Legends of HAITIAN MUSIC

By CC Smith and Gerard Tacite Lamothe

PART I: LOCKING HORNS

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 "COM-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 bodies moves possible. Smoldering with intensity, modern compas features a multipart song structure, 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. Borrowed 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-eighty-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 Antalidas 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 lbo Records label is 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: lbo, congo, merengue lente, guaracha, neo merengue, cha cha cha, rabordage, bolero, contradanse and even the twist.)

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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 WHHD. The producer was Ricardo Witmeyer, 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 Cell" and "Colé Colé."

Another contemporary orchestra was led by Issa El Saieh. According to music historian and saxophonist Charles Desalines (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 Aix, 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 Orchestra 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. Desalines traveled to South America in 1956 and Italy in 1957 with the Riviera band, led by Guy Durotier: "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 indigenous heritage. Desalines 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 Cibaero, led by Angel Vioria. The tipico 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, mbanganga or nortena. (The Ansonia label still maintains at least two 2 1/2s in print, Angel Vioria and his Conjunto Tipico Cibaero (ALP 1206), and Los Reyes del Merengue (APL 1464). Lyrichord 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.

Best: How did you respond when Nemours would attack you?

A: I would answer him through music. I would reply in a song ("Ensemble Makaka") that Nemours' band was a "monkey band": "Monkeys 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 Numanc's nightclub] Aux Cabeusses, and they quit and went to the Palladium. When that didn't work, they went back to Aux Cabeusses, begging to play again. They went back and did the act of contrition, "I 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 fron". The Nemours band was a bunch of kids who were 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 Desalines: "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 Flamberg in 1948, and Flamberg 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 Atome, 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 Internacional along with Weber Sicot in 1955. On becoming the house band at Aux Cabeusses, the group's name was changed to Ensemble Aux Cabeusses. 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 Gardier, 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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The seminal orchestra Jazz des Jeunes at Port-au-Prince’s Théâtre du Verdure.

orchestra, “Poule La Pétite 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 Sicot, 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. Sicot began playing compass 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 compass direct, though with one additional beat that made it sound closer to Latin or calypso music.

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

Sicot 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 Sicot. 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 ce avé ou m’apé palé
Paské moin vini pou moin di ou vèrité
Ce pou suspen’ kapab trompé moun’ seriieu
Paské tout’ Haitien konnen bonne music

Depuis ou commencé ce ou seul kout’ saxophone “jus k’ou fini”
Min mon chè loc ou kapab fait téte ou travail “cépa menti”
Ou pa kapab composé yon boléro
Ou pa kapab composé ou bel merengue—ou pa honte!

Ou pa kapab fait yon solo
Tout’ temps ce moun’ k’ap fait pou ou
(Backings vocals:
Min p’ou, min p’ou
Fèmin bouche ou voisun
Mètè gaçon sou ou
M’apé culbèt ou)
Cè ou seul bagay ou konninn cè 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 bluffling
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
(Backings 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 Sicot, Cadence Rampa, Ibo ILP 122)

Neither bandleader would mention the other by name, and Nemours would rarely answer Sicot 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 compé oui mal calculé
Maestro Nemours fait carré
Nemours cè yon gran missionaire
Que Bon Dye voyé sou la terre
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**HAITI CHERIE**

(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 bel morso, moun conten
Tout’ instrument nou changé, paske-n prop’
Malachong tout’ moun: könnt ou audacieu

Ou achété yon Vaillant
Comme auto privé ou
Ou paka payé-
Vaillant nan la ligne
Kwâ li nan la ligne
Yo obligé sézili-
Mon ché Malachong
Pito ou ai 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 Vaillant
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 commence gatté
Lagué chatte-la
Grace avec poudre Malachong
La n’ap désinfecté ou

Ou vini ti bos papa
Ou di ou potè music neuf

"Rapso" fè deux mois déhors
Sa l’potè 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 Scotel in 1965.

"Polemic Fini"
Ah, oui, polemic fini
N’ap continue fait la bonne music
Pon-n satisfait 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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