing rather than writing in this later period, recycling his old hits with new arrangements, sometimes altering lyrics and

titles for the new generations who became his fans.

Smooth and urbane on the outside, Rogie charmed his audiences with a grandfatherly folksiness and delightful repertoire of stories and songs. Prickly and temperamental with intimates, he insisted that colleagues meet his high standards of musicianship and professionalism. A humanitarian at heart, he could appear naive and world-wise almost in the same moment. He wondered at the world's random goodness and cursed its wanton inequities. He rued his long absence from Sierra Leone and longed for the renewed adulation of his countrymen. Rogie finally exorcised this latter demon over last New Year's holiday with a triumphal round of concerts in Freetown to benefit refugees from the fighting in Liberia and southern Sierra Leone.

Back in London Rogie underwent a lengthy heart bypass operation in February and seemed to be making a full recovery. He completed work on *Dead Men Don't Smoke Marijuana*, a new compact disc for the RealWorld label, his most prestigious recording deal since the early '60s with EMI. In June he returned to the WOMAD tour playing dates in Germany and Eastern Europe, where he was stricken on June 25. He was flown to London for treatment but reportedly never regained consciousness. A memorial service for Rogie was held in London and his body flown home to Sierra Leone for burial. Survivors include his wife Cecilia, daughter Messie and son Brima, a Los Angeles-based musician who plays under the name Rogee Rogers.

Rogie neatly described the nature of his music and philosophy in an interview with Sarah Coxson for *Folk Roots* several years ago. "The essence of palm-wine music is to pass on your experience to other people for their betterment. . . . If you've made some mistakes or done some good things in your life that could be exemplary, I pick out the important part and put it into song for other people to learn from that. That's the kind of thing I like to see. The only thing in the world that can bring peace to the world is the sharing of experience and love. All the good things that I want for myself, I must wish for others to have the same things. When I try to monopolize that thing there is no harmony there. I cannot be at peace while I see all my brothers and sisters suffering."

If Rogie is still in touch with the world that he's left, his feelings for our condition will not have changed.

*Dead Men Don't Smoke Marijuana* by S.E. Rogie is distributed in the U.S. by Caroline Records, 114 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001.

## Lions of West Africa

BY J. V. HORNSBY

**L**EUCADIA, CA—Lamine Camara, master drummer of Foré-Foté from Guinea, West Africa, does not have ordinary hands. Most men have hands that extend naturally from the wrist in a balanced fleshfall of bone, skin and sinew. Camara's hands explode from his wrists, mostly muscle, powerfully waiting to play his beloved *djembe*, his messenger drum.

"I was a dancer first. It was my nature. I began to try both drumming and dancing very young. Someone in the drumming group would be missing; maybe the *djembe* or *doundoun*. If all the members were there, I'd just dance," Lamine says.

He is sitting with his cousin, Abdoulaye Camara, a master dancer from Guinea, in Nikola Clay's backyard in Leucadia, talking quietly. Clay is the head of Global Child, a program which develops an appreciation of diverse ethnic backgrounds in children. She met the Camaras in Sweden after a performance by Foré-Foté. She was impressed with their style and talent and invited them to America.

Lamine tells his story of forced labor in the rice fields of Guinea as a 7-year-old. If he did not work, the dictatorship government would make trouble for his family. Although that government has changed to a peaceful democracy, Camara's hands are reminders that the strength, constancy and power of his polyrhythms were etched by tough work at a tender age. Now, at age 39, his hands are muscular trophies awarded after years of labor and thousands of hours of drumming for the dancers of his Sousou tribe.

"In our country, when it was a dictatorship, we only knew dance, drumming, go to school, farming. It was like that all the time unless I went to the harbor and helped the people with fishing," Camara recalls.

Camara's performance and workshop brochure describes him as the "rhythm devil." However, whether teaching or performing he is a smiling "rhythm lion," swatting the goatskin of his *djembe* like a king cat of

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ABDOULAYE AND LAMINE CAMARA PERFORM.

