

ZOUK:

Magic Music of the French Antilles

**Qu'est-ce que c'est?
C'EST LE ZOUK!**

In North America, as we all know, reggae rules. But we northerners are missing out on one of the hottest musical scenes of the '80s — ZOUK. It's a dynamic melange of African rhythms and international dance music that's sweeping from the French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique to Europe and French-speaking Africa, filling discotheques with happy throngs of dancers and selling albums like hotcakes.

Spearheaded by multitalented powerhouse Kassav', zouk is hot and happening now! *The Beat's* intrepid reporters traveled to Martinique and Guadeloupe recently to explore this vibrant new sound.

By Gene Scaramuzzo

Photos by CC Smith

Immediately on arrival in Guadeloupe, it's obvious that something is happening. Zouk is in the air, everywhere — in the airport, the taxis, the minibuses, supermarkets, on the streets, everywhere. Here is an island that moves, works and plays to its own rhythm. Zouk can be heard non-stop on nearly every one of the 40 Guadeloupian radio stations, and in the numerous "boites" or discotheques every night.

Zouk is hot stuff, a blending of Haitian compas and cadence rhythms with traditional elements of the Antilles like the ti bois and gwo ka rhythms. Song lyrics are always sung in Creole, a language common to the French Caribbean islands, dating back to slavery days. Most zouk features kicking horn sections, quick tempos, plenty of percussion, synthesizers and state-of-the-art recording technology.

The music scene is thriving in Guadeloupe. The largest supermarket chain, Mammouth, is a real zoukermarché, with its own disc jockey to help the customers zouker (pronounced zoo-kay) while they shop. Like in Jamaica, the best minibuses and taxis are those with a jamming cassette deck or radio. The FM dial in Pointe-à-Pitre can clearly tune in 15 stations, while islandwide Guadeloupe can boast over 40 radio stations.

Radio broadcasts mainly feature the latest from the Antilles, Haiti, Africa and a bit from Trinidad/Tobago. Surprisingly, and maybe fortunately, practically no American music can be heard in Guadeloupe. In fact, Guadeloupians interested in listening to American music would be hard-pressed to find any on the radio or in the stores. Reggae music has made very little impact either, with many people saying that it's too slow.

Martinique, on the other hand, has fewer radio stations (around 30), but a wider diversity of sounds, with the Caribbean programming placing more of an emphasis on salsa than Guadeloupe. It's much easier to hear reggae in Martinique, but again it has made little impact on the bands. The various styles of Antillean music show few traces of the reggae beat, and Martinique has only one recorded reggae band, Akay-ouman.

An interview with calypsonian Arrow from Montserrat raised my interest a few years back when he claimed that his internationally successful brand of soca music was a blend of styles which leaned heavily on the cadence and compas rhythms of Haiti and the French Antilles. Cadence and compas were just words to most of us in America who had access to little more than a few folk music recordings from these islands.

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That is, until Globestyle Records put out *Dance! Cadence!*, an anthology disc which introduced the rhythms and names of Antillean artists like Georges Decimus, Michel Godzorn, Guad'M, Georges Plonquette and Batako. This taste was soon supplemented by the distribution efforts of Sono-Disc of Paris, which made the recordings of the number-one zouk band, Kassav', more easily available in America.

This taste has turned out to be the tip of a musical iceberg, only hinting at an incredibly exciting dance music scene which has begun to storm and seriously affect the music of Francophone Africa and the Caribbean. The immense popularity of Kassav's "Zouk-La-Sé Sel Médikaman Nou Ni" has resulted in record sales so high (over 100,000 copies) that the group recently received a Disque D'Or (gold record), an unprecedented feat for an Antillean group. This accomplishment is even more amazing considering the severe record-pirating problem, especially in West Africa.

While Kassav' is undoubtedly the biggest success story, following hot on their heels are a number of excellent zouk artists. Singers like Sartana, Pler Rosier, Zouk Machine, Edith Lefel, Simon Jurad and Thimothé Herelle are very popular right now, as well as zouk bands like Experience 7, Gazoline, Batako and Lazair.

Discotheques abound on both islands where one can hear hot cuts from mainly the Caribbean and Africa. The dance floors are usually packed, and the dancing style gives new meaning to the term "windin' and grindin'." Another dimension of the discos is "playback," featuring popular recording stars who do Dick Clark one better by actually singing over their hit records.

The most popular of the playback stars seems to be Sartana, who can be found performing at discotheques throughout the islands. For added flash, he often has two dancers accompanying him. There's more to his popularity than just high visibility and three record albums. While it's easy to lump many of the zouk artists into one category, Sartana tends to break away from the pack. His lyrics are often philosophical, carrying messages of love and life. And his romantic songs are also on target, apparently. More than one person told me that in order to set the right mood for love, one needs a bottle of champagne and a Sartana album. The musical accompaniment on his recordings is also unusual in its rootsiness.

Antillean music in the 1980s is more of a recorded scene than a live one. Playback is as live as performances usually get. While groups like Kassav', Gazoline and Batako live in Paris, the few complete bands that remain on the islands do not have many opportunities to perform live and must be content with straight daytime jobs and, if they can get them, cheesy tourist-hotel gigs.

Checking out the hotel bands is definitely recommended if for no other reason than to



Posters for Kassav' and FESTAG covered every available wall in Pointe-à-Pitre.

get a better idea of the diversity of musical styles. The music has such a rich background, stemming from Africa, the Caribbean and Europe, that accomplished musicians can perform traditional and updated versions of beguines, mazurkas, creole waltzes, boleros, tangos and calypsos. While most of the hotel music is watered down for dining tourists, the bands are likely to get a bit more inspired as the evening wears on if the audience begins to respond.

One such hotel band, performing nightly at the Hotel Meridien in St. Francois, Guadeloupe, is a condensed version of a very hot 16-piece zouk band named Experience 7. The full band, led by Guy Houllier and Yves Honore, have numerous records under their belt from their past 10 years together. They describe their band's sound as having a basis in the St. Jean rhythm, a Guadeloupean carnival rhythm that is also the basis of Kassav's music, mixed with American musical sounds. More to their pleasure than the hotel gig, Experience 7 is a mainstay of the recording scene at the studio of Guadeloupean impresario Henri Debs, located in Pointe-à-Pitre, appearing most recently on a new album for the three female singers of Experience 7 who, for this record, call themselves Zouk Machine.

Debs' 24-track studio in Pointe-à-Pitre is the larger and more sophisticated of the two Guadeloupean recording studios. It's a satisfactory alternative to traveling to Paris, the only other economically feasible option. Debs produces everything coming out of his studio, overseeing the entire process from recording to mixdown. Owing to the success of zouk, there are rarely other types of music now coming out of his studio. One exception to this is Debs' own group, Max & Henri, who produce mixed-bag recordings of beguines, mazurkas,

cadence and other standards.

A musician, record producer and distributor, Debs is an important figure in the Antillean music scene. He exercises quite a bit of control over the careers of his artists, among them Les Aiglons, Experience 7 and Zouk Machine, Chiklay, Evasion and Ti Celeste. Some musicians feel that Debs could do more toward promotion beyond the Antilles, but all agreed that his musicianship helps artists produce professional-sounding hit records.

Eh bien, c'est le zouk... a blending of Antillean/Haitian elements with state-of-the-art recording technology. The term zouk, by the way, is a Creole word that has been around a long time and used to be slang for the noun "party." The word came into more frequent use when the "grand bals" (featuring live music) died out and were replaced by dance parties called zouks, featuring a sound system and records. In the '80s, with the rise in popularity of Kassav', going to a zouk meant listening and dancing to Kassav'. Because of this, at some point, their music took on the label zouk, and a new infinitive, zouker (to zouk), came into being.

...

Kassav' threw the zoukball, and now everyone is running with it. But the music scene in the Antilles was not always so dynamic.

According to band member Jacob Desvarieux, before the success of Kassav' which hit in 1983 with the cut "Banzawa," Antillean music was not a source of national pride. With the fading popularity of the beguine and mazurka in the late '50s, the music scene became dominated by a succession of extremely popular Haitian dance styles, the cadence rampa (circa 1958), followed by the compas direct (circa 1966) and finally, around 1974, the cadence-lypso.

Except for a very few groups, most notably Gordon Henderson's Exile One and later, the Vikings de la Guadeloupe, Antillean groups were considered poor copies of Haitian groups and received little support. Haitian records were played on the radio and sold in all the record shops. Touring Haitian groups could be heard live. Contributing to this lack of success, the fledgling Antillean recording industry produced vastly inferior discs. Despite this Haitian dominance, some contributions were made to keeping Antillean music alive as the Haitian bands would often engage local musicians to open for them and play the beguine or mazurka.

The stars of the rise of Antillean music, according to practically everyone I spoke with, were the Vikings de la Guadeloupe. The band, formed in approximately 1974, featured singer Gordon Henderson, popularizer of the cadence-lypso style in the early 70s with his group, Exile One. The Vikings were led by three musicians who play prominent roles today: Guy Jacquet, Camille

"Soprann" Hildevert and Pierre-Edouard Decimus. The Vikings recorded nearly 20 albums during their career and were the only band to reach a high level of popularity and to last more than a year or two, the average life span of the majority of popular (and mostly unrecorded) Antillean groups. The Vikings made use of cadence and compas rhythms, incorporated more horns into the music than had been previously used, and even experimented with jazz.

The formation of Kassav' came around 1978 in Paris when Pierre-Edouard Decimus decided to put together a band combining traditional Antillean elements with contemporary sounds and state-of-the-art recording technology. Music enthusiast/radio programmer Freddy Marshall of Guadeloupe played a role in the decision to combine traditional and contemporary ele-

ments, producing the first two Kassav' lps.

For Kassav', Decimus enlisted the musical services of his brother Georges, an 11-piece tambour (gwo ka) unit, and guitarist Jacob Desvarieux, a strictly Guadeloupian lineup. The first two albums are a blending of sounds with an overall funk feel, quite unlike the sound for which they're known today. The premiere disc was called *Love and Ka Dance*, a play on words that heralded the arrival of gwo ka as a contemporary form.

During this initial phase of Kassav's career, they were exclusively a studio band. Live performances didn't begin until 1982, with the first concert in Guadeloupe. Beginning in 1984, the band began adding members, becoming the lineup that exists today. Added to the already killer roll-call were keyboardist Jean-Claude Naimro,

drummer Claude Vamur, and singers Jocelyne Bérourard, Patrick Saint-Eloi and Jean-Philippe Marthey. Pierre-Edouard Decimus has quit performing for now, dedicating himself solely to management of the group.

Kassav' in 1986 is an incredibly exciting performing band with three lead singers, a tight band with a five-piece horn section, and two dancers who, through the course of the average 2-1/2 hour Kassav' concert, go through many exotic costume changes. Their performance style is very African, alternating between dance routines and relaxed, intimate moments. The often-used term "the family of Kassav'" is quite accurate, with the band members smiling, joking and talking with one another onstage, letting the audience share in an overall feeling of camaraderie. The performance

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These two lush volcanic islands are located in the South Caribbean, just north of Trinidad and the South American coast. Their history parallels that of many other Caribbean islands: discovery by Christopher Columbus, colonial occupation by a succession of powers, slavery, plantations, bloody wars for possession. Since 1946, they have been full departments of France, the people full-fledged French citizens.

Each summer, the islands host many tourists from the French mainland, especially "le Metropole," as Paris is called. Americans seem to be a rarity, and French and Creole are spoken almost exclusively. Prices tend to be as high or higher than those in large U.S. cities for food, hotels, entertainment, records and so on.

IF YOU GO: A fairly good command of the French language is highly recommended, although most hotel personnel speak some English. Renting a car will enable you to take advantage of many of the local musical events, discotheques, restaurants and sightseeing. Bring a radio, one with a recording cassette deck if possible; you'll want to tape some of the terrific broadcasts of zouk and African music that jam 24 hours a day. Watch out for sunburn and mosquito bites, both available in abundance. Eastern Airlines has connections from all major U.S. cities to Miami, the gateway to the Caribbean. There are just three flights per week to each Martinique and Guadeloupe, so early reservations are essential.

Check with the French West Indies Tourist Board (610 5th Ave., New York, NY 10020, (212) 757-1125) before planning your trip to find out when major festivals and concerts will occur. Best times to go, musically: July-August, Christmas, and Carnival time (February-March).

—CC Smith

GUADELOUPE AND MARTINIQUE:

Two Pearls in the Caribbean Island Necklace



Mayoumba folkloric group from Anguilla, one of the many Caribbean islands represented at FESTAG this summer.



Right: Jocelyne Bérourard, sweetheart of the Antilles, adds her charms to Kassav's already considerable appeal.

Left: The mighty Kassav' on stage at Pointe-à-Pitre's Hall des Sports in July. Left to right: Jacob Desvarieux, Patrick Saint-Eloi, Jocelyne Bérourard, Jean-Philippe Marthely, Georges Decimus.

ZOUK

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moves from relaxed moments to climaxes of pure frenzy, with Marthely and Saint-Eloi exhorting the crowd to join in the choreographed movements. At moments when it doesn't seem possible to go higher, out come the dancers to shake it up and bring down the house.

"Zouk-La-Sè Sel Medikaman Nou Ni" translated from Creole means "Zouk is the only medicine we have." This smash hit by Kassav', while not intended by the group to have political or social significance, has in fact stimulated social debate in Guadeloupe and Martinique. It may not be Kassav' itself but the *phenomenon* of the band's rise to popularity which has served as one more small step in the strengthening of an Antillean identity separate from France (or more accurately, in the legitimizing of that already-growing identity).

The undercurrent of desire for separatism is tempered, even among the more African-oriented people of the islands, by the reality of the French social security system. It provides a higher standard of living than in most independent Caribbean nations, complete with municipal child care for working parents, medical treatment, welfare and a comparatively low rate of unemployment. People who appear to be down and out are almost absent from the city scenes of Pointe-à-Pitre and Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique.

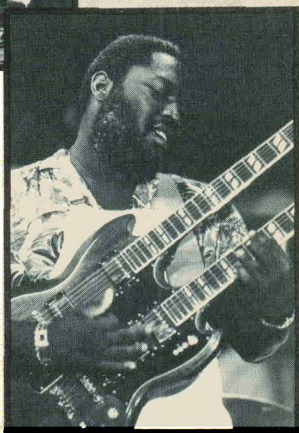
This is not to say that poverty doesn't exist in the French Antilles, and without doubt Guadeloupe suffers more than Martinique. The relationship of Guadeloupe to France has always been one of the neglected stepchild. The Martinique capitals of St. Pierre and then Fort-de-France (after St. Pierre's destruction by the eruption of

Mount Pelée in 1902) were each the favored recipient of France's attention and nurtured to become France's shining Caribbean outpost.

This had led to glaring differences in the cultures of the two islands along with, unfortunately, a degree of animosity between Guadeloupians and Martiniquais. Most people of Guadeloupe, culturally much closer to their African roots, are striving to exert their own identity. Many Guadeloupians feel a need for a change in their society but don't see a move closer to European culture as the solution — independence is the answer. Some Martiniquais on the other hand, more immersed in European culture, a bit bourgeois in their attitude and benefiting more than the Guadeloupians from the French connection, see a return to African roots as a regression. Such a move would no doubt result in the loss of many privileges which they now enjoy. Martiniquais seem to have more to lose.

The strong and growing separatist desire notwithstanding, Guadeloupe's general ambience is positive. The people on the streets are approachable and in fact very curious toward those who show an interest in their music, language and culture. Even in Pointe-à-Pitre, Creole not French, is the language most spoken and can be found written on billboards, storefronts and advertising.

African garb can be seen everywhere in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre and the Guadeloupean countryside. The outfits are handmade from beautiful African prints, which, strangely enough, come from Holland. Madras, the famous cloth prints of the French Antilles, seems to have been relegated primarily to the tourist trade, although it's still used for headwraps by many older women.



Jacob Desvarieux: studio wizard, zouk originator and guitarist extraordinaire.

What effect does all of this have on the music? In Guadeloupe, gwo ka drums and dance rhythms, the most African of all things Antillean, have never lost their importance or significance as an African vestige. Although gwo ka has been incorporated into the tourist trade, it remains a part of the everyday life of Guadeloupians. It is played on the radio even in its rawest form of drumming and chanting, and gwo ka discs can be found in all the record stores. At a two-week-long fair in the town of Abymes this summer, one of the performance stages was set aside exclusively for gwo ka, featuring players and audiences of all ages.

Gwo ka can also be found as the basis of some of the most popular Antillean music, especially that of the hot Guadeloupean singer Sartana, as well as Gazoline, the zouk band which backs up Martiniquan



singer Pier Rosier. The first two discs by Kassav' (at the time a totally Guadeloupian group) incorporated gwo ka into the music, even dedicating one of the tracks to the uncontested master and one-time sole practitioner of gwo ka, the late Vèlo.

Gwo ka in Guadeloupe, like African dance rhythms in nearly every part of the Western Hemisphere where slaves were carried, was frowned on by the colonizers and became associated with the poor, the uncouth and the hooligan element. This attitude still seems to prevail with some white (békés) and Creole Martiniquans, mainly those in Fort-de-France. I'm not convinced that the Creoles in Guadeloupe ever bought the idea that their culture was inferior to European culture; the African identity seems much too strong to be the result of a recent revival or awakening.

Opposition to this strong cultural identity can be witnessed in the French news coverage of zouk. Except for an occasional piece, zouk is largely ignored. The musicians questioned seem to generally agree that this refusal to legitimize an Antillean identity separate from France is behind the media's downplaying of zouk.

Groups like Kassav', Pier Rosier & GAZOLINE and zouk bands in general are at a disadvantage from the outset since they sing in Creole. The words can be (and often are) inane, but the point of Antillean identity is made. As one well-known zouk musician notes: "They don't help us at all. They don't need us. We're not representative of French people. We don't talk in French, they can't control what we say, they can't understand us."

The French media prefers to put its support behind Antillean groups like La Compagnie Creole who emphasize their French identity, often singing in French about things French. This is not a putdown of La Cie. Creole, just an observation of the advantage of displaying a persona of "exotic, touristic . . . but French."

This is part one of a continuing series of articles on the music of the French Antilles. We have much more information than space will permit! The Beat wishes to thank everyone who contributed to this article for their assistance, inspiration, time and patience, especially: Oliver Baudot (Martinique Tourist Office), Maryse Pochot (Guadeloupe Tourist Office), Fred Pain, Jean-Philippe Ludon, Freddy Marshall, Jacky Alpha, Batako, Sartana, Jocelyne Berouard, Jean-Claude Naimro, Jacob Desvarieux, DeDe Saint-Prix, Myron Clement, Eastern Airlines, Yves Honore, Guy Houllier, Henri Debs, Paul Rassin, Guy Vadeleux and Fox Bravo. Nous vous tous remercions beaucoup!

BUYING ANTILLEAN DISCS



In Guadeloupe, Antillean record producer Henri Debs caters to the record-buying public by pressing only enough discs to satisfy the market for a period of three months to one year, maximum. Master tapes are stored in Paris, and Debs himself has a private collection of his entire catalog, but to the public, only the latest releases are available.

From surveying the selection available in record stores in Guadeloupe and Martinique, it's safe to assume that the other producers of Antillean music, Georges Debs, Celini, and 3A Productions, follow the same policy. Consequently, except for Kassav' discs or an occasional stray, collectors don't stand much of a chance of finding unused old records in the Antilles. (The only known source of a few, select older Antillean albums is through the Original Music mail-order catalog: R.D. 1, Box 190, Lasher Road, Tivoli, NY 12583, U.S.A.) Those interested in buying the latest releases should know that the minimum one will pay for a disc in Guadeloupe or Martinique is 70F (approximately \$10 U.S.).

Prices and selection are better in Paris, most notably in the large book and record stores called FNAC. The best prices and best bet for mail ordering the latest discs are through Disc'Inter of Paris, 2 Rue des Rasse-lins, 75020 Paris, France.

RETAIL SALES: In Guadeloupe: Debs Records, 116 rue Frebault, Pointe-à-Pitre, Tel. 82.07.06. In Martinique: G.D. Productions, 43 rue Isambert, Fort-de-France, Tel. 71.57.42.

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Guy Houllier (left) and Yves Honore, leaders of top Guadeloupian studio band Experience 7, outside Henri Debs' studio, in Pointe-à-Pitre.

LIVE MUSIC IN THE ANTILLES



Those interested in checking out the live music scene in the Antilles would do well to travel there in July or August, the traditional French vacation time. Much more is happening then in the way of concerts, fairs and festivals. In fact, this summer saw the debut of what hopefully will be an annual event in Guadeloupe — FESTAG.

Billed as the "Festival Culturel de la Caraïbe," it featured music almost every evening for two weeks, ranging from roots to contemporary music from around the Caribbean, with even a bit from Africa. On the contemporary side were performances by Kassav', Miriam Makeba, Arrow, Skah Shah (Haiti), Irakere (Cuba), Malavoi (Martinique) and Xalam (Senegal). These were all great, of course, but some of the best finds were the internationally unknown musicians such as Flamme Abymienne, ka drummers from around the Carib-

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bean, and the many folkloric troupes from the islands of Anguilla, Barbados, Trinidad and the Virgin Islands.

Another debut of what is hoped will be an annual concert, this time in Martinique, took place Aug. 14 in Sainte-Anne. "Tropic Concert," presented by the daily newspaper *France-Antilles*, featured Steel Pulse, plus two superstar acts of the Antilles, jazz-oriented Fal Frett and zouk crew Gazoline. We'll keep readers posted as to next year's concerts and festivals as the information becomes available.

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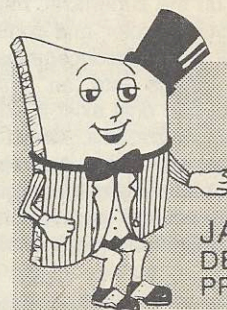
Hottest Music of the Summer of 1986

Lazair
Pier' Rosier et Gazoline
Desvarieux & Decimus ((Kassav'))
Pier' Rosier et Gazoline
Sartana et Mistral
Marthely & St. Eloi (Kassav')
Simon Jurad
Les Aiglons
Experience 7
Desvarieux & Decimus (Kassav')

"Yche Manman"
"Makina"
"Soulage Yo"
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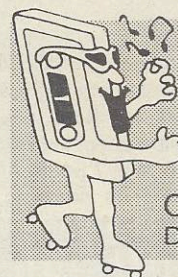
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