

AFRICAN BEAT

Wonders of the Congo

BY KEN BRAUN

It was not for love of the chase that I became a collector of early modern Congolese records. Sure it was exciting, after a long search, to finally get my hands on an old O.K. Jazz single or an Orchestre African Fiesta Sukisa album from a quarter-century ago. But the reward came only when I put the captured prize on a phonograph and listened to it. Unfortunately, it was a rare pleasure: My pursuits usually ended with nothing in the bag, nothing on the turntable. New acquisitions were few and far between, so I had to content myself with playing a modest number of 45s and lps over and over again. Some of them were worn when I found them; all of them were reduced to that condition eventually.

So you can imagine my astonishment and elation this summer when I came across nine new cds devoted to early modern Congolese music. A serious record collector or a true sportsman might have decried the abundance of the quarry, the ease with which it could be tracked down and its pristine medium. Not I. My only concern was for how I could beg, borrow, steal—or if necessary—purchase all nine.

Suffice it to say I did manage to acquire the cds. The collection I had built over 10 years doubled in one week. And there was more to come. The nine albums, each of which contains an hour of music, were only the initial batch of a series of 37 produced by Sonodisc/African (a French company) and scheduled for release by the end of 1992. A second batch of eight albums has been issued in France and may be in American record stores by the time you read this.

Entitled *Merveilles du Passé* (Wonders of the Past), the series features recordings made between 1957 and 1975. A dozen or so businesses based in Kinshasa and Brazzaville—the twin capitals of Congo music—released the original records (mostly 45s) on the local market and licensed the masters to Sonodisc for reproduction and sale to the rest of Africa. Over the years, the French company has issued lp compilations of some of its Congo classics, but (as I can attest) these have been very difficult to obtain in the United States. The only good collection of early Congolese music generally available in this country, *The Sound of Kinshasa*, a single album put out by Original Music in 1982, included several selections from the Sonodisc/African catalog. But the sheer number of equally valuable

recordings contained in the new cd series overwhelms Original's admirable introduction. *Merveilles du Passé* really is a marvelous treat for collectors like me (sportsmanlike or not) and a dazzling enticement to newcomers to this music to hear it all.

Although its chronological order is haphazard (and there are no liner notes to help the listener straighten it out), the series spans three eras of Congo music. The first began in the late 1940s, when the first commercial recordings of the nascent modern genre were made in Kinshasa, then called Leopoldville. (For an explanation of geographical names and musical terms, see accompanying sidebar.) By 1957, the date of the earliest tracks included in *Merveilles du Passé*, the Congolese record industry was thriving, led by two bands whose influence on Congo music would prove to be immense: Orchestre African Jazz and Orchestre Kinois Jazz, better known as O.K. Jazz. Both bands were prolific in two respects: Besides putting out a lot of records, they also spawned a remarkable number of bands that came into their own in the 1960s and took Congo music into its second era. The third era began around 1970, when an array of new bands appeared with no ties to the established order and proceeded to sow their own wild oats.

Congolese musicians of every era have acknowledged Joseph Kabasele (known by the honorific "Grand Kallé") as the father of modern Congo music. When he began his career in 1950, most bands in Leopoldville, Brazzaville and other cities of the Congos were either acoustic guitar and percussion groups or small wind ensembles with a bass fiddle, sometimes an accordion. The former

played traditional and new Congolese songs for the urban working class, the latter performed imitations of European and American salon dances for the educated elite. Forming Orchestre African Jazz in 1953, Kabasele combined the instruments of both types of band (except the accordion) and created a style that was at once cosmopolitan and rooted in African culture. He based his *Congo rumba* explicitly on the Cuban rumba and such related forms as *son*, *bolero*, *mambo* and *cha-cha-cha* but asserted the African origins of Afro-Cuban music. At the same time, he recharged Latin American conventions for the middle of the 20th century by featuring jazzy saxophones and three electric guitars. And by singing mostly in Lingala—the *lingua franca* spoken along the length of the Congo River—Kabasele and the other singers in his band not only reinforced the indigenous character of the Congo rumba but also extended its appeal across tribal-linguistic and class lines.

Historic as his innovations were, Grand Kallé recognized the talents of other musicians and gave them the opportunity to shine in his band. The brothers Dechaud and Nicholas Kasanda (called Dr. Nico by his legion admirers) played guitars in African Jazz from the beginning; their long, entwining lines of ringing treble notes, perhaps more than anything else, defined the Congo sound for all time. Pascal Tabu, known both as Rochereau



and as Tabu Ley, started writing songs for African Jazz in 1956 and became the band's lead singer three years later; more than three decades later, he remains the most renowned Congolese singer in the world. Kabasele also brought the Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango into the band in 1959, and from that time on, Dibango has been in the avant-garde of African music. Dechaud, Nico, Rochereau and Dibango all figure prominently on two volumes given entirely to Grand Kallé's best years, the late '50s and early '60s. There isn't a dull track on either disc.

To my regret, the same cannot be said of the

five volumes (so far) devoted to O.K. Jazz. Founded in 1956 and led for 33 years by Franco Luambo Makiadi, O.K. Jazz was the other seminal band of Congo music. Its output over the years was truly prodigious (an estimated 300 singles and 120 albums), and from its ranks came an even larger number of notable singers, instrumentalists and songwriters than African Jazz produced. But as long as African Jazz existed, and then the offshoot bands led by Rochereau and Nico through the 1960s, O.K. Jazz was always second best, the Rolling Stones in the shadow of the Beatles. O.K. Jazz had its own way with

the Congo rumba (hard and fast) and occasionally gave African Jazz some credible competition, but Franco's voice was rough compared to Rochereau's, his guitar sounded ponderous beside Nico's litheness, and his songs made up too much in rhythmic vigor for what they lacked in melodic and harmonic invention.

Franco, who died in 1989, was indisputably a great musician and a towering cultural hero in the Congos and beyond. But that status came only with time, with the resonance his voice acquired in middle age and the dexterity

Continued on page 28

WHAT IS CONGO? WHERE IS SOUKOUS?

There are two countries that can properly be called Congo. Adjacent to one another in equatorial Africa, their borders were drawn by European explorers and colonialists in the late 19th century. North of the Congo River was the French Congo, and to the south lay the Congo Free State, which became the Belgian Congo in 1908. The French colonial capital was Brazzaville, and directly across the river from it was Leopoldville, the seat of the Belgian administration. Both countries won their independence in 1960. The former French colony named itself the People's Republic of Congo while the other became the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the same time changing the name of its capital to Kinshasa. In common parlance around the world, the two independent countries were called Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa.

In 1971, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo-Kinshasa renamed his country the Republic of Zaire. Many opponents to Mobutu rejected the new name (secretly, if they lived under his regime), but it was recognized by most other governments, and Zaire it has been until now. In July, however, a constitutional convention challenging Mobutu's dictatorship voted to change the name, once more, to the Republic of Congo. So it seems appropriate again, as it was until 20 years ago, to refer to both countries as Congo.

When it comes to music, there's hardly any reason to demarcate the region. Musicians, music businessmen and audiences of

both nationalities have always mixed. Together, Brazzaville and Kinshasa have been the entire vast area's center of modern music for more than 40 years. Although Kinshasa (by far the larger of the twin cities) boasts more nightclubs, theaters, record businesses and studios than Brazzaville, many prominent bands have based themselves, at least for a time, on the north bank. In view of this history, the title of Original Music's survey of early modern Congolese music, *The Sound of Kinshasa*, is something of a misnomer. The subtitle that Sonodisc/African affixes to its anthologies, *Musique Congolo-Zairoise*, is properly inclusive, but it's soon likely to be anachronistic. In the early 1960s, when the music on these sets was current and its popularity was spreading to other African countries, it was called, simply, "Congo music." This still seems as good an appellation as any.

Is there a generic term used by the Congolese themselves? No, not really. People speak of *miziki na biso* (our music) to distinguish it from imported goods, but even that phrase relies on a French word, *musique*, rendered into Lingala. Most African languages have numerous words for different dances and song forms, even rhythms, but no single, general word for music. Similarly, various styles of modern Congolese music have been known, over the years, as *Congo rumba*, *mambetta*, *boucher*, *kiri-kiri*, *soukouma*, *kavacha*, *zekete-zekete*, *kwassa-kwassa* and *mutuashi*.

And there have been myriad others—more, probably, than all the patrons of a Kinshasa or Brazzaville dancehall on a Saturday night could recount. But none of these or any other term applies to the whole, expansive genre.

American and European record publicists and concert promoters cannot abide this kind of thing. They seem unable to function without a brand name (as it were) by which they can label their product. Their first attempt at a catchy moniker for Congo music was *rumba rock*. I can see what they were getting at: Congolese music in the 1950s was intentionally reminiscent of rumbas and other Latin American dances, but one of its many distinctions was the prominent part that electric guitars played—and, true enough, electric guitars have always been associated with rock. Combining a Cuban word with an American word to identify something Congolese, though, strikes me as a doubly inapt interpolation. I don't believe it's a term that any Congolese musician or fan has ever used.

The tag that's become best known in Europe and America in recent years is *soukous*. In the Congos, however, *soukous* refers to a particular dance style popular in the late 1960s, and in current usage it's a soccer term, exclaimed when a player feints and dribbles the ball around an opponent. Using the word to describe music as different as Joseph Kabasele's classics and Tshala Muana's latest is like referring to everything from "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" to "Cop Killer" as *twist*.

Continued from page 27

he developed on his guitar, with his revived interest in folk music and his highly effective songwriting experiments with narrative and persona. (Virtually every Franco and T.P.O.K. Jazz album of the 1970s and '80s evinces the mature band's power and mastery.) Still, anyone interested in Congo music should have an early O.K. Jazz album. It's too bad Sonodisc didn't select 20 or so of the band's best tracks from the '50s and '60s and put them on one cd. No one but a fanatic like me needs five.

A different problem comes up with the African Fiesta albums: Hear one and you'll want them all. Four have been released, with others scheduled before the end of the year.

Orchestre African Fiesta was the band that Nico, Dechaud, Rochereau and another African Jazz singer, Roger Izéidi, put together when they parted ways with Kabasele in 1963. It marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. Having already established the Congo rumba as a singularly African and distinctly modern style with their first band, the members of the new group stretched out. They felt free to use a variety of rhythms, song forms, vocal styles and instrumental colorations (Nico took to playing pedal-steel guitar). Their music hinted at their liking for American pop, soul, jazz and country & western, but far from sounding derivative, it sounded unique. Its special characteristic was the blend of Rochereau's mellifluous tenor and Nico's bell-toned guitar, held aloft by nimble cross-beats that kept the sweetness lively.

Alas, the Rochereau-Nico collaboration didn't last. After scarcely two years, African Fiesta split into two branches: Orchestre African Fiesta National, led by Rochereau, and Orchestre African Fiesta Sukisa, under Nico. Fortunately, Nico found another soft-voiced tenor, Michel Ngwalau, and Rochereau engaged Michéline, a guitarist who clearly emulated Nico. Both bands advanced the African Fiesta sound through the rest of the decade, as their respective *Merveilles du Passé* albums confirm.

The history of Congo music reads like a biblical genealogy: African Jazz begat African Fiesta, and African Fiesta bore two sons, National and Sukisa, and African Fiesta National begat Afrisa International.... Virtually every Congolese band in the 1960s was related in some way to either African Jazz or O.K. Jazz. Paul Ebongo Dewayon, who had been an early mentor to Franco and other founding members of O.K. Jazz, formed his own band, Orchestre Cobantou, in the late 1950s. Dewayon's brother, Johnny Bokelo, headed Orchestre Congo Succès, in which Pablo Lubadika Porthos and Nyboma got their start. Jean-Serge Essous and Nino Malapet, the original O.K. Jazz saxophonists, formed Orchestre Bantous Jazz in 1960. Bantous Jazz,



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in turn, fostered Les Bantous de la Capitale, Tchico (Tchicaya) and Les Officiers of African Music and Pamela Mounka's solo career.

Another O.K. Jazz saxophonist, Kiamuangana Verckys, started Orchestre Veve around 1970 and in the following decade worked with dozens of fledgling bands, including Trio Madjesi, Orchestre Bella-Bella (Kanda Bongo Man's first band) and Orchestre Lipua-Lipua. Papa Bombenga, who sang with Kabasele after Rochereau's departure, joined Sam Mangwana, an African Fiesta singer, in Orchestre Vox Afrique. Franco hired away Vox Afrique's guitarist, Papa Noel, to play alongside him in O.K. Jazz. On losing Noel, Mangwana and another Vox Afrique singer, Ntesa Daliest, wooed Michéline away from Rochereau to play guitar in their new band, Les Maquisards. Both Mangwana and Daliest later sang with T.P.O.K. Jazz. Vicky Longomba, who sang with Franco for many years, quit O.K. Jazz briefly in the mid-'60s to start Orchestre Négro Succès with Franco's cousin and disciple, guitarist Bavon Marie-Marie. And so forth.

Many of these second-generation bands are represented on five volumes in the *Merveilles du Passé* series entitled *Musique Congolozairoise*. Although they never secured lasting fame or fortune, they all had their moments of glory, and several of them were quite important in the development of Congo music. (It's a delight for me finally to hear Vox Afrique and Négro Succès, whose records I've been hunting for years.) These albums hold as many pleasures as those reserved for the bigger stars. I particularly like Veve's party sing-along, "Mumbwa" (Stewed Greens); a kiss-and-make-up song, "Yalimbisa Bijou" (Precious Forgiveness), by Négro Succès; Les Grands Maquisards' touching, "Nalela Ndenge Nini?" (How Shall I Weep?); and an enigmatic Congo Succès item from 1969, "Bana

Conga Baleli Liwa ya Sinatra" (The Conga Kids Mourn the Death of Sinatra).

Seventeen cds to date. Twenty more before Christmas. It seems that Sonodisc/African was inspired by a weather pattern widely known in Africa: a long drought ends with a deluge. And in personal finances, as in nature, a deluge can cause as much damage as a drought. These are cds imported from France; each one sells for not less than \$15—and I've seen them for \$20 apiece. What's one to do if one isn't yet sure if he or she is a collector of early Congo music, heedless of the price?

In that case, the album to get is the first in the series, titled *Les Merveilles du Passé*. (Look for that article, *Les*, to distinguish it from the rest of *Merveilles du Passé*.) It begins with three recordings made in the mid-'50s, before electric guitars were prominent in Congo music. I know nothing about the musicians in these performances, but they are charming as well as instructive of the music popular in Leopoldville and Brazzaville before Grand Kallé made his everlasting impact. Then come two of African Jazz's biggest hits, "Africa Mokili Mobimba" (Africa Around the World) and "Indépendance Cha-Cha." O.K. Jazz and African Fiesta each contribute several songs, and Rochereau with Afrisa, his '70s band, provides another. "Yalimbisa Bijou," the Négro Succès song mentioned above is included, as is Orchestre Veve's controversial "Nakomitunaka" (I Should Wonder), a deceptively lyrical attack on Christianity. The album concludes, appropriately, with "C'est la Vérité," a 1975 recording by Zaiko Langa Langa.

It was Zaiko that ushered in Congo music's third era in the early '70s. No one in the upstart band had any connection with African Jazz, O.K. Jazz or the other bands of previous eras. The boys were young and on their own, and they announced it in the way they sang, the way they played their guitars and drums, the way they dressed and danced. In time, Zaiko turned out to be the most proactive begetters of them all: From that band came Papa Wemba, Viva la Musica, Langa Langa Stars, Victoria Eleison, Choc Stars, Grand Zaiko Wa-Wa, and—in the late '80s and '90s—the contentious Zaiko Langa Langa Familia Dei and Zaiko Langa Langa Nkolo Mboka.

Congo music is alive and well, and the Zaiko guys, now in their 40s, are but a small part of it, however vital. Rochereau still scores a hit every couple of years or so. T.P.O.K. Jazz has put out several fine albums since Franco's death. Sam Mangwana toured the U.S. not long ago. Although the eras of *Merveilles du Passé* may have passed, when I listen to new Congo music and then to these albums, they don't really seem very old. But maybe it's just that, at my age, I'm happy not to have to chase anything down. ★