

At the press reception for *Africa Oye!* at Hollywood's Pantages Theater, snippets were presented of the traditional music of Zaire, Niger, Mali and Guinea that made up most of the revue's program. Standing off to one side, a rakish, well-dressed figure aloofly surveyed the scene. Even when introduced by show producer Mel Howard, Papa Wemba kept up his detached cool.

Fast forward to two nights later. Wemba and his latest version of *Viva La Musica* gave a tantalizingly brief set that culminated in the evening's rootsy entertainment. His edgy tenor voice cut through the theater with soulful conviction, but his time was too short to generate the proper ambience.

A few weeks later, Wemba and company finally get their chance to strut their stuff in a nightclub, filling L.A.'s Executive Club with state-of-the-art Congo fusion, where the rumba often took the back seat to the traditionally rooted, rocked-up compositions that are Wemba's current stock. Dressed in a combination of Paris chic and American casual—designer pants and a T-shirt—the Zairean maestro and his cohorts won over the dance-happy crowd with their heartfelt and fun-loving performance.

Finally, it's Wemba at ease in his hotel room. He greets us in shorts and simple shirt. The fashion plate of a few weeks before is transformed into a regular guy relaxing in the privacy of his own surroundings. This contrast in fashion and style finds a parallel within his music, which ranges from sophisticated studio explorations to the deceptively simple, down-to-earth traditional rhythms of his native Kasai region.

There have been many releases over the last few years of Zairean and Congolese musicians getting in touch with their roots in song. Jean Papy, Tshala Muana, Mbilia Bel, Diblo and others have taken the rhythms of the village and electrified them. But Shungu Wembadio Pene Kikumba (ex-Jules)—Papa Wemba to the world at large—has been doing this for his entire career. "I can't say it's me who has influenced all the Zairean musicians to make their music like that, but I launched the idea," the singer claims. "For a long time, I haven't sung just in Lingala—I often sing in the Tetela dialect."

Wemba was once dubbed the king of rumba rock, but he says that description is outmoded. "I used to do rumba rock but I don't do it any longer," he explains. "On my new album, there is not a single song where I do the rumba rock except 'Esclave' (Slave)—all the others are traditional songs."

The rich cache of Zairean traditional music has not been fully utilized yet, according to Wemba. The flexibility of the roots sounds appeals to him. "You can't fuss with Zairean rumba. You can't put keyboards in it, you can't put violins in it . . . Someone who knows Zairean rumba well wants to buy only the pure rumba played by Franco, played by Tabu Ley, but if you make rumba with violins

in it, phew, people will say, 'No, not that!' With the folkloric music, there is so much there that hasn't been exploited."

Another influence on Wemba's music is rhythm & blues, with the over-the-top vocal anguish of Otis Redding holding a particularly fond spot in his heart. His mates in Zaiko Langa Langa, the premier youth movement band that Wemba cofounded in Kinshasa in 1970, nicknamed him Jules Presley because of his passion for the African-American musical style. His love of foreign music is unusual among Zairean musicians, he says, because they tend to listen to

nothing but Zairean music.

"The only handicap of Zairean musicians is that they don't listen to music from outside of Zaire, like music that is done in Europe or the United States or other African countries," states Wemba. "Zairean musicians tend to play only Zairean music. First of all, it's because of [a lack of] promotion of outside music since Zairean radio, from morning till night, broadcasts nothing but Zairean music. The clubs in Kinshasa only play Zairean music. This makes Zairean musicians very limited. It is necessary to be open-minded, and there are very few who

THE EXTRAORDINARY

Papa
Wemba

BY TOM CHEYNEY

have that spirit."

Since Wemba's early musical experiences took place in the Catholic choirs of his youth, no discussion of his influences would be complete without a mention of religious music. And when this topic is broached, Wemba's first music tutor—his mother—must be remembered as well. "My mother was a *pleureuse*, one of the women who sang around the deceased If she were still alive [she died in 1973], I would be rich in words, rich in melodies. She was my first teacher and my first audience.

"When I started singing pop music, I left

religious music completely. But there was always an influence of religious music on my voice because with religious music the minor key always recurs. When I compose my songs, there is often the minor key."

The nature of Wemba's personal faith emerges naturally at this point. "I am still religious, but I am a nonpracticing Christian. I don't go to church any more but I do pray in my home. I believe in the good Lord, I am a believer but not a practitioner. God is mentioned from time to time in my music."

His self-defined spirituality and relationship

with the Creator also shapes Wemba's opinion of politics. "I don't like politics at all. I do love my country Zaire very much, because I was born there, I grew up there, my family is there . . . but politics doesn't interest me. It is politics that is dividing God's world. Because when God created this world, He didn't say you whites, you go live there, you blacks, you go live there, you others, you go live over there . . . He created this world, He put man on this earth. He said, multiply yourselves. We have only one creator and we also have only one color of blood. God didn't put up these political barriers . . . we shouldn't have racism or apartheid at all."

Although he says he doesn't like politics, the song "Esclave," from his masterful self-titled album on Stern's, is not just another love song. In it, he connects the pain of his ancestors who were taken to the New World in bondage with the suffering of his fellow Africans struggling to dismantle the apartheid system: *I was raised by the whip, bowed beneath the pain inflicted by strangers . . . slave in Africa with a rope around my neck; slave in America on the railroads . . . the stranger still rules in South Africa . . .*—these are deeply felt lyrics, lamenting man's inhumanity to man. When Wemba sings this tune live, it's as if he is trying to cut the shackles of oppression with his gritty voice alone.

Still, "Esclave" is not the typical Wemba composition. He usually writes about things closer to home. It might be a simple call for all his people to come and dance, because "dance is the joy of life," as he does on "Bakwetu." Or it might be the ode to his woman found on "Mukaji Wanyi." One fascinating song with lyrics taken from Wemba's experience is "Hambayi Ede," a new cut on the Stern's album.

"'Hambayi Ede' is a story about my mother's oldest sister, my aunt," Wemba recounts. "My aunt was married to a man who had two other wives. The other wives had 10 kids. My aunt had no kids. During the long school vacation, she picked me up to live with her for a while. She was very happy; she told the people in her neighborhood: 'Here's my child. You say to each other that I have no children, but here's my kid.'"

"Now I've grown up, I start to work, I start to earn some money. I tell my aunt: 'I want to build you a big house to live in. I have a lot of money, I want to take you with me everywhere to see and visit the whole world.' It's a true story."

The compositional process varies for Wemba. "I don't really have a well-established system. There are times when I write down some phrases which come into my head—I don't have a melody yet. I call my guitarist or the keyboardist and I tell them to try and do something with it. I sing some, and little by little I do the songs. But there are other songs that come with the melody and I don't have any words." And nothing moves Wemba to write like the onrush of romantic sentiment. "I am much

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PHOTO BY RITA SIGHIA

PAPA WEMBA

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more inspired when I fall in love with a woman, that feeling, *a la la!*"

Wemba has been called the king of the *sape*. *Sapeurs* are the extremely stylish young dandies, usually Congolese or Zairean, who have transformed this fashion statement into a lifestyle in Paris, Brussels, Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Although he does have a weakness for well-designed clothing, especially the work of Yogi Yamamoto, the Japanese designer, and Frenchman Jean-Paul Gaultier, Wemba is clear on one point: Above all, he wants to be known as a musician, not as a clothes horse. But he does have an explanation of why he counsels the youth to pay attention to their appearance and hygiene.

"It depends on the person. Everyone can't have the same mentality. When I say well-groomed, well-shaven, well-perfumed, it's propriety that I am insisting on among the young. I don't care about their education if their education comes from the family and those they associate with . . . Education comes first of all from the family. If you have children, it's up to you to raise and educate them. Outside of that, the children will get another education from their schools and from those they associate with. Education is truly personal."

Among the recent lessons of life received by Wemba is his entry into the world of cinema. He has appeared in two films, *La Vie est Belle* (Life is Beautiful), a feature, and *Le Chef Couturier de la Rhumba Rock* (Chief of the Rhumba Rock Tribe), a documentary. For Wemba, the jump from music to movies is not a difficult one.

"To begin with, I am an artist. An actor is an artist. A comedian is an artist. Film is art. I wasn't a newcomer to the art form. I waited for the day when I would do films. I didn't have to overdo it in order to play the role in *La Vie est Belle*. I played myself. It was a little bit of my own story."

One subject Wemba is studying in his effort to reach an international audience is the English language. "I must learn English. I'm compelled to learn English. I cannot sing all of my songs in English, no, but I am going to start putting some refrains in English, for example. English is spoken everywhere in the world—there isn't any country where someone doesn't speak English."

This burning ambition to reach a worldwide audience is the main reason he left Zaire for Paris. "Five years ago I decided that, even though I was a star in Zaire, a star in Africa, I decided to slam the door on Zaire. I said to myself, 'I don't want to play music only for Zaireans any more. I am going to do music for all of humanity.'"

The first steps on the route to global acclaim included some painful decisions. Wemba brought all of his Zairean musicians from the then-current version of *Viva La Musica* with him to France. Soon he realized that they weren't capable of doing the increasingly complex and eclectic music he envisioned. He started playing with French, Germans; Jap-

anese—anyone who shared Wemba's vision of open-minded experimentation. The current lineup of his band is truly globalist, with Europeans and Africans jamming side by side. He has embraced what he calls "world music" in his quest to "explode" onto the planetary stage.

This desire to have people all over the planet listening to and dancing to his music isn't just a lot of talk. Wemba's professionalism and innovative material certainly give him an edge over many equally talented but less ambitious African performers. A role model he often cites is Youssou N'Dour, who has transcended his Senegalese audience without abandoning the sounds of his musical heritage.

If Wemba is to reach an international audience, he must have the backing of a committed record company. Content with the sound quality of his latest album as well as Stern's promotion of it, he compliments the independent record label. "Stern's has worked well for me. I believe they are the only company which can work well with me in the years to come. If I were going to sign with Island or whatever big company, they couldn't do the promotion for me because they have many other artists."

"Island, for example, has signed many African artists, but they choose only one or two to follow through with. With reggae it was like that. Chris Blackwell [head of Island Records] signed many reggae singers but there was only one who broke through—Bob Marley. Now the only person on the verge of breaking through a little bit is Salif Keita."

Time is not running out on Wemba or his burgeoning career. He is very playful when it comes to the question of his age. "How old do you think I am?" he replies. "I tell everyone that I have no age. Because I am a Gemini, I am like a double. There are times when I'm too young and there are other times when I am [older and wiser]."

Whether relishing his youthful side or calmly appreciating his growing status as a musical and familial elder, it's clear that Papa Wemba knows time is on his side. ★

les Chanteurs

MBILIA BEL
PIERRE BELKOS
KANDA BONGO MAN
PEPE KALLE
MPONGO LOVE
AURLUS MABELE
SAM MANGWANA
WUTA MAYI
TSHALA MUANA
ZITANY NEIL
NYBOMA
KOFI OLOMIDE
JEAN PAPY (J.P. RAMAZANI)
PAPA WEMBA

PAPA WEMBA: KING OF SOUKOUS AND LA SAPE



PHOTO BY JAN SALZMAN