The elephant has fallen. Ponderous Pepe Kalle, the giant man with the gentle soul and generous gift for rhyme and rhythm, died of a heart attack in Kinshasa early Sunday morning Nov. 29. According to wire service reports, the 46-year-old Kalle, the first among equals of the group Empire Bakula, was stricken around 10 p.m. Saturday night at his home in the Congolese capital. He was rushed to the nearby Clinique Ngaliema where he died just after midnight.

As one of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s biggest stars, both in physical size and personal popularity, Jean Kabasele Yampunya “Pepe Kalle” had endeared himself to the generation of fans who came of age with Congolese “youth bands.” Such bands—the most popular were Zaiko Langa Langa and Orchestre Bella Bella—formed in the late ’60s and early ’70s as
a youthful alternative to older groups like African Fiesta and O.K. Jazz which had pioneered the Congolese rumba.

Pepe Kalle joined the youth movement in a neighborhood band called African Choc where he began to refine his powerful singing voice. With help from Afrisa drummer Seskain Molenga, Kalle embarked on a professional career in 1972 at the age of 20 in the employ of Kiamungana Mateta, the producer known as Verckys. At Verckys' Editions Yévé, Kalle and others from African Choc played on several recordings with Molenga that were released under the name Les Bakuba.

Kalle also sang backing vocals on recording sessions for various groups in the Yévé stable and joined another young singer, Nyboma Mwan Dido, alongside veteran Sokiss Vangeli in the front line of Orchestre Bella Bella. When Bella Bella bolted from Yévé in 1973, Kalle and Nyboma stayed on to front a new band called Lipa Lipa. Several months later Kalle and singers Matolu Dode "Papy Tex" and Joseph "Dilou" Dilemona left Editions Yévé to form their Orchestre Empire Bakuba.

The new band built its following by bridging the gap between the old and new styles of popular music that washed in relentless waves across Kinshasa. Kalle sang smoothly like the great Joseph Kabasele (no relation) whom he claimed as a mentor. Where groups like Zaiko dropped horns from the lineup, Empire Bakuba usually kept them in. But like the day's other youth bands, Empire Bakuba rocked in comparison to the elders. The quality of its music and its enormous popularity propelled Empire Bakuba into the first ranks of Congolese bands in the early '80s.

Empire Bakuba was prolific in the studio, churning out at least four albums a year throughout the '80s and early '90s. Although Kalle professed to be apolitical, his song "Article 15 Beta Libanga" deftly portrayed the difficult life in Mobutu's crumbling Zaire. "Beta libanga," beat with a stone, that is, work hard, do what you must to live.

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Pepe Kalle visited the West Coast for the first time in February 1998, invited by 1MA Records for a month-long tour with “Rigo Star’s African Revue,” a band that included guitarist Rigo Star and Surya Mbuya, 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).

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 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...

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...