

Musiques Métisses

Daniel Brown talks to
Christian Mousset, founder of
Angoulême's annual African
music festival



The monthly *Afrique* magazine believes it's 'probably the world's biggest African music festival.' France's *Le Monde* claims that by 'marrying geographical zones from around the world, Angoulême invents utopias [that] counter some of the ideas that are polluting our times.'

But such praise bounces off the rotund silhouette of Christian Mousset, founder and artistic director of Musiques Métisses, as he embarks on further musical expeditions to discover new African talents.

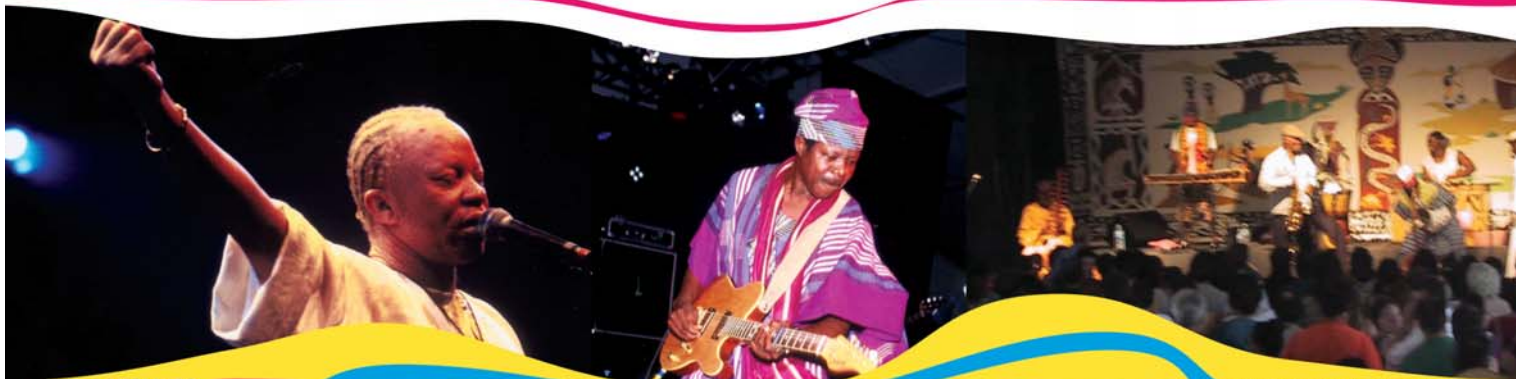
The 58-year-old is preparing the 28th edition of the gathering in the southern French region of Charente with the same good-humoured enthusiasm and drive that he put into the first festival in 1976. At that time the three-day event was called Jazz in France, a festival Mousset had cooked up five years after opening Angoulême's first record store.

"A crazy idea," he recognises, pointing to the town's population (100,000 including outlying villages and suburbs), the difficulties of access from France's major

cities, and the warnings that the local Charentais population would not appreciate Mousset's 'exotic tastes'.

"But we've been astounded at how quickly everyone here has adopted this kaleidoscope of music as their own. Perhaps that's why the National Front scored less than half the national average here at the last elections."

Another likely reason is that the festival is far more than a four-day affair. All year round, it ploughs its annual budget of €1million into local initiatives. As well as



Musiques Métisses, there are north-south support networks, writers' workshops, material support for youth associations in the rough suburbs, artist residencies, music classes at Angoulême's prison and even *djembe* classes for the under-eights. "It's a long-term, underground approach," notes Eric Surmely, manager of these projects collectively called Quartiers Lumières. "But since it started in 1990, I believe we've established some solid bonds with the Charentais."

It was also 1990 when Mousset and his staff of five decided to abandon their natural penchant for European jazz and embrace mainly African-flavoured world music, calling the new concept Musiques Métisses (see box below). And they had solid foundations to build on – the focus on the mother continent had already made Angoulême the first international stepping stone for Cesaria Evora, Salif Keita, Pierre Akendengue, Toure Kunda and Johnny Clegg.

More recently, it's the likes of Rajery, Régis Gizavo and Rokia Traoré who have been introduced to the European public thanks to the festival. But Angoulême has also helped to resurrect the careers of certain formations and musicians. Last year, some 12,000 paying customers enjoyed the sizzling returns of Wendo Kolosoy, one of the pioneers of Congolese rumba, and the legendary Bembeya Jazz formation from Guinea. Both recorded for Mousset's new label, Marabi, which takes over where his previous venture, Label Bleu, left off. "It took me a long time to come round to the idea of recording the visiting artists," admits Mousset. "But I wanted to capture the energy so many were giving off onstage – it's complementary to the philosophy of the festival. It's perhaps what distinguishes our recordings from the polished albums of Real World: we prefer it raw, with the

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musical colours and perfumes untouched by too much modern technology."

Last May Musiques Métisses brought together 31 bands – 25 of which were African. Highlights included the Gangbé Brass Band of Benin, whose turbulent percussions and brass sections united the polyphonies and polyrhythms of the Fon *vodum* (a style linked with voodoo) with vernacular chants in Yoruba, Goun and Creole in a compelling reminder of the roots of jazz. And few spectators seemed to escape the bewitching power of the maloya performed by Danyel Waro from Réunion. The biggest disappointment was perhaps the long-awaited return of Nigeria's King Sunny Ade who, with a reduced formation which deprived his music of the Hawaiian-like steel pedal guitar, was but a pale shadow of his glorious *juju* days.

Highs or lows, little seems to dampen the enthusiasm of the colourful crowd that converges on the island of Bourginès, about a kilometre from the city centre – not even the regular downpours that plague this Pentecostal weekend. Between June 5 and 9 2003, the small island in the Charente river will once again be home to a tent village and three stages with simultaneous programmes that are gloriously frustrating to choose from. And for those who cannot afford the €14-23 per evening (€31-54 for the four nights), they can do what 35,000 people did last year: enjoy, for free, the smaller concerts, literary debates or shops

that sprout up overnight on Bourginès.

"Our theme for 2003 will be Algeria, but not the Algeria of *rai* music from the coast," says Mousset. "We want to bring groups up from the Sahara desert, as well as the Mauritanian singer Malouma. I never finalise the programme until April, but it's likely that we'll host some of the great African orchestras too: Bembeya Jazz again, but also Orchestra Baobab and Super Rail Band. As usual, I will bring a few surprises from Cameroon. And there's a smattering of groups from eastern Europe (Goran Bregovic, Thierry Robin, the Koçani Orkestar), to underline the fact that we are open to non-African music as well."

The European musicians will also provide some Mousset some relief from his biggest headache: obtaining visas for the African musicians. "Nowadays we spend a third of our time overcoming French bureaucrats and their racist suspicions," he says. Last year for example, the festival was deprived of Faadah Kawtal of Cameroon and Congo's Rumbanella Band. "They can't seem to understand that by allowing these artists to travel north and perform, it actually helps them stay in Africa. They become more professional and take back so much from here. The government's obduracy is tragic both for the artists and us." ■

**For up-to-date news on Musiques Métisses, its programming, prices, and accommodation, see www.musiques-metisses.com
Tel: +33 5 45 95 43 42.**

Next year's festival will be June 5-9 2003.

TOP LEFT: *Lokua Kanza* (Akwa Betote)

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: *Salif Keita*, *King Sunny Ade* (Akwa Betote), *Momo Wandel on stage* (Musiques Métisses)

THIS PAGE: *On site at the festival in Bourginès* (Musiques Métisses)



→ Métisse

An English translator's nightmare, such is the inadequacy of our literal equivalent for *métisse*: the dictionary only offers 'crossbreed,' 'hybrid,' 'mongrel' or 'mixed.' Yet *métisser* – from the 17th century Portuguese word *metice* – has *tisser* in it, which means interweave in French. The word is commonly used in the Latin languages to designate, in a positive way, the intertwining of people and their cultures. When will we renovate or invent a word to designate this vital 21st century concept?

