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Haiti's Real Revolutionaries

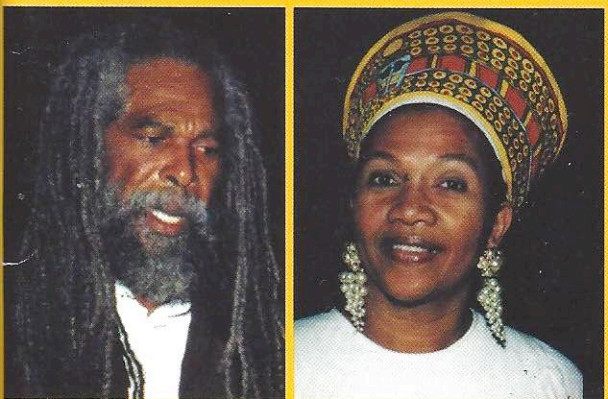
**boukman
eksperyans**

Lolo & Mimerose Beaubrun

plus

**bob marley days
in L.A.**

Soulmates Forever



Bob Andy and Marcia Griffiths



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Boukman Eksperyans

HAITI'S REAL REVOLUTIONARY

By Steve Heilig
Photos by James Hercule

It's been almost a decade since Boukman Eksperyans first exploded from Haiti onto the international music stage. And a combustible entry it was—their first album, *Vodou Adjoe*, was a startling, propelling introduction to Haitian roots music as played by its foremost proponents. Taking their name from the vodou priest and slave leader who inspired a revolution which led to Haiti's independence as the first black republic in the world, Boukman Eksperyans jumped right to the top of the Haitian musical scene.

Like the older styles of *compas* and other forms they used as springboards, this band, with four members of the Beaubrun family as core members, undeniably played dance music—but with an uncompromising political edge. Blending ceremonial drumming and dances from the traditional vodou ceremonies and modern electric instruments and arrangements, the band was greeted with much enthusiasm both on record and on far-flung tours, culminating in a coveted slot on the 1993 Africa Fete grand U.S. tour. On that and other tours, although singing mostly in Haitian kreyol, their dynamic stage show and propulsive rhythms garnered enthusiastic receptions wherever they went, much media coverage, and two more well-received albums released by Island Records.

In the cauldron of unrest and oppression that is modern Haiti, the band's songs have served as rallying cries against all manner of ills imposed

upon the Haitian people from both within and outside of their island's shores. For all its celebratory color on stage, the Boukman Eksperyans message is serious and spiritual at its core, an element which has likely both limited their acceptance outside of Haiti and certainly caused them some problems at home. In any event, after their first surge of visibility, the group virtually dropped from the world music radar screen: "What-ever happened to Boukman?" was a question I heard more than once at international music concerts.

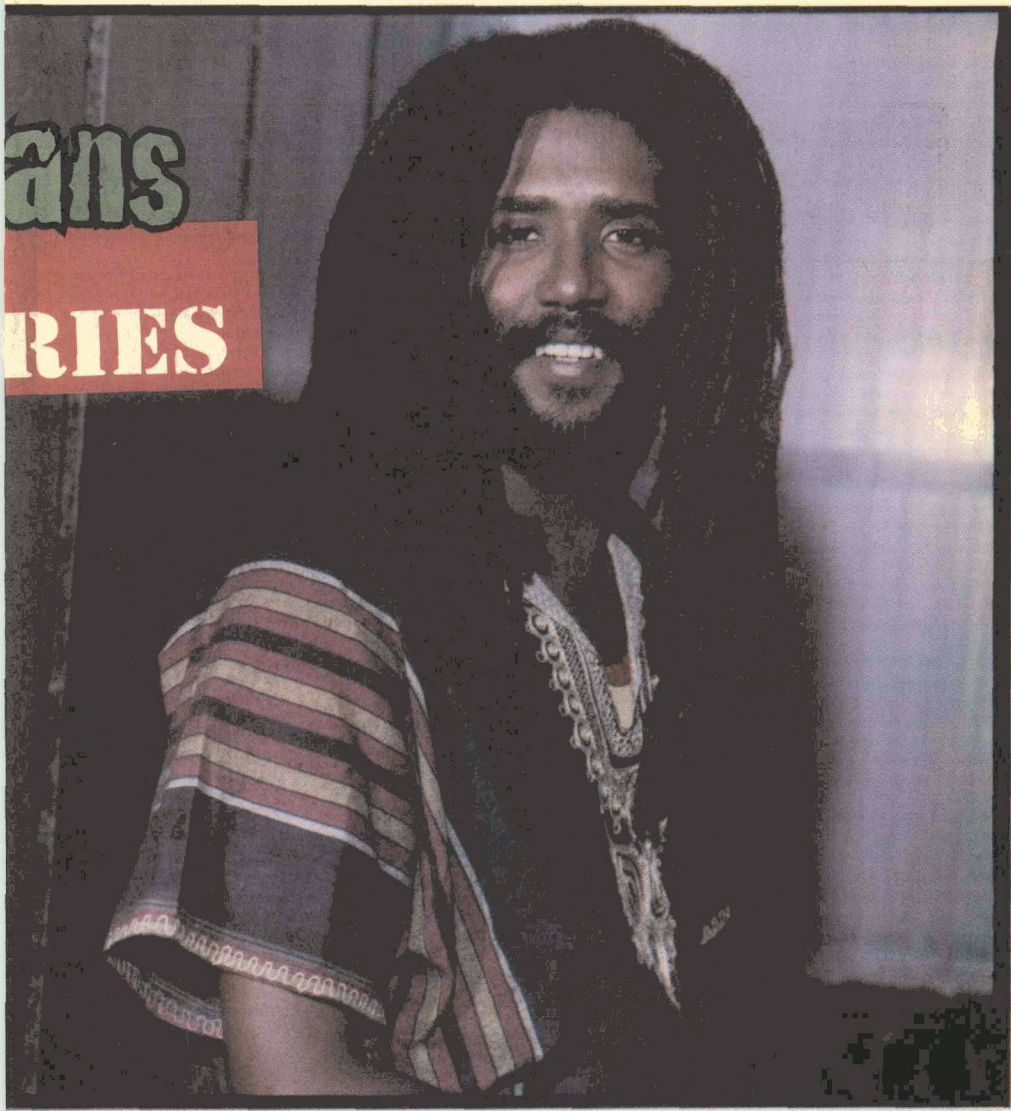
In summer of 1998, however, Boukman Eksperyans returned triumphantly to U.S. stages, touring in support of their fourth album, *Revolution* (Tuff Gong). I caught them in San Francisco, where they tore through a set at the Maritime Hall which had a packed crowd—probably drawn mainly by headliner Alpha Blondy—dancing in joyous frenzy. Theodore "Lolo" Beaubrun, Jr., founding co-leader (with his wife Mimerose) of the band, was eager to talk. He proved a be a warm and utterly unpretentious presence as he discussed the new direction the group's music has taken, the spiritual roots which have sustained him over the years, and the problems they confront as real revolutionaries at home in Haiti.

And if there was any doubt among the jaded backstage scenesters about the sincerity and commitment of this group, that was dispelled when, just before going onstage, the whole Boukman entourage drew together in a huddled circle, arms entwined, for a moment of chanted prayer and silence,

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BOUKMAN EKSPERYANS

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breaking to hug everyone within reaching distance. It was an intimate moment that I felt privileged to witness and be part of, and which made it even clearer that, whatever challenges come their way, Boukman Eksperyans will endure.

Steve Heilig: Welcome back to the U.S.A. We haven't seen you around here for quite some time, it seems. A few years back you were touring and recording regularly, but then sort of disappeared. What have you been up to?

Lolo Beaubrun: Well, we made three records with Island, and then, while we didn't really have any problem with them, we did want to make a change. We split it up in a way, with different labels in different parts of the world. It's Tuff Gong for the U.S., Canada, and the English islands, but other labels elsewhere. But there were other changes too. My brother Daniel turned record producer, and my sister went solo, so there's a lot of new energy coming into the group. It's only two new people, and otherwise the same band, but there is some different energy that we needed to put the message forward.

Q: I've heard you had some troubles in the past few years with political restrictions and pressure as well.

A: Well, in 1994, we were on tour in Europe, and they wouldn't let us come into the U.S. And there were no planes into Haiti, because the U.S. was getting ready to invade Haiti! They were calling it democracy that they wanted to put in there. So we went to Jamaica, and were able to record our last album [*Libète: Pran Pou 'L—Freedom: Let's Take It!*]. For a while, it was like we were in exile from our own country as well as from the U.S.A.

There was also a big concert of Haitian musicians in Haiti where we had some problems when we got back there. We were invited by Wyclef Jean from the Fugees, but the government gave him pressure to not let us play. They didn't want us to be on stage because we were going to tell the truth, you see, to talk about what is going on in the country. But Wyclef kept on with his plans, and said "Lolo, you're gonna play, but in the middle of the Fugees!" All of the other groups would play before, and the government people would think, "Ahh, Boukman is not here, OK." But when Fugees start, they let us play in the middle of their set.

Q: Sneaky!

A: Yes, well sometimes we have to do this kind of thing. I was really glad for that chance, because the audience really let us know they knew who we are and what we were saying. And Wyclef also invited us to record at the Fugees' studio in New Jersey, for a good price. And I am really happy with it, because we were really independent and could do our own thing.

Q: So how is this record different from your previous ones?

A: One thing is that we discover in Haiti a new rhythm. The Mandingo rhythms from Africa survive very strong in people from that community. So we decided to use that more than before, and to work with those people. And they accepted us into their closed community, even in their ceremonies. And we also experimented with hip-hop. Our guest Jerry "Te-Bass" Duplessis, a cousin of Wyclef who is also Haitian, is one of the best new producers—I see that even Michael Jackson wants to use him. He overdubbed things on the first three songs on the album.

Q: Since 1994, in your experience in Haiti as a band and as people, do

you feel that you have any more freedom?

A: There are some more freedoms, because the people were fighting for that freedom. But in '94, I remember when we got back having the feeling that nothing had changed. They had put in what they said was a democracy but it was a fake democracy. They were doing the same thing, but it was called neoliberalism, a concept from the international community.

They elected this guy, like in other places all over the world, where a prime minister or president or I don't know what is elected to make it look good, but really is pushed by the big multinational interests to pass their plan on us. They want to control the earth. That is why in Haiti we are fighting against the neoliberalism. We do demonstrations—in '95 I did two demonstrations in Port-au-Prince against the government which was there.

Q: When you are so visible in demonstrating and telling the truths in your music, do you feel threatened, in danger in any way?

A: Yeah, yeah. When you are talking about revolution, it can happen. And they know that we already have alternatives to the capitalist system in Haiti. The *lakou* system set up by the Maroons and Africans in Haiti when they first settled here is still in existence, mostly in the hills. Boukman himself came from the *lakou*

system. My family comes from this system, and under those traditions, nobody can sell the land. The land is for the community, for the spirit, and the spirit is what can fix the mind of the people. With what they call the *vodou* ceremony, the people get back the energy to live in harmony.

The *lakou* system is spiritual first, with an African view of life, of the totality of life, and thus the only way is a cooperative system. But since 1804, the generals who gained power in Haiti when we got our independence chose the Western way of life. They kicked the French out and had total power to choose what kind of system to have in Haiti, and so we got generals calling themselves "Emperor" and things like that, just like in Europe. And in 1865 we got the Catholic Church, and they start the war against the *vodou*, against the African view of life. And then there's the Protestants fighting against everything too. That's why we have such a big fight in Haiti. Under the new fake democracy, they try to control things with "privatization," to sell everything to be owned by a few people in the world.

Q: That's happening here too. But is there still violence or threats directed at you?

A: In 1996, I went to work with the people of Cité Soleil, the biggest slum in Haiti. The big monopolies were trying to control the Cité Soleil because that is where Aristide got his power. There are really strong people there. I went there to get involved, because we can't only talk about problems, you know. At that time, they sent national police to kill many people in the Cité Soleil, to make everyone there afraid. We took the position opposing this with Aristide, and I heard they were looking for me, to kill me. This message came to me through my family, and even from the chief of police.

Q: Have people in your family or band actually been hurt?

A: No, happily. But you may have heard that we did have one man, our bass player [Michel "Olichia" Melthon-Lynch], die from lack of medicine. Remember in 1994 when there was the political blockade on anything coming into Haiti, and he died from an infection when he was only 25 years old. And at the last Carnival, we heard that the government was very mad that we were going to play and say something against them.

Q: They think there will be trouble if you play?

A: Every time. Every time we play we hear that. Now they don't really do it openly, but they try to not let us play, on the street. But it's sometimes hard to know what to say or think, because then also, they invite us to play on the anniversary celebration of when Boukman himself

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make the revolution.

Q: Do they try to censor what you sing then?

A: That has happened. But this time, they actually invited us to give a new vision of Haiti! So that's what we are going to do. We have to wipe the way the state is now away. It does not fit with our vision, with our spirit. We call it *Ginen*, a way of life, when you are in harmony with yourself, with what you are thinking, saying, doing. Politics without spirituality is evil. Politicians are like drunkards, with no consistency in their words. They are drunk inside. The spirituality is the base of the society. Both that spirituality, and politics and economics, it comes from the *Ginen*. It's a way of life, not just a religion. They cannot wipe it out, but they try.

Q: You know, some of the Catholics and others that you mention would say that vodou itself is the evil thing.

A: Of course. They want you to give up your belief, to forget yourself and to be like a zombie. To accept their system, and dress up like a capitalist and accept a class system. But you see we have to undress from these images, to get away from the ego. That's why the message of Jesus and Buddha and Krishna is so important, and the *Ginen*. It's the same message. You have to forget yourself, to really serve. And in service you can find yourself. But this message is lost when the politicians and the religions get together, and it is dangerous. They want you to dress up and occupy your mind with other things, to follow them, to be afraid to be naked, to be silent with yourselves, to hear truth.

Q: You are very far from being silent; you make this music and it is obviously very joyful for you, as well as a struggle.

A: Yes, because a lot of doors are opening for us that were closed before. This is good, but we are careful too, because we don't want anybody, a government, a society, even those who listen to our music, to give us an image, and then think that is us. And maybe we then lose our energy to that image. You need to know your personal power. We have to stay in contact with our spirits, and the spirits help us to follow our paths.

Q: So this keeps you from wanting to be some kind of superstar. I don't see any of your bodyguards here. . . .

A: I don't want to be like that! I feel stress when you even say that. Oh man. It's a created attitude. It's like you put yourself in a closet, and don't make contact anymore with real people. Sometimes when we are touring with famous people we see this. No, no.

Q: So, your music is evolving, changing, so what do you call it now?

A: It's still vodou adjae, or in Haiti they call it *radine* [roots] music. We just take it forward in a new way. But there are many groups—in Carnival this year, there were 150 such groups playing. This gives us courage, for even though this music is now the most popular in Haiti, it officially doesn't exist for the Minister of Culture. It's like we don't exist sometimes. But as people can see and hear, we do.

[Special thanks to Daniel Marrero of Tuff Gong International for his assistance.]



MUSIC WAS THE WEAPON: How A Song Brought Down A Government

Boukman Eksperyans' *mizik rasin* (Creole for *musique racine*, roots music) is rich with spiritual, political and social messages. Author Gage Averill describes the role of Boukman's music in creating the climate that led to the resignation of provisional president General Prospère Avril during the turbulent times that followed the fall of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

In January of 1990, President (and General) Prospère Avril responded to the assassination of an army colonel with a state of siege and a round of arrests of opposition leaders. This instability came at a bad time for the military government, which was attempting to project confidence and return to a normal state of affairs. Then came the major musicopolitical controversy over Boukman Eksperyans' carnival *rara* "Kè m pa sote" (My heart doesn't leap/I'm not afraid). This was to be only the second Carnival held since 1985, and banning Boukman Eksperyans could have had public relations consequences for the government. The Avril government was divided over the song's significance, although it was clear that it was causing quite a commotion wherever it was performed. The band had set a crafty

trap for the government by using the traditional signifying practice of not identifying the target of the *pwen* [Creole for *point*, or target song]. The song referred only to "those guys" and "assassins," "frauds," and so on, and nowhere was the military or the government identified in the song; by censoring the song, the government would have admitted publicly to being the intended recipients of the *pwen*.

A little over a week after Carnival, a young girl was shot by the military, and the popular forces launched a nationwide strike. "Kè m pa sote," now universally considered an anthem of courage in the face of a government characterized as a "band of paranoid frauds and idiots," helped propel the strike along. The protests grew into a popular uprising demanding Avril's ouster; and four days later, on April 10, Avril resigned.

Boukman Eksperyans were the recipients of continued threats and intimidations, but not direct violence, presumably because of their international renown. The Mango Records release of their first album, retitled *Vodou Adjae*, was nominated for a Grammy Award, the first nomination ever for a Haitian band. During the early months after the coup, the band produced a number of new songs, including two that were called "violent" by the authorities: their 1992 carnival song, "Kalfou danjere" (Dangerous Crossroads) and "Nwèl inosan" (Innocent Christmas). In one incident, *attachés* with machine guns showed up at a concert to keep them from performing [those songs].

Their song "Kalfou danjere" was perhaps the most-quoted Haitian song of the decade, as it seemed to capture perfectly a moment of political crisis, spiritual resistance, and cultural production.

Excerpted from *A Day For the Hunter, A Day for the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*, by Gage Averill (University of Chicago Press, 1997).