Drummer, Give Me My Sound:

Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Frisner Augustin[1]

BY LOIS WILCKEN

Ountògi, ba mwen son mwen e
Tanbouyè, ba mwen son mwen e
Ountò, ba mwen son mwen
Solèy leve[2]

Sacred drummer, give me my sound, oh
Drummer, give me my sound, ah
Drum spirit, give me my sound
The sun rises

On January 3, 1981, I found myself waiting for my first lesson in Haitian drumming in a narrow hall outside a room in a residential hotel on Broadway and West

Photo 1: Frisner poses with his Madi Gra band, Port-au-Prince, circa middle to late 1960s. This is the first extant photo of Frisner Augustin, who plays the large drum in the center. Photo: Joujou Foto.

Figure 1: Flyer for Makandal's first performance in New York City on Thanksgiving Day (November 26), 1981. Ti Manno, Tabou Combo, and Farah Juste were top performers of the day.

Haitian Vodou

Haitian Vodou serves a pantheon of spirits as diverse as the African peoples who brought them to Haiti. The spirits (*lwa*) group into nations (*nasyon*), and the nations fall into one of two major branches, Rada and Petwo. Historically, Rada came from West Africa, particularly the region around the Guinea Gulf; Petwo came from the Congo region. Rada and Petwo differ markedly in temperament and expressive style, and we see this in Vodou arts, ritual offerings, and the behaviors displayed in spirit possession. Vodouists may use the words Rada and Petwo to describe spirits, nations, rites, drums, and dances.

The spirits of love and feminine power illustrate the Rada/Petwo dichotomy. Èzili Freda Dawomen, a Rada spirit traceable to West Africa, stands for romantic love and luxury. Her color is pink, her element water. We might call Èzili Dantò, a Petwo *lwa*, the spirit of tough love. She fought alongside her children in the Haitian Revolution, bears scars on her face, and continues to wield a dagger. Her color is red, her element fire.

99th Street. I had met the drummer, only in passing a few weeks ago, backstage at a community festival in Brooklyn. On the night before my lesson, however, a new acquaintance had insisted I take drum classes with Frisner Augustin if I wanted to understand anything at all about Haitian traditional drumming. He arranged the class for me, and on this January afternoon, I braved the threat of a snowstorm and dragged my new (to me, but used) conga drum through the subway to meet with a musician I didn't actually know.

The memory of my first meeting with Frisner remains as fresh as the snow that fell later that day. First, he made me wait—well, probably not on purpose. In Haiti, as in most parts of the world, clock time does not rule in the same way that it does in our fevered modern world. As I stood with my drum in the cramped hallway, I exercised patience, a skill (or perhaps, an attitude) I had been learning from Haitian performers since taking up the study of their folk arts in September. I hadn't mastered it yet, because I sneaked an occasional glance at my watch and noted, on the last glance, that it was 45 minutes past rendezvous time. Was it time to give up? Just as the thought entered my mind, like a drum stroke teasing the listener with an ever so subtle delay, Frisner arrived.

He nodded a greeting, fumbled in his coat pocket for his keys, then opened the door to his modest room. It was a Dorothy in Oz moment for me, as I transitioned from the drab hallway into a space decked out in *imaj*, the word Haitians use for the color prints of Catholic saints that they have adopted to represent their spirits, or *lwa*. Color-coded jar candles illuminated the *imaj,* which graced tables and baseboards. I reminded myself

that I was still in New York and then savored the thrill that comes from having reached the successful end of a treasure hunt. And the lesson hadn't even begun.

And what did Frisner see that day? His new student had carried a chocolate brown conga drum in a black trash bag, probably because she didn't know where to acquire a canvas sack. The drum called for an examination in his "take your time" mode (as opposed to his "let's go!" mode) with a studied passing of eyes and hands over the single head of cow skin, the wood body, the metal hardware that holds the head to the body and tunes it, and finally, the interior. Not a remarkable drum, but it would do. He cleared a space, set two chairs opposite each other, and placed the student's drum and one of his own in front of the chairs. Noting that the student roughly matched his thirty-two years, with a complexion the color of Èzili Freda's (the sweet Venus of Haitian Vodou) and hair as long as that of Lasirenn (of Haitian mermaid myth), he invited her to sit, and the lesson began.

The first drumming style we worked on revealed something about Frisner's Port-au-Prince roots that I would come to know later. Most Haitians living in New York in 1981 had emigrated from Port-au-Prince; even those with origins elsewhere in Haiti had spent some time in the capital before leaving the country.[3] Most, then, who continued in New York to serve the *lwa*—a spiritual practice called "Vodou" after a West African term for "spirit"—served in the style of Port-au-Prince, where the *dans* (a nightlong, "danced" celebration of the *lwa*) opens with a music and dance style called *yanvalou*. *Yanvalou*, a word meaning "praise" in the language of the Fon people of Benin, invokes the Rada *lwa*, a spiritual nation brought to Haiti (and then to New York) from the region on the Gulf of Guinea, in particular, modern Benin and Togo. Because practitioners in Port-au-Prince consider the Rada nation cool, balanced, and formal, they place it at the top of the ritual order, reserving the more tempestuous *lwa* for later in the night. Thus, my own dance through the drums of Vodou began with *yanvalou*.

Figure 2: Flyer for Makandal's first performance outside the Haitian communities of New York. The staged Vodou ceremony took place at Soundscape in Manhattan on October 22, 1982.

I had not anticipated the tectonic shift this exercise was about to deliver. Although I had never played any kind of drum, I had studied music for some years and played other instruments. I easily identified the meter of *yanvalou* as a compound 6/8 or 12/8 full of two-against-three synchronies. For this student, rhythm, the element of music most commonly associated with drumming, did not emerge as the main challenge. Tone, on the other hand, did. I would come to learn that Frisner paid meticulous attention to tone. He demonstrated the sequence of *yanvalou* strokes and had me repeat them after him on my drum, sometimes verbalizing them with "Tone, squeeze, squeeze, bass, tone, tone." (That's right, "squeeze"—Frisner's charming way of naming a stopped tone.) My hands tensed as I struggled to carve out in real time new neural pathways to accommodate the unfamiliar sequence.

My struggle did not escape Frisner. He placed his hands over mine. "When you play the Vodou drum, relax, and let these people"—pointing to the *imaj* along the baseboards—"help you."

Each of us has at least one moment that radically alters the direction of his or her life.

Photo 2: Frisner is moved to tears as filmmaker Jonathan Demme presents City Lore's People's Hall of Fame Award, New York, November 19, 1998. Photo: Martha Cooper. Courtesy of City Lore.

This was mine. It took me decidedly out of theory/composition and into ethnomusicology; it broke up my first long relationship, lifted me out of Manhattan, and dropped me off in the Caribbean neighborhoods of Central Brooklyn to embark on a 32-year journey with a Haitian master drummer. What did he mean when he said, "relax and let these people help you"? Putting it into words is never adequate, but let's say that I heard it as my invitation to ride with the spirits, something I thought I would never hear inside the steel and concrete of New York.

The Life

On March 1, 1948, Andrea Laguerre, a poor retailer, gave birth to a baby boy under a tree outside the general hospital of Port-au-Prince. She had been waiting for a room, but the baby could wait no longer. Andrea never got the room and simply went home with her first child, whom she named Frisner. Home was a shack behind the city's Grand Cimitière (Great Cemetery). Andrea's entire family—two sisters, three brothers, and their mother—had fallen on hard times, and the younger boys were no longer in school. When praying before her *ogatwa*, a personal Vodou altar inside a cabinet, Andrea likely invested her hopes in her baby son, her mother's first grandchild, and asked the *lwa* to guide and protect him.

Frisner's first memories recalled the shack on Koridò Djòn (John's Corridor), one passageway among many in a labyrinthine community on the west side of the cemetery. He lived in the shack with his baby sister and his mother while his father, Julien Augustin, traveled in search of carpentry work. They all slept on the floor, often hungry. Andrea would open the *ogatwa* when she thought the children were asleep, but Frisner observed her praying through her tears and offered up prayers of his own. In an autobiographical interview he granted me in 1982, he recalled a dream in which the two Èzili, the *lwa* who love and nourish, came to him in response to his prayers. They promised to serve him if he would serve them.[4]

Koridò Djòn took its name from an *oungan* (male Vodou priest) whose temple lay in the same passage. Frisner trained as a drummer in Kay Djòn (John's House) and excelled at it. As he entered his adolescence, his favorite *lwa*, the militant Ogoun, possessed Djòn during a *dans* and instructed the society to initiate the youth as an *ountògi*, a sacred drummer. The word *ountògi* derives from Ountò, the spirit that lives in consecrated drums and animates drummers. The skilled *ountògi* wields significant power during the *dans*, guiding the ebb and flow of spirit possession. Through his disciplined study of the drum, Frisner answered the call of the Èzili and Ogoun to serve.

Frisner came into his world of Port-au-Prince during the height of an African consciousness movement variously called *indigènisme* (nativism), *noirisme* (black pride), and *négritude* (black pride). Adherents called the cultural dimension of this movement *folklore*. Ethnologist Jean Price-Mars had introduced the term into Haitian discourse with his 1928 *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (*Thus Spoke the Uncle*), a book widely considered Haiti's first ethnography. Price-Mars took the term from French writer and folklorist Paul Sébillot but acknowledged its coinage by British antiquary William Thoms (p. 49). By the early 1940s, Haitian dancers and musicians, inspired by the writings of Price-Mars and others, were establishing troupes that featured traditional Haitian dances with song and instrumental accompaniment. Most of the dances had come to Haiti from West and West Central Africa, and a few from France; Vodou dances dominated the African side. Because virtually all of the troupe directors had trained in ballet, modern dance, and classical music, the European notion of choreography (the composition of movement for the theater) determined the Haitian folklore performance. Some young dancers from privileged families crossed over from ballet to folklore, but musicians from the

same class did not study or perform Vodou drumming.

While Frisner was playing his first Vodou dances, folklore companies were scouting Vodou houses for drummers. He was drumming one day at a house associated with Kay Djòn when a troupe director showed up and offered him work. About 13 at the time, Frisner knew what this would do for him because his uncle drummed for folklore companies and came home with money for his mother's rent. Drumming and dancing in theaters and tourist havens made no one wealthy, but it was a godsend for the poor. It was also a step toward emigration.

Over the next decade Frisner drummed for Viviane Gauthier, for African-American dancer Lavinia Williams, and for the Haïti Chante et Danse company of Lina Mathon-Blanchet. He toured with the Blanchet group in Puerto Rico, St. Croix, and Acapulco. Meanwhile, he continued to play for the *lwa* in Vodou houses, and he formed a *Madi Gra* (Haitian Creole for Mardi Gras) band in his community (see photo 1). At the age of 24, Frisner contracted with the *Vodou djaz* (Vodou jazz) band Jazz des Jeunes for an engagement in New York. The entire band decided, before getting on the plane, that they would stay in New York.

Frisner emigrated from Haiti during the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier, when the use of music bands and folklore companies as instruments of migration proliferated. Folklore artists entered New York City during this time and regrouped into new companies that entertained the blossoming diaspora in the community *festival* (festival), a variety show mixing local talent with stars from Haiti. Likewise, Vodou clergy and initiates regrouped into new *sosyete* (societies), and in October 1973, just 11 months after arriving in New York, Frisner married his protectors, the Èzili, in the house of Oungan Emmanuel Cadet, a friend from childhood who had established a vibrant society in the Bronx.[5] He also wed Haitian American Marie Claire, an initiate in Cadet's society, and by 1976, he had secured residence.

Frisner drummed in Vodou houses and on stage in festivals throughout the 1970s, but he wanted to create his own group. In July 1981, dancers Marie Léotard Sylvain and Smith Desroches came to New York with the band Roots of Haiti. Frisner had left the residential hotel in Manhattan for a Haitian neighborhood in East Flatbush, where Smith and Marie had settled. The two dancers had heard about him back in Haiti and easily found him through neighborhood networks. They explained to him that they danced primarily for La Troupe Makandal, a company established in a poor neighborhood of Belair in Port-au-Prince, and that six more members of Makandal would arrive in October. Frisner moved into a small basement room in East Flatbush with Smith and Marie, and when Makandal arrived in October, all of them crowded into that room and another. They looked to Frisner for support and for jobs in folklore. Like many new immigrants, they believed that the wealth of New York could sustain them in their chosen profession.

Thrilled that the company he dreamed of had landed on his doorstep, Frisner promptly introduced La Troupe Makandal to entrepreneur Firmin Joseph, and the group debuted in a Thanksgiving festival at Brooklyn College on November 26 (see Fig. 1). The company stunned the audience with its uniquely bold presentation of Vodou, a representational mode that contrasted markedly with the more polished mode of the established companies. They had named themselves after François Makandal, an 18th-century revolutionary and messiah believed to possess magical powers. The Makandal artists—Vodou initiates—had mastered a number of mind-over-body feats. I accompanied the troupe in its performances—recording, photographing, and guarding handbags backstage. Unaware that I was laying the groundwork for the position of manager, I also made printed programs when the occasion called for it.

For one year, Makandal performed only for Haitian audiences, but the performers' raw authenticity, which brought out Frisner's to an extent that other troupes could not, inspired me to introduce the company to producer Verna Gillis. Gillis presented world music in her Manhattan performance loft, a venue she called Soundscape. In October 1982 she launched a "Voodoo Theatre"[6] series (see Fig. 2) and asked the company to stage Vodou rites—"just as you would do it at home," she said. Makandal puzzled over how to present the full-scale *dans* in two hours before an uninitiated audience, but multiple opportunities to resolve such challenges arose over the next years as Voodoo Theatre attracted contracts. The company learned how to play on the threshold between the temple and the stage.

By the 1990s all but one of the original Makandal artists had left the group. All but one had succumbed to the stress of being the first of an impoverished family to migrate; families back home expected remittances more substantial than a career in folklore could yield. As Frisner replaced several artists with outsiders to the culture, some reproached him from a concern for authenticity. This genuinely surprised him. He argued that the spirit has no color. In time, even his white drummers, rigorously trained in the Augustin drumming style, earned the respect of the City's Vodou houses, and the exuberant spirit of the maestro in theaters, schools, and festivals overrode the debate.

In 1998 the board of directors of City Lore, the New York City-based organization that documents, presents, and advocates for urban grassroots cultures, approved the induction of Frisner into its People's Hall of Fame. Frisner received this first major badge of recognition in an award ceremony held at the Museum of the City of New York. Filmmaker Jonathan Demme, who had recorded Makandal for the soundtrack of his film *Beloved*, presented the award (see photo 2). Over the next 13 years, Frisner won the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the United States' highest honor in the traditional arts; a certificate of achievement from the National Coalition for Haitian Rights; a plaque of honor from the children's dance company Tonèl Lakay; and dancer Peniel Guerrier's Kriye Bòde award.

Frisner came into this success on the threshold of his senior years. At this time,

Photo 3: Ti Makandal Ayiti, a post-earthquake relief effort of Troupe Makandal, gets ready to animate the neighborhood at Carnival time, Port-au-Prince, February 20, 2012. Photo: Lois Wilcken.

too, he began to think about bringing something back to his country. After the earthquake of 2010, Makandal raised funds, and we delivered tents, tarps, and medical supplies to the community that raised Frisner, the community with which he had kept close ties. Responding to the appeal of a *manbo* (female Vodou priest) who had taken in a number of children after the earthquake, Makandal organized Ti Makandal Ayiti (Little Makandal of Haiti) and animated the community with a children's Carnival (see photo 3).

This new work came to a painful halt on Frisner's last trip to Haiti in the winter of 2012. On the morning of February 24, just after Carnival, we (myself and friends) couldn't wake him. After four days in a coma, he died of a massive brain hemorrhage. We buried him on March 3 in the mausoleum he had built for his family in the Grand Cimitière. The previous night we held the Vodou funerary *bowou/desounen* (separation of the soul from the body) in a small temple behind the cemetery, sending him *anba dlo* (under the sea that houses the invisibles) until such time as his soul would be reclaimed and installed in a new place of honor and authority.

The Legacy

What did Frisner Augustin take from New York, and what did he give to it in return? In addressing this question, I would like to reflect on three of the motifs that thread his narrative: his tendency to challenge conventional notions of authenticity, his conscious clouding of the imagined line between the sacred and the secular, and his virtuosic creativity. Frisner's personal qualities—an extroverted character, exploratory curiosity, and a resolute commitment to his most fundamental values—worked in tandem with his experiences as a youth in urban Haiti and as an immigrant in New York to shape his unique style.

From the start, Frisner was open to working with people outside his immediate culture and community. In interviews he spoke of the "white" (privileged mulatto) Haitians with whom he worked in Haiti, in particular, Lina Mathon-Blanchet and her circle—an association that his mother initially feared. Like most Haitians from his stratum,

Frisner maintained class-consciousness, but he insisted on respecting an individual's inner light. He easily mapped this early experience in Haiti onto encounters in New York with a broader diversity of artists, students, presenters, and scholars than he had known in Haiti. Eager to plant the beauty of his culture in whatever soil he stood on, he opened it to people like myself and to other artists and students while learning from them in return. His work with ethnically mixed companies that represented Haiti drew criticism from presenters who felt he was sacrificing authenticity, and from activists who argued that the jobs should go to Haitians. As executive director of the company, I found myself in the odd position of having to tell an authentically Vodou drummer—a real McCoy—that he should represent his culture according to standards coming from outside.[7] In the end, I decided to trust Frisner's judgment.

Ironically, it was Frisner's mixed company that broke Vodou performance taboos to which homogenously Haitian troupes prudently adhered. If "authenticity" was partly absent in terms of ethnicity, it was dynamically present in spirit. At the beginning of his career, Frisner, like most folklore artists, represented Vodou music and dance through the aforementioned *koregrafi* (choreography), an arrangement of steps and drum patterns derived from the traditional dances but rehearsed and formalized for the theater. Makandal peppered its first *koregrafi* in Brooklyn with blatant displays of Vodou gesture, facial expression, and feats of mind-over-body, and this quickly and permanently became the Troupe's hallmark. The Voodoo Theater series of Verna Gillis took this proclivity to another level, dispensing altogether with formal stage conventions. The sacred and the secular merged in this new context and delivered authentic possessions. In 2007 in Tokyo, where presenters had advised us that the public was very reserved, Frisner nonetheless drew audience members onstage for blessings from a very real Èzili Dantò (the hot Venus; see photo 4). On the flip side of this coin, Frisner distinguished himself in the *peristil* for a style of drumming that exceeded the norm in terms of theatrics and virtuosity. In sum, he brought the spontaneity of the temple to the stage, and the artistry and professionalism of the stage to the temple, thus challenging the sacred-secular split (see photo 5).

Wherever he beat the drum, Frisner embroidered a dense sonic tapestry around the traditional pattern. He distinguished himself for his crisp and precise treatment of tone, an element of drumming often lost inside the obvious concern for time (rhythm). "The drum is a piano," he insisted, meaning the drum can produce at least as many different sounds as the keyboard. He put the keys of his "piano" to the task of jazzing up and lending nuance to the conversations that transpire among the drum ensemble,

Photo 4: The public lines up to receive blessings from a *manbo*/performer possessed by the *lwa* Èzili Dantò in Tokyo's Sogetsu Hall, July 14, 2007. Photo: Shinji Takehara.

Photo 5: Frisner Augustin's explosive exuberance energizes a Vodou dance in Brooklyn, 1983. Photo: Chantal Regnault.

the chorus, the audience, the professional dancer, the *ounsi* (Vodou initiate), and, not least, the *lwa*. At the same time, he displayed a unique mastery of the temporal by way of the *kase*, a break from the ensemble's main pattern rich with offbeat phrasing. Frisner's *kase* excursions tested the limits of how far one could go without losing one's footing, i.e., the beat. He traveled farther than most, in the manner of a jazz musician when he or she "loses" the melody. In fact, I propose that these elements of Frisner's style derive to a significant degree from his love of jazz, beginning in Haiti with Lina Blanchet, Jacky Duroseau, and Jazz des Jeunes, and expanding across his work in the United States, Europe, and Latin America with Kip Hanrahan, Rara Machine, Edy Brisseaux, and, most recently, Haitian American Andrew Cyrille.

Reflections

Frisner Augustin's life and legacy, which his company intends to archive, developed from a life that began in urban Haiti (with Vodou houses impacted by in-migration from all corners of the nation, and with theaters impacted by tourism and modernization) and continued in New York City, a cultural capital and a longtime mecca for immigrants. From this heterogeneous and often fragmented experience, he was able to actuate through drumming such aspects of his philosophy as the convictions that the spirit lives in all of us, that it operates in a great variety of spaces, and that Ountò, the spirit who animates the drummer, ought to play with a virtuosity rivaling the masters of jazz.

In the end, however, Frisner began his passage to the other side not only in Haiti, but also in the very neighborhood where he grew up. He rests in the Grand Cimitière, and one year and one day after the dispatch of his soul to the waters below, his Vodou community will call him back and install him in his proper place of honor among the ancestors—a fitting tribute to the little boy from Koridò Djòn who, as his mother cried herself to sleep, prayed for and got, the eternal ear of the *lwa*.

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Notes

1 This article is an adaptation and expansion of a paper presented on November 9, 2012, at the 24th meeting of the Haitian Studies Association (HSA) at York College, CUNY in Jamaica, New York. The author thanks HSA, which accepted the proposal for a panel honoring the late Mr. Augustin; and which, at the meeting's end, presented his company, La Troupe Makandal, with its Award for Service. She also thanks co-panelists Carolle Charles and Elizabeth McAlister, and moderator Marie Lily Cérat for their feedback and support.

2 The song quoted (in Haitian Creole with English translation by the author) belongs to the extensive repertory of Haitian Vodou (the name given to Haitians' service to their ancestral spirits). A group consisting of soloist and chorus sings this particular song at the beginning of a *dans* (nightlong danced ritual) when they pour libations for Ountò, spirit of the drums and drummers.

3 This observation on the author's part was confirmed in Laguerre 1984, pp. 25–26.

4 Augustin, Frisner, interview by the author, March 24, 1982.

5 The Vodou marriage brings a human into a contractual relationship with a *lwa*. Each vows special service to the other. For the human, the *lwa* offers enhanced guidance and protection.

6 Scholars prefer the spelling Vodou, which more closely approximates Creole pronunciation. Until recently, presenters argued that the use of Vodou in publicity would confuse and deter a potential audience. Scholars counter-argued for usage and exposure as the only ways to change a spelling that played on negative stereotypes (the voodoo of cannibals and zombies). The efforts of scholars have borne fruit, as demonstrated by the Library of Congress' change of subject heading from Voodooism to Vodou in October 2012.

7 In making this statement, I acknowledge that those who argued for Haitian performers only sincerely believed that this position reflected insiders' standards. I can verify that these were not Frisner's standards.

Dr. Lois Wilcken (PhD, Music/Ethnomusicology, Columbia University), a native New Yorker, has had the pleasure of researching the traditional music and dance of Haiti in Port-au-Prince and New York City's Haitian neighborhoods. She shares her experiences with academic and general audiences. In addition to administering and developing programs with La Troupe Makandal, Dr. Wilcken has served students from kindergarten through university with educational programs. White Cliffs Media Company published her book, *The Drums of Vodou*, in 1992. In 1998, University of Illinois Press published *Island Sounds in the Global City*, which she co-edited with Dr. Ray Allen. One may visit French and English versions of Dr. Wilcken's "Vodou Music in Haiti" exhibit at *www.lameca.org*. She is currently annotating a collection from her own field recordings for publication on the web-based Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis Digital Archive (EVIADA) based at Indiana University, and with Makandal, she is planning an online archive centered on the life and legacy of the company's late Artistic Director, Master Drummer Frisner Augustin. The author is shown here with Frisner in a photograph taken c. 1984 at Lincoln Center. Photo by Chantal Regnault.