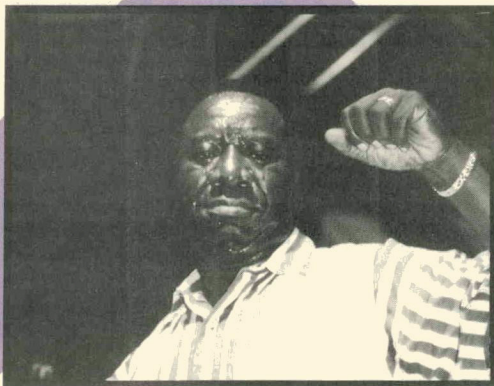


## African Godfather:



# Tabu Ley Rochereau

The champion of African music is back with two new recordings, an extensive U.S. tour and a mission—to bring soukous to America.

By Robert Smith

LAFAYETTE, LA—The warm Louisiana sun caressed the stage, and even though peacefulness seemed to permeate the air there was a definite excitement building; an excitement you could almost reach out and touch.

The people of Lafayette and all of their guests certainly love their local music. However, there seems to be a special place in their collective heart for African music.

Tabu Ley Rochereau was due to be the closing act on the second night (Friday) of the eighth annual Festival International in Lafayette, and his band Afrisa International was on stage for sound check.

"Do you have your dancers and other

band members?" I asked.

"Picked them up today," the manager, David Gaar, said proudly.

"What!" I exclaimed in disbelief. "Isn't that cutting it a little too close?"

Gaar then proceeded to tell me what had happened: "We started working on bringing these musicians, two dancers, a singer, a drummer, a bass player and a rhythm guitar player over from Zaire months ago. Getting the U.S. work permits was no problem; the African side of things was. We had to smuggle money into the country to enable them to get their Zairean passports. During this endeavor we had to hide the fact that the musicians were coming to America to play with Tabu Ley.

If the authorities had found out, they would have never issued them passports because of the bad blood between Tabu Ley and President Mobutu.

"We didn't even want to risk a flight out of Zaire for this reason so we made arrangements to fly the band members out of Brazzaville, Congo. Once we got the passports straightened out we mailed them tickets through DHL—which got lost. The new tickets we eventually got for them routed them through Paris and we had to fight the French government for weeks so our band members could stop for one hour in Paris to make a New York connection. When this paperwork nightmare was over the logistical nightmare

PHOTO BY GARY GREENE

began. The airport that they were flying out of in Congo was shut down for civilian traffic because it was needed for the Rwandan crisis. We got a flight out of Africa three days ago—they got here three hours ago.

"When we picked them up at the airport we discovered the bass player didn't have an instrument for fear of the authorities and the girls had one change of clothes. They figured that they were coming to America where they could get anything they wanted so they gave everything they owned to their friends and family. We spent the next hour or two shopping for stage costumes and a bass guitar!"

Ultimately it would not be the adventure which would prevent Tabu Ley from performing that evening. Something more mundane would factor into the equation—the weather. When a storm canceled the band's Friday night performance it appeared that Tabu Ley would not get a chance to play on the main stage. However, the band scheduled to perform be-

fore the closing act on the last day (Sunday) seemed to think there might be a reason why they shouldn't perform. Luckily, Beth Verret, the executive director, chief cook and bottle-washer, is one of the most calm, rational, and impossible to manipulate persons there is. She is known not to cave in to artists' outbursts and by simply placing Tabu Ley in the band in question's spot, the festival was treated to one of the greatest closing nights ever.

Tabu Ley's performance was brilliant. His three male dancer/backup singers were joined for the first time by three young female dancers. The band played a few songs and then introduced Tabu Ley whose crisp vocals and smooth dancing wooed the audience. His presence is always felt even when other members of the band are soloing, and everyone does: Tabu Ley is very unselfish on stage and everyone in the band is allowed the space

to maximize their particular talent. The result is a beautifully cohesive spectacle of soukous. Tabu Ley's genuine enthusiasm is a pleasure to watch and it served as a catalyst for a truly electrifying performance. Salif Keita was the closing act and it was the last stop on his U.S. tour. The intensity of his set paralyzed the audience, who were taken for a four-hour ride from Zaire to Mali with quite a few stops in between.

To cap things off Tabu Ley and Afrisa International performed that evening at the traditional after-festival party at the Grant Street Dance Hall. Festival International might have come to an end but Tabu Ley's work week was just beginning.

Dockside Studio is located on a 12-acre plantation estate in Maurice, Louisiana, only about 10 minutes away from Lafayette. Its tranquil setting turned out to be an inspiring location for the band to record not one but two brand new cds for Rounder Records.

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PHOTO BY DAVID GAAR



PHOTOS BY GARY GREENE

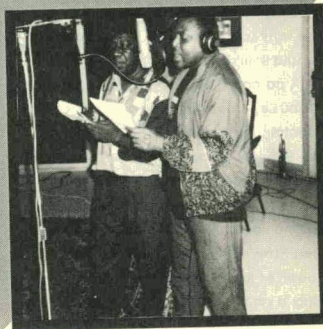
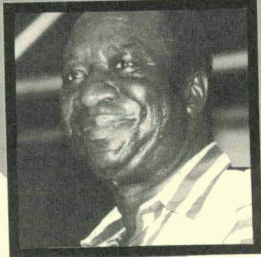


PHOTO BY DAVID GAAR

Above: Djeffard Lukombo and Hawali Bonane harmonize at Dockside Studio. Far right: Tabu Ley and Munoko Dodo cut their vocal tracks.

## Tabu Ley Rochereau

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The year-old recording studio is situated in a tremendous two-story building which was at one time a woodworking mill. A vintage handmade Neve 80 sound board is featured in the downstairs studio. When the musicians aren't recording they can enjoy the tennis and basketball courts, a swimming pool (with a guitar painted on the bottom of it) and a two-acre stocked bass pond. The musicians' living quarters are in the plantation house and on the second floor of the studio where verandas overlook the beautiful grounds and the Vermillion River.

With walking paths all around the property and river the band members agreed that the grounds at Docksides reminded them more of their homes in Zaire than anywhere they've been so far in the States.

In the studio Tabu Ley is an extremely well-organized individual who is both precise and adept in his approach. It is fascinating to watch his constantly evolving vision of each song. A new idea for a vocal or instrumental part would come to his mind during the recording and everyone would wait while he would work out the idea and incorporate it into the song. To communicate to his fellow musicians how he wanted their instruments to sound he would sometimes sing to them.

A cd commemorating the 35 years of Tabu Ley's illustrious career was recorded, containing 12 songs originally recorded in the 1960s captured in a live studio performance. With over 200 albums it's a wonder how one would choose 12 songs.

The second cd contains all new material. The songs for this recording had been at first composed by Tabu Ley using a computer. Release for the two is scheduled for September and January.

Tabu Ley Rochereau was born in Bundundu, Zaire in 1940. "I was born in a village; no doctor, no hospital. My mother was pregnant with me in the city and when



PHOTO BY DAVID GAAR

Tabu Ley and Afrisa International on stage at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival this spring.

she was ready to have me she went back to my village. I was my mother's first child. She was pregnant before but she would have miscarriages. Because of this my family told my mother she must have her baby in the village. I was inside my mother for 10 months before she gave birth, not nine months. I stayed in the village for the first three months of my life. During this time the elders administered to me various things that have kept me strong and healthy for my entire life. I've never had to go to a hospital!"

Tabu Ley came from a musical background. His grandmother was a well-known griot. He sang in the church choir in his younger years, and immediately joined the band African Jazz in 1959 when he finished his schooling. At that time the band included Manu Dibango, Dr. Nico and Kabasele. In 1963 Tabu Ley and Dr. Nico formed their own band, African Fiesta. Two years later Rochereau split from Dr. Nico and formed his own orchestra, African Fiesta National. Innovation was always encouraged by Tabu Ley; he

would introduce new instrumentation, and elements from other styles like salsa, Western pop and soul, while expanding his lyrics in French, English, Spanish and Lingala.

In 1970 Rochereau's new band, Afrisa International, gave a show at the Paris Olympia which is considered a crucial development in the evolution of Congo-Zairean music. The show included a fanfare introduction, fancy arrangements with lots of brass, choreographed steps for the musicians, and a troupe of female dancers. The show is said to have introduced African music to the West, plus it regenerated interest in his own country. Afrisa International introduced musicians which have become icons in African music: Sam Mangwana, Dizzy Mandjeku and Ndombe Opteum, plus Mbilia Bel, who in her time was the most famous and popular female singer in all of Africa.

Tabu Ley is now living in the United States, making New Jersey his home base. "There is a much better market here in

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## RAS ROJAH

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Meantime, Al Anderson has resolved many of his differences with the Tuff Gong posse, and will be joining the Waiters for next year's four-month world tour during which various superstars are expected to sit in on selected dates, including such alleged reggaeophiles as Elton John, Bruce Springsteen, Barbra Streisand, Sting and Eric Clapton.

Mark Morrison, local reggae producer, has split from Charlie Morgan's lately dormant Outernational Records label and formed his own imprint, Shark Records. First release is *In the Belly of the Whale*, a masterful dancehall compilation cd featuring the Heptones, Simpleton, Angie Angel, L.A.'s Wendy Shaw and more. Upcoming Shark shots include some from Kulcha Knox (son of late dj Free-I who was murdered alongside Peter Tosh in 1987) and Sugar Black. Jah guide de works, Mark!

An interesting tape has been forwarded to me from Hopiland by a group called the Wailing Coyotes, a native American reggae band. Led by two brothers, Mike and Tyler George of the

Hopi nation, they have already opened for the likes of Jimmy Cliff, Inner Circle, Sugar Minott and Pato Banton. Imagine an Indian tribal stomp mixed with a Nyabbinghi grounation, and you've got their sound, spacey and compelling. For info and bookings, call: (602) 283-5977.

Jo Menell, putative director of *Caribbean Nights* (some of his footage was used, but he was definitely not the director of that particular Marley project, having been fired by Chris Blackwell back in 1982 as the initial director of the Marley biography) is back at work for Blackwell. This time it's as director of the definitive Nelson Mandela life story documentary, for which he has shot more than 250 hours of film. Private interview sessions were held between Menell and Mandela at Compass Point, Blackwell's Nassau, Bahamas, retreat shortly after Christmas. Menell, most famous for his *Dick Doc* (distributed by Blackwell's Island Visual Arts) expects the film to be completed by year's end.

Till next time, Jah love, everyone! ★

## TABU LEY ROCHEREAU

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America now than in Europe, I am sure of that. There is also more opportunity for me to give live performances here, now.

"I came here for the first time in 1984 and toured 37 states. At that time people were curious to see this soukous and African music. Now my audience knows. They know what they want to hear, they're familiar with the music now not only to listen to it but also how to dance to it.

"I want to find a way to mix American music with soukous and I would also like to encourage young people here to play soukous music. I am very optimistic that I can be successful at this."



Tabu Ley Rochereau's music and presence can profoundly affect people. After a live performance he seems to recognize how important it is for people to tell him this and he will unselfishly listen to fans whose lives he has touched. Recently, a young woman told him that she met the man who is now her husband at a show he gave three years earlier. The artist invited her to eat with him, and after they shared stories of their lives, asked if she had children. When she said not yet, Tabu Ley asked if he could be godfather for their first child.

Godfather and ambassador of soukous, Tabu Ley Rochereau is not only an extremely gentle and sincere person, he also gives you the impression that if anyone has a sense of where he has been, where he is now, and where he wants to go, it's Tabu Ley Rochereau. Throughout his entire life he has not only been making beautiful music, he has also been forging a path for it in places where it never has been. ★

## MUSIC MAHAL

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got an exemption from All India Radio; he got the same exemption [to play 'under age'] that I got. He also plays duets with me. He's about 16 or 17. Ganesh is the name that they call him by but his actual name is Sudarshan."



Karnatic music's northern Indian counterpart places great store in the interpreter's ability to improvise. Karnatic music too holds this in great esteem but also holds a musician's ability to both improvise and interpret known compositions to be essential. To a considerable degree this is because there is a core repertoire by named, historic composers. The work of Karnatic music's holy trinity of saint-composers—Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri—is on a scale with, and as regularly performed as, the work of Bach and Beethoven. Reinforcing the link between the classical and the devotional, a typical performance of a *kriti*, a Hindu hymn by, for example, Thyagaraja, will frequently be rooted in a specific Karnatic raga.

Performances regularly capture the essence and spirit of a Karnatic raga far more succinctly than its Hindustani counterpart. Many will be rendered in five to 10 minutes. Of course, Karnatic performers may well exceed or ignore this generalization—the violinist L. Subramaniam, for example, rendering two self-penned kritis on his *In Praise of Ganesh* (Audiorec ACCD 1027) takes up an entire cd. But, as far as Ravikiran's work is concerned, his performances are models of economy and imagination and none of the commercial recordings by him compares in length.

Ravikiran was acknowledged as an artist of major potential very early and his subsequent

career has borne out the pundits' early plaudits. It is no wonder that he was selected by L. Subramaniam to contribute to the finest general guide to Karnatic cosmos, the four-cd set *An Anthology of South Indian Classical Music* (Ocora C 5990001/2/3/4). Given his devoutly classical background—he has consistently balked at even doing film music, a ready lifeline for classical musicians in India—it may come as a surprise to learn that he jumped at the opportunity to work this April in Santa Barbara, CA, with Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and Taj Mahal on a project for Kavachandran Alexander's Water Lily label. Among the tracks recorded were versions of Robert Johnson's "Come On in My Kitchen," a Bahamian version of "Out On the Rolling Sea" via Joseph Spence, and the Slickers' "Johnny Too Bad." Look for *Mumtaz Mahal* to be released in late October. (Rest assured, a classical album was also recorded during the same session.) Innovation and imagination within the tradition was always the Karnatic keynote and the combination of chitra vina, Ravikiran and Karnatic music is irresistible. Talents such as Ravikiran's are rare. You read it first in *The Beat*.

*Kent Hunt is currently working on a series of entries about Indian music for the All Music Guide. Special thanks to Shireen Isar, Kavi Alexander and Mr. H.R. Sridhar.*

# HATS



- CROWNS                      any style
- TAMS                                      • size
- KUFIES                                      • color
- SNUGS                                      • rasta/afro
- TOTE BAGS
- MONEY POUCHES

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