

# Loketo

## SHAKE YOUR HIPS

INTERVIEW BY  
TOM CHEYNEY AND CC SMITH

One of the most exciting sounds in soukous today comes from the Zairean band called Loketo, which means "hips" in Lingala, as in "shake your..." At the heart of the group are super guitarist Dibo Dibala and top vocalist Aurlus Mabele, who have perfected a radical innovation in soukous in which the slow part is dropped and the band swings immediately into the fast dance groove, called the *seben*. Even the concept of a set group is unusual in Zairean music, where lead vocalists usually call on a pool of session musicians to back them in the studio and on tour.

Dibo was born in Kisangani but moved to Kinshasa at the age of 6. Although he had been playing guitar professionally since he was 16, his musical breakthrough came after he settled in Paris in 1980. His work on the early Kanda Bongo Man records established his credentials as a much-sought-after session player.

Aurlus Mabele is from the Brazzaville side of the great Congo River, born into a musical family that he says formed the first orchestra in the Congo. He has five albums and one Maracas d'Or (the French Grammy-equivalent) to his credit (for *Africa Mousso* in 1987), and has worked with many of the soukous and zouk musicians who record in Paris.

On stage the action, which at times resembles a comedy act, never stops, what with three singer/dancers (Mabele, Pierre Belkos and Jean Baron) winding, grinding, posing, break dancing on the floor or leaping up on top of the bass drum; two female dancers in exotic costumes shaking their hips; audience members jumping onto the stage and dancing; and above it all, the wicked, sparkling guitar lines of Dibo and rhythm guitarist Freddy de Majunga electrifying the ozone. After their phenomenal show at the Music Machine in Los Angeles, we sat down with Aurlus and Dibo to find out what makes Loketo so "hip."

**Q:** As a guitarist; who are your influences?

**Dibo:** I listen to George Benson, I like the way he plays a lot. Aside from soukous, I listen to a lot of jazz guitarists.

**Q:** What about African guitarists, specifically Docteur Nico?

**Dibo:** Nico was our papa. I played with Franco a little but not with Rochereau. I played with Nico in his second group other than Africa Fiesta, but that didn't work out.

**Q:** Was he a good guitar teacher?

**Dibo:** When we learned to play guitar, we learned what he had already done. He was super, better than Franco.

**Q:** Are you influenced by traditional music?

**Dibo:** My parents are from Eastern Kasai, they're Baluba, so I often draw from Baluba folkloric music. The song "Boling" from the *Super K* album is from Baluba folklore. "Kamulango" is also a Baluba folkloric rhythm.

**Q:** Aurlus, when did you start singing?

**Aurlus:** They say that an African always has song, knows song. I was born into an artistic household, there were many artists around. I had a brother, a cousin of mine, who formed the first modern Congolese band, named the Diaboïs. It's him who also started the modern Congolese ballet. So I was born into this ambience. Since I was very young, I started to form groups, ballets—I can say that even at the age I began to talk, I also began to sing. It's been more than nine years since I started singing professionally.

**Q:** What is the influence of zouk on your music?

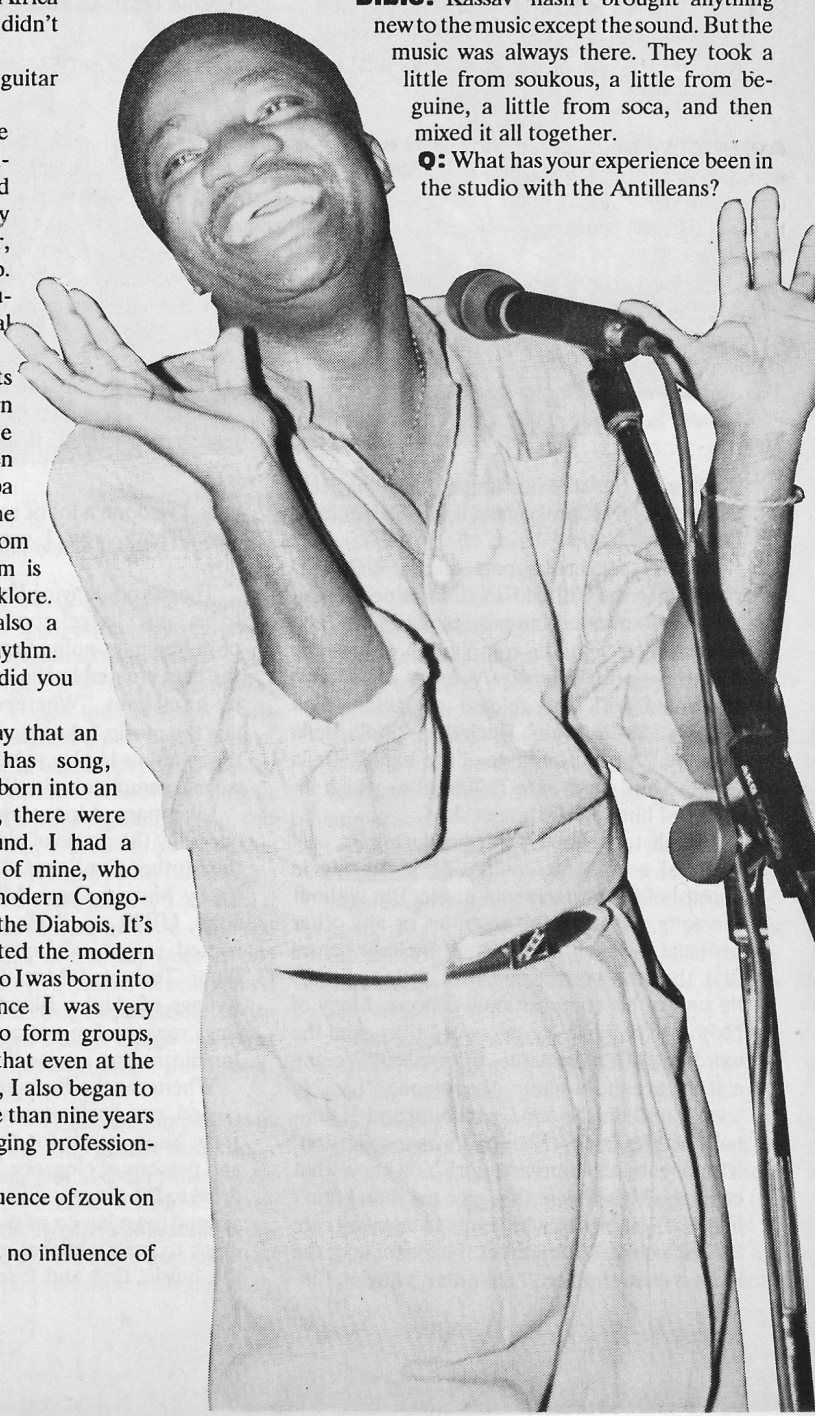
**Aurlus:** There is no influence of

zouk in our music. It's the influence of soukous that's in zouk. The rhythm (claps hands like Antillean *ti-bwa*) that came from our land first, we began that. Even the word zouk come from soukous. It was *se kous*, then *soukous*, *soukoue*, *soukoue ko*, *souk* and then they made it zouk.

**Q:** Aside from the roots of the music, what about the production aspects that Kassav' brought to the music?

**Dibo:** Kassav' hasn't brought anything new to the music except the sound. But the music was always there. They took a little from soukous, a little from beguine, a little from soca, and then mixed it all together.

**Q:** What has your experience been in the studio with the Antilleans?







LEFT: AURLUS MABELE: BORN TO SING.

ABOVE: PIERRE BELKOS, AURLUS MABELE AND JEAN BARON DEMONSTRATE THE LATEST STEPS.

# les Danses

ROBOTI ROBOTA

(1984)

KWASSA KWASSA

(1987)

MADIABA

(1988)

SOUNDAMA

(1989)

**Aurlus:** We have worked with some people and they have their own techniques. We have our own way of working in the studio—we work live in the studio. But they work instrument by instrument.

**Q:** So they record one track at a time?

**Diblo:** Yes, they do it one by one, while when we work it's the whole team together. It's like we do it in concert—everyone plays together. The Antilleans work somewhat like the Europeans—one track at a time, lots of retakes, little by little. With us, it's the heat we release when we play. If one works like they do, one by one, the sound is good and clean but the feeling is missing. When we all work together, a great feeling is released.

**Q:** In your compositional method, do you improvise?

**Diblo:** On stage we improvise a lot. If we did it the same way every time, it would become boring. We try to change things all the time, to improvise. But as far as compositions are concerned, the things that inspire us are the way we live, what we see, the women...

**Aurlus:** Men, trees, animals, air, moon. [Laughs]

**Q:** Do you write the song lyrics?

**Aurlus:** Yes, on my records, on my songs, it's me. With Loketo, I write certain titles as well. Diblo and Jean Baron also write some. Then we all do the arranging together.

**Q:** I hear some Creole words in your songs.

**Aurlus:** The Antilleans really liked me. They supported me, they were the fans. I went to the Antilles often so I familiarized myself with the Antilleans. I learned to speak Creole because they really like the music and listen to it and I wanted to make them understand. To please them, I put little Creole phrases in the songs. So they are very happy. Sometimes I sing in Lari, which is the most widely spoken language in the Congo.

I am Balari mixed with Bateke, and those are the two most popular languages in the Congo. But that doesn't prevent me from singing in some of the languages of West Africa, for example. I sing in Bambara, Djoula. I sing in the languages of the Central African Republic—it helps them understand the songs. I use a lot of languages to get people to listen to the music.

**Diblo:** It's a way to reach everyone. When you put in a little French, a little Creole, the French get interested a little more. In fact, we just put in a few phrases in English. Since we know that not everyone speaks Lingala, we have introduced a few phrases in other languages. The group is starting to become international.

**Aurlus:** I sing about women, I sing about love on the whole because, in our world, when there is no love, all is wickedness. You see? If there is love everywhere, there would be no nuclear arms, there would be no weapons, we wouldn't see any wars. Love is lacking. Since there is this lack of love, we must sing about it in order to wake up the people to love. As far as women, I know, that's life. Without women, a man cannot be born. It's the woman who guards us for nine months in her belly. After nine months, she puts us into the world. And a woman becomes our wife. Women even make men suffer as well. Therefore, we must sing about women.

**Q:** What does "Super K" mean?

**Diblo:** *Kinkiki*, which means a super dance in Lingala.

**Q:** Like kwassa kwassa?

**Diblo:** Like kwassa kwassa yes, but all the dances mixed up.

**Q:** Is there a new dance now?

**Diblo:** Yes, the dance you saw last night, the soundama. After kwassa kwassa you had madiaba. Now madiaba is finished and it's soundama.

**Q:** What are the dance's movements?

**Diblo:** It's a little bit like the beguine, but

most of all you move the butt more.

**Q:** That's the Zairean way. [Laughs] Is kwassa kwassa still going on, is it still popular?

**Diblo:** Yes, it's popular. Kwassa kwassa showed the way for all the dances that have come after it. It's going on in those places where it's just started becoming known but at home in Zaire and pretty much throughout Africa, its popularity is over.

**Q:** Do you fall down on stage each night?

**Aurlus:** [Laughs] That's the feeling! In Loketo, the style that we're doing now, the style that everyone is doing now, we began it ourselves. When we began doing this style, everyone made fun of us, they said, that's not a good style. We said, no, it's our style and we're going to continue with it. Now the style is going well and everyone is playing it. Loketo has six arrangers, we are a group.

**Diblo:** We work as a team. Each person tells his idea, then we discuss it, we see if it's good, if so, we adopt it, if not, well...

**Aurlus:** What I would like to say about Loketo is that we started this style. We are the originals. There are people who copy it, who are very good as well, but we are the originators.

**Q:** But what about *les invitées* (the invited ones)?

**Aurlus:** It's still Loketo. We call some people to participate with us on the project. We would like to get a bit of a blend with the people who help us, to be like a family. We don't tell them how to play but it's we who lay down the rhythm.

**Q:** Who are the permanent members of Loketo now?

**Aurlus:** Diblo Dibala, Mack Macaire, myself, Jean Baron and Kombas as well. Now Freddy de Majunga and Miguel Yamba are here. At the beginning, we were six, but two of the originals left—Mav Cacharel and Mimi Kazidonna. With

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## LOKETO

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Pierre Belkos, we're in the process of testing him out to see if he can do it because we have our own way of working. We have a certain way of singing, of doing certain tricks—if he can do that, we will count him in. Discipline is also important in the group.

Although I am primarily a musician, I am also a stylist—all the clothes that I wear I have designed myself. Belkos is a stylist as well. In Loketo, we have a little of everything. You saw Komba on congas? I play congas as well—we try and work in a communal fashion.

**Q:** Will you continue to work with Kanda Bongo Man or not?

**Diblo:** From time to time, but not in concert. If it's possible to do so, I'll work in the studio. We're still friends. We might call him to see if he could sing for us or I could play for him, if he asks me and it works out. But I think that's going to be harder and harder to do because we have a group that is on the rise. In the long term, we must stop playing with others here and there or

we are going to disperse our strength. It might be a good time to say that we need to work for no one but Loketo. It's not set yet but we will do that soon. So when that time comes, I will no longer play with Kanda.

**Q:** Tell us something about Jimmy Houetinou of Jimmy's Productions.

**Aurlus:** He was a young guy, a fan of mine, but he wasn't a producer when we met him. One time he threw a party and invited me as principal star of the party to do a playback of my new album. Although when I arrived at the party, there were a lot of people there, Jimmy hadn't made a lot of money. At the end of the night, when I asked him for my money, he didn't have it. He was afraid. He told me that he didn't have anything to pay me with. I told him, OK, just give me enough for taxi fare to return home. But he came by my place and continued to be my fan.

At the time I had a producer who didn't pay me well. He sold my records but he didn't pay me. I wondered what I could do about it. I had to find a way to finance and release a new album. I saw Jimmy and I told him that I had the songs but I wanted him to produce the album. He told me, I'm already your fan, I have a little money, I want to give you some money. When we went into the studio,

I said if I released an album that doesn't make any money it will be hard to pay you back. So he proposed that he would become my producer. We went into the studio and made my first album with Jimmy. It was my third album, *Africa Mousso*. We sold a lot of them, almost enough to get a gold record. He was ecstatic so he became my producer. Then he asked Diblo if wanted to make a record....

He has produced a lot of people, he has become a serious producer. He is 27 years old, from Benin with French nationality.

**Q:** We want to ask you about your clothing, design, la sape and all that.

**Aurlus:** We know music the best—it's music for us first of all, la sape afterwards. Belkos designs and I also design. On my clothes, it's my label—it's marked "Aurlus Mabele." Sometimes I wear clothing from Jean Paul Gaultier, Yogi Yamamoto, Thierry Mugler.

**Q:** Do you ever sing about other clothing brands in your songs, like some performers have done?

**Aurlus:** No, we don't like that, we don't like singing about the labels like that. We dress for ourselves, in order to present our image. But we don't go as far as to sing about the labels, because those people who do that don't get paid

any money. If one pays, then one could sing about it. The stores get a lot of African clients because of a song like that, but the musicians make nothing. Once, in my country, there was a motorbike called the Velo Solex. I did a dance called the "oyosca." Everyone did that dance in the Congo at that time. Sales of the Solex climbed so much that they even raised the price. People bought it but I didn't make a thing. It was the hippest motorbike at the moment but I didn't make any money.

**Q:** With the musical arrangements, you have changed soukous style—it's all fast now. What's next?

**Diblo:** Even if we hadn't done it, others would have done it. If you compare other music, for example European music, there aren't two parts to the music, where it starts slow and then heats up afterwards. It's a rhythm that starts at the beginning and carries through to the end. We want to try and have a music that makes people dance. There are people who don't understand two parts—a slow part with a fast part after—it doesn't make sense to them. So we begin with the hot, fast stuff and the music is everywhere. You, who don't understand a word of Lingala, you dance anyway. You dance, even during the singing, because of the rhythm.

**Q:** Will the rumba be lost?

**Diblo:** No, the rumba as it exists will always be there. The difference between the two parts, what we have done, is that we no longer mix the two. We no longer do both. With Franco, for example, on "Mario," that's rumba. It's slow from beginning to end. With us, you can see there are a few bits of rumba; "Bolino" is not soukous, it's rumba....

**Q:** In your opinion, what is the future of soukous?

**Aurlus:** I think there are people in the world who know that it's good but because they don't have it inside of themselves, they don't want it to happen. But the future of soukous will be better, if it continues like it's going now. We will see soon. If not by ourselves, our children will see it explode. We who have started it have opened the way. Those who come after us could push it even further. I know that there is a better future.

**Q:** I hope to see a day when music like soukous can compete on the radio with rock.

**Diblo:** We need people like you, if you're there for us, it will happen. But if there is a lack of people like you, if there's less than 200 like you in the U.S., I think soukous is finished. You're not numerous so it's up to you to educate the people. If people learn about soukous, like it, then one day, it will be good. We have already tried to work and get soukous to an international level. I see a rosy future. We dream of when soukous will be accepted like reggae, so that one will hear tell of soukous everywhere.

Translation by Tom Cheyney

## VIRTUOSO GUITARIST

### DIBLO DIBALA:

"WHEN WE ALL WORK TOGETHER, A GREAT FEELING IS RELEASED."

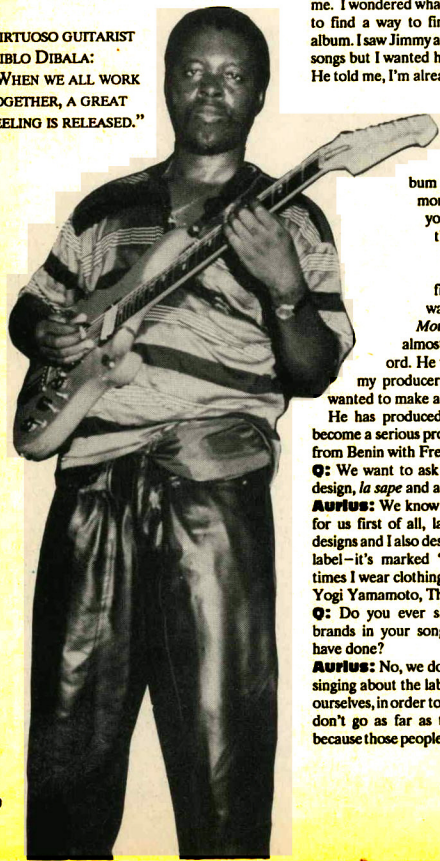


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