

## PEPE KALLE

Continued from page 43

Other Kalle compositions like "Dadou," which spoke of family problems brought about by an absent father, addressed the vicissitudes of urban life. "Zouké Zouké," a party song recorded with Nyboma, rollicked at the pace of Paris soukous and Caribbean zouk. Kalle's embrace of break-neck Paris soukous helped to win its acceptance back home where initial reaction had been decidedly cool.

Kalle worked seriously at his music but was quick to see life's humorous side. He remarked more than once that he loved contrasts, a predilection that moved him to squeeze his six-foot-something, 300-plus-pound frame into a Volkswagen Beetle and to hire a dancing dwarf called Emoro to perform with the band. Emoro himself died of a heart attack in 1992.

In an industry where bands seemed to change personnel on a weekly basis, Empire Bakuba distinguished itself as Congolese music's most stable group. The core trio of singers worked together for nearly 25 years, although Kalle's last album, *Cocktail*, was recorded as a solo while Papy Tex cooled his heels in Brussels and Dilu was said to be working for a Kinshasa bank.

Despite bleak conditions in Zaire/Congo during Mobutu's last years and under the faltering regime of Laurent Kabila, Pepe Kalle continued to reside in Kinshasa, refusing to join the mass movement of the music's stars to Europe. "He was the only musician... who never had a problem with anybody," said Tabu Ley in Kinshasa. "He was the man who could reconcile two musical generations."

Veteran Congolese journalist Achille Ngué, who covered Empire Bakuba from its inception, remembered Kalle as a man of the people. As Ngué told it, Kalle could be on stage in the middle of a song and, seeing a person in the audience he hadn't seen for years, work a greeting to that person into the song. "He was an extraordinary person. He had an elephantine memory."

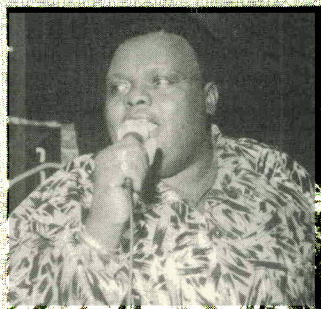
Upon his death Kalle received the praises of government ministers and the common people as well. His body lay in state at several locations throughout the city where he lived and worked. More than one million people were reported to have paid their respects at his funeral at the Palais du Peuple and along the funeral procession's route. Pepe Kalle was buried on Dec. 6 at Gombe Cemetery, joining the growing pantheon of Congolese music stars who died much too young. ★

# Pepe Kalle Larger Than Life

**P**epe Kalle visited the West Coast for the first time in February 1998, invited by IMA Records for a month-long tour with "Rigo Star's African Revue," a band that included guitarists Rigo Star and Syran Mbenza, along with singer Abby

Surya. I was fortunate to interview him at that time, as well as see him perform on four occasions. He was a marvelous entertainer, and, although his role was as a guest artist accompanying Rigo and his band, Pepe Kalle immediately dominated the stage. It was clear that he was the one everyone had come to see, and you could feel the outpouring of affection from the audience.

He had many definite ideas about taking soukous in a new direction, and was very much aware that a change was necessary to revitalize the popular music of the Congo. Many of the ideas he discusses here are realized in his last release, *Cocktail* (Ets. Ndiaye).



PHOTOS BY ADE JAMES

CC Smith: Last night, you were guest vocalist with Rigo Star's band—it was his band, not yours.

Pepe Kalle: Yes, I was invited to come on tour with his group.

Q: Did you miss having your own band?

A: Well, you know, I am a professional. A professional, wherever he goes, he feels like a fish in the water. Last night, you saw me on stage, I came on to play, and somehow, I was at ease, at ease with everyone: Rigo! Jean Claude! Abby! Then, I directed—like I was with my own group. I played the Grand Master of the stage. That's how an artist should be, and that is professionalism. You don't have to always be with your own group to express yourself well.

But here are other things that in my own group the musicians know, that these artists don't know. Happily, I had with me the little dancer [Dokolos], and with him I communicate well. It went well, I am very content. I'm very happy that Rigo thought about me, to bring me to his record label, saying he would invite a great professional, a great connoisseur, someone he could continue to work with.

Q: Normally, in your group Empire Bakuba, how many musicians are there?

A: Usually, when Empire Bakuba is home in the Congo, you'll see 20 or 30 musicians, but for a tour, they cannot all come. I have to choose who will come on tour—10 or 15.

Q: On stage, what is the presentation, how does the show go?

A: For an Empire Bakuba show, I have six female dancers, three male dancers, Dokolos and Jolie Bebe, the two little dwarfs, and another one, very fat. Then we add the artists who will back us—17 or 18 musicians.

Q: Why do you like to use the dwarfs in the show?

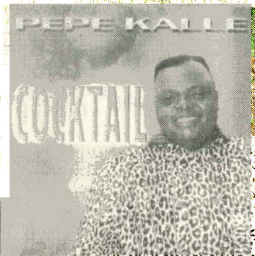
A: Since I started out this business with Emoro—I had only one dwarf then—he himself got in touch with me, while we were in Kisangani. I accepted. Since his passage, at my side, when

Interview by CC Smith



**Q:** But for the ones who are in Europe, do you think they are missing something, or lose something?

On my new record with Rigo—it will be “Congolese country music,” new ideas, a new tempo. It’s not soukous, it’s something else. It’s Afrobeat, but a new Afrobeat. You will discover, I promise—it’s Congolese country music, because that is my strength. You will love it.



**A:** Yes, and in my music, if you listen well, I sing more in folk, accompanied by soukous. That's what I'm talking about, the roots. I stay with African folklore, and put in soukous. It's not soukous/

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