



xavier Amama

meringue!

the screaming end direct from a smoking Haitian dance dive

Nemours Jean-Baptiste and orchestra

COOK

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La Vrai Meringue

*Beyond the mountains there are more mountains**

Whenever the origin of the meringue is mentioned, national pride is sure to raise its bright green head. The dance is claimed by both the nations that inhabit the big island of Hispaniola, on the northern edge of the Caribbean—Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Informed Haitians have widely diversified stories to back up their claim. In one, the name came from Africa, where it meant as it does today a pastry, and where a meringue was given to a slave as reward for doing an expert dance, the dance thus acquiring the name. In another version the name came from Spain. When Haiti was invited to occupy the Dominican Republic during the Spanish-American war, troops brought along a dance known as the *carabinière*. Inevitably the Dominicans picked it up during the 30 years of occupation, but gave it their own name—and the name went back to Haiti along with the troops and a French accent. Whatever its origin, the Haitian meringue is gentler than the Dominican, and its melody is sweet and uninhibited.

*After the dance, the drum is heavy**

The Ensemble aux Calebasses is the finest meringue band now playing in Haiti, so say dancing Haitians. Along with the 2,400 hand painted calabashes hanging from the thatched roof, the band is a permanent fixture in the big Aux Calabasses night club in the outlying district of Carrefour in Port-au-Prince. The eight sidemen are led by husky tenor saxophonist Nemours Jean-Baptiste, who also orchestrates the music and makes up many of the prettiest tunes. Vocals are sung by Julian Paul.

Aside from its calypso-like French-flavored balladry, the meringue might be said to require digging from the hips down, particularly with the feet. A more scholarly approach to the problem of music appreciation could well start with a course in the temperament which engendered the meringue, and for this purpose the following Haitian proverbs are recommended for preliminary study:

*The little man does what he can; the big man does what he wants
No matter how much you hurry, you can not make the day dawn
Stupidity won't kill you but it will make you sweat
All fish eat people, but sharks get the blame
The fish trusts the water and is cooked in it
When the cat is full, he says rats are bitter
Nodding your head won't break your neck
The dead don't know the price of sheets
Donkey works, horse gets paid
An empty bag can not stand up
Seek, find, be embarrassed
Poverty is no dishonor
Poverty is a sin*

*Haitian proverbs



Ensemble aux Calebasses

Side A:

Donnez moi la main
Mariage solenel
Tan moin la ti garcon
Alicia
Trou-panneau

Side B:

Villa Creole
Calebasses Campe
Ensemble aux Calebasses
Maman tioule sou
Desorde musical

Recorded by Carter Harman with Cook widerange stereophonic equipment

For more music of Haiti, hear

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