Compas! Compas! Compas!: Legends of Haitian Music, Part 2
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The Beat; 1988; 7, 2; International Index to Music Periodicals Full Text
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Legends of Haitian Music, Part 2

By CC Smith and Gerard Tacite Lamothe

Wicked guitar lines, hair-raising key changes, tension and release, call and response, and dramatic shifts in texture and color characterize compas, the popular music of Haiti, at its best. The rhythmic counterpart between the cymbal and the floor tom produces a sensual, rocking beat unlike anything else in the Caribbean, although the multilayered polyglot sound of compas (pronounced COMB-pah) can include touches of salsa, soca, jazz, funk and even highlife.

As discussed in Part 1 of this series (Beat, Vol. 6 #2, 1987, “Legends of Haitian Music: Locking Horns”), popular Haitian music has grown and changed in roughly 10-year cycles since the late 1940s, beginning with the big-band style music of René Saint-Aude’s Super Jazz des Jeunes. Nemours Jean-Baptiste and Weber Scot followed with their orchestras, gaining massive public attention by maintaining an extended “polemic” of traded insults and one-upmanship between 1958 and 1965. Nemours’ “compas direct” rhythm became the hallmark of Haitian music up to the present.

This 10-year pattern is a phenomenon that we noticed while researching this article. It was also confirmed by Johnny Toussaint (“Ti-Fre”) of Skah Shih in a recent interview: “I think every 10 years, we got some change, every 10 years — 65, mini-jazz start and 75, Exile One came...” Then, 1985 brought the advent of Kassav’ and the beginning of the zouk revolution. The impact of zouk on Haitian music is a story that has just begun to be told.

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he late '60s were an unsettled time in Haiti, as they were in much of the world. The repressive regime of "President-for-Life" Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier had developed its full force, with the result that anyone who could tie Haiti for New York or Miami.

It was the end of an era for Haitian music and the advent of a new direction. A truce was called in the rivalry between Nemours and Sicot in 1965, as announced by Sicot's "Poëmique Fin." Both men continued to play and record music but their creative genius was pretty well exhausted. Without the competitive edge of the polemic, neither seemed to generate the same excitement. Nemours gave up the distinctive sound of the accordion for a cheesy-sounding synthesizer and uninvintive "modern" arrangements. Sicot added a Hawaiian guitar and traveled frequently to the French Antilles, where his music received greater acceptance. After a decade of listening to what was essentially the same song over and over again, it is no wonder that the huge Haitian audiences were looking for something new.

Enter the Beartles. The Liverpool sound revolutionized popular music all over the world, and Haiti was no exception. The revolution came in the sound and style of music as well as in the realization of the teenagers that they, too, could play music and have a sound that identified their generation.

The first wave of the youth movement in Haitian music occurred in 1963-65. Groups like Les Copains, Les Consuls, Les Corvintons, Blousons Noir, Loups Noir and Les Virtuoses played rock 'n' roll copied from French artists like Johnny Halliday, and covered American hits like "Doo Wah Ditty," "Dey Doo Run Run" and "Dream Dream Dream" with French lyrics. The stage was thus set for the next big change in direction.

In 1963, Fred Dejean and five of his brothers formed Les Frères de Petion Ville, later to become Les Frères Dejean, a band with one foot in the '60s and the other searching for a niche in the future. It was a big band with a horn section, but the members were quite young.

Two years later the sound emerged that was to distinguish the popular music for another decade. It was dubbed "mini-jazz" by a DJ at Radio Haiti, referring to the fact that the bands were about half the size of the big orchestras and also to the young age of the musicians. A typical lineup would have about nine members: two guitars, bass, drums, percussion, vocals and usually a single saxophone. The first mini-jazz band is generally acknowledged to have been Ibo Combo, although, like so many innovators in music history, they never received full recognition for their invention.

At the beginning, it was primarily a live music scene, with seemingly every neighborhood producing a small combo. The Port-au-Prince suburb of Petion Ville was fertile musical ground, producing Les Difficultes de Petion Ville (now known as DP Express), Tabou Combo and the aforementioned Frères Dejean. Other towns produced such groups as Diables du Rythme de St. Marc and Les Fantastistes de Carrefour.

Most of the bands were formed by high school students or slightly older neighborhood youths; their concerts were frequently given in the afternoons, since their audiences were too young to stay out late at night. During school vacations and holidays, some bands played nearly every day at house parties.

The mini-jazz bands followed the compass direct rhythm established by Nemours, but the arrangements and the topics covered by the lyrics were completely different. Vacations and volleyball were favorite subjects, along with love, mother, the beauty of nature and, of course, teenage girls. At the beginning, bands were formed just for fun or to attract girls. There was usually no plan to become "stars" or professional musicians. In fact, to be a musician had a disreputable connotation and, in most cases, did not receive parental approval. Loubert Chancy, Skah Shah's saxophonist since 1974, remembers: "It was very difficult for young people to get involved in music, because once you were involved in music, you were considered as being a bum. I didn't go to school for music, there were no music schools in Haiti. My parents, if I went to play a party, when I would come back at 2 or 3 in the morning, they would not open the door to me, and I would have to rely on a friend of mine to (put me up for the night)..."

The seminal band Shleu Shleu began in 1965, led by sax player Tony Moise. The band would go through at least three incarnations, as producer Dada Jackaman lost each group he managed to the New York exodus, but each transformation became a highly popular, trend-setting group, featuring one excellent horn player. The first Shleu Shleu went off in 1970 to become Original Shleu Shleu of New York. The second moved to New York in 1974 and became Skah Shah, with Loubert Chancy on sax. Jackaman's third attempt took off for New York after only three months and became Djet-X, a group featuring another great saxophonist of the mini-jazz era, Gerard Daniel.

Les Ambassadeurs came together on July 23, 1966, with alto saxophonist Ernst Menelas as maestro and a Chinese-Haitian, E. Fong Cap, as vocalist. Their first record was released three years later by Marc Duverger's Marc Records in Brooklyn, containing a trend-setting carnival song, "Carnaval Cizo."

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Les Fantaisistes, led by alto saxophonist Carmin Bichotte, was formed in the summer of 1967. They came out with an album containing "Ti Zoseau," their first hit, along with "Vacances," in 1968. Their own "version of "Valley Ball" ("Volleyball"), included on their second LP (Ibo ILP 143), hit in the summer and was played constantly at the many parties, barbecues and soccer games. In 1968, Bossa Combo started in the neighborhood of Wané, Carrefour. They were a little older than some of the groups and featured a saxophone, three guitars, Adrien Jeanne on piano and bandleader Alfred Miché on tambouras.

With the contradictions inherent in Haitian society, it was almost inevitable that a polemic would arise among the young bands as well. The rivalry between Shieu Shieu and Les Fantaisistes developed along the lines of uptown vs. downtown, middle-class suburbs against inner-city youth, although the music of the two was very similar, using the same themes and instruments.

Mini-jazz was putting pressure on the big orchestras just as Nemours had challenged Jazz des Jeunes in the '50s.

According to Eddie Poulard, bassist for Formula One Haitian Band in Los Angeles: "Shieu Shieu was an elite band, because they had a Syrian, a mulatto [Jackaman], as manager. He had money and pushed Shieu Shieu all the way. But Shieu Shieu would not go beyond a certain point in the country [wouldn't play in the poorer sections]. Les Fantaisistes said, 'We've got to have something for the masses.' That's how this band was created. This is why there was competition between the two. They were playing the same kind of music, same instruments. People would pay high prices to see Shieu Shieu because they played 'uptown' gigs.

Then, in 1967, yet another young group of middle-class boys from Petion Ville convinced their parents to buy them some instruments and started on a path that would bring them local fame and eventually world renown. First known as Los Incognitos de Petion Ville, the band was led by guitarist Albert Chancy, with his brother Adolphe on bass. In a departure from the usual mini-jazz lineup, the group contained an accordion, but no horn. They soon changed their name to Tabou Combo and won the Radio Haiti mini-jazz competition in 1968. Their first album, "Haiti," came out in 1969 on Ibo Records, complete with effusive liner notes that describe the various members as irresistibly attractive to the feminine heart. By 1970, they were one of the leading bands in Haiti.

The net result of all this youthful activity was the decline of interest in the music of Nemours and Sciot. Mini-jazz was putting pressure on the big orchestras just as Nemours had challenged Saint-Aude's Jazz des Jeunes in the early '50s. The Ibo Records catalog, which had been exclusively the provenance of Jazz des Jeunes, Nemours and Sciot from the beginning, was invaded in 1968 when Haiti, Mon Pays by Groupe Les Chieu-Chieu (sic) (ILP 139) (Shieu-Shieu's first record) appeared, followed by Les Fantaisistes' second (ILP 143). A Nemours LP, appropriately enough, Reminiscence (ILP 145), follows that; and finally, Tabou Combo's first album (ILP 146) in 1969. The liner notes on the Chieu-Chieu album comment on how the band was bringing a new breeze to Haitian music that had fallen into lethargy. ('Les Shieu-Shieu on apporte un souffle nouveau à la musique haïtienne qui était tombée en lethaerie."

In an interview in Brooklyn in August 1967, we asked Yvon Andre ("Kapi"), percussionist of Tabou Combo, if there was a generation gap developing between the music of the parents' generation and that of the younger generation coming up, as was happening all over the world. He replied: "Yes, that's right. Also, that created a conflict between the older generation and the younger generation of musicians, because they saw a threat, a competition coming for them. As a matter of fact, Nemours Jean-Baptiste used to have a gig at El Rancho Hotel every year; it was a tradition. But all of a sudden, Nemours was cancelled and Shieu Shieu was taking over."

"It was time for them (the big bands) to fade away, because the younger generation was taking over all the gigs. Shieu Shieu was playing at Cabanne Choucoune [Nemours' old club], and there was a new wave of younger people getting more involved in the music scene, and they went for younger musicians. Of course the music was hipper than what Nemours was playing. Nemours used to play at the Rex Theatre. Ambassadeurs took over, kicked Nemours out. Tabou Combo used to be at Paramount (the first band to play at this high-class movie theatre)."

Weber Sicot's standing gigs at the El Dorado Theatre in Port-au-Prince were taken over by Shoupa-Shoupa; his weekly appearances at Don Petro and Hotel Beau Rivage were replaced by Les Fantaisistes and Bossa Combo.

Tabou Combo relocated to New York in 1971. The band's original leader, Albert Chancy, left to go to college, and the band reorganized under the direction of Adolphe Chancy, who continues to manage it.

In the absence of Tabou and Shieu Shieu, the Difficultes and Les
The stage was set for the next big change, and once again, it involved horns.

Gypsies de Petion Ville became the leading bands in Haiti. The Gypsies (later renamed Scorpio) were formed in 1970 when Les Difficultes' lead guitarist Robert Martino split off to form his own band. Yet another musical conflict arose between the fans of the two groups, which were referred to as the "Scorpio" and "Gus" groups. This feud lasted for several years and led to a series of confrontations between the two groups. Eventually, the Gypsies merged with Les Difficultes to form Scotch, a new band that combined the talents of both groups.

By 1978, the Gypsies had established themselves as one of the leading bands in Haiti, with hits like "Petion Ville" and "La Reina." Their music was a mix of traditional Haitian rhythms and modern pop elements, and their concerts were a favorite among the young people of Haiti.

In the late 1970s, the Gypsies began to incorporate more jazz influences into their music, which was a significant departure from their earlier sound. This new direction was influenced by the music of American jazz groups like Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman.

The band's most successful album, "Sous le ciel d'Haïti," was released in 1979 and featured a mix of traditional and modern elements. The album included hits like "Sous le ciel d'Haïti" and "La Reina," which became instant classics in Haiti.

The Gypsies' success continued into the 1980s, with hits like "L'Amour" and "Le Voleur." Their music remained popular in Haiti, and they continued to tour throughout the region, gaining a following in other parts of the Caribbean as well.

The band's influence was felt throughout the music scene in Haiti, inspiring a new generation of musicians to explore their own unique sounds.

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The exodus of Haitians to New York continued throughout the 70s, making Brooklyn the second-largest Haitian city in the world after Port-au-Prince. The Haitian community in New York today is lively and self-contained. In certain sections of Brooklyn, Haitian businesses, groceries, bakeries, restaurants and record shops line the streets, and Creole is the most frequently heard language. There are several newspapers and magazines printed in French: Haiti Observateur, Haiti Derniers, Haiti Culture and Nouveautés. Many radio programs keep the lines of communication open: Moments Créoles, WLBD, Sun., 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Eddy Zamor's Eddy Publicite, Sat., 8 to 10 p.m. and Echo de la Metropole, Fri. 6 to 7:30 p.m., 105.9 FM; Ekspresyon Kreyol, Sat., 10 a.m. to 12 noon 89.5 FM; Haiti en Ondes, Sun. 9 to 10 p.m., WEVD, 98 FM; and continuous daily broadcasting on WIBS, 92 FM, Voix des Antilles.

The center of the music shifted to Brooklyn as well. Currently, eight of the leading bands are located in Brooklyn and actively working: Tabou, System, Skah Shah, Mini Allstars, Macho Band, Djet-X, Ambassadeurs et Accolade, with the emphasis on performing "nan bal" (at a dance) rather than recording. On any given weekend, at least two or three Haitian bands will be playing to thousands in Brooklyn or Queens dance halls such as the Empire, Tilden, Starlight and Bitmore ballrooms, Cenegal Manor or Chateau Royale. There are at least six record shops: Jace, Ma Maison, Marc, Saint-Aude, Mini Records and Geronimo; even the African Record Center seems to be specializing in Haitian music these days. The Haitian-based bands — Bossa Combo, Scorpio, DP Express, Coupe Clouse et Frères Dejean — travel frequently to the United States to release records and perform. A few more bands are scattered among Montreal (Dixie Band), Boston (Volo Volo) and Miami (Magnum Band and Top Vice).

For all the strength of the Haitian presence, it seems that the Haitian recording industry is in somewhat of a decline. Highly popular bands that routinely draw a thousand people to a weekend dance express problems with their recording arrangements. Amazingly, there is no royalty system in place for record sales; the band is usually just paid a lump sum for the record.

Veteran trumpet player Anderson Cameau told us his view of the Haitian music industry: "We don't have producers. Those people, they see the music just like a grocery store. Let's say we got a band, and we go to a producer and he tell us he's gonna give us $5,000, and after that he pay for the recording, pressing, album cover, and put that album out. And after that, he don't owe you no money. Even if you sell 20,000 or 1 million, he don't care about you. Not even a gift, not even a pair of shoes.

"Long time ago, Nemours Jean-Baptiste, Coupe Cloure, they suck their blood, man. They would buy their albums from them for $800, and they have 14, 15 musicians, and they make a lot of money, almost $20,000 over that $800."

But according to producer Marc Duverger of Marc Records: "Today, even if you sell three or four thousand records, you need at least $10,000, $15,000 — the recording alone sometimes will take $10,000, whether the record sells or not. Haitian business is in big crisis now, cause nobody's making money, nobody wants to put a record out. That's why a lot of bands now go on their own to try to do their records. A lot of people think it's the music from the Antilles, Martinique, Guadeloupe, that's making the Haitians go down, but that is not so. Haitian music start to come down before those bands. They stopped buying the Haitian music after (Francois) Mitterrand came in with the socialism (in France). The minute Mitterand got in power, the franc came down...."

To counter these problems, Tabou Combo, System Band and Skah Shah have all started their own labels, allowing them to control the production and distribution, and to share in the profits. Tabou Combo's Chantery label is the best established, having released nine Tabou Combo singles, five for Coupe Cloure, and one for Ti Manno and Gemini All Starts, among others.

Most of the bands we spoke to expressed their desire to reach a larger audience. Kapi, speaking for Tabou Combo: "I'm a compas player, so I'd love it to be big. That's what's we're heading for. We want compas to be international. We want compas to be as known as reggae or calypso."

We asked Skah Shah's Loubert Chantery if his band wants to cross over to the American audience. "We would love to. But not by playing American music, but by playing our own music and have them understand our music. I think the handicap now is promotion. Because I believe that anybody who has the chance to listen to Skah Shah would really enjoy it. When we play at S.O.B.'s, they (the mostly American audience) have a very good time, they enjoy every bit of it. ... The groove is universal."

When Baby Doc was forced to abdicate in 1986, the heady possibility of freedom after 29 years of oppression hit the Haitian people like a bomb, and music soon appeared to mark the historic events. "Dechoukaj" means "uproot" in Creole, and refers to the often-violent effort to get rid of the Tontons Macoutes and all vestiges of the Duvalier regime. Since 1986, some of the albums that have appeared are Fedia Laguerre's Dechoukaj, Toto Necesite's Hait Libere, Les Freres Parent's Operation Dechoukaj, and La Grand Puissance: Operation Dechoukaj by Joubien.

The long-established fear of speaking out against the government is still present.

The long-established fear of speaking out against the government is still present, however. Most of the dechoukaj songs talk around the topic, never advocating it. The latest releases by System Band, Accolade and Bossa Combo, as well as Skah Shah's 1988 release, Van Libe (Wind of Freedom), are still very conservative, calling for unity but not much more.
One exception is Formula One's "Halla": "Duvialier tombe/Ton Ton Macoute pa la mode encore." (Duvialier has fallen the secret police are not in style now). Vocalist Yvon Estiville was reluctant to sing even those seemingly innocuous lines at first, even though located safely in Los Angeles, some 6,000 miles from the scene of the crimes. Certainly the lines of the chorus, "mekte baton pou yo" (Put a stick to them), would have been enough to land the group in jail, or worse, during the Duvialier regime!

We asked Kapi of Tabou Combo if the band had ever addressed the political situation in Haiti. "We did, even when Duvialier was there. Not directly, but we tried to put the message across without going straight to the point. We circled around the bush, but then they got the message anyway. We were talking about even though you have millions in Swiss banks, there are material things and when you die you can't take those with you and about sharing what you have with the poor people, sharing with the people who have nowhere to sleep ("Partager")."

For many years, Bossa Combo was identified with the Duvialier regime and was said to be Baby Doc's favorite band. The insidiousness of this situation is illustrated of how the unchecked political power of the Duvaliers affected every aspect of Haitian life. Adrienne Jeanette recalls: "We were a neighborhood group in 1968, and there was one person in the neighborhood that Jean-Claude (Duvalier) looked up to as a father figure and counselor, LeMaire Prospere. In the neighborhood, there were a lot of people who had connections with the government. We approached him about putting our band together. He had two cars. He sold one and used the money to buy us our equipment."

The report we had with LeMaire put us in connection with other people in the government because he went around and kept saying 'I

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Kapi: "We want compas to be international. We want compas to be as known as reggae or calypso."

One in the early '50s, an itinerant Haitian guitarist named Gesner Henry was plying his trade from door to door, "enjoying life," as he says, playing his guitar and singing for spare change or a free meal. From these humble beginnings rose one of the most enduring and beloved figures in contemporary Haitian music. Coupe Clouse.

Born in Leogane, west of Port-au-Prince, in 1925, Henry had a talent for music and soccer. He actually gained fame first on the soccer field and picked up the nickname Coupe Clouse (pronounced Koo-pay Kloo-ay), it means roughly, "cut and kick" that would follow him throughout his musical career. By the mid-'50s, he had gained enough renown to become the opening act for Jazz de Jeunes at the Theatre de Verdure in Port-au-Prince. Drawing largely on the merengue of the Dominican Republic for inspiration and arrangements, he soon became known for his lyrics, which ranged from sexual double entendres to universally recognized depictions of Haitian life and social situations.

He began with his first group, Trio Crystal, later named Trio Select, and then continued with Ensemble Select. In 1976, he began adding more members until the band numbered 12. However, he never lost his homey, popular touch.

Of all Haitian music, his is closest to that of Africa — the use of percussion and acoustic guitar patterns closely resemble the Ghanaian palm-wine higlitte of Ko Nimo and even early Dibango. Amazingly, he claims never to have heard African music when growing up. It is understandable, given Haiti's historical isolation, but the parallels are uncanny. Coupe Clouse visited Africa in 1975, performing in the Ivory Coast, where his physical similarities to Dibango gained him much attention and his music, even more. It was in Africa where he was given the title of "Le ROI" (the King). In January 1987, he was scheduled to return to Africa for a concert in Gabon.

Coupe Clouse calls his music "compas mambana" (peanut compas), and he has at least 15 albums to his credit. He has introduced a synthesizer into his band, but as if to balance this technological innovation, he has also added a traditional bamboo stick (tibwa) for percussion. His recent LP Madam Marcel even contains some musical references to the zouk phenomenon, which he feels is only a passing fad. Coupe Clouse remains and endures, as a symbol of "bootsrap" Haitian music, adapting to modern trends but keeping true to himself and the soul of Haiti.
Ti Manno:

The Dawn of Haitian Protest Music

Ti Manno (Antoine Rossini Jean-Baptiste), said to be the Bob Marley of Haitian music, began his career in St. Marc, north of Port-au-Prince, then joined Shoupa-Shoupa in New York in 1971, and went to Boston in the mid-70s with Volo Volo and Astros. In 1979, he joined DP Express in Haiti, and their 1980 lp contained his first protest song, “Corriga,” speaking out against sexual harassment of women by the Tontons Macoutes and other “gran neg” (big shots).

Leaving DP Express to form his own band, Gemini All Stars, he found his forte. Songs exposing the hypocrisy of the upper class (“Min Culture Pa Nou”), advocating the Creole language over French (“Operation Min Centre”), and stressing education and African origins were stronger and more pointed than any other band had done up to that time.

In “Neg Kont Neg” (“Black Against Black”), he called for black unity: “Africa, pa guin l’union plit ou yo / Nou kite moun ap oue nan cereve nou / Pou youn pa vi e oue lot” (“Africa, there is no unity among your children / We are letting the white men play with our minds / To make us hate each other”).

Ti Manno’s fearless comments on the ills of Haitian society landed him at least one stint in jail. He was pulled off stage during a performance and badly beaten by the Macoutes; he was also sent into exile to the French Antilles for a time. But his popularity was so great that the government was afraid to do anything too drastic to silence him. It is said that his music may have planted the seeds of revolution that led to Duvalier’s ouster. He died, still in his 30s, on May 13, 1985, of meningitis, although the cause of death is still the subject of much speculation.

From 1978 to 1986, compas grew stronger as bands became more professional and the musicianship improved. The songs, however, became increasingly complex, as the simple song structure of the mini-jazz gave way to a multipart “symphonies” with, as one observer notes, “an introduction to the introduction, then an introduction, then several rhythm changes, before getting to the groove, or ‘manman compas.”

But by 1985, another musical revolution was brewing in the French Antilles. The tidal wave of zouk, with Kassav’ riding the crest, washed over Haiti, causing many of the groups to rethink their music to keep up with the interest in the dynamic new sound. None of the musicians we spoke to, however, would admit that they were going to capitulate to the challenge and actually play zouk music. The overriding opinion seemed to be that Kassav’s has the edge because of their state-of-the-art technology and electronics, not because of any musical superiority. The Haitian bands are realizing that a new standard has been set and they can no longer allow their records to be released with out-of-tune horns, hoarse monotone vocals or rambling, disorganized songs.

We asked Ti-Fre and Jean Michel St. Victor (“Zouzouli”), guitarist and vocalist of Skah Shah, if their band was going to jump on the zouk wagon. Ti-Fre responded: “We got our own zouk. If we go back to Haiti and look at the traditional rhythms, we got congo, petro, ibo…” Zouzouli added: “Haitian folklore is really rich, with more than 20 rhythms… Ti-Fre; “I think the Haitian bands were too full, too sincere about the compas. Over those 20 years they should have played ibo, rabordage…”

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It seems that in Haiti, history is not linear, but circular.

We posed the same question to three more Haitian musicians. Trumpeter Anderson Cameau was asked if he thinks that zouk will change the direction of Haitian music. He predicted: “I guess it’s going to change. Compas needs some changes in the rhythm. Especially with the guitar, the way we play, I feel that it has too much noise, you cannot understand these two guitars. This is my opinion. The compas is too complicated.”

Guitarist Ronald Smith of System Band: “We don’t plan to play exactly the zouk, but yeah, we plan to add much more electronics and make the music more commercial. One idea music, because that’s the way they compose. They start out with a groove, and they continue that groove, where Haitian music, we have a beginning, the singer sings, and then it goes into the solo, the singer sings again. So we’re trying to change that, we’re trying to see if we can go, and the people start dancing, the groove starts right there. We have to make the music less complicated, lighter. We’re trying to use basslines too, instead of like regular compas, to give it more popular music sound, so people get into it easier and notice what’s going on.”

According to Kapi, Tabou Combo is going to begin using “the latest technology for recording, so definitely the sound is going to improve, and the music will sound better also. Once we do it, all the other bands will follow.”

Despite these protestations, several records have come out that sound suspiciously just like zouk. One of the first on the scene was Le Zouk by Kapi and Gary Resil, although Kapi maintains that it was not his project, he was just helping out. Nestor Azerot’s sp. Zouk Celebration, was released in 1986. Claude Marcelin’s Lakol and Anderson Cameau’s Kalalou were recorded in Paris, where most of the zouk sound was forged. Mini Alistars, producer Fred Paul’s studio band, made Raraman, a record that has many parallels with zouk, but draws on the “rara” rhythms of Haitian carnival as well.

By the end of 1987, System Band had put out an LP with one pseudo-zouk track on it, “Sa Pi Red.” Its experimental nature is apparent: All the pieces are there, but nothing hangs together. Skah Shah, his new album, Van Libbé, stayed closer to compas than their comments during our interview led us to expect. The long-awaited Tabou Combo record came out early in 1988, and as promised, has a nice, clean high-tech sound. It also has many, many similarities to zouk: keyboards, tight horn arrangements, melodic bassline, dominating kick drum, female background vocals and simplified string structures, with the conga and cowbell (staples in compas) mixed way down.

And so, another cycle in the history of Haitian music is complete: compas direct to mini-jazz, mini-jazz to compas, compas to — not zouk, but high-tech music that reaches back to the founding rhythms of Haitian folklore, the heartbeat of the Haitian people. It seems that in Haiti, history is not linear, but circular.

But what of the future? Can we expect another major change in 1995? Kapi of Tabou Combo: “There is a new generation of musicians. They don’t play compas, by the way. They go back to the roots — ibo, petro, congo, the authentic rhythms, but nicely done, with electronics, synthesizer, nice guitar licks. There are groups called Kata, Cajou, a lot of young musicians... Compas is going to fade, believe me, sooner or later. By the year 2000, there will be no more Haitian bands playing compas. Thirteen years from today. You heard of Mouf Fous band? Check them out. They’re going to be the next Haitian stars, if they stick together. They’re here in New York. They just happen to be Haitian, but they’re not playing Haitian music.” Do you think they may push you out, just like you did to Sicot and Nemours? we asked. Do you see history repeating itself? “Oh yes, oh yes....

(NEXT PART THREE: THE HAITI-ANTILLES CONNECTION
—From cadence to zouk and back again)

The authors would like to thank all those who helped us in our research and made this article possible: Ronald Smith (System Band), Ti-Fre and Zouzou (Skah Shah), Loubert Chancy, Anderson Cameau, Formula One Band, Kasner Guercy, Attius Paul, Jean and Yannick Lazare, Edouard and Annette Lamothe, Anne-Marie Bonhomme, Marc Duverger, Bossa Combo, Tabou Combo, Yvon Louisant, Gerard Daniel, Joseph Bugaud Etienne, Miriam Firmin, Couple Clouse—merci mille fois!

REGGAE & AFRICAN BEAT VOL. 7 #2 1988