



Jane Cornwell on the Cameroonian sax legend celebrating 50 years in the business

MANU DIBANGO

Manu Dibango is many things to many people. No wonder: in a career spanning over half a century the Lion of Cameroon has proved himself a remarkably versatile force. An African ambassador. A world music pioneer. A creator of disco. A champion of new talent. A media-savvy style icon. A humanitarian and philosopher. A reporter and anthropologist. A lover of everything from funk, hip-hop and cabaret to *chanson*, gospel and reggae; from Latin, Caribbean and West African rhythms to Congolese sounds and his very own Cameroonian derivative, *makossa* soul. At

73 Dibango is still wielding his colour-coordinated set of saxophones, still rippling his hands over the length of a vibraphone/*marimba*, still improvising melodic lines from behind his circular black specs. Above all else, he is a jazzman.

His annual residencies at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London are the stuff of legend. Dressed, inevitably, in a sharply-cut shirt, his bald pate shining in the spotlight, the Brussels-based Dibango leads his trim jazz combo through sets that combine fresh African and Western grooves with good old-fashioned musicianship. Buoyed by the ability to find the right phrase at the

right time, Dibango's effortless, articulate sax playing has got even better with age, ripened by a penchant for experimentation – one of fame's luxuries – that has seen him alongside jazzers such as Art Blakey, Don Cherry and Herbie Hancock and African musicians including Salif Keita, Baaba Maal and the great Congolese band leader, Joseph Kabasele. His big-band shows are similarly legendary (check out the current DVD, *Lion of Africa*). His grin is as wide as ever.

Indeed, in an age where fusion is commonplace and 'world music' a given, it is important not to underestimate Dibango's role in making it so. A glance at his extensive

discography reveals an instinctive populariser, an artist bent on exploring whatever takes his fancy. If his work is a little uneven as a result, Dibango is iconic enough to get away with it – to be applauded for his curiosity instead of criticised for his failures. Living and working in various countries has seen him leap cultural boundaries with ease. His onstage patter is usually in French; his lyrics (delivered in a laid-back rasp) in the Douala language of his native Cameroon. Those who feel he has forsaken his African roots forget his essence: that the music of this self-styled 'negropolitan' addresses what it means to be both a black artist and a citizen of the world.

Emmanuel Dibango was born in 1933 in Douala, Cameroon, the son of Protestant parents. His was a mixed heritage – his civil servant father was Yabassi, his choir-leader mother Douala – a fact notable in a country in thrall to its ancestral traditions. "Born of two antagonist ethnic groups in Cameroon, where custom is dictated by the father's origin, I have never been able to identify completely with my parents," Dibango once said. "Thus I have felt pushed towards others as I made my own path."

In 1949, aged 15, he set off for boarding school in Saint-Calais, France, where he took up classical piano. He met fellow countryman and jazz nut Francis Bebey at a holiday camp for Cameroon children; together they explored the city's jazz scene, starting a band and learning their instruments – including the saxophone – as they went along. He'd intended to make a career in business until he failed his second *baccalauréat* and his father cut off his allowance; undeterred, he moved to Brussels and – gaining contracts from several clubs – plunged into its vibrant modern jazz scene. In 1960 he happened to be playing at Les Anges Noirs, a nightclub popular with politicians and intellectuals from Zaire, when he met Kabasele, aka Le Grand Kalle, then helming the orchestra African Jazz.

Kabasele hired Dibango as a saxophonist, and thus began the latter's musical 'Africanisation'. He moved to Kinshasa for several years, toured with African Jazz, opened a nightclub (Tam Tam), recorded a precedent-setting solo album of jazz/*rumba*/Latin rhythms titled *African Soul*. A string

of similar albums followed. In 1962 he got Kinshasa doing the twist with 'Twist à Leo', then moved briefly back to Cameroon and on to France. He played organ and then sax in Nino Ferrer's Orchestra which led, eventually, to his first recording contract with Tutti. In 1969 he released *Saxy Party*, a horny, jazzy excursion further uplifted by organists Booker T and MGs. He to-ed and fro-ed from France to Africa; in 1972 he was asked to compose an anthem for the eighth African Nations Cup. On the B-side he recorded a track called 'Soul Makossa', a meeting of big-band American soul and

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Cameroon's dancehall *makossa* sound.

Catchy and compelling (Michael Jackson plagiarised it in his 1983 hit 'I Wanna Be Startin' Something'), 'Soul Makossa' blazed a trail. Dibango became the first African musician ever to record a Top 40 hit. It allegedly kickstarted disco, shook up the soul scene, underscored the Black Power era. It gave Dibango carte blanche to do what he liked; he collaborated with salsa fusion supremos the Fania All Stars; moved to Abidjan to lead the new orchestra on Ivory Coast radio and television; worked with musicians from Ghana and Nigeria, including the late, great Fela Kuti. He swapped ideas with Sly and Robbie in Jamaica and, in Paris, with Ray Lema, Bill Laswell, Herbie Hancock. He released album after album, some good, many great, all building bridges between different musical trends. Long may he continue to do so. ●

Manu Dibango performs at the Barbican on April 18. See On the Road for more details

You can hear two tracks and an excerpt from an interview with Dibango from the *Lion of Africa* CD/DVD, on this issue's podcast



From top to bottom: Dibango on tour in Cameroon, 1981; in Togo playing with a local police orchestra, 1976; in NYC with the Fania crew including Johnny Pacheco, 1973; at Club Afro Negra in Kinshasa, 1962; next to his house in Joinville-le-Pont, France 1970



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BEST...

...ALBUMS

Soul Makossa (Unidisc, 1973)

The album that embodies the man's classic rhythm, with the track that put him on the world map.

Waka Juju (Polydor France, 1982)

A genre-defining album that sees Dibango embracing the Afro-soul sound.

CubAfrica (Celluloid/Mélodie Records, 1998)

A warm Afro-Cuban collaboration with Cuarteto Patria, featuring Buena Vista guitarist Eliades Ochoa.

...COMPILATIONS

Rough Guide to Manu Dibango (World Music Network, 2004)

Classics and rarities chosen by the man himself – what further recommendation do you need?

...DVD

Lion of Africa (Global Mix, 2007)

Filmed at the Barbican in 2004, this CD & DVD shows just why Dibango is regarded as a first-class performer. Reviewed in this issue.

...AVOIDED

Wakafrika (Giant/Warners, 1994)

Clichés galore on this over-produced love-in. Guests Peter Gabriel and Angélique Kidjo contribute to a project without bite.

LIKE MANU DIBANGO? THEN TRY... RAY LEMA

Safi (Buda Musique/Tinder, 2001)

Congolese composer, arranger, producer, pianist, guitarist and sometime Dibango collaborator shows his similarly visionary side in a project with Morocco's T'you Gnaoua.

