

# Beethova Obas: claws beneath the velvet

Haitian musician of renown, Beethova Obas is adored in his native country, not only for his romanticism, eclecticism and the sophistication of his music, but also for the swipes he takes at those in power and the shortcomings of Haitian society. His music has hints of Cuban and Brazilian influences, but behind the sensuality lie commentaries on the struggles of Haiti, a country that became the world's first independent black nation almost 200 years ago.

Hegel Goutier

Beethova Obas is probably the best-loved singer in Haiti, but his admirers are spread far and beyond his native island. Adulation based on the smoothness and sensuality of his songs, the mellowness of his music and on his own person; on the "velvet" aspect but also on the claws beneath which take sophisticated swipes at the indifferent authorities and the shortcomings of Haitian society.

A talented songwriter with a voice full of beauty and warmth, his journey has led him to a vibrant, subtle blend of Haitian music – from the classic inspiration along the lines of Frantz Casséus to the Haitian *musique racine* of Boukman Eksperyans – flirting with Cuban and Brazilian influences. He himself calls it "Cubhabra" (Cuba, Haiti, Brazil), but this is a narrow description of his work, which also contains elements of blues-type jazz, lively African affinities, and Russian and Central European romantic music which his father, an eclectic

amateur, instilled in him. From his orchestral journey have emerged the most original innovations, such as the transcription of carnival-type percussion scores for violin.

**Regarding the regularity with which you bring out your albums, spaced apart by on average three and a half years, would you say you have the discipline of a craftsman?**

I always take the time to do things properly. I need time to write my songs. I also need time for observation, to capture certain situations and translate them into songs. Making music means being an antenna which captures energy and tries to translate it into melody.

**A paradigm: are you serious or farcical? A track like "Kè'm poze" (I'm calm), the title track of your latest album, is all about hardship. Is it farce?**

There is often a very ironic undertone in my singing, which has enabled me to touch the most unfeeling people. A couple of anecdotes: An extremely rich man, allergic to poverty, told me that he had been listening to me since the 1980s, explaining, "You made me angry and I admired you". Michel François, a former high-ranking police officer and Duvalier's right hand man, also revealed that he appreciated what I was doing although he could not stomach it. Poetry and humour ease the passage for a lot of things.

**Your style of music is very subtle, something one would associate with a refined cultural environment. What does it consist of?**

I come from a family in which I discovered music at a very early age. My father was a painter but he also made music. He was murdered under the Duvalier regime. My grandfather played the mandolin. My father took care to spend time with us. Unfortunately he was taken away too soon, when I was just five years old. My mother brought up five children by herself. I learned to identify with the majority of people in this country who suffer so much. This is why my music is made up of many parts. One very important part: the fact that I was constantly woken up by the music of a very well-known popular singer, Rodrigue Millien, who used to play a couple of blocks from our house.

Every evening, I would learn from hearing him practise. It was a sweet pleasure to find myself, at four o'clock in the morning, already awake and listening to the end of his concert.

***Your music does not belong anywhere in particular. Do you feel like an exile within Haiti?***

Because of social prejudice, the Haitian elite often shut itself off from others. My father's open mind protected us from such confinement. For example, my father taught me to love the "band apié" (rural carnival groups – ed). At an early age, I became interested in the instruments of the carnival, the movements of the crowd. Then, I had a fateful meeting, with Manno Charlemagne and his musique racine choir with "band apié" instruments and voodoo temples. Culturally, I have not felt like an exile. Politically, on the other hand, after the disappearance of my father, my family was exiled. The fear of being branded "camoquins" (opponents – ed) drove a number of former friends of our family to keep their distance.

***Your music: romantic subversion, but subversive all the same. What is its subversion now?***

Right from the start, I decided to speak out about the reality of Haiti. The first track I wrote, around 1985, was "Plézi, mizè", which challenged a government which had nothing to offer its youth but more carnival days. I was the golden child in the eyes of the democratic government which came to power in 1990. And again in 1994, after the coup and the return to democracy. Not any

more. My last CD contained a track I wrote in 1987 about the military junta. It happens that the media find it still relevant to the current situation. If someone is let down by something he used to admire, it is up to him to take stock of himself. I am in a state of permanent self-analysis.

***What are the hallmarks of your albums? Do they form a series, or a palette of five different colours?***

I started writing music at 17, but at the time I did not see myself as a singer, merely a songwriter. Encouraged by friends, particularly Ralph Boncy and Joe Charles, I began to sing after I had received two awards for my compositions. Then, one day Joe Charles made me understand that I had to throw myself in at the deep end and, there and then, he booked a studio for the following day. Joe Charles is an excellent bass player, who, with his style of playing, has helped revolutionise Haitian music. I was 21. And that's how it all began. That first album, "Chant de la liberté" had a certain innocence in terms of music.

For the second CD I had already gained some experience on stage. I had already recorded my track "Nou pa moun" on Malavoi's album "Matebis". One day, in Bataclan, I was invited to perform one of my tracks live. I received such applause that the group let me continue with a second. Suddenly, I was approached by a producer. And the album "Si" was born, which was a huge success particularly in the French-speaking world.

I followed it up with "Pa Prese", an album about which I have mixed feelings. I approached things with perhaps too much confidence. Meanwhile, my propensity for a fusion of Haitian music with Cuban and Brazilian influences asserted itself. My fourth album, "Planèt La" is symbolic of this sensibility. Finally, "Kè'm pozé", my most recent offering, goes perhaps further in terms of fusion, and some commentators have said that it contains a perceptible hint of jazz. ■

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