

The Spirits

COME TO Brooklyn

FRISNER AUGUSTIN
BEATS A RADA DRUM
IN A BROOKLYN
TEMPLE WHILE
GESNER DÉSIR
KEEPS TIME WITH
THE BELL.

STORY BY
**LOIS
WILCKEN**

PHOTOS BY
**CHANTAL
REGNAULT**

In the three years that I've been writing this column, I've focused almost exclusively (except for the recent articles on rara) on Haitian commercial dance music. To the Haitian middle class that is the source of (and patronage for) most dance bands, vodou is a part of the old order, a superstitious practice of the peasantry that stands in the way of development and progress. They are tired of being stigmatized with the voodoo label by non-Haitians and put as much social distance between themselves and vodou as possible.

I've touched on the music of vodou in this column chiefly as background to certain roots-oriented popular musics, but I've studied with vodou drummers in Haiti and New York to help my understanding of the folkloric popular musics of the 1950s and the 1980-90s. I've also attended ceremonies in the countryside in Haiti as well as in New York for a better window into this aspect of Haitian culture. In order to open up the subject in "Haitian Fascination," I asked Lois Wilcken, a North American vodouizan, researcher and former manager of La Troupe Makandal, to write of her experiences in vodou in New York City, where some Haitian immigrants carry on the tradition. As I write this, Lois is in Haiti for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Bwa Kayman (the vodou ceremony presided over by the slave leader Boukman) that launched the Haitian slave revolution. The debate over vodou in Haiti is illustrated by nothing better than the recent storm over whether to officially recognize Bwa Kayman as an annual holiday. The Christian churches and many of the middle and upper class see this as state recognition of vodou, a subject of concern to many who associate vodou with the notorious Duvalier dictatorships of the past.

—Gage Averill

HAITIAN FASCINATION

It's 5:30 Sunday morning, Aug. 4, 1991. Most of Brooklyn is in bed logging in a few more hours of sleep before the weekly rituals of Christian faith begin. The sky is just starting to pale as my friends and I disturb the quiet of the streets, just having emerged from a ritual of another sort. We've been calling down the spirits of vodou.

Mainstream America calls it "voodoo," a word steeped in images of cannibals, zombies and black magic. But to some thousands of Haitian immigrants living in New York, vodou (derived from a West African term for "spirit") is a way of interpreting and dealing with the universe and its forces that has little to do with Hollywood fantasies. Like Christianity, it is monotheistic and features a pantheon of spirits that resemble the Catholic saints. Unlike Christianity, these spirits, which Haitians call *lwa-s* (after a Bantu word for "spirit"), possess their servants—a servant releases his or her ego and takes on that of the *lwa*. A certain interplay of energies is necessary to pull this off. Music is a key energy in vodou.

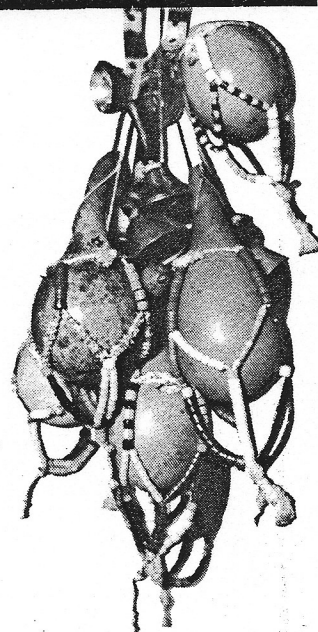
Tonight's ceremony, held in a makeshift tent in a priestess' backyard in Flatbush, is the culmination of a young woman's initiation into the esoteric knowledge that vodou ser-

vants call *konesans*. She's been in seclusion for four days, and tonight is her "coming-out" party. The priest and priestess who presided over the initiation must present her to the *lwa-s*, and they do this through the medium of song. Custom calls for the hiring of an accompanying four-person percussion battery headed by a master drummer. But vodou drumming is more than accompaniment because the patterns themselves are symbolic of particular spirits. The ensemble is also the force that drives servants to dance themselves into possession.

Frisner Augustin, whom many regard as the best Haitian drummer in New York (he also directs the folkloric La Troupe Makandal, reviewed in this column in Vol. 8 #6, 1989), shows up at about 10 o'clock with his drummers—Jean Alphonse, Steve Deats and Paul Uhry Newman. Deats and Newman are white North Americans who have been playing with Augustin since 1984, and their talents are acknowledged in the vodou circuit. Like Augustin, Alphonse is a native of Port-au-Prince. In addition to these regulars, Augustin has invited several of his students, including three women, to watch and train. I'm there as an ethnomusicologist but I like to pinch-hit from time to time for the bell player.

The first thing that strikes you about the

A CLUSTER
OF SACRED
RATTLES
SUSPENDED
FROM THE
CEILING OF
A VODOU
TEMPLE.



instruments tonight is that the three drums used at the opening of the ceremony are congas. Congas are not traditional in vodou, but then, this is New York. Drummers make an effort to get "the real thing" but often have to compromise, and vodou is flexible enough to accommodate the difference in sonority. A fourth drum lies on its side, waiting to be used later (I'll explain why further on), and this one is traditional. It consists of a goatskin head laced to one end of a hollowed-out log, the laces running the length of the instrument. Augustin made the drum in New York using a goatskin from a source I probably shouldn't mention. The remaining instrument is a cow bell, whose traditional equivalent is a hoe blade. I've also seen auto parts used in Port-au-Prince.

Keeping time with a bead-covered rattle, the priest opens the ceremony with a song (in Haitian Creole) for Legba, the spirit who sits at crossroads and gateways, metaphors for that invisible barrier that separates the living and the dead. vodou spirits arise from a cosmic sea beneath whose surface the dead reside. To open the way for them, servants propitiate Legba.

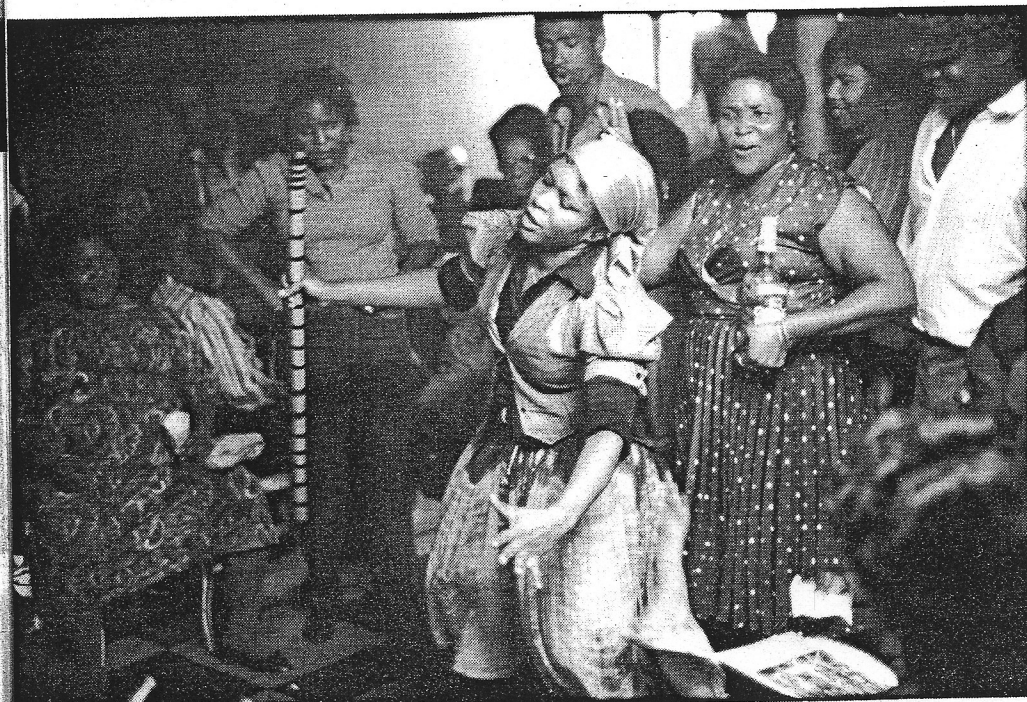
*Ouvri barie pou Atibon Papa Legba
Kite pep pase, e, vye zo.*

*Open the gate for Atibon Papa Legba
Let the people pass, oh, old bones.*

Tonight, a few people sitting along one side of the tent repeat the priest's phrases in the call-and-response style familiar to anyone who grooves on African and African-derived musics.

The priest takes the song to its end, but after signaling the drummers to stop, he makes a little speech that I've heard countless times in New York. "My friends, we're all Haitians.

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IN BROOKLYN, A WOMAN POSSESSED BY A VODOU SPIRIT DANCES FOR THE SERVANTS AND THEY SING FOR THE SPIRIT.

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We know the songs. Please, a little stronger." Cross-challenges continue through the early part of the ceremony. "The drums are no good," claims the woman to my right. And, from a vexed Augustin, "Sing!" These exchanges have always impressed me as a characteristic of New York, where vodou congregations are not as tightly knit, and therefore not as practiced in singing together, as those in Haiti. In the diaspora, it might take a little more to get it off the ground.

If this is a problem, it's one that always takes care of itself, and I believe that the order in which spirits are called has something to do with it. Spirits belong to nations associated with the African groups that Haitians descend from—Ibos, Kongos, Mayis, Nagos and the like. In temperament, each of these nations occupies a position on a spectrum ranging from cool and benign to hot and aggressive. The cool spirits are called Rada, the rougher ones Petwo. Ritual order is clearly from Rada to Petwo, which is the same as saying that the ceremony begins in an orderly, formal fashion and ends on a communal, seditious, even

dissolute note. As the servants move through this panorama, they become *chofe* (warmed up). The energies of the drummers and the chorus feed off each other in an upward spiral.

Each of these different nations has its own beat, its own dance, its own song repertoire and, in some cases, its own drum set. Rada drums, whose single cowskin heads are attached by wooden pegs around the top of the drum, are used for the Rada and Nago nations. Petwo drums, like the goatskin instrument I described earlier, serve the Djouba, Ibo, Kongo, Petwo and Gède nations. There are special drums for Nago, Djouba and Kongo (but these haven't appeared in New York yet). Rhythmically, the most marked difference between Rada and Petwo is the presence or absence of a 3+3+2 pattern—totally absent in Rada, ubiquitous in Petwo. This pattern lacks a center, and the idea is completely compatible with the temperament of these fiery spirits. Conversely, Rada patterns have a 6/8 feel lacking in Petwo.

Back to tonight's ceremony. Somewhere during Rada rites, the initiate emerges from a

shed behind the tent, where she's spent the last few days. She is literally danced around the centerpost that holds up the tent (the centerpost is symbolic of the cosmic center, but I rarely see one in New York), then led back into the shed, where the priest gives her a Christian-style baptism, complete with French Catholic songs. Vodou servants regard their syncretic use of Christian elements not as a sign of cultural imperialism but rather as a recognition that all faiths share a common base.

Later on, everyone agrees that the best part of the evening was Nago rites. The Nago spirits are associated with power, and several servants, including the priest, were possessed by them tonight. The spirit possessing the priest swung a machete, subjected the initiate to a fire test (which she passed) and drank an amazing quantity of Haitian rum. Meanwhile, Augustin displayed Nago power with his drum mallet. The master drummer breaks the rhythm periodically with a pattern called a *kase* (pronounced kah-say, it means "break") that beats the spirit into a servant's head. Augustin's Nago kase-s spare nothing.

We left just before sunrise, happy and exhausted. The smile on the initiate's face as we packed the drums was an eloquent statement of the power of African traditions to thrive anywhere, a power to which the spirits contribute no small part. Thinking of this, I leave you with the words to a Nago song:

*Ogou o, se ou mèm ki mennen m isit
Pran ka m, pran ka m, nèg Nago.*

*Ogou, oh, you led me here
Take care of me, take care of me, you of Nago.*



AN INITIATE SEATED IN FRONT OF A VODOU ALTAR IN 1984.



VODOU DISCOGRAPHY

**DIVINE HORSEMEN:
THE VODOO GODS OF HAITI**
(LYRICHORD LLST 7341)

MUSIC OF HAITI, VOLS. 1-3
(ETHNIC FOLKWAYS FE4403/
4407/4432)

ROOTS OF HAITI, VOLS. 1-6
(MINI RECORDS MRS 1063-6/
1071/1073)
(YOU HAVE TO SHOP IN A HAITIAN
NEIGHBORHOOD FOR THIS SET.)