

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

FRANCO

Martin Sinnock on the sorcerer of the guitar



JIM ZEE

African music's greatest bandleader and legend of Congolese *rumba* Luambo 'Franco' Makiadi would this year have been celebrating the 50th anniversary of his Orchestre Tout Puissant OK Jazz had he not succumbed to an unspecified illness – generally thought to be AIDS related – that took his life on October 12 1989.

More than a decade and a half after his passing and Congolese music is still missing its moderator. Franco was acknowledged to be the motivational force and figurehead of Congolese music. The *rumba odemba* style of his OK Jazz group encompassed Congolese folklore, a general hybrid of African dance styles, and

subtle external influences of jazz, soul and Afro-Cuban music. Chugging rhythms, brash horn interjections, sublime vocals and massed interlocking guitars are what make Franco's music amongst the most widespread and popular music to come out of Africa.

Franco was an inventive guitarist, a distinctive singer and a poignant lyricist but above all he was a great bandleader and business entrepreneur. His leadership qualities, sometimes necessarily dictatorial and ruthless, enabled him to sustain group headquarters in Kinshasa, in the Belgian former colonial capital Brussels and an office in Paris. He operated his own nightclub called the Un-Deux-Trois and issued OK Jazz recordings on his own record labels. With a large entourage of musicians in the Congo and a second entourage who were semi-permanently based in Europe, at the height of his group's popularity in the 80s, Franco was releasing vinyl LP albums at an almost monthly rate. He was not just the Congo's most powerful musical leader; he was also one of its most prolific. By choosing (and sometimes poaching from other bands) the best composers, singers and musicians to play in OK Jazz, he was able to dominate Congolese *rumba* music for four decades. Many of the Congo's greatest musicians and vocalists have been part of Franco's group at some time in their careers.

Initially the music of OK Jazz was mostly made up of short fast rumbas, *merengues* and *chachachás* performed by a small combo. Recorded on 78rpm shellac and subsequently on 45rpm vinyl, the early songs were semi-acoustic performed by one or two guitars, a double bass, light percussion (congas and maracas), and clarinet, saxophone or flute. Usually two or three voices would sing the verse and chorus. The group's sound and that of their Congolese contemporaries, was similar to much of the 50s West African highlife but with less of the colonial jazz emphasis and more of a Latin structure mixed with a Congolese folkloric rhythm. By the early 60s Franco had been dubbed the 'Sorcerer of the Guitar', and his precocious talent had gradually led him to assume leadership of the group. Under his direction OK Jazz forged its own distinctive sound and eventually developed a full horn section with three saxophones, four trumpets, up to six electric guitars, drums, congas and a large selection of vocalists of which usually four would be on stage at one time, accompanied frequently by spectacular dancers. A string of hit songs kept OK Jazz prominent right through the 70s and 80s despite the onslaught of the younger generation of musicians led by Zaïko Langa Langa.



Poster for Franco's only UK performance in 1984

Franco's popularity and patronage by president Mobutu and his government inspired him to compose songs that were frequently controversial. His social commentaries often made reference to sexual behaviour, and his political narratives at times dutifully supported Mobutu and his party and at other times inflicted thinly veiled criticisms at the state leader and his cronies. Not surprisingly Franco's forthright opinions occasionally caused him to be censored and even imprisoned – all of which seemed to help his popularity amongst the masses. Towards the latter part of his career he spent time between his Kinshasa and European bases, often performing in France and Belgium and occasionally Holland, as well as touring extensively across Africa. In 1983 he took OK Jazz to the US and on one sole occasion the following year he performed in the UK. It was whilst in Belgium preparing for a further UK performance in 1989 that a severely debilitated Franco was hospitalised, where he finally passed away. His body was flown back to Kinshasa where a four day period of national mourning was declared.

Franco has left us a back catalogue of about 150 LPs and 100 CDs but many of the

best tracks are only sporadically available on limited pressings of CDs from record labels that suffer from poor distribution. The era of the compact disc has not served Franco's music particularly well. Although much of his music has been made available on CD, it has not been dealt with in a methodical or respectful manner. Most of the OK Jazz repertoire was licensed to Sonodisc in France who released dozens of compilations. Unfortunately they chose to mix up tracks from different albums and different eras with no apparent rhyme or reason.

At one point there were plans for Stern's Africa to release a four CD

definitive compilation which would have authoritatively covered Franco's career. Sadly the demise of the Sonodisc label prevented the licensing of the recordings. Our selection picks out just a few of the better releases which may still be available, possibly under slightly different titles on alternative labels.

BEST ALBUMS



● **The Rough Guide to Franco** (World Music Network, 2001)
An excellent introductory overview of Franco's music.



● **Franco et L'OK Jazz, 1966-1968** (Sonodisc, 1992)
By the mid 60s Franco's voice and guitar had become dominant in OK Jazz and the group's distinctive sound is fully evident on this compilation of 7" 45rpm releases.



● **Franco & le T.P. OK Jazz, 1972/1973/1974** (Sonodisc, 1993)
Two complete LP records (*Azda* and *Mabele*) from Franco's Edition Populaire label on one CD. During the early 70s the LP format allowed the group to stretch out the length of its songs.



● **Franco & son T.P. OK Jazz, 3ième Anniversaire de la Mort du Grand Maitre Yorgho** (Sonodisc, 1993)

Six lengthy essential tracks from the early 80s including Franco's epic 'Tres Impoli', 'Non', and the masterful song known as 'Libumu ya Accordion' (the belly of the accordion).



● **Grand Maitre Franco et Seigneur Rochereau, Lettre à Monsieur le Directeur General** (Sonodisc, 1994)

The two giants of Congolese music joined together in the early 80s for a magnificent series of recordings that included an epic suite that stretched its theme over four lengthy tracks.

DVD/VIDEO

Compared to the huge quantity of video and DVD releases of modern Congolese artists, there are comparatively few filmed examples of OK Jazz featuring Franco. A dozen or so commercially available video releases are now finding their way onto DVD and the following are worth viewing.



● **Spécial - Franco & le T.P. OK Jazz, Au Grand Complet! 6 June 1976** (Salumu Production, 2004)

The 20th anniversary live concert filmed in a television studio and featuring guitarist Michelino and singers Michel Boyibanda, Youlou Mabiala, Josky, Wuta Mayi and Ndombe Opetum.



● **Les Merveilles du Passé de Franco - La Belle Epoque de Kin la Belle** (Salumu Production)

Mid-80s live TV performance that includes Madilu singing 'Mamou' and 'Mario', and Franco's anthemic 'Chacun Pour Soi'.

LIKE FRANCO? THEN TRY...

Franco's main rival and occasional collaborator was the great vocalist Tabu Ley Rochereau and his group African Fiesta which became Afrisa International.



● **Tabu Ley Rochereau Vol. 1 - Ekese** (Ngoyarto)
Includes some of his best late 70s-early 80s rumbas.