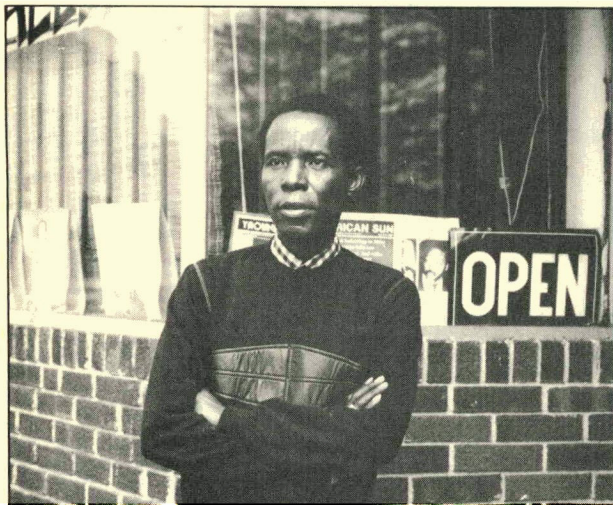


## DOCTEUR NICO RETURNS

BY ELIZABETH SOBO



*Docteur Nico (Nicolas Kassanda) visited the U.S. this year for the first time to arrange for the promotion and distribution of his recordings by the African Music Gallery, Washington D.C.*

After a decade's absence, Zaire's best-known guitarist, Docteur (Doctor) Nico, is back with a long-awaited new lp. His *Dieu de la Guitare* is actually but one of ten new albums recorded during the past year for producer B.G. Akueson's Africa New Sound. It features four expertly done selections in the modern Congolese style. Nico's outstanding guitar work blends well with the accompaniment of Les Redoutables d'Abeti (back-up band for Zairean singer Abeti) and the voices of Mampuya Kalala and Malage Matuli.

All of the selections — "Mikalay," "Obandi Lisusu," "La Vie Est Un Combat," and "Mamu Wa Mpyoi" — are upbeat and danceable; the first is reminiscent of Nico's old "Hawaiian guitar" style.

The new material, most of it done at recording facilities in Lome, Togo, is scheduled for release over the next two years.

There are few musicians who have influ-

enced contemporary African music as much as Dr. Nico. His guitar style has been imitated for nearly three decades, not only in Congo and Zaire, but more recently in much of French-speaking West Africa and throughout the eastern and southeastern parts of the continent as well.

Dr. Nico was born Nicolas Kassanda on July 7, 1939. He was taught the guitar by an older brother, Dachaud, who had worked with some of the earliest musicians in Congo-Leopoldville (as Zaire was then called), artists such as Jean Bosco, Wendo, and Jimmy, who migrated from what is now the Central African Republic and is credited with introducing the guitar to Congolese music.

Nico began his career around 1953, when he and the legendary Kalle (Joseph Kabasele) formed their African Jazz Orchestra along with band members Petit Pierre, Vicky, Roger Iziedi, Brazos, and

Nico's brother Dachaud. Some of their best-remembered recordings include "Independence Cha Cha," "Table Round," "Sophia Ya Motema," and "Meringue Scooby Doo." In the early years, they were one of the only two really professional bands in the Congo, the other being the Rock-A-Mambo group, Luambo Makiadi (Franco) and his OK Jazz came a few years later.

Sometime around 1960 or 1961, when Kalle was unable to appear for a scheduled performance, a young, unknown vocalist filled in for him. That vocalist, who became a regular member of the group, is now known to millions as Tabu Ley Rochereau.

By early 1963, Nico left Kalle and African Jazz to form his own group, African Fiesta, along with Rochereau and Dachaud. In 1966, there was another split, with Nico heading the new African Fiesta SukiSa and Tabu Ley forming his African Fiesta Le Peuple, later known as the African Fiesta National and then as Afrisa. Kalle remained with the African Jazz organization through about 1969, at which time the band re-grouped as African Team.

Zairean music was then in its infancy and the popular sound of the day was still West African highlife. But over the next decade, the Kinshasa sound began to emerge as the definitive music form of all Central and East Africa, and today it is recognized all over the world.

Although the popular Zairean music of today is the product of the many bands and vocalists that have played it over the years, it is undoubtedly the creative genius of guitarist Nico that set the pace for this new hit sound, giving the music its individuality and its universal appeal. It can be said with certainty that the African music of today would not be the same today without him.

Nico went into semi-retirement after the early 1970s, before performers earned any appreciable sums of money for their work. Although he never became rich for his efforts, he is "Number One" to millions of people who remember the early days of the Congolese sound and to many more who have come to appreciate it since.

The new series of recordings is Nico's first in more than ten years, with the exception of his contribution to a 1984 offering by vocalist Vonga Aye, which prominently featured his name but included only two selections in which he actually participated. The newly released album is, by anyone's standards, good music. But best of all is the promise of so much more to come.

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