



ROCHEREAU IN CONCERT

Review by Jiml Horl



Photo by Genee Wilner © 1984

Tabu Ley Rochereau, Mbilia Bel, L'Afrisa International and a troupe of lithe and sexy 17-year old shake dancers presented a motor booty affair at L.A.'s Country Club Feb. 22, the first ever major live Congolese music show in Southern California.

The lounges of Las Vegas seemed to be on many people's minds as they pondered the rich visuals of dancers and band who seemed to love theatricality and Show Biz. But L'Afrisa International, the crack back-up unit, rocked too hard to really fit into the cultural slackness and anomie embodied by that anti-oasis in the desert. With a sure sense of dynamics, the band would set up their rockers quietly and then take off with a roar, the drummer leaning into it and the horns shouting in unison, in classic Congolese two-part song construction style.

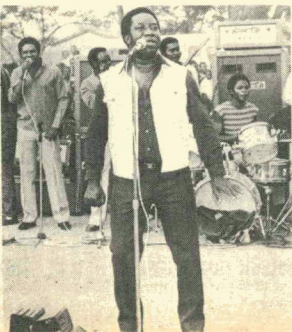
While the dancers, who had more moves than Magic Johnson going to the hoop, demonstrated an unstoppable exuberance, Rochereau himself was acting the 25-year showbiz vet, restrained in voice and dance, leaving the sweat to the youths.

Perhaps it was that restraint and the rigors of the road that, with a couple of exceptions, showed his highly-touted vocalizing unable to live up to its hype. His protegee, Mbilia Bel, also seemed to be a little stiff, until she started dancing, revealing herself to have more joints than most (at least more than I). Her vocals, particularly on slower songs, seemed very Middle Eastern and moving.

As with Sunny Ade, the joy and rhythm overcame language barriers. The band was tremendous, showing itself capable of many moods, sounding at times like a highlife carnival band, other times near second-lining like Crescent City natives, other times almost rocksteady, and always, locking into a groove. The sense of celebration enraptured the crowd, which danced all night in the spirit of the music and in love with the spectacle.

The warmth of African music transcends cultural barriers, creating empathetic art, capable not just of entertaining, but of touching the soul. Rochereau has touched the souls of Africans for many years, and is now reaching out to America.

Photo courtesy of Shanachie Records



ALBUM REVIEW

TABU LEY: ROCHEREAU, WITH L'AFRISA INTERNATIONAL ORCHESTRA AND M'BILIA BEL (Shanachie 43017, 1984)

Tabu Ley is a significant new release on a domestic label for lovers of African music from the undisputed King of Zairean song. Comparable in popularity in most of Africa to Elvis Presley or Frank Sinatra in the U.S., Le Seigneur Rochereau has selected these recent tracks especially to gain the ear of America.

The music is joyful and eminently danceable, with sparkle provided by the masterful L'Afrisa horns and the rippling guitar work characteristic of the Congolese style. Tabu Ley's masterful voice interweaves with the musical base, creating a true orchestral synthesis. His vocal stylings, which have set the standard for so much African music, may seem unusual to first-time American listeners, as there is not a trace of American blues or soul present, but several listenings will yield a great appreciation for this massive talent. Rochereau not only writes all the songs and arranges the instrumentation, he also choreographs the exuberant moves of his troupe of teenage dancers for the live performances. He was actually responsible for changing the style of Congolese music

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from Latin-influenced dance-hall rumbas and cha-cha to a more modern, popular sound with elements of showmanship in its presentation.

The album contains six tracks. The opener, "Gagner Gagner," (Winning, Winning) is a full-tilt boogie, with a bouncy rhythm and call-and-response chorus. There are two tracks from previous releases on Genidia import, "En Amour Ya Pas De Calcul," (In Love There is no Calculation) and "Es Yo Wapi" (Where Are You?), both largely unavailable in the U.S., and both very good. The latter, and "Loyenghe," feature the celestial M'Bilia Bel, Rochereau's angel-faced protegee and rising female African vocalist. Her vocal style is modeled closely on that of Tabu Ley, always light but strong at the same time. The remaining tracks, "Ibeba" and "King Sa" feature Tabu Ley with his uncredited, but excellent, backup singers providing the harmonies and responses.

Shanachie Records is to be congratulated (and supported) for taking a chance on releasing what is a virtually unknown quantity in the U.S., despite Rochereau's immense popularity in Africa and Europe. Rochereau has released over forty albums in Africa, but just try to find one in the U.S.! (Actually, Makossa/African Record Centre has released a few here, but promo-

tion and distribution efforts are minimal at best.) This music should appeal not only to the African and reggae music audience, but also to soca, salsa and other Caribbean music fans as well. And to have it available on a domestic label, with clean production and pressing, is a delight.

—CC Smith

ALBUM REVIEW
PERAMBULATOR: FELA KUTI & EGYPT 80

(LIR Records, Nigeria, 1983)

The Black President and Chief Priest Fela Anikulapo Kuti with the 23-piece Egypt 80 band and guest artist Lester Bowie in tow, comes screaming out of Lagos with a new Nigerian release. Corruption in high places has always been Fela's primary target, and this lp is no exception. Recorded just before the military takeover in Nigeria on Jan. 1, 1984, the title track condemns wealthy Nigerians for draining the country's resources by going in and out (perambulating) of the country, spending Nigeria's currency, and ignoring traditional medicine in favor of European doctors. Fela's rant is punctuated by the chorus singing "No solution," and propelled by a driving uptempo rhythm. The flipside, "Frustration," is an instrumental in a slower, funkier groove, an almost Bo Diddley, "Who Do You

Love" type rhythm, featuring a tortured trumpet solo from Bowie, of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who has appeared on at least four other Fela releases to date. No American distribution has been spotted yet—my copy was sent from Nigeria by a friend of a friend—but if you see it, grab it.

—CC Smith

RECENT AFRICAN RELEASES

Briefly noted... **The Flamings of Ghana, It's Time for Highlife** (Makossa): Formerly the Super Sweet Talks, this extremely accomplished and versatile band was recorded live on their recent U.S. tour. This is the real thing—contemporary Ghanaian highlife as it is played in Africa. In concert, no song was less than 30 minutes long, presented in an energy-conserving style developed for all-night gigs. This band is about as tight as they come, playing as a single instrument... **Toure Kunda, Amadou-Tilo** (Celluloid): Self-conscious fusion, sounding sometimes like Sun Ra, sometimes Oriental, and once like the Ventures, but never settling into a solid, identifiable African sound... **Mohammed Malcolm Ben, African Feeling** (Sterns): Speedy Ghanaian highlife; political lyrics in English are a little obvious... **Diana & Les Bobongo Stars, Marguerida** [Angola] (Safari Ambiance): Diana ap-

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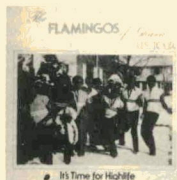
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