

MANU DIBANGO

AFRICA'S HIPPEST HOPPER

BY Charles de Ledesma

1 984 in the U.K. has seen a long procession of great African singles which rank in rhythmic supremacy and mix sophistication alongside the toughest funk or the tightest dance hall reggae. George Darko's *Highlife Time*, Shina Williams' *Agboju Logun*, Sunny Ade's *Ase*, Kantata's *Asiko* and Hugh Masekela's *Don't Go Lose It Baby*. Manu Dibango's *Abele Dance*, though, is the most resounding of them all — cascading hip hop rhythms duel with flamboyant alto sax, cool vocals and frenzied congas. The single, out on Celluloid, has brought Manu back into the fore. It's been 11 years since *Soul Makossa* rocked the U.S., U.K. and Africa. Dibango's particular brand of jazz/African dance music was for most people outside Africa their first taste of "the real roots."

Born in Cameroon in 1934, Dibango's parents sent him to study in Paris in his mid-teens. Through the early '50s he studied classical piano but was more emotionally drawn to jazz. He lived in Brussels in the late '50s and played sax in a succession of jazz bands. The early '60s were spent commuting from Paris to West Africa, playing within a wide range of styles from one of Zaire's top dance bands African Jazz to the slow tempo Parisian nightclub world of Nina Ferrer. But by the late '60s the world of African electric music had become too exciting to avoid and Dibango settled in Zaire. The Congolese sound, a fusion of guitar-based, up-tempo West African soukous rhythms and Cuban salsa brass and percussive patterns, had claimed itself as the Number One dance beat over Africa. Its originators Franco and Rochereau had capitalized on their success of the late '50s and their bands had long since become institutions through which musicians passed before embarking on their own solo careers. In Ghana highlife was everpopular and had developed in sophistication. The rural "palm wine" guitar bands which had originated in the thirties and the colonial swing big bands which had held court in Accra up to independence had amalgamated and highlife/jazz was born. In Nigeria, the impact of Ghanaian highlife had spawned its own styles, but most popular in Lagos were the visiting solo singers from the States. Fela Kuti's militant sprawling funk, Afrobeat, changed that; Nigeria too had an urban sound which was more immediate and aggressive than Fuji and Juju, it was very much "modern Africa," electric and compulsively danceable.

Douala, Cameroon, was a vibrant, liberated capital. The transistor bombarded it with the music of her neighbors and a new sound inevitably arrived. It was called Makossa and

though it was essentially an amalgam of soukous, rumba and highlife, it had its own flavor — a hard driving rhythm, speedy call and response vocals and swinging guitar patterns. Despite disappearances to Europe, that Dibango was central to Makossa music's development is certain. He widened the indigenous electric style to include the slower time signatures of the European ballad song, introduced new instruments-quality brass, guitars and marimba, and, as he was able to travel around Africa, brought other indigenous sources into Makossa.

His first lp, *Manu Dibango* was released on the Philips label in '68, *O Boso* followed in '71, and *Soma Caba* in '72. The jazz tenor was there; "Night In Zeralda" and "Hibiscus" on *Boso* exude a restrained Coltrane mood, but the rhythmic body was too understated. It was as if Dibango was not quite where he wanted, or needed, to be. *Soul Makossa* in '73 got him there. As Fela's funky urgency gained steam, so the dance crazy youth tapped onto international dance floors. It was the moment for hybrids and *Soul Makossa*'s spunky Junior Walker style tenor, jazz looseness and depth and electric African rhythms spread like bushfire.

But unfortunately *Soul Makossa* was in a class of its own and the continued internationalizing of the more accessible African blends did not follow by proxy. Manu sees in very clear terms a basic prejudice at work in the way African music is marketed and viewed. "People in the West expect and seem to want African music to stay at being folk music — if you do not play tom-tom you are not an African musician. But everywhere has its own ethnic music and there is now an electric Africa. People there, are dealing with technology and all that it promises." But the exodus to Europe, especially Paris, is proliferating. Musicians by going to Europe stand a chance of getting launched all over Africa and gain access to new styles like reggae, jazz and soul. Manu: "A more professional approach has to occur when they work in Europe. They have to learn about music in order to use studios and they are in a position to offer and receive ideas."

The Paris scene, though, is run in a very ad hoc vein — there is no development of any one artist, no solid contracts, whoever is popular in Africa is rushed over, lps are cut and then flood the market, then he/she is passed on and a new talent is thrust forward. This thread links the current scene to earlier periods. Manu: "The African music has always been plundered. It is like all our natural resources. They take oil, they take coffee, they take coconuts and they take music! It is the same — the transformation occurs, then

it is sold back to Africa. It becomes gospel, blues, soul, reggae or funk — we are eternal customers!"

After the *Makossa Man* in '73, Dibango switched from the small tight band of the first four albums to a big band: 14 musicians played on the marvellous *Super Kumba* helping Dibango create clammy intense soulful Makossa Jazz. Other notable lps in the '70s include *Waka Juju*, *Afrovision-Big Blow*, *A L'Olympia* and *Home Made*. He split his time between Paris and Cameroon, traveling all around Africa in between times *Home Made* was recorded in Nigeria.

Onto Jamaica in '80 where *Ambassador* and *Gone Clear* were recorded, his only records for a British company. Geoffrey Chung was at the controls and aimed for a rich mix whilst not undermining spatially, the top reggae producers' hallmark. The Sly and Robbie duo, which Manu thinks the best rhythm section around, and many other reggae luminaries contributed, but the results were disappointing. Rolande De Courvior, Manu's long-standing Decca-France producer (now dead) had the knack of bringing out the commanding qualities in Manu's sax or marimba playing while not oppressing the contributions of the rest of the band or dulling the sharpness of the over-all mood. But Chung sifted a mix where Manu's role was dissipated and the melodies and rhythms sounded congested and edgeless. Their attempt at producing a chic reggae Makossa lacked bite.

Another live lp, *Deliverance*, a disco with strings fusion, *Sweet and Soft*, and two solo piano lps, *Melodies Africaines Vols 1 & 2*, constitute his '83 output. Now, having teamed up with Celluloid label boss Bill Laswell, and with a Paris-based band in full gear, a visit to the UK is doubted for November. *Abele Dance* is, no doubt, a taste of things to come, a taste of African music's dynamic collusion with hi-tech production and intermeshing musical genres (it's produced by the man behind Sunny Ade's mixing desk, Martin Meissonnier). It's a crying shame that African music can only reach Western ears in such fits and starts, crawls and leaps, so often dependent on the dubious tactics of the majors or the few enlightened entrepreneurs. Manu, though, is optimistic: "I am of course hoping that *Abele Dance* will affect people . . . worldwide! But it isn't important who has the first big African hit this year in the West. Once it happens others will come flooding. For there is so much music ready to come out of there!"

Charles de Ledesma is a freelance writer based in London.

REGGAE & AFRICAN BEAT DECEMBER 1984 31