

Milton Cardona
Bembe
American Clave

Then there's *Bembe*, a lovely and lively album of Afro-Cuban religious music. The religion is Lucumi, the Spanish Caribbean cousin (Cuba, Puerto Rico) of the French Caribbean religion (Haiti, Louisiana) we know as Voudoun or just voodoo. They're both based on West African religions brought to the Americas by black slaves, with a patina of Roman Catholicism laid on top. They share many of the same beliefs and rituals, and the Lucumi gods Elegua, Ochun, Chango and so on have very close parallels in the Voudoun pantheon (with many borrowing attributes from Catholic saints).

Cuban-born Milton Cardona is a well known salsa percussionist, one of the main men behind the success of Ruben Blades. He's also a leading figure in the preservation and observance of Lucumi ritual among New York's Hispanic-Caribbean community. *Bembe* is a documentary recording of Cardona leading a Lucumi ritual, the Eya Arania, in the Bronx.

As religious rituals go, the Eya Arania is a pretty nifty one. Like a Catholic mass, it has a set liturgy. Like Voudoun, it involves spiritual possession and ecstatic dance. Like African ritual, it's based on the rhythms of sacred drums and a series of call-and-refrain chants between a lead singer and chorus. Each god has his/her own favorite drum, beat and song; the idea is to woo them with the playing and singing into possessing a dancer's body.

The resulting music is a remarkable combination of great dignity, lovely vocal melodies and hypnotic, snaky rhythms. The Cuban influences are very recognizable in the drums and rhythms—especially in a chant to Babaluaye, god of protracted illness, parodied (cheapened) by Desi Arnaz in Ricky's famous "Babaloo" shtick. The singing, meanwhile, sounds very African, especially the lovely choruses, reminiscent of the *Missa Luba*. And

there's some of the sense of ecstatic abandon we associate with the staged "voodoo" rites of tv and movies, but tremendously dignified and without the racist-sexist overtones usually imposed by Hollywood.

Each god's personality is mirrored in his/her song. Babaluaye, god of sickness, has a rather somber, slowly coiling song. Chango, the god of thunder and lightning, is invoked in a fierce flurry of drums. Ochun, the goddess of love and lust, is treated to a seductive shimmy. And so on.

It's a wonderful album—absorbing, mesmerizing, beautiful and fun, graceful and sensual. It draws you into a space and reality all its own, with a mood and flow quite distant from the everyday and yet hauntingly familiar. I've found myself playing it over and over during the last few weeks, and each listen is like a vacation in someone else's culture.

Bembe was produced and godfathered by Kip Hanrahan, a leading light of New York's Downtown music scene. He's sort of a less famous alter ego to Bill Laswell. Both are auteurs who use their record labels to promote internationalist, cross-cultural music. They'll throw together African tribal musicians with New York rap artists, or British art-rockers with Asian traditionalists, to see what happens.

Probably Hanrahan's best known experiment to date was *Conjure: Music For The Texts (Of Ishmael Reed)*, which matched up Cardona's Cuban influences with the likes of Taj Mahal, Allen Toussaint and Carla Bley. *Vertical's Currency* was a more pop-oriented thing—sort of Hanrahan's version of Laswell's Golden Palominos projects—on which he invented a kind of salsa-fied power pop by bringing together Jack Bruce, Steve Swallow, Arto Lindsay, Cardona and Haiti's Elysee Pyronneau. He was also behind one of the seminal avant-rock ensembles of the early 80s, the Japanese-American band DNA.

Although *Bembe* is one of Hanrahan's "straightest" albums—more a documentary than an experiment—it still fits well with his other projects, which are always intriguing and educating, and often fun as well. If you're interested, write for a catalogue to American Clave, 213 E. 11th Street, NYC 10003.