Session men are the lifeblood of the Paris soukous scene. For 15 years or so, musicians of Africa and the Caribbean have flocked to this former metropolis of colonialism. Frustrated by deteriorating facilities at home, they sell their belongings, even their instruments, to scrape up precious airfare. They arrive with little money, move in with friends or relatives, wash dishes, sweep floors and make the rounds of the studios, searching for a chance to play.

“We know each other, you know,” says Cameroon trumpet player Tete Fredo, who like many contributors to soukous isn’t from the area of its birth. “If you came to Paris now, you are an African, good musician, you play once, everybody’s going to know.” Fredo played well enough to back nearly every musician living in Paris at one time or another, African or otherwise. Fredo, along with his partner, sax player Jimmy Nvondo, became the Sly and Robbie of Paris hornmen.

The session men work as individuals. When one has the makings of an album, he calls on others to record with him. The record is issued in the initiated’s name and he gets the royalties while those who work on the session with him get a one-time payment. The principal on one session will likely be a backup on the next. Even big names like Kanda Bongo Man work this way. He is the star on his own lip, but often sings backing vocals—or even lead if the principal artist is an instrumentalist—on others’ projects.

It is a matter of economics, says guitarist Rigobert “Rigo” Star “Bamundele. “Life is a lot harder now and supporting a band is not an easy task. So most people tend to go as individuals, do their own individual efforts and come with [their own] material rather than work as a group.”

Rigo moved to Paris eight years ago after working 10 years in Kinshasa with people like Papa Wemba and Tabu Ley Rochereau. A guitar virtuoso, he has also become a much-in-demand producer and arranger. From his early ‘80s solo lp Rnbo Star through Sam Mangwana’s Aladi and Keoti Olatunde’s Teza Tcha to this year’s wonderful Phenomenon by Mbilia Bel and Wembé’s self-titled album, Rigo’s contributions to soukous are impressive. “My telephone number doesn’t change,” he says, “they just call me.

Another fine session guitarist is Diblo Dibala. Diblo left Zaïre in 1979, after honing his skills in such groups as Vox Africa, Bella Mambo and Bella Bella. After nearly two years of “adventure” in Brussels where he washed dishes for a living and played a rented guitar, he moved to Paris. “I really learned the hard way,” he says. In Paris he rejoined Kanda Bongo Man, with whom he’d played in Bella Bella. Their first album collaboration, Iyole, in 1981 was a breakthrough for both men. For Kanda it has meant a measure of real stardom. For Diblo it has led to as much session work as he can handle and to the birth of Loketo.

As has happened with Loketo, Paris musicians do occasionally experiment by forming bands. One of the earliest attempts was Les Quatre Étoiles, the Four Stars, which brought together singers Nyboma and Wuta Mayi and guitarists Bopol Munsaminta and Syran Mbenza in 1982. The four had extensive experi-
ence back home in Zaire playing separately with bands like O.K. Jazz, Lipua Lipua, Baby National and Loya du Zaire. In Paris they work independently then join forces from time to time to record and tour. Lately another Zairean singer, Jean Papy, has appeared to replace Nyboma, so the stars may be changing.

About two-and-a-half years ago another group, called L.P.P. (Les Potes des Potes, or friends of friends), surfaced as a more or less stable session band. An international cast, L.P.P. includes three Congolese musicians — singer and dancer Pierre Belco, bass player Reny Sahlom and rhythm guitarist Mimi Kaziokonn, Zairean solo guitarist Daily Kimoko; drummer Jean “Ty-Jan” Azem from Guadeloupe; and singer-dancer-manager Eweligne “Sammy” Marin from Martinique.

In addition to their studio efforts, the members of L.P.P. have worked as touring bands for Kanda Bongo Man and are recording their own material released under the names of the individual members. First out was the lp Ty-Jan released last spring followed a few months later by Belco’s Musique et Mode. But L.P.P. may or may not be here to stay; it has lately shown signs of unraveling.

Two other standout among the legion of Paris session men are the ubiquitous drummer Domingo Salsero from Central African Republic, whose work with Loya du Zaire and Sam Mangwana’s African All Stars paved his way to Paris, and Zairean bass bass player Andre “du Soleil” Kinzouzi, who is perhaps the only one to rival Salsero for number of album credits.

In the old days in Kinshasa, studio owners were pivots to the music’s success. In Paris, it is the producers who succor soukous. One of the most successful was Richard Dick of the Republic of Benin. In the late ’70s and early ’80s his International Salsa Musique and Africana superlabels produced some unforgettable records, among them the great Macoco by Zairean guitarist Pablo Lubadika Porthos. Tracks from that album later put the kick in Island’s Sound d’Afrique series.

Another early producer was saxophone player Eddy Gustome of Martinique, who established the Eddy’Son label around 1980. Eddy’Son produced Rico Star’s Ringo Star lp and two best-sellers, L’Argent Appelle l’argent and Samba by l’Ooriental Bantous alumnus Pamela Marka. Gustome continues in the business with Eddy’Son’s successor Saxone.

Following in the footsteps of these pioneers came the Ivory Coast’s Moumouni Ouattara with his Afro Rythme label. Ouattara introduced Kanda Bongo Man and Dibbó to soukous lovers with the albums Iyole and Djessy. Zaire’s Louketo Sambor, alias L.M. Kilua when he’s writing songs, launched the Innovation series, beginning with two standard-setting volumes: Bopoli’s Pîne, Je Veux and Chérif Makwana by Julios Lukau. In the mid-’80s the French husband-wife production team of Charles Manilatskis and Colette Lacoste gave us Ku-manji Mado from Kosmos and Mpong Lope’s classic lp, Femme Commerçante, one of the best Paris-produced soukous albums of all time.

As we head for the ’90s two more producers have emerged to pick up the beat. Jimmy’s Productions, owned by Benin’s Jimmy Houtchi-

**Far left:** Vocalist Pierre Belco works with the session band L.P.P. (Les Potes des Potes) in Studio and on Tour. **Left:** Musicians consult with producer Ringo Moya (on right of board) in a Paris studio. Center: Tete Fredo, trumpet player from Cameroon who is much in demand in Paris. Right: Guitar virtuoso Rico Star.

**Photo by Gary Stewart**