



# RHYTHMS of RAPTURE

SACRED MUSICS of  
HAITIAN VODOU



Smithsonian  
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## RHYTHMS OF RAPTURE SACRED MUSICS OF HAITIAN VODOU

Live ceremonial music, studio recordings and popular songs from Haiti  
Conceived, compiled and produced by Elizabeth McAlister  
Notes by Elizabeth McAlister, Gage Averill, Gerdes Fleurent, David Yih, and others  
Produced in association with the museum exhibition and exhibition catalog, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, presented by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at the University of California at Los Angeles.

This new release explores the recent innovations and traditional roots of this potent music, and the enclosed notes examine its political and spiritual base. Included here are well-known artists such as Boukman Experyans, RaRa Machine, Boukan Ginen and RAM, as well as more traditional recordings made in Haiti, including some from Vodou ceremonies.

Portion of the proceeds from the sale of this recording goes to benefit Haitian grassroots community projects.

- 1 Badè - Rara Machine 2:19 2 Azouke Legba - Vodou Le 3:45 3 Bossou Dja Eya - Port-au-Prince Mayi 1:17 4 Pale-m mal - RAM 2:48 5 Legba Plante'I Poto/Papa Loko Di Yo Sa - Master Drummer Coyote 3:56 6 Vye Gran O (Song for Ezili) - Port-au-Prince Zepòl 1:09 7 Simbi Dio - Frisner Augustin and La Troupe Makandal 5:10 8 Guantanamo Rara Song - Cité Soleil Rara 1:50 9 Konbit Zaka - Boukman Experyans 4:22 10 Laserenal - Premye Nimewo Group 1:50 11 Kadja Kadja Nou Tande - Lakou Souvenans 1:40 12 Tande - Boukan Ginen 5:35 13 Sen Franswa Di Prye Dye Fò - Cape Haitian 2:53 14 Chwal Sen Jak Mare Nan Poto (Song for St. James) - Manbo Micheline Forestal 0:52 15 Ogou O Wa Dè Zanj (Song for Ogou) - Mimerose Beaubrun 1:46 16 Piè Aleman Batala Lemiso - Nago Song from Lakou Badjo 3:13 17 Gangan Move Tèt O - Racine Mapou de Azor 4:05 18 Brave Guede Banda - Wawa and His Group 3:11 19 Rara/Bizango - Artibonite/Archaie 4:31 20 Djah-la Fouye Twou-li - Doudli's Sister 1:40

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1. **Badè-Rara Machine** 2:19 (Traditional-Clifford Sylvain/Yam Hill Music, BMI)
2. **Azouke Legba-Vodou Le** 3:45 (Trad. Arr. Inc., BMI)
3. **Bosou Djo Eya-Port-au-Prince Mayi** 1:17
4. **Pale-m Mal-RAM** 2:48 (Trad. Arr. Richard Morse/Willibelle/BMI)
5. **Legba Plante T Poto/Papa Loko Di Yo Sa-Master Drummer Coyote, Bon Repos** 3:56
6. **Vye Gran O-Port-au-Prince Zepòl** 1:09 (Trad. Arr. Mondy Jean/Smithsonian Folkways, Inc., BMI)
7. **Simbi Dlo-Frisner Augustin and La Troupe Makandal** 5:10 (Trad. Arr. E. Augustin/T. Newman/Smithsonian Folkways, Inc., BMI)
8. **Guantanamo Rara Song-Citè Soleil Rara Inorab Kapab** 1:50
9. **Konbit Zaka-Boukman Eksperyans** 4:22 (D.Beaubrun-Traditional/Balenjo/Songs of Polygram International, BMI)
10. **Laserenal-Premye Nimewo Group, Cavaillon** 1:50
11. **Kadja Kadja Nou Tande-Souvenans Grennedy** 1:40
12. **Tande-Boukan Ginen** 5:35 (Evans Seney-Eddy Francois/Green Linnet Music ASCAP)
13. **Sen Franswa Di Priye Dye Fò-Cape Haitian** 2:53
14. **Chwal Sen Jak Mare Nan Poto-Micheline Forestal, Bois Laborde** 0:52 (Trad. Arr. M. Forestal/Smithsonian Folkways, Inc., BMI)
15. **Ogou O Wa Dè Zanj-Mimerose Beaubrun** 1:46 (Trad. Arr. Mimerose Beaubrun/Balenjo/Songs of Polygram International, BMI)
16. **Piè Aleman Batala Lemiso-Nago Song from Lakou Badjo** 3:13
17. **Gangan Move Tèt O-Racine Mapou de Azor** 4:05
18. **Brave Guede Banda-Wawa and His Group** 3:11
19. **Rara/Bizango-Artibonite/Archaie** 4:31
20. **Djab-la Fouye Twou-li-Doudli's sister** 1:40



A manbo dances during a Vodou initiation photo by Chantal Regnault

Featuring field recordings and liner notes by Gage Averill, Mimerose Beaubrun, Maya Deren, Gerdès Fleurant, Elizabeth McAlister, Gregory (Azouke) Sanon, Lois Wilcken and David Yih

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# **Introduction: Vodou Music and Ritual Work** by Elizabeth McAlister

When you say the word "Vodou," most people immediately think of dolls with pins in them and walking ghosts. But for many people in Haiti, Vodou is a way of life. The word encompasses a philosophy, a religious system, a healing system, and also a form of artistic expression. When I was first invited to a Vodou ceremony, I had no idea what to expect. My hosts called it a "dance." But would it be scary? What kinds of rituals would I see?

When I walked into the room, my eyes ran the length of a long well-lit space with an enormous table at one end laden with cakes, candies, flowers, bottles of alcohol and statues of Catholic saints. The ritual unfolded like an improvisational opera performed by talented artists. Everyone was dressed in white, the women with lace petticoats under their skirts and lace headwraps on their heads. Priests and priestesses took turns calling out songs while the whole room answered in chorus. When three drummers took their seats and began playing, the singers became dancers as well, and soon the whole room was participating in dancing and singing one song after another with hardly a break. Each song had its own rhythm and dance, and each song was calling the name of one of the *lwa*, the spirit gods of the religion. "Papa

Legba, open the gate for me. Sacred Twins, we have eyes that see visions. Loko, you are the priest of all priests."

The *manman* drum led the music by barking out low rolling phrases, which were immediately answered by the higher-pitch tones of the second drum. While the baby drum played a steady pattern, the first two drums talked to each other in an elaborate conversation all night long. I felt that right at that moment, there was no better music being played anywhere in the world. That sentiment has stayed with me throughout my field research in Haiti, during which I have had the honor of "assisting" at other dances in different regions of the country, and in New York City, with its large Haitian community.

Music is a form of direct communication with the spirits in Vodou. When the priestess (*manbo*) raises her rattle-and-bell (*ason*) to shake it, the drummers have their cue to roll back and forth louder and louder and "heat up" the space. Then the manman drum "breaks," and plays against the rhythm, and the spirit whose song is being called may very well come down and possess one of the dancers (You can hear this in track 6). "Ezili is dancing in Marie's head," people tell each other. Or they say that the person is the "horse," and the *lwa* "rides the horse." The spirit may well turn to the group, compose a brand new song, and teach it right then and there.

Singing and drumming are a form of devo-

tion and are considered spiritual "work" in Haiti. There are many times when people will sing or make music in addition to intense crowded ritual dances. While working on making objects—drums or flags, or decorating their altars—people will sing to "heat up" the work. In track 20, a priest sings while he makes a traveler's passport. A woman sings to herself as she goes about her day in track 14. Or a song can be a coded message meant for another person. In track 15, a woman "sings a point" (*chante pwen*) to her enemies that she will not succumb to their threats because she is protected by angels—another way of saying "*lwa*."

This recording shares with you some of the musical jewels from the vast repertoire of musics in this Afro-Haitian religious system. The selections presented here give you the chance to listen to Vodou musics in a variety of contexts and a range of places. You will hear recordings made live during dances, music by singers in the tradition who worked to capture the best sound in the studio, and also pop tunes based on traditional music using Rock 'n Roll guitars and synthesizers.

Vodou has long been denigrated by the literate, Catholic, Francophone minority in Haiti, and by bad press in the United States. A small corps of Haitian researchers have rejected the prejudices around them and have spent time in the countryside to learn this music from the



older people. Mimerose Beaubrun, (Track 15), Richard Morse, (Track 4) and Azouke Sanon (Track 2) are among these artist-researchers who offer us songs and commentary on this album. They are part of the "roots movement" in Haiti and in the diaspora that is working hard to validate and maintain the richness of Haitian culture. We also have the participation of scholars who use their formal training to record and study Vodou musics, including Gage Averill, Lois Wilcken, David Yih and myself. And we have the help of Professor Gerdès Fleurant, who is a scholar and a Vodou priest. Here on Track 19 he presents the first ever released recording of Bizango music from the Vodou secret societies. Although most of the tracks are recently recorded, we catch a glimpse of the past in Track 5, a recording made in 1949 by the writer and filmmaker Maya Deren.

We made an effort to present a variety of regional styles, so that you can hear music from different parts of Haiti and its diaspora. In the notes below, we take turns talking to you about each song. We tell you which group or *soisyete* (Vodou temple) sings them, where and what year. We all hope that you will enjoy this taste of Vodou music and we invite you to go out and find the albums listed below and listen to more. Ayibobo! That's the Kreyòl way to say "Amen!"

## The Diversity of Vodou Music by David Yih

Haiti's unique history has produced a culture of remarkable diversity. This diversity stems, first of all, from the many peoples whose cultures flowed together in Saint Domingue (the French colony that became independent Haiti). The African people that were brought to Saint Domingue as slaves came from regions of Africa ranging from Senegal to the Congo River basin. When they arrived, members of the same ethnic group were purposely separated to discourage communication that might lead to revolt. Throughout the eighteenth century, slaves managed to escape to the mountains and form their own societies. In the wilderness and on the plantations, Africans and creoles of African descent took up the task of cultural reconstruction, adopting elements from both African and European sources. They created a new language—Haitian Creole (*Kreyòl*) and a religion: Vodou. Vodou music was created in hundreds of locations all over Saint Domingue to serve the needs of the emerging religion; for in Vodou participation is more important than dogma, and participation means, to a large extent, singing, dancing, and drumming.

In the colonial period, Vodou repertoires were fairly isolated. Travel was difficult and slave gatherings illegal. After independence (in

1804), throughout the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, Haiti's economy and culture acquired a regional character. Seaports like Cap-Haïtien, Port-de-Paix, Gonaïves, Saint-Marc, Port-au-Prince, Petit-Goâve, Jérémie, Les Cayes, and Jacmel were active in import and export and flourished as centers of regional culture and commerce. Beginning with the American occupation of 1915–1934, the centralizing of international trade in the capital city turned these once bustling ports into sleepy provincial towns of faded grandeur, but regional cultures remain vibrant and distinctive. This is especially true of Vodou music and dance.

Vodou has never been subject to any standardizing authority. As a result, every region of Haiti has maintained its own rhythms, its own songs, its own dances, and its own musical instruments. Haitian drums range in size from the little *tanbou kout*, the size of one of a pair of bongo drums, to *asotò* drums that loom ten feet tall. Although ensembles consisting of three cowhide-covered drums played with sticks are common in many areas, several other kinds of ensembles exist. Goat skin-covered hand drums sometimes with corded fiber snares, are used in Soukri Danach and (on Track 17), Petwo dances in Port-au-Prince. Double-headed drums figure in the Nago ritual of Badjo (Track 16) and in some Kongo ensembles. Southern Kongo groups use as many as eight drums at once,

while southern *menwat* groups feature violin or flute, two tambourines, and a dance caller (on Track 10). The use of the violin in rural Haitian folk and Vodou music dates from the era when slave violinists performed in colonial opera houses and concert halls and for society balls. Slaves' proficiency on the violin was so widespread that competence on violin was often mentioned in colonial newspaper ads describing runaways or offering slaves for sale.

Vodou ceremonies are meant to be beautiful and entertaining, and they are; part of their function, after all, is to regale the spirits with food, drink, music and dance. But Vodou also carries a grave message that testifies to its birth and development in the midst of struggle and conflict. Transmitted through the centuries, the songs reveal the group's response to a history of oppression, persecution, and militarism. Recurring themes and verbal formulas refer to hypocrisy and betrayal and warn against trusting outsiders. (See Tracks 4, 15, and 20.)

## The Music of Vodou: Rada, Kongo-Petwo, and Bizango Rites by Gerdès Fleurant

Vodou includes many rites, but the best known are Rada, Kongo-Petwo, and Bizango (secret society). The Rada rite is historically rooted in the Fon culture of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, while the Kongo-Petwo is based in the kingdom of Kongo. Both rites emerged from the crucible of the plantation slavery system in the Caribbean. Each rite has a distinctive music and dance in tune with the characteristics and temperament of its spiritual entities, known as *lwa*, and also called *zanj*, (angels), *sen* (saints) and in the Petwo rites, *djab* (loosely translated as "trickster").

The music of the Rada rite is played on three three conical single-headed drums of different sizes, several rattles, and a bell which plays a cyclical 12/8 pattern. The manman is the largest drum, which produces a commanding voice in the low register. It is played with one bare hand and one hammer-shaped stick called *agida*, and it leads, orchestrates, and choreographs the dance. The middle-sized drum, the segon, played with a half moon shaped stick called *abara* and one straight stick, sounds in the middle register and plays a series of intricate patterns in dialogue with the manman. The smallest drum, the *boula*, played with two straight sticks, sounds in the high register

and plays a regular pattern which coincides with the short strokes of the bell or *ogan*. The rattles, known as *ason*, are handled by priests and priestesses, *oungan* and *manbo*, or their assistant, the *ounganikon*, who is the chorus leader. Sometimes a large tambourine, called *bas*, reinforces the sound of the lead manman drum. The primary rhythms for the Rada *lwa* are *yanvalou*, *mayi* and *zepòl*, which form an obligatory trilogy, the *nago gwan kou*, *nago cho*, *mazoun*, *twa rigol*, *kongo-rada*, and *dyouba-matinik*. The music of the Rada rite is the most sophisticated of Vodou, and its beauty resides in a series of cross rhythms created by the instruments and the singers.

Kongo-Petwo music uses two conical single-headed drums, smaller in size than the Rada instruments, and tuned by pulling at laces attached to the drum head. They are known as *gwo baka* and *ti baka*, and played in call and response with each other in some of the most intricate patterns in Vodou (See Track 17). A bell or *ogan* plays a continuous timeline, and rattles called *tchatcha*, handled by the song leaders, play in counter rhythms with the other instruments. At times, a third drum smaller in size than the *ti baka*, called *kata*, (an onomatopoeia from the sound it produces), is added to the ensemble to "warm up the music" or "*chofe musik*." The rhythms played for Kongo-Petwo *lwa* are *kita* and *boumba*.

The music of Bizango, or secret societies, which are in fact societies for the protection of the community, uses two drums, whistles, and a cracking whip called *fwèt kach* (See Track 19). One of the drums, a Kongo-Petwo style instrument simply known as *tanbou*, is played with bare hands, and the other is a double headed tambourine called *kès* played with two sticks. It is the staccato rolling of the rhythm that marks its distinctive sound. The musics played, danced and sung at Bizango rites are the *chika* and the *kongo-sosyete*.

## Vodou and Pop Music: The Roots Connection by Gage Averill

Ever since it has been possible to record music in the studio, Haitian musicians have set out to capture the sound of Vodou music. Beginning in the 1950s, the sacred musics of Vodou and Rara have been echoed in popular music by musicians (mostly from the middle class) who have crafted commercially viable roots music hybrids. In the late 1950s, the Haitian Vodou-Jazz band Jazz des Jeunes sang "A nasty little guy is insulting his superior, take him to the cemetery, Crossroads Oh!" Three and a half decades later, Boukman Eksperyans sang "When we have them at the crossroads, Crossroads, judge these bad guys for me." These two songs about judgement, both addressed to the deity of the crossroads and both making reference to the political struggles of their times, stand at either end of five decades of roots music in Haitian popular song.

This history begins with a musical movement that explored the songs and rhythms of Vodou in post-WW II Haiti. Haitian audiences enjoyed the big band Jazz des Jeunes, female folkloric singers Lumane Casimir and Martha Jean-Claude, and other *djazz* (dance bands) such as the Orchestre el Saïeh. These performers were inspired by an intellectual and political nativist movement that took hold in Haiti dur-

ing the first American Occupation (1915–1934) in reaction to the racism of the occupation forces and to the history of Haiti's domination by a light-skinned elite which took its cultural cues from France.

After François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (a proponent of the Africanist movement) assumed the presidency, the leftist opposition organized roots-oriented cultural organizations to win the hearts and minds of the peasants. With names like Lanbi (conch shell trumpet that signals rebellion) or Karako Blè (blue peasant dress), these groups promoted Kreyòl literacy and Afro-Haitian culture. They were broken up by Duvalierist repression in the late 1960s, and surviving members joined the growing exodus to the United States and Canada, where they formed the backbone of a cultural movement in the diaspora, called *kilti libèr* (freedom culture). Here, Afro-Haitian cultural expressions aided Marxist anti-Duvalierist political organizing. None of the previous movements, however, treated the religious beliefs of Vodou with the reverence that one finds in the more recent *mizik rasin* (roots music) movement, which has become a Haitian global export in the 1990s.

This current movement began in the late 1970s, when many Haitian youth were listening to Jamaican roots-reggae as well as to American funk and rock. A few groups of young Haitians devoted themselves to learning

Afro-Haitian religious music from Vodou percussionists and to blending it with influences from transnational popular musics. These were the predecessors of the roots groups Foula, Sanba-yo, and Boukman Eksperyans (on Track 9). Although all of these groups existed before "Baby Doc" Duvalier fled Haiti, the turbulent period of *dechoukaj* (uprooting) of Duvalierism laid the groundwork for roots movement's popularity, with its intense search for political, social, cultural, and spiritual direction.

Roots music came to stand for a sympathy with the plight of Haiti's poorest classes, thus assuming a new political relevance. Sakad released a political roots album in New York; *angaje* troubadour Manno Charlemagne joined with Vodou drummers and singers to create the ensemble Kalfou Lakay (Crossroads At Home). Other roots bands arose: Zobop, Koudjay, and RAM (Track 4). Impressed by the ability of this new music to speak across language barriers, foreign labels signed Haitian roots artists: Mango (re)released Boukman Eksperyans' first and two subsequent albums. Xenophile picked up the premier album by Boukan Ginen (Track 12). In New York, percussionist Clifford Sylvain organized Rara Machine (Track 1) and signed with Shanachie Records. International acclaim quickly followed: a song by RAM made its way on to the soundtrack of the movie *Philadelphia*, Boukan Ginen won the French

Prix Découverte, and Boukman Eksperyans was nominated for a Grammy Award.

Throughout all of the global exposure, the music has continued to enter into the struggle to give a voice to Haiti's dispossessed and marginalized majority. Although the music wields a political impact, *mizik rasin* groups emphasize spiritual messages of tolerance, unity, faith, and respect (for the ancestors as well as for the living) as a way out of Haiti's political and economic morass. This movement, which has already done much to de-stigmatize Vodou in Haiti and among foreigners, has begun to build a dialogue among all classes in Haiti while acting as a moral conscience of a troubled nation.



A *ouns* calls a song during a ceremony in New York City  
photo by Chantal Regnault

This album is sequenced according to the basic *regleman*, or rules, of Vodou, to guide the listener through the proper “line” of spirit songs, from the “cool” Rada through the Ogouns, into “hot” Petwo and Banda and then to Bizango (secret societies) and Rara. But compact discs can be programmed to play in different orders. Here are some suggestions:

**Rada rhythms:** Tracks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12

**Petwo-Bizango-Rara rhythms:** 8, 17, 19

**Countryside:** 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 16, 19, 20

**Port-au-Prince:** 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 17, 18

**Women's Voices:** 3, 14, 15, 18, 20

**Men's Voices:** 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 17

**A capella songs:** 1, 14, 15, 20

**Rock 'n Roll and Jazz:** 1, 4, 7, 9, 12

## Notes on the Selections

### 1. Badè

**Rara Machine**, New York City 1994. From *Voudou Nou*, Shanachie LC 5762, used with permission.

This song opens with the blowing of a conch shell (*lanbi*) which is used in Haiti to signal to people far away. The song is adapted by a New York based band from a traditional prayer chant sung at the Lakou Souvenans—a spiritual compound known as the seat of Dahomean-based practices in Haiti. Some of it is in *langaj*—an untranslated spiritual language. The first bit contains parts of the Priye Djò, a prayer sung right after the Catholic prayers. —*Elizabeth McAlister*

The bone, it walks, it walks, it walks (Chorus repeats) The body, it walks, it walks, it walks (Chorus repeats) Our life is in God's hands/ The body, it walks/Our life is in God's hands/ The bone, it walks/Our life is in God's hands/ Abolizagbadji-a oungan siye/Lisadole zo (repeat 2x)

E Zo E Zo E Zo E Zo/Badèkouloudjè o wan yole (lead repeats after each line)

Anye e ya badèkouloudjè badè wan yole (Chorus repeats after each line)

We want things to change/We gather the angels/We call all the children/We call all good people/We call all the children/We gather all

the good angels/Oh call the angels/We want things to change/We want our country to work/We want things to work well/We call the children of Ginen/We call the children of the house/We call the little children/We'll call all the children

### 2. Azouke Legba (Dans Kanari)

**Vodou Le**, New York City, 1995. Recorded by Gregory (Azouke) Sanon, Harry (Aiyzan) Sanon, and Patrick (Yangadò) Pascal, at Funky Slice Studios, Brooklyn, NY. Produced by Holly Nicolas and Engineered by Randy Phipps and Yoichi Watanabe.

The instruments you hear in this song are funerary instruments. The low instrument is made out of a clay pot, called a *kanari*. The *gamel* water drum answers it. The *gamel* is made with a log you dig out, put water into, and float three small calabashes in. Then you play the calabashes with sticks. You control their tone with the amount of water. We play these instruments when somebody dies. After one year and a day, we call a dance to liberate the dead person's spirit, to take it out of the water (*retire mò nan dlo*). We play the *kanari* all night until it breaks in the morning. That means the spirit has gone. This is how it's done in the Arti-bonite.

I interpret this song as a critique about the influence money has come to have over people.

Money is such a heavy thing now that even though it's only paper, it can break rocks. People don't know how use the concept of money yet—they kill people for money. That's not really what money should be. It should be used for positive things. —*Gregory (Azouke) Sanon*

Azouke Parenn Legba ye/Azouke Parenn Legba ye/Parenn Legba, lajan kase wòch O/Azouke Parenn Legba ye

Azouke, Godfather Legba Ye/Azouke, Godfather Legba Ye/Godfather Legba, money cuts through rock, Oh/Azouke, Godfather Legba Ye

### 3. Bosou Djo Eya (Mayi rhythm)

**Société Jour M'alongè Fòc Nan Point Dieu Devant**, Carrefour, 1987. Recorded by David Yih.

This performance by the musicians of the *Société Jour M'alongè Fòc Nan Point Dieu Devant* is under the direction of Cèlité Estimè (songleader) and Ynold Colin (lead drummer). In addition to the three Port-au-Prince Rada drums, this group uses four low-pitched frame drums called *bas* and an iron idiophone. You can hear also Cèlité's rattle and handbell (the sacred *ason* and *klòch*). This is a typical instrumentation for groups in the active Vodou scene of the Carrefour neighborhood of Port-au-prince.

—*David Yih*



[Lead]	[Chorus]
Rele Bosou djo eya	Bosou Kenlendjo(3x)
Papa Bosou pale konsa	Bosou dlo eya Bosou Klendjo
Papa Bosou mache Konsa	Bosou Kenlendjo
Call Bosou djo eya	Bosou Kenlenjo(3x)
Papa Bosou talks like this	Bosou Kenlendjo
Papa Bosou walks like that	Bosou Kenlendjo

#### 4. Pale-m Mal (Mayi Rhythm)

RAM, From *Aiybobo*, 1993. Cave Wall Records, P.O. Box 228, Princeton NJ 08542. Used with permission.

This is a traditional song that reflects themes of spying and betrayal that come up all too often in Vodou. It also talks about being a stranger in the area, which is another common theme, perhaps because of migration within Haiti from the countryside to the towns. The rhythm played here is a Port-au-Prince Mayi from the Rada rite. It is complemented nicely by the guitar and bass in this arrangement by RAM. The English rap is a translation of the Kreyòl lyrics. —Elizabeth McAlister

Pale mal yo t'ap pale m mal/Zorèy-mwen la  
m'ape koute yo  
Pale mal yo t'ap pale m mal/Je mwen la m'ape  
gade yo  
Pale mal m' pa moun isit O/Papa, mwen nan  
mitan yo

They're talking me bad/I'm not deaf I can hear them  
They're talking me bad/I'm not blind I can see them  
I'm not even from around here and  
Daddy, I'm stuck right in the middle of  
'em/Aibobo

#### 5. Legba Plante'I Poto/Papa Loko Di Yo Sa (Yanvalou rhythm)

Master Drummer Coyote, Bon Repos c.1947. From *Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti*. Lyri-chord LLST 7341, used with permission.

The gifted writer and filmmaker Maya Deren recorded this music for her 1947–1951 field collection made in Bon Repos, a community located seven miles north of Port-au-Prince. You can hear the voice of the *oungenikon*, or chorus leader, introducing the songs to Legba, and then to Papa Loko, two major *lwa* of the Rara rite. The instrumental ensemble of three drums features the late Philoclès Rosenbère, a.k.a. Coyote, hailed as one of the last authentic master drummers of the old style. —Gerdès Fleurant

Papa Legba plante i poto E/Plante i poto O/  
Tibon Legba plante i poto E/Plante i poto O  
Papa Loko di yo/Atibon Loko di yo sa ye(2x)  
Se ou-menn ki soti Jakomèl, ou ap bay yo nou-  
vèl O

Papa Legba plants his post Ey/Plants his post

Oh/Tibon Legba plants his post Ey/Plants his post Oh

Papa Loko tell them/Atibon Loko tell them that, Ye (2x)  
You're the one who came from Jacmel, give them the news Oh

#### 6. Vye Gran O Prete Mwen Chwal La (Zepòl Rhythm)

*Société Soleil Levant*, Male Pandye Bon Oungan, Port-au-Prince 1993. Recorded by Elizabeth McAlister.

This is a song for a female *lwa* called Gran Ezili. We sang it at a dance at Papa Mondy's temple when two men were marrying both Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò (to marry only one would unbalance you). In this part of the service you can hear the *manman* drummer *kase*, or "break" and slam the drum hard against the rhythm. He saw that one of the *ouns* in the chorus was ready to *pran lwa*, or get possessed by Ezili. When Ezili came, she sprinkled Florida Water on her grooms, and they all sat while a Prèt Savann, or "bush priest," said wedding vows in Latin. After they were married, we all ate some delicious pink cake. —Elizabeth McAlister

Vye Gran O prete mwen chwal-la (3x)  
Chwal-la malad nan do, ou pa wè l pa ka sele?

Old Gran Oh lend me your horse (3x)  
The horse has a bad back, can't you see it  
can't be saddled?

#### 7. Simbi Dlo (Yanvalou rhythm)

Frisner Augustin and La Troupe Makandal, Spring Valley, NY 1984, From *The Drums of Vodou*, White Cliffs Media, Tempe Arizona 85282, WCM 9338, 1994, used with permission.

La Troupe Makandal was established in Port-au-Prince and emigrated to New York City in 1981. They come out of the "folkloric" style of performance that depicts and stylizes traditional culture. The troupe now uses Euro-American musicians and instruments (trombone and bass guitar) but the Vodou battery remains central. Here the trombone solos in the interplay with the chorus. —Lois Wilcken

Simbi Dlo yaye Danbala Wèdo yaye (2x)/  
Simbi ou poko konnen mwen/Simbi ou poko  
konnen mwen la/Simbi Dlo yaye O

Simbi Dlo yaye Danbala Wèdo yaye (2x)/  
Simbi you don't yet know me, Simbi you  
don't yet know me/Simbi Dlo yaye O

#### 8. Guantanamo Song (Rara Rhythm, Southern style)

Rara Inorab Kapab, Citè Soleil, Port-au-Prince, 1993. Recorded by Elizabeth McAlister.

This is a Rara band whose members came to live in Port-au-Prince from the southern coastal town of Jèrèmie. When they arrived in the capital, they found that making a living was still impossible. This song tells about how they decided to sell everything they had and leave Haiti by boat.

Rara is a form of spiritual work in which people parade to natural sacred spots, graveyards and into towns, singing and playing bamboo instruments during Lent, from Ash Wednesday until Easter. Single-note *banbou* instruments are played by three or more people, each playing one note to make up a melody in a technique called hocketing. The style you hear here—*banbou* and voices, without drums, is typical of Jèrèmien Rara. —Elizabeth McAlister

Frè-m yo m'prale (Mama-m, Sè-m) (3x)/Fanmi-m konnen mwen nan travay vre/Yo voye m tounnen nan peyi-m/Pou lafen ka touye m O

Nou vann kochon nou vann kabrit/N'al Miami/Kote n rive n'retounen/Woy woy Guantanamo nou rive (2x)/Nou vann kochon nou vann kabrit/N'al Miami/Guantanamo nou rive/ ...Konsèy zanmi pa bon Woy

My brothers, I'm leaving (Mother, Sister) (3x)/My family thinks I'm working/They sent me back to my country/So hunger could kill me Oh

We sold our pigs, we sold our goats/To go to Miami/Where we landed they returned us/

Whoah Whoah We ended up at Guantanamo(2x)  
We sold our pigs, we sold our goats/To go to Miami  
We ended up at Guantanamo/....Friends' advice is no good Whoah

#### 9. Konbit Zaka (Djouba Rhythm)

Boukman Eksperyans, 1995. From *Libète*, Mango 162-539 946-2, 1995, used with permission.

This song is for Kouzin Azaka Mede, the spirit close to farming and country life. When Azaka possesses someone, he dresses in a blue denim outfit and carries a straw *djakout*, or sack, full of plant medicines. He likes to drink *kleren* cane liquor, with sweet spices in it like cinnamon, cloves and allspice. The rhythm and dance for Kouzin Zaka is Djouba, and it is usually played by setting the manman drum on the floor and using both the hands and feet to play. It is danced with the hands on the hips, the feet stepping elegantly. —Elizabeth McAlister

Travay m'ap travay O/Kouzin Zaka, m'ap travay avè ou, tande (2x)  
Kouto digo-m nan men-m/Djakout mwen sou do-m/M'ap sekile/Kouto digo-m nan men-m-m/Vye alfo m sou do-m /M'ap sekile  
Jou m gen youn fanm, l'ale kite m/Demen m'a jwenn youn lòt O

Travay, m'ap travay m'ap travay avè' w/Zaka mete' m travay (2x)

M' pa't panse si' m te ka fè travay sa yo  
Zaka mete' m travay la nan bitasyon mwen

Working I'm a' workin'/Cousin Zaka, I'm working alongside you, you hear(2x)/ My axe in my hand/A straw bag across my back/I'm sickling/ My pickaxe in my hand/My old sack's across my back/I'm weeding/If my woman ever ups and quits me/Tomorrow I'll find another one Oh

Working I'm a' workin' I'm a' working with you

Zaka put me to work (2x)/I never thought I could do this much work/Zaka gave me a job on my own farm

#### 10. Laserenal

Premye Nimewo Group, led by Womè Tès, Cavaillon, 1991. Recorded by David Yih.

*Laserenal* is an example of the music of *kò mizik memwat*—ensembles prevalent in the south of Haiti that specialize in European court and social dances of the past, ranging from the minuet through contradances and quadrilles to waltz and polka. These *memwat* ensembles perform at a type of event called *bal hwa* (spirit ball) held in honor of the family deities. The instruments are violin and two large tambourines (with jingles and bells); the dance caller keeps time on an old hoe blade. *Laserenal* is one of the few pieces that is not for dancing. It takes its name from the serenade music of early Haitian military bands. The spirit ball begins with a performance of *premye anons*,

music that derives from military signal drumming. Then the musicians play three *laserenals* and open the dancing with a *memwat*, just as eighteenth-century French court balls opened with a minuet. —David Yih

11. Kadja Kadja Nou Tande (Grennadye Rhythm) Lakou Souvenans, (Gonaïves) Easter Holy Saturday, 1991. Recorded by David Yih.

Many Haitians consider the annual Dahomey Festival at Souvenans to be one of the most authentic, elaborate and beautiful rituals of Haitian Vodou. Its uniquely Haitian character is evident in the classification of the deities into two camps: Chasè and Grennadye—designations deriving from the Franco-Haitian military divisions. Each camp has its own cycle of songs. The song we include here is from the Grennadye cycle. Badè and Sobo are brothers, hence “we are two.” Like many Vodou songs it includes African words and phrases from the sacred ritual vocabulary known as *langaj*. —David Yih

Kadja Kadja nou tande/Kebyesou manouba E (2x)

Badè nou de/Sobo nou de/Kebyesou manouba E

Kadja Kadja we hear/Kebyesou manouba Eh (2x)/Badè we are two/Sobo we are two/ Kebyesou manouba Eh



Boukan Ginen

## 12. Tande (Grennadye rhythm)

Boukan Ginen, Port-au-Prince, 1993. From *Jou A Rive*, Xenophile 4024, 1995, used with permission.

Listen to the quick cascade of elements that build the texture of this song: the bell alone, intoning the timeline of the *grennadye* rhythm, Eddy Francois' powerful and compelling voice singing vocals; the *manman* drum; rock guitars; chorus; and finally the insistent pulsations of a (synthesized) *ason* (sacred rattle.) —Gage Averill

Hey old brother/Look at the light, I'm telling you/I'm standing in the doorway/It's been a long time since we played/We're looking for the light of life/For everybody to go for-

ward/I'm standing at the gate/Open the gate and let us go ahead

Old brother/It's been a long time since we've talked/We're here/We hear you're there/We're looking for truth/It's been a long time since we've played/Deaf ears refuse to listen/We're looking for the truth

If there's light, we have to go forward

Hey, light is what we want/Hey, Hey, give them light/Hey, that's what we demand/Hey Hey give them light/Hey, light for them, it's true/Hey Hey give them light/Matisou Legba/Open the door for them  
Zilibo Papa/Light the light for them/Blaze a trail please/Agao se  
Open the door for them/Kebiyesus Papa/Light the light for them

In Haiti we have our Vodou/In this country of rituals/Souvenans has good spirits, it's true/Soukri Danash O/Lakou Souvenans O/Lakou of the Petwos/Lakou Dahomey/ Tonton Nwèl papa/Talk to them/Talk to the children/Talk with the little ones

## 13. Sen Franswa Di Priye Dye Fò (Mereng rhythm)

*Sal Bosou Twa Kòn temple in Cap-Haïtien*, 1990. Recorded by David Yih.

This song was probably originally a hymn and shows the extent to which Roman Catholic cul-

ture has influenced some Vodou repertoires. The last line is in French rather than Haitian Kreyòl. Notice, also, the Western melody and balanced phrases (every phrase is the same length and has the same rhythm). When you hear it, remember the lead drummer, Edris Pierre, who died of tuberculosis in 1991 in his mid-twenties.

—David Yih

Sen Franswa di "priye Dye fò (2x)  
Si nou priye avèk lafwa/La foi de Dieu la foi de l'esperance..."

Saint Francis says "Pray strongly to God. (2x)  
If you pray with faith/The faith of God the faith of hope..."

## 14. Chwal Sen Jak Mare Nan Poto (Song for Saint James)

Micheline Forestal, Bois Laborde (Les Cayes), 1991. Recorded by David Yih.

This song shows you how we sing in our religion, in our way of life. Whatever you are doing—going to the market, making food, washing clothes or shelling peas—you sing. It's not like singing is only for the times you do a big ceremony and the other days you're "off." It's every day, every moment.

This song speaks in metaphors. It's saying that St. James' horse (the person who is a spirit medium for St. James) has a problem. The image of being tied to a post represents a problem. St.

James is saying, "I'm not asking anybody to help my medium. Even if you see her in a terrible state, I'm not asking anybody to help because I will help her." —Mimerose Beaubrun

Chwal Sen Jak mare nan poto/M'pa priye pèsoun  
O ba li lavi pou mwen/ (2x)/Men l genyen vè  
nou wè l genyen maleng nan do/Sen Jak O ba li  
lavi pou mwen

Saint James' horse is tied to the post/I'm not asking for anybody to set him loose for me (2x)/ He may have worms, you might see he has sores on his back/Saint James Oh, set him loose for me

## 15. Ogou O Wa De Zanj (Song for Ogou)

Mimerose Beaubrun, Port au Prince, 1995. Recorded by Mimerose Beaubrun.

This song came to my grandmother while Ogoun was in her head [while she was possessed]. She was a market woman. Other women in the market were her rivals, and they used to do *wanga* [magic] against her. But she had an angel, a *lwa*. It's the *lwa* who wrote this song. Now they sing it in services in Ouanaminthe [in Northern Haiti]. The first verse of the song is traditional.

This song is sung in two voices. Ogou and his horse (medium) are talking. The horse is saying to Ogou, "The *djab* [trickster spirit] says he'll eat me." And Ogou says "It's not true, because there is God, the saints, and the angels." It's a conversation between a horse and the master of his

head. A “*djab*” doesn’t have to be a person doing something to you. Whenever you face a problem, it’s a “*djab*” who’s “eating” you, your imagination, your intelligence, and that makes you unable to solve your problem. In this song Ogou is assuring his child that since he is there, the *djab* can’t eat him; the problem will be resolved. —*Mimeroise Beaubrun*

Ogou O, wa dè zanj/Lè m sonje pitit an mwen  
chwal an mwe/Chwal an mwe parenn Ogou  
chwal an mwe/Lè m sonje pitit an mwen chwal  
an mwe

Ogou O, djab—la di lap manje mwen si se  
vre?/Pa fout vre/Ogou O djab—la di lap manje  
mwen si se vre?/Men gen Bondje O gen  
lèsen—yo/Djab la di lap manje mwen se pa  
vre/Se pa vre ti moun—yo se pa vre/Sa se jwèt  
ti moun—yo sa se blag

Ogou Oh, king of angels/I miss my child,  
my horse/My horse, Godfather Ogou, my  
horse/I miss my child, my horse

Ogou Oh, the spirit says he’ll eat me, is this  
true?/It’s not true/Ogou Oh, the spirit says  
he’ll eat me, is this true?/But we have God, Oh  
we have the saints/The spirit says he’ll eat me,  
it’s not true/It’s not true, children, it’s not  
true/That’s a game, children, that’s a joke.

**16. Piè Aleman Batala Lemiso (Nago Rhythm)**  
Lakou Badjo, (Gonaïves) January 6 (Epiphany),  
1995. Recorded by Gregory (Azouke) Sanon.

The Badjo mystical compound is based on the  
Nago rite. It is based on what our Yoruba ances-  
tors brought with them. I recorded this song on  
January 6th, the day of the three magi. It is the  
day the kings saw the star of Jesus. But the kings  
and the star, for us, are actually Nago spirits.  
Each January 6th we have a feast and a dance.  
—*Gregory (Azouke) Sanon*

Piè Aleman Lemiso Batala yey (2x)/Aleman se  
nèg dife ou ye  
Piè Aleman Lemiso Batala yey (2x)

M’ap rele Piè Aleman Lemiso nèg Feray yey/  
Ogoun O se nèg dife ou ye  
Mwen Feray se nèg dife mwen ye/Piè Aleman  
Lemiso Ogou O Batala yey...

Piè Aleman Lemiso Batala yey (2x)/Aleman you  
are a man of fire  
Piè Aleman Lemiso Batala yey (2x)

I’m calling Piè Aleman Lemiso Man of Iron hey/  
Ogoun Oh you are a man of fire/I Feray am a  
man of fire/Piè Aleman Lemiso Ogou O Batala  
yey...

**17. Gangan Move Tèt O (Petwo Rhythm)**  
Rasin Mapou de Azor, Port-au-Prince, 1994.  
From *Rasin Mapou de Azor*, Louis Records LR  
001317, used with permission.

This music was recorded in the studio by a group  
of ouns, or chorus members of a Vodou temple.  
This song, along with other studio recordings  
like it, are favorites of many Vodou-ists. People  
play them at home, as they do their housework,  
and sing along. Listen to the rich, full voice of  
Azor, the lead singer. —*Elizabeth McAlister*

Gangan move tèt O, m’a rele, Gangan move tèt O  
(x2)/Prete m fizi ou la pou m’al tire zwazo/  
Prete m fizi ou la pou m’al tire zwazo nan bwa/  
M’a pote ke—a bay yo, gangan move tèt O

Lè Azor mouri O, n’ap sonje dantan’l/Lè Azor  
mouri O, n’ap sonje dantan’l palmanan, O se pou  
jou-a

Se lwa k fè m sa anye/Se lwa k fè m sa waiy/Se  
lwa k fè m sa anmwe  
Se lwa manman m nan ki fè m mande charite

The healer—priest is mean, Oh I’m calling, the  
healer—priest is mean/Lend me your shotgun so I  
can go shoot a bird/Lend me your shotgun so I  
can shoot a bird in the woods/I’ll bring its tail  
back to them, the healer—priest is mean

When Azor dies, Oh, you’ll miss his good  
times/When Azor dies, Oh, you’ll miss his good

times palmanan/O on that day

It’s the spirits who did this to me Anye/It’s the  
lwa who did this to me Whoah/It’s the spirits  
who did this to me, help me/My mother’s lwa  
made me go beg for charity

**18. Brave Guede Banda**  
**(Port-au-Prince Banda Rhythm)**

Wawa and his group, From *Le Vaudou Haitien*  
Vol. 3, Marc Records, Marc 353, used with per-  
mission.

This rhythm and song are for Gede, the irrever-  
ent, worker-healer spirits who are mediators  
between life and death. Most *manbo* and  
*oungan*—priestesses and priests—work very  
closely with their own Gede spirits, whom they  
call to possess them when clients come to them  
in crisis. Gede’s dance, also called Banda, is  
centered on the pelvis, which rotates and  
gyrates. When you hear the drum break, the  
dancer performs a move called “yas,” and slams  
the pelvis from front to back. Drummers and  
dancers are locked in close communication for  
Banda. —*Elizabeth McAlister*

Anmwe mache, prese O kouri non, mache  
Djab—la nan bariye—a l’ap tann mwen

Help, walk, hurry, Oh run, walk  
The spirit is at the gate, he’s waiting for me



### 19a. Rara Ya Sezi (Rara)

Lakou Kanno (Verettes, Artibonite), Easter Sunday, 1993. Recorded by Elizabeth McAlister.

This Rara band calls themselves “Ya Sezi,” meaning “They’ll be surprised,” because their friends and neighbors doubted they could form a band. After they started, they were so good they were adopted as the personal Rara band of Papa Dieupè, a Sanpwèl (secret society) Emperor. Here you can hear them “animating” the Lakou, or compound, for Papa Dieupè on Easter Sunday.

In the mornings, Rara bands tend to sing prayer songs for the *lwa* from the Vodou repertoire. In the afternoon, the bands become silly and rebellious. The *banbou* here are playing a melody which has words that go along with it. It says “Grosè bagay sa, mwen pa kapab avè l,” which means “The size of that thing, I can’t do it with that.” It is one of the funny, sexual songs that Rara is known for. —Elizabeth McAlister

### 19b. Bizango Song for Kalfou (Chika Rhythm)

Sosyete Manto Sen Pyè, Arcahaie, February 1983. Recorded by Gerdès Fleurant.

This song was recorded during a Bizango, or secret society, ritual in Arcahaie, a city some forty miles north of Port-au-Prince. The song invokes Mèt Kalfou, the spirit of the crossroads, and the first *lwa* of the Kongo-Petwo rite that must be saluted at the start of a secret society ritual. The instrumental ensemble consists of one

*tanbou*, one *kès*, and rattles which play in a series of dialogues in cross rhythms with each other and the chorus. —Gerdès Fleurant

Kalfou O Toro bann mwèn/Nan pwen kote  
m rele ou Pou pa antre/Kalfou1 Kalfou2  
Kalfou3

Kalfou our protector/Whenever I call on you  
You always come/Kalfou1 Kalfou2 Kalfou3

### 20. Djab-la Fouye Twou-li

Sung by Doudli’s Sister, Pass Chemen ritual, Jacmel, 1987. Recorded by David Yih.

This song is from a private ceremony in Jacmel. A young *oungan* named Doudli offered to make a *pass chemen* for me—a kind of safe conduct or Vodou passport that would provide me with protection and access to Vodou gatherings wherever I might go. I agreed. Making the *pass chemen* involved holding a small ceremony. After a few songs, a *lwa* (spirit) arrived, and interviewed me for a few minutes. Doudli then instructed me to eat some of the food offerings, and I tasted a delicious *akasan*—a cornmeal pudding; the remainder was scattered on the ground outdoors to be consumed by the spirits. The next day I had my *pass chemen*, an ornate document garnished with several elaborate signatures. —David Yih

Djab-la fouye twou-li li rantré ladan li/Badesi

fouye twou li li rantré ladan li/(repeat)M’ di jou  
m’angaje m an kòlè/Jou m’angaje m kòlè  
la/Badesi fouye twou li li rantré ladan li/

Pito pito se lwa leman e/Pito pito se lwa leman  
e/M’ di ma rele mèt Osan-iy O/Ma rele mèt  
Fery O/M’ pa vle djab-la toumante m

The spirit digs his hole he crawls into it/Badesi  
digs his hole, he goes inside (repeat)/I say, the  
day I have problems is the day I’m  
angry/When I have problems I’m angry/Badesi  
digs his hole, he crawls inside

Pito Pito the spirit of magnet force/Pito Pito  
the spirit of magnet force/I say I’ll call Master  
Ossangne Oh/I will call Master Feraille Oh/I  
don’t want this problem to torment me.



A man possessed by a *Gede* spirit dances *banda*  
photo by Chantal Regnault

### Other recommended recordings of Afro-Haitian religious musics:

*Roots of Haiti Voodoo*. Many Volumes on Mini Records, MRSD 1063

*Wawa & Azor Collections 8 & 3 and 9 & 1*. Geronimo Records. GR 0014-79.

*Vodun-Rada Rite for Erzulie*. Recorded in Haiti by Verna Gillis. Folkways 044911.

*Music of Haiti*. Three volumes Recorded by Harold Courlander. Folkways 04403.

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Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe; Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.

Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. New York: McPherson and Company, 1953.

Gerdès Fleurant, *Dancing Spirits: Rhythms and Rituals of Haitian Vodun*. Ct: Greenwood Press, 1995.

John Gray (editor), *Ashe, Traditional Religion and Healing in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Diaspora: A Classified International Bibliography*. Ct: Greenwood Press 1989.

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### About the Authors

Gage Averill, Ph.D. teaches in the Music Department and in the Latin American Studies Program at Wesleyan University. His work has appeared in *Ethnomusicology*, *Latin American Music Review*, and in edited volumes.

Mimerose Beaubrun holds a degree in ethnography from the Faculté d'Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince. She is a founder, songwriter and vocalist for Boukman Ekspéryans.

Maya Deren is the author of *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, a classic book on Afro-Haitian religion. She also produced a film and an album of the same name. She recorded Track 5 in 1949 using a wire recorder hooked up to a car battery.

Gerdès Fleurant, Ph.D. teaches in the Music Department at Wellesley College. He is also a oungan, a traditional priest, and is an initiated member of a Bizango (secret) society. He recorded the Bizango music on Track 19 with a Nagra and two mics.

Elizabeth McAlister is a doctoral fellow in American Studies at Yale University writing on Vodou, Rara and transnational migration. Her work has appeared in *Aperture*, *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, and *Sacred Arts of Vodou*. She recorded Tracks 6, 8 and the Rara music on Track 19 with a Marantz PMD 430 and Sony ECM 909 stereo mic.

Gregory (Azouke) Sanon is an artist and independent researcher of traditional Haitian music. He was a vocalist and guitarist for the band Sanba-Yo, and is now a founding performer in the group Vodou Le. He recorded Track 16 with a Sony Dat recorder and stereo mic.

Y.-M. David Yih has just completed a dissertation in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University entitled "Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou; Diversity and Unity in Regional Repertoires." He recorded Tracks 3, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 20 with a Marantz PMD 430 with two Audio-technica ATR 30 mics.

### Credits

Conceived, compiled and produced by Elizabeth McAlister

Field recordings and liner notes by Gage Averill, Mimerose Beaubrun, Maya Deren, Gerdès Fleurant, Elizabeth McAlister, Gregory (Azouke) Sanon, Lois Wilcken and David Yih

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Production Supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters

Mastering by Malcolm Addey

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