Pepe Kalle: Larger Than Life

Smith, CC

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pg. 44

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 breakneck Paris soukous helped to win its acceptance back home where initial reaction had been decidedly cool.

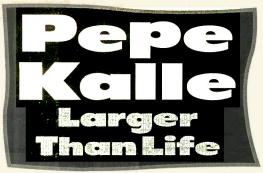
Kalle worked seriously at his music but was quick to see life's humorous side. He remarked more than once that he loved contrasts, a predilection that moved him to squeeze his six-foot-something, 300plus-pound frame into a Volkswagen Beetle and to hire a dancing dwarf called Emoro to perform with the 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 Ngoie, who covered Empire Bakuba from its inception, remembered Kalle as a man of the people. As Ngoie 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. *



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 banthat included guitarists Rigo Star and Syran Mbenza, along with singer Abby

Surva. 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).

CC Smith: Last night, you were guest vocalist with Rigo Stat'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 a lease, 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.

PHOTOS BY ADE JAMES

But here are other things that in my own group that 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.

O: 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 temale 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

44 THE BEAT VOL. 18 #1, 1999

he died, all the dwarfs want to work with Pepe Kalle, first of all to become known, and second,

to go to work.

When they are with me, I try to support them, that is to say, to transform them into real men, someone who has a family, a home, like him [Dokolos]—he has a wife, two children—give him a chance to work, and to take advantage of his extremity—that is to say, extreme: We are two extremes. On one side, you have Pepe Kalle, tall, fat-on the other side, the opposite side, you have a little guy, short, a dwarf. Now I have three dwarfs, and a big guy [Pepe Kalle] on stage-without even starting to play, it is a big spectacle.

O: What year did Emoro start with you?

A: He began in 1982, on our European tour. He died in 1992.

O: How did he die?

A: He died of a heart attack . . . yes, c'est la vie.

Q: Are you in good health yourself?

A: Yes, I'm doing OK, for someone so large: From time to time I get sick like everyone does. But it is not my weight, I was born like this. In my family everyone is fat: my father, my brothers. We were born this size.

Q: A lot of Congolese musicians live now in Europe. But you have stayed in Kinshasa-why?

A: I don't want to cut myself off from my roots. I want to stay near my roots, but to go out from time to time, to Europe, America, Asia, to make them discover our talent. It's difficult, but if the chance arises, I could stay for a long time, in America, for example, or in Europe, to benefit from an opportunity for my career.

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



there is a wall. Where to go now? That is what the others need to understand, that soukous actually . . . What must be done? O: That's what I'm asking.

A: What must be done? I go, I go, I go, I hit the wall! So I go into rap. Everybody gets into rap. I look for another road to go, to get out, you can't slay stationary, no. That is what the

soukous-le te te-no, it's not like that.

when you don't know our folklore from home,

you might say there is too much soukous, but

it's not too much soukous, it's a mixture. In

Full Option, there is, for example, soukous,

rap, folk, all mixed. It is necessary to come to

a modification, and that is what we are trying to

do. It is very important. Because soukous right

now is in a cul-de-sac-soukous has reached an

impasse, Soukous has come to a point where it

Q: But on record, there is a lot of it. A: On my records, when you hear soukous,

> others have to understand. Q: But it is not your invention-

A: No, it is not my invention,

it is not in our way to do it. In our music, there is no rap. But while we are looking for the road, I want to do somthing while we are here. It is a longer vision, further into the future. What can you do, the people have to dance, put the rap in there with the soukous-we can't be sleeping, no, we are in the process of research; give us time.

On the next album, we will find-I hope, I believe, I have faith-I will come back, I will meet you when our new album comes out, and you will see the new path that you want me to take. It's not you who will show me what to do. Lalready have it in me. I am going to bring it out to the public-here is the new sound of Pepe Kalle! You'll see, this is what you want-I

want a new road. Give me the time, I'm doing my research. like when a scientist does his research, you wait for his results-give me the time to finish what I am looking for, that's what I'm asking—give me the time. You'll see, I promise you. It will have a little bit of everything, not too much soukous, but a lot of the new line, the new style that the people want. Yes, yes, I know there is a need for that. It is not just you who wants this, it's me too. I'm telling you, soukous is against the wall. Yes, you are tired too.

Q: Yes, a lot of musicians have told me the same thing-everyone is tired of this direction. A: Soukous is too limited, there are too many people who are doing the same thing. Right now, I'm looking for a new path.

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.

Thanks to Jean Koh Elong for his assistance with the French translation.

THE LATE, GREAT PEPE KALLE, ALONG WITH HIS SIDEKICK, DOKOLOS.

A: I don't know, for me, I find that if I stay somewhere, I would lose something. As for the others, I can't say: everyone has their own way to see things: taste and color can't be disputed. Everyone makes their own choice. Me, I've made mine.

Q: What do you think of the future of the music—will it take a new direction? Why are people saying that soukous cannot continue as it is? That everyone is tired of it, it is not developing, it is not changing, that it needs to find a new route.

A: Yes! It's true, I am with those people there. Listen to what I've done-I don't do "soukoussoukous." You have to give some meaning to the soukous. There are artists and there are artists, you know. Some go into the studio, and ti ti ti ti -OK, soukous. That is not what I do. These people

have to get to the essence of soukous. I'll give you an example: what Rigo trying to do-that is the music of tomorrow. That is the music of tomorrow! That is the music that we must follow. It's the same music that's made by Youssou. Salif Keita, Papa Wemba does it, Lokua Kanza, that's the direction that everybody-1'm not saying

that everyone is obliged to follow, but that is a good direction. O: Do you think that there is still respect for the rumba?

A: Yes, I am a big singer of rumba; I have a lot of respect for the rumba, but a modernized rumba, that is to say: I stay in the rumba...in the same sense of world music. Lokua Kanza—he does rumba. Q: Yes, but also a mixture, a potpourri, with Pygmy music.

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/

THE BEAT VOL. 18 #1, 1999 45