



DOCTEUR NICO:

A Legend of African Music

The life of Docteur Nico, "Dieu de la Guitare" and one of the creators of contemporary African music, and the birth of a new African nation, Zaire, as recounted by Gary Stewart.

The death of Docteur Nico last year was a tremendous loss for the world of African music. At his peak during the '60s and '70s, Nico was Africa's premier guitarist. The magic of his music molded and shaped the Congo sound that exploded across Africa and swept into Europe.

My introduction to his music came in 1968 in Sierra Leone where I was living at the time; his records were constantly played on radio and at dances. Seventeen years later, in March 1985, I finally met him in person in Washington, D.C., where he had come to negotiate a record deal and obtain treatment for a troublesome blood disorder.

Docteur Nico was a diminutive figure, short and slight of build. Dressed for the interview in black nylon parachutist's trousers and a black-and-white checkered shirt, he was fooling around with his newest purchase, a guitar shaped like a machine gun. His appearance conjured up images of Ivan O. Martin from *The Harder They Come*. Images aside, he was warm and articulate and anxious to talk about his Congo music.

The Congo (now Zaire), a country that would later explode musically and politically, was the Kingdom of the Congo in 1482 when the first Portuguese explorers arrived. A relatively small area around the mouth of the Nzadi (Congo/Zaire) River inhabited by the Bakongo people, its territory would later expand enormously with the onslaught of colonialism. By 1908, when it was officially annexed by Belgium, it encompassed more than 200 ethnic groups and a 900,000-square-mile area of thick rain forests, wide-open savanna and immense mineral wealth—a colony nearly 80 times as large as the metropolis.

It was into this Belgian Congo that Nico was born on July 7, 1939, in the town of Mikalay, Kasai Province. Local custom dictated that a child be given the name of an ancestor so he was called Kasanda after

his grandfather, with the Catholic first name Nicolas. His elder brother, who became known as Déchaud, was called Charles Mwamba after an uncle.

The family was a musical one. Nico's father played accordion, and his mother was a singer and dancer, so it seemed natural for the two boys to take up music as well. They grew up listening to the pioneers of modern Congo music—Zackarie Elinga, known as Jhimmy, who introduced the Hawaiian guitar style to Congo music, and singer-guitarists Antoine Wendo, Henri Bwané and Léon Bukasa. Nico remembered trying to mimic these great stars with a guitar he had fashioned from a board with

nails at each end and wire strung between.

As traditional life began to disintegrate under the weight of colonialism and the influence of western missionaries, thousands of Congolese migrated to cities in search of jobs and a "modern" lifestyle. By the late 1940s, urban areas had grown considerably. Nico and Déchaud were among this group of migrants as they moved with their parents to the capital, Leopoldville. There Déchaud met Jhimmy and began to take up the guitar seriously, eventually winning a spot as Jhimmy's accompanist.

Another major event was the opening of the Congo's first recording studio in 1948. Called Ngoma, it was joined in 1950 by two more studios, Opika and Loningisa. These first rudimentary studios, owned by foreign businessmen, were key elements in the evolution of modern Congo music. Studios could afford to buy European horns, guitars and recording machines that were far beyond the financial reach of most Congolese. Musicians hung around the studios, practicing and recording with the instruments, exchanging ideas on composition and technique.

It was in this studio atmosphere that Nico got his start. Opika, he told me, "That's the studio that made me what I am today." It was just a small one-track affair about as large as a medium-size parlor. The musicians would gather around a microphone at one end of the room and the owner, Jewish businessman Gabriel Moussa Benatar, would operate the recorder at the other end. The tapes were then sent to London for pressing into 78 rpm records. The musicians, oblivious to the financial aspects of the business, were thrilled to hear

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Docteur Nico, creator of the Congolese guitar style

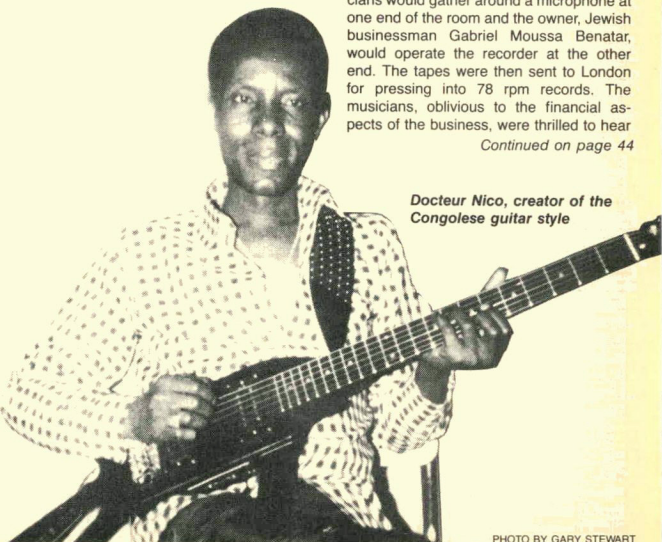


PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

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their music on record and were paid little or nothing for their work.

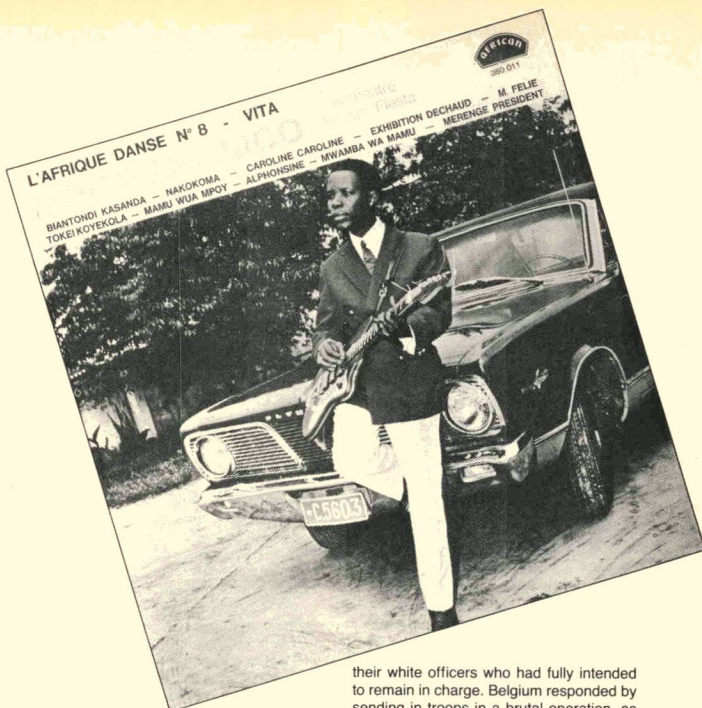
Nico made his first recording at Opika singing with Jimmy and Paul Mwanga, a popular singer of the time. Benatar took a liking to "little Nico" and bought him a guitar and a bicycle for encouragement. Nico turned to Déchaud for guitar instruction and practiced constantly to develop his style and technique.

In the early '50s, there were no permanent bands in the Congo. A musician would simply call on his friends to back him when he had a song to record or a wedding to play for. As his guitar skills improved, Nico was often asked to accompany other musicians, like Jimmy and Mwanga, and an up-and-coming singer named Joseph Kabasele. Nico, Déchaud and Kabasele along with Georges Dula, Albert Yamba-Yamba and Tino Baroza played together so much they decided in 1953 to become a permanent group. Nico was dubbed "Nico Mobali" by his fellow musicians, and Kabasele was known as "Kallé Jeef" or "le Grand Kallé." With a nod to the music of black America, they called their group African Jazz.

The Orchestre African Jazz created excitement in Leopoldville. The group's records sold well, and people flocked to see its live performances. Kallé's sonorous voice and Nico's inspired guitar produced a sound that seemed to capture the essence of the new urban class. Kallé emerged as the group's agent and producer, and Nico handled the musical arrangements. Around 1955, Nico and Déchaud dropped their acoustic guitars in favor of electric models. Conga player Antoine "Dépuissant" Kaya and trumpeter Willy Kuntima joined the band, and it began recording at the new Esengo studio, a move that led to a brief but creative collaboration in 1958 with a group called Rock-A-Mambo led by Ros-signal and Nino Malapet.

While African Jazz was blossoming in the Belgian Congo, the clamor for independence sweeping across Africa bore fruit in the Gold Coast. There, in 1957, the independent nation of Ghana was born. Ghana was followed by Guinea in 1958, and the independence movement gained momentum. The Congolese, frustrated by racism, a lack of educational opportunity, and an absence of political and economic freedom, pressured Belgium for independence through clandestine nationalist organizations. As the unity of the colonial establishment unraveled, Belgium relented and agreed to negotiate a timetable for granting independence.

A round-table conference between Belgian and Congolese leaders began in Brussels in January 1960, and African Jazz was invited to provide entertainment. The band included Nico, Kallé, Déchaud, Dépuissant, singer Victor "Vicky" Longomba,



bassist Antoine "Brazzos" Armando and maracas player Roger Izendi. They entertained the conferees and played public concerts in Brussels and Paris. Nico was particularly impressive, and Europeans were amazed to see an African play the guitar with such style and command. A Belgian radio announcer named Mimi was so impressed by his performance she called him "Docteur," a title to match the distinction of the artist.

With business completed, the conference adjourned at the end of February, and the delegates headed home to jockey for power. Back in Leopoldville, Docteur Nico and the other members of African Jazz basked in the afterglow of their own European triumph. To celebrate their country's approaching independence they released two new records, "Independence Cha Cha" and "Table Ronde," which were instant hits in the last days of the Belgian Congo.

Independence day, June 30, 1960, was a day of celebration throughout the country. Joseph Kasavubu was sworn in as president and Patrice Lumumba took the oath as prime minister. "We are no longer your monkeys," declared Lumumba, pointedly addressing Belgium's King Baudouin in his speech to the gathering.

From that high point, the country rapidly disintegrated into near anarchy and civil war. Congolese soldiers rebelled against

their white officers who had fully intended to remain in charge. Belgium responded by sending in troops in a brutal operation, as Europeans fled the country in droves. The mineral-rich province of Katanga (now Shaba) seceded in collusion with Belgium, which sought to protect its mining interests. Peacekeeping forces of the United Nations were dispatched to try to maintain order, while rival Congolese factions set up governments in their respective strongholds. In January 1961, Lumumba was assassinated in a plot inspired in part by the CIA, and the crisis deepened.

During this period, Nico, who had earned his secondary school certificate in mechanics, was pressed into service as a technical college teacher to replace a European instructor who had fled the country. In spite of the turmoil, music continued to flourish in the capital, and he maintained his career with African Jazz. Three new additions bolstered the band in 1961: Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango, whom the group had met in Brussels; a new singer, Pascal Tabou, who was becoming known as Rochereau; and the itinerant singer-composer Joseph "Mujos" Mulamba. Fonior, the Belgian company that owned the African record label, negotiated a deal with Kallé to record the band and release its records internationally.

In early 1963, however, as the Katanga secession was coming to an end, a secession was brewing within the ranks of African Jazz. Nico and the others had become

disenchanted with Kallé's handling of the group's affairs. The recording contract with Fonior was an especially contentious issue. The contract called for the musicians to fly to Brussels periodically where they would record 100 songs — the equivalent of 50 45 rpm records — in two weeks' time. They were paid only 10,000 francs (about \$200) plus transportation and lodging for their work. "They wanted a lot of merchandise," Nico recalled with great understatement. The dispute came to a head in midyear when Nico and most of the others, including Déchaud, Rochereau, Roger Izeidi, Mujos and Depuissant, left African Jazz to form the Orchestre African Fiesta.

The new band was an immediate success with hits like "Fiesta Kombo Ya Sika" and "Mama Ege"; unfortunately, they did not fare any better when it came to negotiating a recording contract. All the bands of the day were forced into a take-it-or-leave-it decision. If they didn't like Fonior's offer, there were no better terms elsewhere. So after a brief two-year existence, African Fiesta split up with money once again playing a major role. Disagreement between Nico and Roger, who acted as the group's agent, was particularly heated. Nico's faction, which included Déchaud, formed a new group called Docteur Nico and Orchestre African Fiesta, while Rochereau and Roger formed African Fiesta National. Some, like Mujos and Depuissant, left to join other bands.

African Fiesta was splitting up, but the

country itself was slowly coming together. Consolidation in the political arena had been an arduous and painful five-year process, the culmination of which was the seizure of power in a military coup d'état by General Joseph Mobutu on Nov. 24, 1965. Mobutu began removing reminders of the unhappy past when, in 1966, he changed the names of several major cities including Leopoldville, which became Kinshasa.

Kinshasa's musical community continued to expand, with more and more groups forming. Musicians and their fans fell, for the most part, into two distinct schools — those who preferred Docteur Nico's progressive sound and other who favored Franco's more traditional style. Franco had formed his O.K. Jazz in 1956, and he and Nico were intense competitors. Even in 1985 Nico bristled when I asked him a question about his rival. The two had occasionally taunted each other in their songs, although in later years the rhetoric cooled. Nico added the word "Sukisa," which essentially means stop, to the name of his band, implying that other bands should stop bragging, because "African Fiesta is the best!"

Docteur Nico and his Orchestre African Fiesta enjoyed an incredible 10-year reign as one of Africa's most popular bands. They recorded hundreds of songs and entertained thousands at live performances across Africa and Europe. Nico introduced the Hawaiian steel guitar into the music and popularized a new dance step called the "kirikiri" which supplanted the "soulous." Despite the appearance of success, how-



ever, he earned very little money for his work. Record royalties, he claimed, were almost non-existent, and live performances did little more than keep food on the table.

In 1971, President Mobutu declared that the Democratic Republic of the Congo would henceforth be known as the Republic of Zaire. Early the next year, even more far-reaching changes were announced. All citizens with foreign-sounding names were ordered by law to change them to Zairian ones. Most people responded enthusiastically to the "recourse à l'authenticité," and Nicolas Kasanda, remembering his birthplace, became Kasanda Wa Mikalay. After a brief period of confusion, musicians were allowed to keep their stage names and Docteur Nico continued to reign.

By the mid-'70s fortune took a turn for the worse. Fonior ran into tax problems in Belgium, and the company was forced to close down. Its assets were sold to settle the debt, and Docteur Nico was left without a record company. Since he had never been happy with his recording contracts, he decided to "sit back" for awhile until the right deal came along. Rumors about drinking and marital problems began to circulate and there was talk of his declining health, but Nico, who was very guarded about his personal life, insisted he was only waiting for the right opportunity. In view of his death, however, it seems likely that the rumors had at least a grain of truth to them.

Nico staged a brief comeback, starting in 1983, with the assistance of B.G. Akueson who was then artistic director of the Office Togolais du Disque in Lomé, Togo. At Akueson's behest Nico and some of his old musicians, including Déchaud, traveled to Togo and began recording with Abeti Masakini's band, Les Rédoutables, at the Africa New Sound studio. During the next 18 months, they recorded enough material for 10 albums, and tracks were laid in Paris for an additional two. *Dieu de la Guitare* (No. 1) and *Docteur Nico Aux U.S.A.* were both a result of those sessions.

Whether this final flurry of activity was spurred by a premonition or even direct knowledge of his impending fate is speculative. When I saw him in Washington he appeared healthy, and the doctors treating his blood disorder did not feel his condition warranted hospitalization. He did interviews with Voice of America and concluded a record deal with the African Music Gallery. On his return to Kinshasa, however, his health began to deteriorate. As the months slipped by it was decided — it is said by Mobutu himself — to send him to Brussels for treatment, but by then it was too late. Docteur Nico died Sept. 22, 1985, at the age of 46. ★

Docteur Nico Discography

Docteur Nico was a prolific recording artist, and this discography represents only the albums that are most readily available. It was compiled with the assistance of Ibrahim Bah of the African Music Gallery, who acted as Docteur Nico's host during his 1985 visit to Washington, D.C. The following two albums, released in 1984, are compilations of singles by African jazz:

Hommage Au Grand Kallé Vol. 1

Hommage Au Grand Kallé Vol. 2

Another compilation album by African Jazz, although the recording dates listed on the jacket are suspicious and are most likely release dates instead:

Authenticité Volume 5

Albums by Docteur Nico and his various orchestras:

L'Afrique Danse No. 5

L'Afrique Danse No. 8

L'Afrique Danse No. 9

L'Afrique Danse No. 10

M'Bandaka

Zadio

Dieu de la Guitare (No. 1)

Aux U.S.A.

The following two albums have been released following Nico's death as part of the newly resurrected African record label's Merveilles du Passé series; they are compilations of singles originally recorded by Orchestre African Fiesta during the years 1963-65:

Eternal Docteur Nico (blue cover)

Eternal Docteur Nico (yellow cover)

African Jazz

African Jazz

African Jazz

African Jazz

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