

By Daisann McLane

November is voodoo month: the season of ceremonies in honor of Guede Nimbo. Haiti's lord of death and sex, tricks and politics, dissing and dark glasses. For anthropologists, Guede is a religious archetype, symbol of the underworld, decay and regeneration, a distant Haitian cousin of Eshu, the West African trickster spirit. But the thousands of Haitians who come to his feasts in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx on the first weekend after Halloween know Guede not as symbol, but as somebody. Because when the voodoo priests, or houngans, have prepared his feast properly (cassava bread and sacrificial goat stew) and the drum rhythms are just right, Guede doesn't just observe from the spiritual plane—he jumps into the head of an initiate and shows up in person, wild, horny, and ready to party.

When Guede's around, Haitians will tell you while rolling their eyes, *anything* can happen. He may spit rum in your eye, or tell you your future; save your life, or end it; give you a big kiss, or a pinch on the ass. (In Haiti, Guede is not only a religious, but a historical figure, one with many legends: Once a throng of Guedes forced their way into the Presidential Palace in Haiti, demanded money, and got it. Duvalier himself was rumored to have Guede in his head. No fool, Papa Doc never denied it. And he outfitted his Tonton Macoute goon squad in Guede's dark shades.)

Unpredictable maybe, but Guede has consistencies: he dresses in black or purple, likes hats, hates rules, teases, talks nasty, has major league 'tude, and can dance like a devil (which, despite his graveyard trappings, he's not—Afro-Caribbean religion has a more sophisticated take on the cosmos than white/black, good/evil). Does Guede's style ring a bell in your rock and roll brain? Does the Lord of Port-au-Prince seem like a sort of Prince? Who do you think Mick Jagger shared goat's head soup with on all his trips to Haiti?

Saturday, around midnight, I'm cruising Clarendon Road in Flatbush in a BMW with my Haitian friend Michelle and her brother Henri, who jumps out of his car whenever he spots a crowd of Haitians on a corner and asks them where the voodoo is tonight. Henri tries to attend at least one Guede fete every November, although he's not a voodoo initiate. He explains that the Guede ceremonies draw not only the religious community, but also a secular posse of young Haitian guys looking for a good time. The main attraction being that when the lord of sex comes down, the ceremony turns into a sling-fest of spiritually salacious talk, song, and dance. These funky, joyously irreverent celebrations of eroticism have been happening for a couple of centuries in Haiti (2 Live Crew expert witnesses, take note). Henri remembers sneaking into a Guede all-nighter as a boy in Port-au-Prince. "The next morning," he chuckles, "in my head I had a dictionary of dirty words."

Henri double-parks the car in front of a brownstone on a Flatbush block that appears working-class to me, but that Michelle (a sociologist) explains is a middle-class Haitian area. "Racism forces Haitians into poorer neighborhoods. But if a Haitian was mid-

dle-class back home, he considers himself the same here." The driveway is blocked by off-duty taxis, the door is open, the lights are on, and a handful of sharply dressed guys are hanging out on the stoop, drinking Barbancourt rum from the bottle. This is the place. Once nobody knows us here, I'm expecting a once-over, but the people at the door smile, and we walk in. Right away I hear drums. Descending the rickety staircase to the basement, you can feel them in your bones.

There's hardly room to dance, let alone breathe—there must be a hundred people jammed into the long, noisy cellar. The main mambo (the priestess running the ceremony) and her assistants are somewhere up front. All we can see from the back is the master drummer, a wiry bundle of hyperdrive who's standing on top of a chair, sweaty and shirtless, yelling at the dancers and flapping his arms. "It's Frisner," exclaims Michelle, pushing me ahead of her into the crush. Frisner Augustin, known outside religious circles as leader of the folkloric La Troupe Makandal, is the best voodoo drummer in New York. Since Augustin and his three-man group (which includes two white, male Americans!) are here, that means we've stumbled on the best ceremony in town. "Guede will be here very soon," Michelle assures me. We squeeze in between the drummers and an old refrigerator, and await his arrival.

At first, the scene seems like another chaotic basement jam, not a ceremony. Augustin and his

group play fast, jumpy patterns on their handmade goatskin-headed drums quite similar to the rara rhythms used by Haitian popular bands like Boukman Eksperyans. ("Where do you think the rara comes from?" asks Michelle.) People edge to the center and dance with a smooth, erotic hip motion, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs. But soon, the religious dimensions of tonight's event become clear. Through a gap in the crowd, I spot Guede's altar, a table covered with food, rum, candles decorated with skull-and-bones, and, in the center, two goats' heads adorned with purple satin bows. (Michelle estimates that the hosts spent \$2000 on the party.) The mambos bow to this altar, and to the three other corners of the room as they present offerings to the guest they hope will show. As out of control as he first appeared, Augustin is actually running the show. He's standing on the chair so he can keep an eye on the mambos, and changing his rhythms to help bring on their possession.

And then it happens. The drums rise, and the head mambo, a large, round black woman, starts to spin out of kilter like a kite cut loose from its string; two other women grab her to keep her from falling. The mambo pulls them across the room, and I lose sight of her for a moment. When I spot her again, she's transformed: serene, her chin confidently tilted, her stride cocky and masculine. Her expression has completely changed—there's a powerful, knowing, and fearsome gleam in

her dark brown eyes. The woman of a few moments ago is gone. Guede's here.

The mambos hand Guede a Smirnoff bottle filled with homebrew *clairin* rum that's been steeped with hot peppers for months—his favorite drink. Guede takes a big swig (I duck) and begins to sing in Creole, while pumping his pelvis. Michelle blushes. "He's saying, 'I want you to wipe the head of my penis like a mop.'" The crowd roars with delight and joins in the song. Meanwhile, a drummer opens the refrigerator and hands out Heinekens.

"I don't like AIDS," Guede sings in his high-pitched rattle, the voice of the grave. "It keeps me from fucking." My mouth opens in amazement as I watch this cosmic jokester prance around, doing



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his best to shock the house. He grabs women by the bottom, holds them close to dance, then pulls away. Everybody is laughing. This may be a ceremony to the voodooists, but it's also theater, a confrontational performance. Here you have a woman with a hard-on, challenging and taunting the audience, who challenge him/her back on matters of sex, morality, and politics.

"Guede," asks one man, "Who will you vote for in the Haiti elections, Lafontant or Aristide?" (Lafontant is former head of Duvalier's Macoute, and Aristide is a Catholic priest who champions the poor—metaphorically speaking, this is a choice between Vlad the Impaler and Jesus Christ.) The lord of life and death shakes

Music

his head in mock horror. "I can't tell you. What are you trying to do, get me in trouble?"

As I try to huddle inconspicuously behind Michelle, I think about the metaphysical subtext of this Guede feast: that God is not only potent and alive, but he tells good jokes and even reads the newspapers. Pretty reassuring, and no wonder Guede draws overflow crowds of émigrés from the most exploited and impoverished nation in the hemisphere. Yet Guede's party is more than a sociological release valve—it's art. In fact voodoo symbols and rituals inspire most Haitian painting. If white Americans had come up with this improvisational collage of music, dance, visuals, and commentary, instead of black Haitians, it would be getting awards and tax exemptions, instead of being hidden in airless Brooklyn basements.

But suddenly, there's no time to think about this, because Guede has noticed me. He shoves past Michelle, wide-eyed and hungry, and grabs me around the waist.

Sure, I've read the literature. The roads of Haiti are tracked with anthropologists' sneaker prints, and at least two scholars are here tonight. I've heard the field recordings, viewed documentaries of the ceremonies, talked to practitioners. But right now none of that matters. Voodoo, like all Afro-Caribbean religions, isn't about study—you have to do it to get it. And you don't really know the lord of death until you meet him and say hi.

The main mambo pulls me close and licks her lips. I smile back at Guede and give him a big, sloppy kiss.