trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Makossa

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Born in Douala in the 1950s, and strongly influenced by Ghanaian highlife music, Congolese rumba and Latin-American rhythms, Makossa made its mark in France and the United States in the 1970s, in the wake of soul and disco, clearing the way for a number of transfers and appropriations.

TRANSLATION	Larry Kuiper
PUBLISHED	March 27, 2020
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	French
AVAILABLE IN	English, French
TOPICS	Music
SPACES AND PLACES	Africa · Europe · North America
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization
KEYWORDS	soul makossa, sampling, cultural transfers, musical hybridization
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/makossa/

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The word "makossa" means "contortion" or "sway." When the "ma" is removed, the term "kossa" is often used by singers to encourage dancers to shake more and musicians to play harder. Makossa is both an urban music, and a dance born in the city of Douala, Cameroon in the 1950s. Its pioneers sought their inspiration in 1970s French pop, Ghanaian highlife music, Congolese rumba, beguine from the Antilles, Dominican merengue, and Latin-American rhythms. Cameroon's Atlantic coastline allowed for increased musical hybridizations and, in tandem with higher rates of migration in the Cameroonian population, positioned Makossa in the commercial networks dominated by two primary hubs (France and the United States), and secondary hubs that emerged in the rest of Europe, the Americas, and Africa.

A musical genre born out of Atlantic exchange

In the 1950s, in Douala, one could listen to mambo by the Matamoros Trio and beguine by Sam Castandet on Afro-Cuban records, edited by the British company EMI under the label GV. At the same time, French songs by Tino Rossi, Eddy Mitchell and Sacha Distel could be heard on Radio-Douala. On Voice of America (VOA) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), jazz and, later, funk and soul delighted local musicians. The program that made the greatest impression was that of Georges Collinet, *Maxi voum voum*, on the air at VOA from 1960 to 1990. Makossa is the result of these cultural transfers, made possible by the introduction of radio to Douala between the two world wars, the importation of records and new instruments brought in by the coastmen and soldiers passing through, or sold by Greek, Portuguese and Lebanese merchants. Also called "popos", these former were men coming from the west coast of Africa who were office staff during the colonial period. Within the coastmen, there were people of diverse origin (Nigeria, Cameroon, Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast) who, using the Atlantic Ocean as their throughway, settled in countries on the African coasts and facilitated the spread of varied music and dance styles.

Emmanuel Nelle Eyoum is considered to be the father of Makossa. It is he who, for the first time, used the word during a benefit at the Flambeau Bar, in Douala, in his song *Mot'a Ogono mo asi ma nanga ndabo*. Starting in 1958, the style was popularized in the other cities of the country by the group Négro Styl. Makossa saw its first success on the continental level with the musician Eboa Lotin, who represented Cameroon at the Panafrican Festival in Algiers in July 1969. The genre then grew and diversified in the 1970s and 80s, becoming Makossa New Wave, Makossa Pop, Makossa Funk, Makossa Soul, etc., according to the inspiration of the songwriter.

Finding success between Douala, Paris and New York

With artists like Jo Tongo and Charles Lembe, Cameroonian music was already quite present in Paris in the 1970s, especially in the northern part of the French capital, in the 18th arrondissement and in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, where immigrant populations are concentrated. According to the Ministry of the Interior in 1976, out of 80,000 Sub-Saharan Africans in France, 30,000 were residents of Paris, and 11,000 of Seine-Saint-Denis. But Makossa had a difficult time breaking into the major labels. In France, Pathé, Atlantic or Philips rarely took chances on musicians; so it was with Dikoto Madengue, Ashanta Tokoto and Manu Dibango. The main source of diffusion for African music was what the journalist Achille Ngoye calls a "parallel economy" embedded in independent record labels such as Sonodisc and Safari Ambiance.



Paul Bondy, independent record producer and distributor, in the 18th arrondissement in 1986

Source: Photo © Catherine Millet



Makossa musician Guy Lobé at the Phil One disco in the neighborhood of La Défense, Paris, 1986

Source: Photo © Bill Akwa Betote

It is not until 1973, and the impressive success of *Soul Makossa* in the United States, that the musical genre made its mark in Western markets. The piece by Manu Dibango, recorded in France and launched by Decca in 1972, initially had limited success; neither the public nor the French music industry paid much attention to it. It caught on when David Mancuso discovered Manu Dibango's record in a West Indian shop on Utica Avenue in Brooklyn and made it a hit in his private club, the Loft. American DJs quickly picked up the song, especially the well-known Frankie "Hollywood" Crocker, who played it on African-American radio station WBLS. *Soul Makossa* won over black, white, and Latino listeners, and became an important ingredient in the development of disco.



1973 concert by Manu Dibango and the Fania All Stars in New York. From left to right: Jerry Masucci, Manu Dibango, Johny Pacheco and Jerry Masucci's brother

Source: Photo © Musica del barrio

This vibrant scene incited Ahmet Ertegun, the director of Atlantic Records, to distribute the record in the United States. At his invitation, Manu Dibango undertook a 24-concert tour at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, in the company of the Temptations, and appeared at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. with the group Osibisa, and at Yankee Stadium with the Fania All Stars in front of 50,000 spectators. In August 1973, *Soul Makossa* cracked the Billboard Top 100 in sales and radio play, and stayed there for 9 consecutive weeks, peaking at number 21 and accumulating 2 million sales by the end of the year. On his return to France, Manu Dibango was invited for the first time to play as a headliner at *L'Olympia de Paris* from the 14th to the 17th of May 1977.

If the United States is the place where Makossa made it big, France remained a major hub of production and distribution of this musical style. In the 1980s, the Left then in power authorized the creation of private radio stations, permitting the musical genre to break away from the African ethnic audience to which it had been effectively confined.



Jean-François Bizot, head of Radio Nova and of the magazine *Actuel*

Source: Photo © Catherine Millet



In the Radio Nova studio, 1988

Source: Photo © Catherine Millet

The journalist Jean-François Bizot, a counter-culture figure, contributed, along with critic and producer Philippe Conrath, to the promotion of Makossa in French media. Makossa was played on the radio: on France Inter, for the show "Pollen," [1] and on Radio France Internationale for "Canal Tropical." [2] It was also seen on the public television channel France 3, on the show "Spécial Beaubourg," [3] as just one example. Makossa integrated the "Sono mondiale" ("world sound") that Jean-François Bizot yearned for in his columns for the magazine *Actuel*. [4]

Starting in the 1980s, on the other side of the English Channel, the development of world music by stars like Paul Simon and Peter Gabriel mixed African sounds with pop music, and resulted in the creation of new independent labels such as Real World, thus opening new markets to Makossa.

Remakes and Appropriations

Since the 1970s, Makossa has been the object of various and complex reappropriations in the Atlantic world. Some titles were adapted, without authorization, by North American and European singers. JamesTala when he visited Kinshasa in 1974 to participate in the giant concert for the opening of the fight between Mohammed Ali and George Foreman. The song, played on Zairean radio, captured James Brown'sStartin' Somethin'* on the album *Thriller*. The legal disputes surrounding the affair have added to the song's renown and its success endures; in 2007, the singer

A whole Makossa song was once remade and sung in another language; DemisMore recently, on the occasion of 2010's football World Cup, Shakira



Golden Sounds, Zangalewa

Source: Ebobolo fia production, 1986



Shakira featuring Freshly Ground, *Waka Waka (This time for Africa)*

Source: Epic, 2010

The success of Makossa in the West has not been without consequence on the author-composers of this musical style living in Cameroon. Makossa in the first decade of the 21st century took on a form thought to be more commercial by integrating more technology and increasing its reliance on sound processing. The Douala language, which had until then held a near monopoly in the songs, gave way to more international languages such as English and French. This is a new page in the book that is still being written about this musical genre.

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NOTES

1. Music program created in 1984 and hosted by Jean-Louis Foulquier from Parisian concert venues and broadcast on France Inter. It is produced by Radio France and available on INAthèque, in the INA-Radio France collection.
2. Music program hosted by Gilles Obringer beginning on September 28, 1981, produced and broadcast by Radio France Internationale. Available on INAthèque, Radio France Internationale collection.
3. Program about immigration from the May 29, 1977, recorded at the Centre Pompidou at Beaubourg by Jean-Michel Dhermay. Available at INAthèque, Mosaïque collection.
4. The archives of the magazine *Actuel* are available to consult at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, site François Mitterrand, starting with the first edition in October 1968 (call number 4-JO-22034).