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THE OTHER CARIBBEAN

C'est le Fun

BY BRIAN DRING

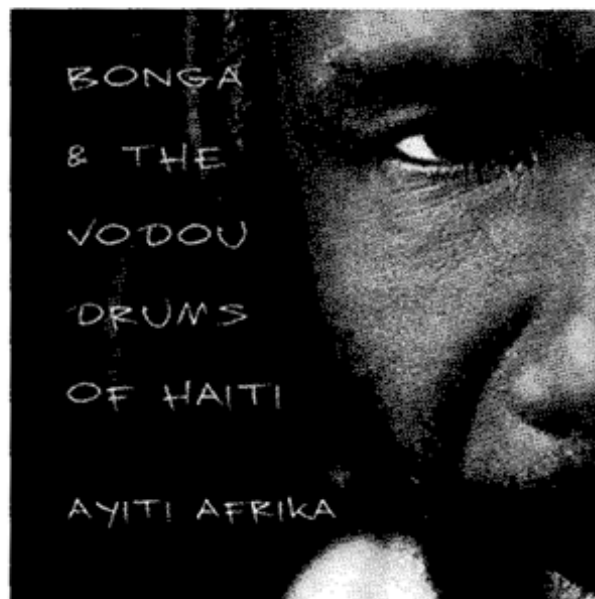
It all started in 1985 with the opening of Club Balattou on St. Laurent Blvd., when founder Lamine Toure had the idea of bringing Africa to Montrealers who might not be able to afford the plane ride. Some 20 years later Toure says of the variety of musical talent that graces the stage that every night he discovers some new culture, costume, musical instrument or tradition that he didn't know about. Today the Balattou (*bal* = dance, *tout* = all cultures) attracts some of the best up-and-coming acts from Africa, the Caribbean and Brazil just like the Festival Nuits d'Afrique that grew out of it. "It was meant to encourage cultural exchange," he continues, "here is a place where for example Haitians can discover the roots of their culture in a Congolese rhythm or hear the origins of *compas* while dancing to the rumba."

No doubt Montreal's unique cultural ambience facilitates access to some of the best world music from the French-speaking world and the festival has grown to include several additional venues. This year's headliner was Senegal's Youssou N'Dour out of a roster that included Cape Verde's Sara Tavares, Guinea's Alpha Yaya Diallo, Belize's Aurelio Martinez, RD Congo's Kekele, Morocco's Said Mesnaoui and Cuba's Sierra Maestra. Local phenomenon Dibondoko opened for Youssou and captured the crowd's mood with their rousing chant "don't try to tell me what to do...I ain't working no nine to five." Later that night I stared in wonder at Said Mesnaoui's funky three-string bass as he threw a *Gnawa* trance on the crowd. Most of these artists are featured on the annual commemorative cd *Festival Nuits d'Afrique Compilation 2006* (Nuits d'Afrique Productions) which this year includes a second disc featuring some of Montreal's resident world-class artists like South African Lorraine Klaasen and Brazilian Paulo Ramos. C'est le fun. [www.festivalnuitsdafrique.com]

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For his latest cd *Bonga and the Vodou Drums of Haiti: Ayiti Afrika* (Bongamusic) the artist Gaston "Bonga" Jean-Baptiste takes yet another step forward in the exploration of the roots of Haitian music. Having played with just about every known *rasin* band from the renowned Boukman Eksperyans to the lesser-known but seminal Foula and several mainstream artists along the way, this percussionist has a lot of rhythms percolating underneath those dreads and the thoughtfully calm eyes.

This one seems to flow better than his first solo



album which tried less successfully to impose angular guitar chords and bass onto the essentially folk rhythms and chants which, for this outing, are left unfettered by such. Instead, occasional jazzy touches of flute, muted trumpet and sax are totally in the flow of things. Adding further touches of an amazing five-string cello (that can whine like an electric guitar or throb like an upright bass) and an authentic *balafon* player results in a dreamy soundscape that meanders straight back to the Motherland.

"Free Yourself" takes us on just one of those meanderings as it briefly traces a path from Haiti to Morocco with a little *Gnawa* trance and then back. Similarly "Peace" opens with a droning *didjeridu* before taking us out with a Middle Eastern odyssey thanks to an arching minor mode sax solo. "We Are Blessed" is a pure delight of pan-Caribbean calypso flute. Bonga is certainly no slouch and besides holding down a battery of various drums and percussion also holds his own on lead vocals with some background support from, among others, his son Tiga, Jephthe Guillaume and a couple of female vocalists. It is the superior and uncluttered arrangements and able sidemen who bring out the best in this artist and help him step up to a new level, where he deserves to be.

Check out his Web site at www.bonga.com and you will find that in addition to making commercially available spirit-activated healing herbal bundles called *pakot kongo* and building and repairing drums, he also conducts drum workshops in the NYC area.

Q&A with Gaston "Bonga" Jean-Baptiste

Brian Dring: The new album seems to go back even further to African roots than did your first solo album. Was this due to new arrangements and is it partly due to different musicians? For example

I noticed the absence of the guitar which was very prominent in your first album.

Gaston "Bonga" Jean-Baptiste: *Ayiti Afrika* explores my musical connection to Afrika in terms of my own heritage (Dahomey), my travels and of course the influence of stellar musicians who are skilled in African music. That connection has grown even stronger since the first cd *Kanzo* on which Jon Glazer played the guitar and co-produced. The new arrangements really brought forth of how these traditional Haitian songs are truly rooted in Africa and musicians on the album have a real grasp of how to work with Afro-Haitian music.

Our ancestors came to Haiti from different parts of Africa and brought their rhythms with them so I have been blessed with a wide repertoire of African rhythms from—Ibo, Kongo, Dahomey and more. We honor the spirit of our ancestors by continuing to play these rhythms.

I did the arrangements and got a lot of help from cellist Rufus Cappadocia and Peck Allmond [www.peckallmond.com]. Peck plays brass, reeds, kalimba, woodwinds and he has taken the time to learn vodou tempo and melody from me. Peck has really helped take the phrasing to a new level.

Q: I was very impressed in particular with the five-string cello and the balafon players. They seem to add new dimensions to your music. Did you meet these musicians in NYC and are they part of your regular band?

A: The five-string electric cello was played by Rufus Cappadocia [www.rufusmusic.com] who is known as the leading voice of the modern cello and has played with Kasse Mady, Abdoulaye Dioubate and Odetta. I met Rufus in New York but we got to know one another musically on the road, touring all over the world when we formed the rhythm section of Urban Tap [<http://urbantap.net>]. In New York, Rufus introduced me to master balafonist Famoro Dioubate [www.fulaflute.net/fula_flute/artists/famoro.html] who is in the lineage of griots and masters in the Mandeng (Manden; Mandingo) tradition. I was very impressed with Rufus and Famoro's ability to grasp the Haitian rhythms both in terms of speed and adding their own music in at the right time. I met all the musicians in New York except my son Tiga who has been raised in Haiti playing vodou drums and who is self-taught on the *didjeridu* which I brought to him from Australia. Tiga is heavily into the Shona *mbira* and has studied with Stella Chiweshe and Kevin Hylton. His excellence on this African thumb piano is a perfect compliment to vodou rhythm.