

Deep in the green bush that surrounds the ancient Beninese city of Abomey, a voodoo priest specialising in affairs of the heart prepares his ceremony. In order to correctly divine the destiny of the curious, lovesick patient who has been sent to see him, he calls upon the fetishes to enter the spiritual circle. First a bell sounds, hard metal on metal, and then a crying out, almost like a mourning wail as a line of young children, wrapped in hessian sacks, their bare backs rubbed with some kind of dark oil, creep into the mud compound led by a woman who leads the rhythmic chanting. Kneeling in front of the patient, the children and the bare-breasted woman rock backwards and forwards humming and chanting a rousing wave of notes, sounding almost like an Islamic *zikr*, a passionate remembrance of god. This is the invocation to the spirits to attend, the beginning of a voodoo ceremony. In Benin, a tiny West African country wedged between Nigeria to the east and Togo to the west, voodoo (or vodun as it is also commonly known) still thrives more than any other spiritual practice, and with it, the eerie, irresistible chants and rhythms that are so much a part of it.

Worlds away, in a small provincial theatre in eastern Belgium, worlds collide. From behind the auditorium door comes the unmistakable sound of metal on metal, the ringing of the bell that appears throughout this marching-like music. Then parading softly, light-footed along the gangway and up towards the stage, come a group of brightly dressed men, one with a military-style marching drum strung around his neck, ratter-tat-tatting on its tight skin, another with an enormous bellowing sousaphone wrapped, quite literally, around his body like a large, consuming sea creature. Arriving on the stage, the musicians pick up saxophones, bugles, trumpets and trombones and the strains of softer-toned instruments replace the hard metal bell as two enormous men, brothers sparring on trombone and trumpet, step forwards as the sound folds into a fast, rapturous beat with Yoruba *juju*-like rhythms.

This is the Gangbé Brass Band, the exuberant, eight-man band from Benin whose brassy charms have the power to warm even the coldest of concert halls. Their music is the place where West African spirituality coupled with unaffected vivaciousness meet the strains of Western jazz and regimental marching band sounds in a loud and complex collision of cultures and musics. But it is history – spiritual roots and colonial takeovers – that inspired this band of brothers and friends in their quest to revive, renew and remember Beninese music.

## What do you get when you mix West African ritual music with colonial marching band traditions? Rose Skelton finds out with Benin's Gangbé Brass Band

PHOTOS MICHEL DE BOCK

# VOODOO PEOPLE

"Every kind of music from a given region of Benin is influenced by the voodoo [spirits] of that region. Every region has its spirits, and its music, so the music is necessarily voodoo music," explains James Vodounnon, as he patiently takes apart his sousaphone, polishes and oils every piece and then fits it all back together. "But there is also the region's pop music. This is what every member of Gangbé brings with him, the music that he had from birth, that he grew up with."

Benin, which was once a powerful kingdom, was colonised by the French in 1893, making it part of French West Africa. What its colonisers found was a culture rich in musical history, especially in its spiritual

and army their own style of music, the fashion caught on as the Beninese – ever adaptable and open to outside influences – quickly took it on as their own.

"In Benin we have a three-metre long brass trumpet called the *kakaki*," says Yovogan, whose father was in the military. "There are also *lanzo* (cow horns), stones where we drill holes and play it like a flute, there are wood and bamboo flutes, snail shells where we blow through the holes... We have a tradition of wind instruments going back many centuries," he says. "And then there is the *zangbeto*, our traditional brass band!" he laughs, as the rest of the group become more animated at the mention of this musical voodoo ceremony.

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practices. What it left behind when the colonisers left in 1960 was a tradition of European-style military marching band music, which now seems incongruously deep rooted amongst the Beninese people.

But, explains Eric Yovogan, who plays the trumpet, there is a tradition of metal wind instruments in Benin that goes back many centuries, and the region has a tradition of bronze casting too, as the celebrated Benin Bronzes from the ancient Kingdom of Benin, in what is now neighbouring Nigeria, attest.

When the French arrived with their military marching bands and taught the police



Gangbé Brass Band pictured in Porto-Novo, left, and in Cotonou, below, in September 2008



Voodoo fetishes at a shrine in Abomey

"This divinity looks after the security of the village, its music chases away bad spirits that bring illness and scares off robbers. They play at night all around the village."

Voodoo music, like much spiritual music, is traditionally restricted to the temple and to the appropriate ceremonies, like the *zangbeto*. But, says Athanase Dehoumon, another trumpet player, these traditional rhythms were being forgotten. "*Gangan, agumé, bon, pahulé...* these traditional rhythms and the instruments they used to play them were used in the temples, and only in the temples, and many of them were locked away, forgotten. And it's not just anyone who can use these instruments either." He goes on to explain how between 1994, when the band first got together, and 1999, when the band brought out its first album, the musicians travelled from region to region seeking authority from the highest spiritual elders in the land to be able to reproduce this music which up until then had only been heard during spiritual ceremonies.



"Before," chips in Vodounnon, "you couldn't ask a young musician to play *zinli*, a very complicated ceremonial rhythm. We worked hard to renew this music and dance, and now we even see *zinli* danced in nightclubs!" The band fall about laughing. "The elders saw that our music was being forgotten, now that hip-hop and reggae is taking over. That's how we got the authorisation to reproduce anything we liked."

Spending time with the eight effervescent members of the Gangbé Brass Band is a bit like being immersed in one huge African living dictionary. Between them they speak at least ten different African languages, all mixed up into one huge linguistic spaghetti. Each member comes from a different region of the country, with its own rhythms and melodies.

'La Porte du Non Retour', a song on the new album, is sung in the *adja* language, says Yovogan: "Before I joined, there was no one from my region in the group, so to get that diversity, we sang this song in my language and I translated it for everyone. It has the rhythms of my region, which anyone who knows the music can identify."

The band also has a bursting passion for pan-West African music, squeezing Ghanaian, Niger, Togolese, and Nigerian sounds in there too, acknowledging that ethnic groups have no regard for colonial borders. So while the fanfare-style pom-pom-pom of trombone, sousaphone and bugle form the backbone of many of the band's songs, there is also a generous tipping of the hat to the Yoruba music of Nigeria, such as the Afro-beat of

their hero Fela Kuti. While the towering brothers Martial and Magloire Ahouandjinou blast out a funk-driven duet on trumpet and trombone – a tribute to the late Fela – and Lucien Gbaguidi plays a sweet solo on sax, the audience in the concert hall look about as bewildered as I was when I was taken off to the Benin forest to consult a voodoo priest. The irony is not lost on the musicians. "Thank you for staying until the end," says Martial, ever so sweetly, as the concert is all but finished. And then they climb down off the stage and in their irresistible way, parade through the audience with their drums suspended around their necks, whipping up a thoroughly Beninese storm of fun and laughter. This is fanfare, African style. ●

REVIEW *Assiko* is a *Top of the World* album this issue and is reviewed in the Africa section CD 'La Porte du Non Retour' is on the covermount CD ONLINE Hear excerpts from the new album on [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/058](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/058)