



Soukous

BIRTH of the BEAT

BY GARY STEWART

The rest of the world is discovering what Africa has known for 30 years. Congo music—the pop music of Congo and Zaire that we in the West call *soukous*—is captivating. Its intricate, invigorating rhythms set feet to tapping. Its pumping and pounding kick drum and bass go for the gut and quicken the pulse. And its guitars, pulsating, ringing, sweet guitars, penetrate the skull with mesmerizing force. It is music that defies anyone within earshot to sit still.

"African music is old in Africa, but here it's new," says Kanda Bongo Man, one of Zaire's hottest singers. "That's because there aren't a lot of big recording companies promoting African music." But the list is growing. The handful of small, mostly European labels that released the music in the '60s and '70s was joined by Island Records (Mango in the U.S.) in 1981. Island dipped into the bag of Congolese dance steps and pulled out soukous to name the second volume of its *Sound D'Afrique* collection (despite the presence of tracks from as far afield as Cameroon and Mali), and the term has been synonymous with Congo music ever since. Now, after an extended diversion into South African music thanks mainly to Paul Simon's *Graceland* project, some of the big guns like Virgin and Mango (again) have soukous in their sights.

Because they happened at roughly the same time, it's tempting to equate the birth of Congo music with the outbreak of rock'n'roll in the '50s. On reflection, however, it is America's jazz revolution of the 1920s that may provide a more accurate parallel. For within the twin Congos

controlled by Belgium (now Zaire) and France (Brazzaville), the development of Congo music was itself nothing short of revolutionary.

Jazz and Congo music are rooted in Africa. Both are indebted to the march of technology. Each genre is the product of its country's rapidly expanding cities. For jazz these elements combined between the world wars and changed American music forever. In the two Congos it happened after World War II: Colonialism's dying days witnessed a new music's birth.

In the '40s and '50s large numbers of Congolese moved to the cities in search of jobs. Once beyond the protection of the close-knit village, traditional forms of entertainment began to mix. New associations developed and blurred ethnic ties. Roving minstrels like Antoine "Wendo" Kalosoi and Zackarie "Jhimmy" Elenga took up the cheap acoustic guitars that flooded into Africa and bridged the gap from traditional to modern music.

As people found jobs and earned money consumer goods became affordable; high on the list of *desirability* were the new technological marvels—radios, gramophones and records. Within a fairly short span, perhaps a decade or so, the sounds of Europe, America and, more importantly for Congo music, Latin America permeated Congolese cities. African rhythms, exported on slave ships, suddenly echoed back from 78-rpm record grooves and crackling radio loudspeakers.

The source of Congo music's rhythmic base is a contentious subject among musicians and observers. Did the Congolese borrow from Latin America or are they themselves the creators? On one point there is near unanimity: For Congo music, rumba is the mother rhythm. Where did it come from? Who borrowed from whom? Did it develop independently on both sides of the Atlantic? These are hotly debated questions. Zairean author Malangi Lonoh, in his *Commentary on Modern Congolese Music* (1969), perhaps resolved the issue as well as anyone: "The Latin Americans used African influences as the Africans profited by the extension of the Latin American rhythms. 'Para Fifi,' 'Kai Kato' of Joseph Kabasele of Kinshasa were adapted by Latin Americans as it is [done] in Kinshasa with Latin American records."

Where American jazz had Louis Armstrong as catalyst and innovator, Congo music had Le Grand Kalle, Joseph Kabasele. "There was music in Zaire," says Isaac Musekiwa, who played saxophone for Kabasele in the '50s, "Wendo, Adou Elenga, Bowane, there was

music. Another kind of music. But when Kabasele started to sing, he changed everything. And when [Docteur] Nico and Tino Baroza started the solo for guitar, now it brought all the people to look for solo which was not there before. You see, that's how that music was started."

Kabasele's band, l'Orchestre African Jazz, was truly an inspiration. It was the first full-fledged band of real significance in the development of modern Congolese music. When it formed in 1953, the rudimentary Leopoldville (Kinshasa) recording studios—Ngoma, Opika, Loningsa—that had sprung up at the hands of a cadre of Greek businessmen, were populated by individual musicians who were beholden to the studio owner. Since he also owned the instruments, musicians practiced at the studios and exchanged ideas with others who worked there. Compositions inevitably developed from these sessions and were then recorded using whatever combination of house musicians was necessary. The resulting record was issued in the session leader's name or that of the person who had the original song idea.

But the musicians of African Jazz worked together more or less exclusively. They borrowed from traditional rhythms and melodies, incorporated African echoes from their favorite records and featured the tasty guitar interplay of Dr. Nico and his brother Dechaud alongside Kabasele's lusty vocals. The music was joyous and witty and above all highly danceable. The newly arrived city dwellers heartily embraced it.

In 1956, O.K. Jazz (*Orchestre Kinois de Jazz*, or Orchestra of Kinshasa) was formed and quickly became a rival for Kabasele and company. A bit more steeped in tradition, the members of O.K. Jazz created their own rumba-based version of crisscrossing guitars and sweet vocals. The two groups developed rapid followings and spawned dozens of imitators. By 1966 there were more than 30 bands of note in Kinshasa alone—groups like Congo Succes, Rock-a-Mambo and Negro Succes.

The Leopoldville riots of January 1959, a manifestation of long-suppressed nationalist feelings, inadvertently led to the formation of a third prominent *orchestre*. Brazzaville musicians in Leopoldville bands—and there were many—fled back across the river when the riots broke out. Many remained there in the face of their neighbor's continuing instability, and they

began to form new groups, among them the powerful *Orchestre Les Bantous de la Capitale*.

Radio and records, the products of modernization that helped create the new music, also aided its spread. Congo music dominated East Africa in the '60s, "particularly among the middle-class Africans . . . the young budding elite," says music historian John Storm Roberts, who worked in Nairobi at the time. "Congo music," he says, "apart from the fact that it was more danceable and really probably a bit more sophisticated musically, was also hip because it was foreign."

Heading West, Congo music had the same impact. "On the radio you heard music from Zaire, very popular, you know," says the Caribbean All Stars' guitarist Jean Koh Elong of Cameroon recalling the '60s. "Like what they call today, like soukous . . . I grew up in it." Nigerian bassist Kenneth Okulolo of the California-based band Kotoja remembers, "We have two major musics that were influencing everybody at that time, which was the highlife and the Congo music." Farther up the coast a Sierra Leonean guitarist called Dynamite became Dr. Dynamite after he sat in with Dr. Nico during Nico's 1969 West African tour.

Touring bands did much to popularize the music. East Africa, because of its proximity to Zaire, was constantly treated to appearances by O.K. Jazz, African Fiesta and others. Several bands also made forays into West Africa, especially Nigeria. At least as influential as any of the big names was a band called Ryco Jazz. This Congolese quartet, augmented along the way

Continued on page 20

Soukous

(pronounced SOO-KOOS,
from *secouer*, to shake)

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in Zaire, produced in Paris
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PHOTO BY GARY STEWART

DOCTEUR NICO, THE ORIGINATOR OF THE MODERN SOUKOUS GUITAR STYLE, IN 1985.

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SOUKOUS

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by local musicians, piled the West African coast in the '60s, reaching as far as Guadeloupe in the Caribbean at one point. "When that band came it made such an impact on the young people," recalls Chris During, a broadcaster and record producer in Sierra Leone. "When the Ryco Jazz came, oh! it swept the young people off their feet."

Wherever it was heard in Africa, and that was nearly everywhere, Congo music made an impact. It was, as Roberts says, foreign and perhaps more sophisticated, but it was still palpably African. It transcended geographical and ethnic boundaries yet had a familiar ring. The predominantly Lingala lyrics, although not universally understood, had a marvelously melodious quality and were sung with such sweet harmony that they blended into the mix like another instrument. And of course the stunning, interweaving guitars, played in a fashion Dizzy Mandjeku of O.K. Jazz likens to the left and right hands on a keyboard, were the centerpiece. Musicians across the continent scrambled to incorporate Congolese guitar arrangements into their own local styles.

As Congo music developed through the '60s and '70s, the triumvirate of Dr. Nico and his Orchestre Africain Fiesta Sukisa, Franco and l'Orchestre O.K. Jazz and l'Orchestre Africain Fiesta National of Tabu Ley Rochereau emerged to dominate the field. Shuttling between the studios of Kinshasa, Brussels and Paris, they recorded hundreds of songs and popularized dozens of dance steps like the "kiri kiri," "apollo" and "soukous." Almost to a man, today's soukous stars cut their musical teeth in the company of Nico, Franco or Rochereau.

In the early '70s some new, harder-edged, so-called youth bands began to spring up. Brash and cocky and only once removed from playing in Kinshasa's streets, these groups were famous for their rousing dance routines and had to be seen to be fully appreciated. Their music, initially a rougher, stripped-down version of the classic Congo sound, owed as much to their equipment's poor condition as to design. Young, fashion-conscious and incredibly hip, these groups sparked Congo music in the '70s.

Zaiko Langa Langa and Empire Bakuba, two of the best-known youth bands, gave birth in turn to many offshoots. Zaiko splintered several times, yielding in the process the rumba rocker and original *sapeur* (society of ambieners and persons of elegance), the very dapper Papa Wemba. Empire Bakuba served up its leader, the ponderous Pepe Kalle, perhaps the largest if not the best-dressed band-leader in all of Africa.

But as popular and enduring as the music is in Africa, it has taken the unhappy onslaught of economic decline in Congo and Zaïre to thrust it onto the world stage. In the late '70s, as the recording studios of Kinshasa and Brazzaville fell into disrepair or obsolescence and instruments became scarce and expensive, musicians were forced to move abroad to continue their careers. Thanks to its past as colonial ruler of

the Congo and its bequest of French to both Congo and Zaïre, France, especially Paris, was the place to go.

"Right now, all the great Francophone African musicians live in Paris," says Kanda Bongo Man, himself having moved there in 1979. The fraternity includes, among scores of others, Wemba; guitarist Dibo Dibala, whose new band Loketo is gaining notoriety; producer, arranger and session guitarist extraordinaire Rigo "Ringo" Star; and Les Quatre Etoiles (Four Stars), Syran, Bopol, Nyboma and Wuta Mayi. Abeti (Masikini), one of the few female soukous stars, and her band Les Redoutables record in Paris, so too does Mbilia Bel, having broken away from her mentor Rochereau. Even the old masters Franco and Rochereau have recorded in Paris some of the time. All this activity smack in the middle of Europe has at last attracted the record moguls' attention.

What does the future hold? Will soukous break rock's monopoly of the top 100? Thomas Brooman of WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) thinks that for any musical genre to break through it will need a charismatic leader. "I do think that the parallel with the early days of reggae is appropriate. I mean until Bob Marley, he was literally like the spearhead, [he] was just in the vanguard like a movement, the acceptance of a whole musical style."

Joe Boyd of Hannibal/Carthage Records sees opportunity in what he calls "the poverty of the current rock scene." He points to Marley's success as an example for African musicians and a warning for those who yearn to cross over as a way of making it. "If you analyze Bob Marley's



PHOTO BY ADE JAMES

**WUTA MAYI AND JEAN PAPY
(J.P. RAMAZANI), TWO OF THE
QUATRE ETOILES, PERFORMING
IN LOS ANGELES IN 1988.**



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MBILIA BEL (LEFT), WHO BEGAN HER CAREER WITH TABU L EY R OCHEREAU'S AFRISA INTERNATIONAL, HAS GONE SOLO AND TAKEN OFF AS A MAJOR SOUKOUS STAR. DIBLO DIBALA AND GROUPE LOKETO (BELOW) ELECTRIFIED DANCE FLOORS WITH "SUPER K" IN 1988.



tunes... they're not particularly traditional Jamaican melodies, but the rhythm was always pure Jamaican, absolute, rock-solid, down-the-line reggae. And he conquered the world with it. And I think African musicians who ignore that lesson risk falling by the wayside."

Following such advice is far from easy. It's

tough to be pure in Paris where soukous and zouk meet makossa and rai. Musical temptations abound. Yet despite an occasional lapse, soukous remains true to its roots. For the musicians of Congo and Zaire the real challenge lies in persuading the rest of the world to accept soukous on its own merits. ★

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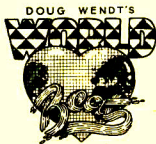
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