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FREE

Funky drummer



Markus Schwartz may not be Haitian by ancestry, but the soul of Ayiti finds voice in his trained fingers. Music- Page 14

Meet Markus Schwartz

Foreign influences have long been a part of the Haitian musical experience. As early as the 1940s, Haitian bandleaders like Issa El Saieh sought out American talents to help better exploit the charms of the Island's music. In the '60s, American Jazz and Rock and Roll helped shape the musicians who would bring Haitian popular music to new heights. By the late 1970s, popular acts like Tabou Combo, Skah Shah, Magnum Band among others used the inspirations of American and Latin musicians to animate their horn arrangements.

Recent years have found Haiti's music giving some of its own back to world music audiences and musicians. The rich rhythms of the Island's Vodou religious tradition have been of interest to lovers of world music since the widespread fame of "Racine" or roots bands like Boukman Experience and Foula. The success of Boukman opened new markets for the more exotic side of Haitian music. The advent of performers like famed Vodou drummer Azor influenced a generation of non-Haitian musicians who sought out Haiti's roots music scene by actually traveling to a remote countryside "Lakou" (Worship yard) in Haiti.

One such musician was a young Markus Schwartz. Markus' story is of interest to us not because he is currently playing with one of New York's top Haitian Jazz outfits, Mozayik, or because he's played and recorded with artists like Wyclef Jean, Emeline Michel, Foula and other serious Haitian performers, but because his story

brushes Boston a bit: Markus is a product of the Boston Public School system and a graduate of UMass Amherst! Well, that's partially the reason. The main reason is the astounding level of industry and study this man has dedicated to a culture far from his own.

Markus was born in Copenhagen, Denmark and raised in the United States by a family enamored by Jazz music. He learned a host of different instruments in his youth but did not commit serious time to musical studies until his senior year at U-Mass Amherst. It was then that he was introduced to African drumming by a local drum maker who also taught classes on African rhythms at the college. Markus had found his instrument of choice and dedicated himself to a course of study and research that led him to other non-Haitian musicians who were serious connoisseurs and practitioners of African and Haitian drumming.

Our drummer's first step towards Haitian culture occurred, oddly enough, in California. Upon finishing his studies at U-mass, he moved to Oakland and quickly fell in with a performing ensemble named "Roots of Haiti"; made up entirely of non-Haitians, led by Blanche Brown, an African-American/Filipina dance teacher who specialized in Haitian dance. Markus was initially attracted to group due to the virtuosity of the troupe's talented drummers, John Scovel, Mayra Montalvo and Oba Irawo. Recalling the moment in a recent interview he shared: "I was mesmerized by their performance...I ended up performing with the troupe a month later and stayed with them almost seven years".

While a member of Roots of Haiti, Markus met a renowned Haitian drummer who would facilitate the second phase of his journey toward Haiti's culture - a first trip to the Island. Jean Raymond Giglio, co-founder of the now mythical roots band Foula and then leader of the Haiti based troupe Foula Vodoule, happened to catch a performance by Blanche Brown's group and met the young drummer. Markus and Giglio became fast friends and the two spent several months together practicing and studying Haitian rhythms. When the time came for Giglio's return to Haiti he extended an open invitation for Markus to visit his homeland.

Markus acted on the invitation in 1992. In the course of that first eventful trip he was introduced to the "Lakou" culture of the countryside and learned more about the Island's history, the Vodou religion and the practical relevance of the varied drum based rhythms that constitute the music of its practitioners. He was connected to Lakou Souvenance of Gonaives and there met more of the Island's gifted drummers. He learned that great African-American Jazz drummers, like Max Roach and Elvin Jones preceded him to Haiti in the 1960s to study with the late great percussionist, Raymond Baillargau ("Ti Roro") in a quest to learn the secrets of the Haitian technique.

Markus' first trip resulted in an ongoing commitment to the Island's roots music and culture. The fruits of that commitment include a recording of traditional Haitian drumming entitled "Simido", countless lecturing tours on the culture and drum based rhythms of Haiti and astounding contributions as a member of the New York-based Haitian Jazz group Mozayik.

OK, a shameless plug for a great band time! Mozayik is the brainchild of guitarist Eddy Bourjolie, a musician who has backed and been backed by the very best active Haitian instrumentalists in the industry. The band first aired its musings in a self-titled release in 2000. Its music was a blend of the



Markus Schwartz, second from left, is currently playing with one of New York's top Haitian Jazz outfits,

Mozayik.

day's smooth and avant-garde Jazz backed by a host of native Haitian rhythms. Manned by luminaries including our hero (Markus), Emeline Michel and New York All Star's Welmyr In Pierre, the album burned with hot tracks. Traditional compositions like the song "Peze Cafe" were given a new lease on life through Markus' aggressive and well-rounded percussive attack, seconded by Bourjolie's meaty solos. Emeline Michel's astounding performance in drummer Gashford Guillaume's "Pran La Vi'm", was a fine example of the progressive and the commercial potential of Mozayik's hybrid sound.

Markus' recent work can be heard on Mozayik's latest album, "Rhythmic Reflections" (which was picked up by independent label Zoho Music and re-released as "Haitian Creole Jazz" in May of 2005). Much like the band's first release, the album has commanded the respect of critics. Compositions like "Havana Sunrise", "The Journey" and "Pen Mayi" are just some of the reasons why this band and its talented percussionist are worth your immediate attention and their website (mozayik.com) is a good place to start.

Oh, before I forget, a grand finale: Wyclef Jean, after hearing Markus throw down on a rhythm track for his "Creole 101" album was given a compliment by the artist that captures the point of this wordy article. Jean said simply: "The way you played just proves that we are all one."

Steve Desrosiers' column on music appears monthly in the Boston Haitian Reporter.