



# HAITIAN

(A two-part series on the history of Haitian music)

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## PART I: LOCKING HORNS

# MUSIC

The music of Haiti, the Caribbean nation which sits back to back with the Dominican Republic on the island of Hispaniola, is known as "compas." Falling in the middle of the spectrum between the heat of soca and zouk and the cool, laid-back sound of reggae, compas (pronounced COMB-pah) is beloved by millions, Haitians as well as the people of the French Antilles and Panama. Its languid backbeat inspires a hip-swinging dance that is surely one of the most seductive body moves possible. Smoldering with intensity, modern compas features a multipart song structure, hot horn arrangements, dramatic key changes and graceful, flowing lead guitar lines similar to those found in West African highlife.

The development of the popular music of Haiti has been nearly as turbulent as the country's political history. Mob scenes, foreign invasions, fierce battles, intense competition and intrigue have marked not only Haiti's political life but the history of the music as well. The notable difference is, of course, that the music is primarily designed for enjoyment and has rarely taken on the deadly seriousness of Haitian politics.

Politics has always been a predominant aspect of Haitian society. Since the overthrow of the French colonizers in 1804 after a bloody slave uprising led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and 13 years of devastating war, Haiti has had 43 presidents, one emperor and one king. Although Haiti was the world's first black republic, it has never been a democracy. Of the 45 leaders, 19 were deposed by revolution, and seven were shot, poisoned, blown up or otherwise eliminated. President Guillaume Sam in 1915 was reportedly dragged out from under a bed by members of the families of the 160 political prisoners he had cruelly executed. He was thrown to a howling mob that tore him to pieces in the street.

The turmoil created by the constant change of governments and Haiti's increasing international debt led the United States to invade Haiti in 1915. The Marines occupied the country until 1934. During their 19-year residency they met with fierce resistance from the "Cacos" rebels. A second 19 years of oppression began in 1957, when Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power and instituted his own reign of terror, administered by the VSN (Volunteers for National Security), commonly known as the Tonton Macoutes. The violence of the Duvalier regime and worsening economic conditions sparked a massive exodus of thousands of Haitians to the U.S., mainly to New York and Miami. Duvalier was succeeded in 1971 by his son Jean-Claude (Baby Doc), who continued the iron-fisted dynasty until his ouster last year.

But as much as politics saturates Haitian life, so too does music. Brought from Africa by the slaves and from France and Spain by the colonists, music has always played a major role in religious and social gatherings, and as an aid to fieldwork and manual labor. Until the

1940s, however, there was no distinctively Haitian popular music. The elite class preferred chamber music and French conservatory-trained pianists. Social music for the middle class was supplied by dance bands of the Dominican Republic and Cuba. These bands were in turn imitated by local orchestras. Haitian military bands could be heard playing Dominican merengues and popular U.S. hits in Port-au-Prince on Thursday nights and Sunday afternoons. And in the hills and the back streets of the cities, voodoo drums had been beating for centuries, their rhythms linking this most African of the Caribbean islands with the Mother Continent.

In 1943, Rene Saint-Aude, a saxophonist from Gonaives who had played in the Haitian Army band, took over the leadership of a small combo named Jazz des Jeunes. So began a sequence of musical history that has grown and changed dramatically in six-to-eight-year cycles, earning Saint-Aude the title of "Grandfather of Haitian Music."

Of all the orchestras that Haiti has produced, Jazz des Jeunes is the most highly revered. Any Haitian, when asked about the history of the music, will without fail mention Saint-Aude, a legend in his own time. The significance of his band stems from the fact that it coalesced three major forms of popular music: merengue from the Dominican Republic and Haitian folkloric and voodoo rhythms, presented in the style and arrangement of an American swing orchestra of the day, such as those of Stan Kenton and Glenn Miller. The arrangements came from the genius of Antalcidas Murat; the driving force behind the band was Saint-Aude.

Jazz des Jeunes played open-air concerts at the Theatre de Verdure in Port-au-Prince every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday during the tourist season and performed live on Radio Haiti for 11 years. Listening to the radio broadcasts became a Sunday ritual for many families. Despite the orchestra's immense popularity, they did not record an album until 1956 and have only released 15 lps to date, many of them commemorative anniversary albums. Several of the earliest are still available and are essential for anyone wishing to explore the history of Haitian music.

(On the Ibo Records label [a company that was largely responsible for the dissemination and popularity of early Haitian music], two of the earliest albums, both called simply *Super Jazz des Jeunes*, may be identified by their catalog numbers, ILP 113 and ILP 126. Recorded when the band was 19 and 22 years old, each track is meticulously labeled as to the rhythm utilized: ibo, congo, meringue lente, guaracha, neo meringue, cha cha cha, rabordage, bolero, contredanse and even the twist.)

Saint-Aude is very proud that Jazz des Jeunes represented Haiti at the 1951 Exposition in the U.S. and won first prize. The band traveled to Cuba in 1951 and Canada in 1967, and was invited to play at the 1974 World Cup Soccer Games in Germany. Today he is living in New York, helping his son run his record shop and the Saint-Aude label, and giving concerts several times a year. His current band includes many of the original members.

Although Jazz des Jeunes was the orchestra which gained lasting fame and acclaim, they did not exist in a vacuum. The first Haitian orchestra, led by Francois Guignard, was recorded in 1938 at radio station WHSS. The producer was Ricardo Wtmeayer, who sold the records privately to friends of the group, although he did not establish a record label as such. The songs that were recorded were "Ti Celia" and "Colé Colé."

Another contemporary orchestra was led by Issa El Saieh. According to music historian and saxophonist Charles Dessalines (who played with many of the early bands), El Saieh "came to the United States and brought Budd Johnson, one of the best tenor sax [players] at that time, [back] with him, and Johnson taught him to play saxophone. After that, he had his own orchestra, Orchestra Saieh, one of the best.... Johnson used to make the arrangements for El Saieh, and Bobby Alix, an American composer/conductor, who used to live in Puerto Rico, also arranged for El Saieh. Johnson was an active saxophone player of the orchestra also." There was some competition between Jazz des Jeunes and Orchestre Saieh because Murat, a trumpet player who used to arrange for El Saieh, left that band and went to join Des Jeunes.

Johnson had played with and arranged for Count Basie and Artie Shaw, so this may be the source of the swing band sound of the early Haitian orchestral arrangements. Another possibility is the influence of the American military personnel stationed in Haiti. Although the occupation officially ended in 1934, there was a continuing American presence in the country until Duvalier took power in 1957. Not only did the soldiers have the latest American recorded hits, but the military bands undoubtedly played the contemporary music of the day. The Haitian arrangers also may have had access to stock arrangements of dance tunes, the sheet music for a big band that was available for sale in the U.S. at that time.

Other popular groups of the period were Orchestre Citadelle, Jazz Hubert, Orchestres Septentrionale and Tropicana, and Ensemble du Riviera Hotel. Dessalines traveled to South America in 1956 and Italy in 1957 with the Riviera band, led by Guy Durosier: "Haitian orchestras used to travel to Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia or Jamaica. In 1953, I went to Jamaica with Atomique Orchestra. We went to Santo Domingo also. We used to travel a lot."

A continual influence on Haitian music has been the Dominican Republic merengue. The two countries share both an island and a common musical heritage. Dessalines maintains that the Dominican merengue is based on a Haitian rhythm that was appropriated during the Haitian rule over Santo Domingo from 1822-44. The merengue from the Dominican Republic, either in "typico" form or arranged for a dance band, was very popular in Haiti throughout the '40s and '50s. The band that seems to have had the greatest impact was the Conjunto Tipico Cibaëño, led by Angel Vioria. The typico groups were usually composed of an accordion, bass, "guiro" (gourd), "tambora" (drum) and a saxophone. The music is fast-paced and delightful, with a sound not far from zydeco, mbaqanga or nortena. (The Ansonia label still maintains at least two lps in its *Angel Vioria and his Conjunto Tipico Cibaëño* (ALP 1206), and *Los Reyes del Merengue* (APL 1464). Lyricrhord also has an album compiled by musicologist Verna Gillis that is still available.)

Jazz des Jeunes was virtually an institution in Haiti for 25 years. However, in the early '50s, an upstart musician named Nemours Jean-Baptiste took it on himself to challenge Des Jeunes' supremacy. It was an early indication of the feistiness that would be the hallmark of the



popular Haitian music scene throughout the decade and beyond.

In a November 1986 interview in Brooklyn, we asked Rene Saint-Aude about the polemic between Jazz des Jeunes and Nemours:

**Saint-Aude:** Nemours used to attack us, saying that we were a bunch of old guys playing voodoo music. That's how everything got started.

**Beat:** How did you respond when Nemours would attack you?

**A:** I would answer him through music. I would reply in a song ["Ensemble Makak"] that Nemours' band was a "monkey band": "Monkey don't have brains." There was another one called "Acte de Contrition."

**Q:** What was "Acte de Contrition" about?

**A:** They were having a problem with [Jean Numarc's nightclub] Aux Calebasses, and they quit and went to the Palladium. When that didn't work, they went back to Aux Calebasses, begging to play again. They went back and did the act of contrition, "forgive me, I'm sorry, take me back." We had a song called "Baron," who is the judge in Haitian voodoo (Baron Samedi). The song says, "Ti moun fronté": The Nemours band was a bunch of kids who are very disrespectful to grown-ups. They will end up in the cemetery. Those who do not respect their elders will grow up in the cemetery.

Nemours Jean-Baptiste was born Feb. 2, 1914. According to Dessalines: "He was a guitar player at first, and then, at that time, a saxophone player was making more money than a guitar player, so he changed his mind and became a saxophone player. He went to a guy called Victor Flambert in 1948, and Flambert taught him to play a saxophone. Then he went to play with Guignard, to make more money, and after that he founded his own orchestra, Atomique Orchestra. He was the bandleader from 1949 or 1950 to 1954. . . . The Atomique Band had a singer called Ti Joe Atomique, or Joe Laveaud. He was a Dominican—father Haitian and mother Dominican—and was born in Santo Domingo, so he was interested in playing Spanish music, like Cuban, guaracha, salsa, things like that. So we had the influence of Spanish music."

Nemours subsequently left the Atomique Orchestra to form Conjunto International along with Weber Sicot in 1955. On becoming the house band at Aux Calebasses, the group's name was changed to Ensemble Aux Calebasses. Nemours left the club in 1958, renaming the orchestra Ensemble Nemours Jean-Baptiste.

This was the orchestra that developed the "compas direct," Nemours' trademark rhythm that has shaped modern Haitian music. It is said that compas direct was created because of the inability—or unwillingness—of the conga player, Kreutzer Duroseau, to play the Dominican merengue beat correctly. The name itself is claimed to have been invented by Raymond Gaspard, the guitar player. "Compas" means "beat" in Spanish; "direct" refers to the fact that the music went just one way—no third chord.

Sicot, a contemporary of Nemours, was a brilliant alto saxophonist who would hang around Jazz des Jeunes and sit in if there was an opportunity. He first played third saxophone with Orchestre Citadelle, and then went on to the Atomique Orchestra, although by that time Nemours had left. Sicot made at least one recording with El Saieh's

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## HAITIAN MUSIC

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The seminal orchestra *Jazz des Jeunes* at Port-au-Prince's Theatre du Verdure.

orchestra, "Poule La Pété Chaudier," before joining Nemours to start Conjunto International in 1955, moving from there to Aux Calebasses. After a brief stint with the Casino International Orchestra in 1956, he formed his own group, Ensemble Weber Scicot, in 1957; by 1958, he had begun recording for Ibo.

The polemic with Nemours began almost immediately, ushering in one of the most colorful episodes in all of popular music history. Scicot began playing *compas direct*, but by 1959, he had created his own signature rhythm, the "cadence rampa," to distinguish his band from Nemours'. It was very similar to *compas direct*, though with one additional beat that made it sound closer to Latin or calypso music.

Dessalines recalls: "The polemic was because Scicot envied Nemours. That's why he left Nemours, the first time. Scicot was a very good, very brilliant saxophone player, but Nemours was the best composer, so he didn't like Nemours for that."

Scicot was a great showman, known as "Maestro Difficile," who would do stunts on stage such as playing two saxes at once to egg on the crowd. Large in stature, resembling Fats Domino in some photos, he rapidly gained a vast following of fanatics who thrived on and encouraged the rivalry with Nemours. Music fans were soon divided into two camps—followers of Nemours and followers of Scicot. Some would attend performances by both in a single night, just to hear what they were saying about each other.

### "Deux Guidons"

*Mon cher voisin cé avé ou m'apé palé  
Paské moin vini pou moin di ou vérité  
Ce pou suspen' kapab trompé moun' serieu  
Paské tout' Haitien konnen bonne music*

*Depuis ou commencé cé on seul kout' saxophone "jus k'ou fini"  
Min mon ché loc ou kapab fait tête ou travail "cépa menti"  
Ou pa kapab composé yon boléro  
Ou pa kapab composé on bel merengue—ou pa honte!*

*Ou pa kapab fait yon solo  
Tout' temps cé moun' k'ap fait pou ou  
(Backing vocals:  
Min pa' ou, min pa' ou  
Fémin bouche ou voisin  
Meté gaçon sou ou  
M'apé culbité ou)  
Cé on seul bagay ou konnin cé chita apé fait tintin*

(Translation)  
Neighbor, I'm here to talk to you  
I'm here to let the truth out  
It's time for you to stop bluffing  
Because Haitians know good music



Saxophonist and music historian Charles Dessalines played with many of the early bands.

*It's the same sax solo from start to finish  
My friend, you've got to work harder  
You can't compose a bolero  
You can't compose a nice merengue—shame on you!*

*You can't do a sax solo  
Somebody else has to do it for you  
(Backing vocals:  
Take this and shut up, neighbor  
Get your act together  
I'm going to be kicking you)  
The only thing you know is to sit around and make a fool of yourself  
(Super Ensemble Webert Scicot, Cadence Rampa, Ibo ILP 122)*

Neither bandleader would mention the other by name, and Nemours would rarely answer Scicot directly. He would appear to rise above the attacks, usually resisting the temptation to return the insults and restricting his lyrics to simply boasting about himself and his band.

### "Bien Compté, Mal Calculé"

*Bien compté oui mal calculé  
Maestro Nemours fait carré  
Nemours cé yon gran missionnaire  
Que Bon Dyé voyé sou la terre*



(Left) Weber Sicot and his ensemble. Sicot was a great showman who would excite the audience with his antics, in contrast to the more restrained style of Nemours Jean Baptiste (right).

(Translation)  
 Good counting but bad calculation  
 Maestro Nemours is a genius  
 He is a missionary  
 Sent by God to earth  
 (Nemours, *Haiti Cherie*, Ibo ILP 131)

The tables had turned from when Nemours attacked Jazz des Jeunes; now he had to appear to ignore the assaults of the "lesser" musician. However, the fanatics would frequently make up their own additional, more direct, lyrics aimed at the rival group.

By 1963, the rivalry became a national mania. The bands had their own trademark colors: Nemours—red and white, while Sicot fans wore four colors—red, white, black and green.

**"Symbol de la Cadence"**  
 Quatre couleurs bien choisi  
 Vert et blanc, noir et rouge  
 A la yon bel étandard  
 K'ap symbolizé cadence rampa  
 Avec vert, symbol de l'espérance  
 Cé sa'k fait n toujou pi haut  
 Avec blanc, symbol de la purité  
 Nou toujou innocent  
 Couleu noir, symbol de notre couleu  
 Fanatiques yo bien choisi  
 Couleu rouge, victoire la ap continué  
 Cadence la ap toujou en joie

(Translation)  
 Four well-chosen colors  
 Green and white, black and red  
 What a beautiful banner  
 To symbolize cadence rampa  
 With green, symbol of hope  
 That's why we're always on top  
 White, symbol of purity  
 We're always innocent  
 Black, symbol of our race  
 Our fans have chosen it well  
 Red, victory will continue  
 The cadence will always be happy

(Sicot, *Zepons*, Ibo ILP 129)

The two maestros encouraged the polemic, knowing it would be good for business. Ironically, they were both on the Ibo record label, which would release a new album every three months or so, alternating between each group. Record companies being what they are, Ibo used the backs of the albums to advertise the records of the competing

band! (For example, the back of Sicot's *Sons et Couleurs d'Haiti* features the covers of five Nemours albums, ILP nos. 131, 134, 136, 137 and 138, and only one other Sicot lp, ILP 132.) It is said by some that the two bandleaders were actually good friends and would often dine together; Sicot was the godfather of Nemours' grandchild, and Nemours to Sicot's.

The competition came to a head in 1964. On April 8, a soccer game between the two bands was held at L'Estade Sylvio Cator in Port-au-Prince, attended by 35,000 rabid fans. Sicot played center-forward and was called the *Pele* of Haiti by his fans, and Nemours was the goalie for his side. Fortunately, the game ended in a draw, 1-1, and was called because of rain; otherwise, a riot may well have occurred.

Sicot's song, "Pété Filèt," tells the story of the game:

**"Pété Filèt"**  
 Nou min'm cadence rampa, métier'n cé joué music  
 Nou tandé affai football, nou obligé prend position  
 Sicot ret' déyé carré, il passé deux arrières  
 Li chaviré'l sou côté, yo ouè ballon-an nan filèt  
 Min moulin pa jan-m compren' pou apprend joué football  
 Ala yon bel formation, min voisin ou guin chance

(Translation)  
 We of cadence rampa, our job is to play music  
 We heard of the soccer game; we had to take our side  
 In front of the goal line, Sicot dribbled past two defenders  
 Before they knew it, the ball was already in the net  
 But some people never understand how soccer is played  
 With our better team, you were lucky, neighbor

(Sicot, *Cadence Rampa*, Ibo ILP 122)

The cover of Nemours' album *L'as Du Rythme* (ILP 124) pictures him in a soccer uniform in front of a goal net. The song "Huit Avril" gives Nemours' version of the game:

**"Huit Avril"**  
 Huit Avril, nan Stade Sylvio Cator  
 Més zamis nan yon duel musical  
 Ni gradin ni tribune latéral  
 Toute chargé a toute capacité  
 Peuple-la té si tèllement apé joui  
 Yo nomé compas direct a vie  
 Rythm nou-an cé'r rythm ki Atomic  
 Cé sa'k fait Nemours pa fait critic

(Backing vocals:  
 Avec-m pon rété  
 Cé déyé'm pon maché)

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Nemours (kneeling) is pictured with his band on the cover of one of his most popular albums (Ibo ILP 131).

*(Translation)*

*Eighth of April, in Sylvio Cator Stadium  
My friends, in a musical duel  
From the bleachers to the box seats  
Jammed to full capacity  
People were having such a good time  
They proclaimed compas direct for life  
Our rhythm is an atomic rhythm  
That's why Nemours doesn't criticize.*

*(Backing vocals:*

*You'll always walk  
Behind me like a servant)*

Typically, he talks around the subject, not about it, making the soccer game out as a "duel musical." However, Nemours was not above slinging mud when provoked. One of the most pointed exchanges occurred after both bands had gone on tour to New York:

**"En Tournee"**

*Deux mois seulement ké nou fait nan New York  
Nou rentré ak bèl morso, moun konten'  
Tout' instrument nou changé, paské-n prop'  
Malachong tout' mour: kònnin ou audacieu*

*Ou acheté yon Valiant  
Comme auto privé ou  
Ou paka payé-l  
Valiant nan la ligne  
Kwak li nan la ligne  
Yo obligé sézi-l  
Mon ché Malachong  
Pito ou al doucement*

*(Translation)*

*We spent just two months in New York  
We came back with brand new songs, people are happy  
All our instruments are brand new, because we're clean  
Malachong, everybody knows that you're audacious*

(Malachong is a type of disinfectant)

*You bought a Valiant  
As your private car  
You can't pay for it  
So you made it a taxi  
Even then they had to repossess it  
My dear Malachong  
You better take it easy.*

Sicot, naturally, did not "take it easy," and responded with:

**"Crabe Mal Zoreille"**

*Chatte-la commencé gâté  
Lagué chatte-la  
Grace avec poudre Malachong  
La n'ap désinfecté ou*

*Ou vini ti boss papa  
Ou di ou poté music neuf*

*"Rapso" fé deux mois déhors  
Sa-l poté crabe mal zoreilles*

*(Translation)*

*The dead cat is beginning to smell  
Get rid of it!  
Thanks to the Malachong powder  
We'll disinfect you*

*"Rapso" spent two months out there  
He brought back crab lice in his ears*

*Here you come, little boss, papa  
You say you bring new music...*

Eventually, the two bands called a halt to the rivalry because of increasing violence between their fans. The truce was announced in a song by Sicot in 1965.

**"Polemic Fini"**

*Ah, oui, polemic fini  
N'ap continue fait la bonne music  
Pou-n satisfé yon public  
Ah, oui, polemic fini*

*(Translation)*

*Oh yes, the polemic is over  
We're continuing to make good music  
To satisfy our audience  
Oh yes, the polemic is over*

As hostilities ceased between the two musical camps, the stage was set for the emergence of the next wave of Haitian music—the rise of the mini-jazz bands. *(To be continued)*

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