

LEYLA MCCALLA ON *BREAKING THE THERMOMETER*

1. NAN FON BWA

Sometimes on Radio Haiti they'd play a whole record from start to finish, which is how I discovered a lot of really amazing music. One of the albums I heard was by a guitarist named Amos Coulanges, and I just fell in love with this track in particular. I later found out it was written by Frantz Casseus, who was a huge figure in Haitian folk music. He taught Marc Ribot, among others, and did a lot a lot of adaptations of traditional Haitian folk songs that he set to classical guitar in a Haitian folk style. Anyway, I just fell in love with this piece and wondered what it would sound like if I played it on cello. Pretty badass, it turned out.

The title, "Nan Fon Bwa," translates to "In The Deep Woods," and what feels so significant to me about the piece is that nobody outside of Haiti really thinks of it as this lush, beautiful place. No one thinks about the deep woods of Haiti. And this song, to me, is the Haiti I want people to know and hear, the Haiti that's as beautiful as this piece of music.

We did a lot of sound design work on this album, you'll hear some of that here with the roosters crowing and the dogs barking and the goats bleating. I wanted it to be an immersive trip into my memories of Haiti. And on top of all that, you'll hear an overdubbed conversation with my mother. I interviewed her to try and understand if the memories I had of Haiti were accurate or not. It seemed like they were, but at the same time, there was something funny about asking these questions of someone whose own memories might not be particularly accurate. In the recording, you'll hear my mother and me talking about the summer I spent living with my grandmother in Haiti, which had a huge influence on me. My mother reminds me that that trip was really the thing that made me feel like I was Haitian and start to define myself that way. I wasn't sure about including my own voice, let alone my mother's voice, on track one, but I decided to do it because I wanted to be clear up front that this album isn't just about Radio Haiti. It's my story, too.

2. FORT DIMANCHE

I wrote this song after listening to an interview Michèle Montas [widow of Radio Haiti owner Jean Dominique] had conducted with a survivor of Fort Dimanche, which was the Duvalier regime's political prison. Many people were executed, tortured, and imprisoned there without any due process at all. People were held in the worst possible conditions, with no human rights at all. I was listening to this old man in the interview and wondering whether it would be right to include his voice in the song. I ultimately decided to do it because at one point during the interview, Michèle asks him what he thinks should exist now at the site of Fort Dimanche, and he says a monument to the people who survived the most barbaric regime in Haiti's history. And that's how I see this song. We've emerged from the deep woods on the first track and now it's time to go into the heart of darkness and really be clear about what people were navigating during these times.

3. BON APPETIT MESSIEURS

This piece was adapted from an editorial by Jean Dominique, which came out of this moment in 1980 when the Carter Administration was in their lame duck stage. There had been a sense in the Haitian government during the Carter years that they wouldn't get US aid if they didn't at least pay lip service to human rights, but when Reagan was elected, they felt like they had the freedom to consolidate power and strengthen their authoritarian hold over the country

4. LE BAL EST FINI

I took the words from the Bon Appetit Messieurs editorial and used them to write this song, which is sort of a reflection on standing on the precipice. The party's over, the independent press is shutting down, and the government can have their way now.

5. DANS REKEN

This song actually came from a poem written by a Radio Haiti journalist named Richard Brisson, who was also assassinated. Richard was very close to Jean and Michèle, and Jean considered him like a second son. It's worth noting, too, that a lot of the journalists at Radio Haiti became journalists by accident. They were creative people, oftentimes artists, who landed at Radio Haiti because they were anti-oppression and anti-Duvalier policies, if not outright anti-Duvalier. Richard was a poet and a theater maker who later became a journalist, and he wrote this poem called "Dans Reken," which translates to "The Shark's Teeth." The clincher statement in the poem is that the shark's teeth are sweeter than the prison cell, and he was talking about people risking their lives to flee the desperate situations they found themselves in. The refugee experience is something I've spent a lot of time thinking and writing about myself, and that piece felt particularly relevant.

6. DODININ

I first heard this song years ago on a Smithsonian Folkways record. It was being performed by a band that called itself the Atistes Independent, and my understanding was that they were all artists from Haiti who had been exiled and were living in New York City. In Kreyòl, "Dodinin" means "Rocking," and it's a reference to the plantation owners sitting in their rocking chairs. It's a song about revolution, with lyrics that basically say: it's us who bake the bread, who get burned in the oven, who make the bed, who sleep on the floor, and the situation isn't sustainable. We're going to knock you out of your rocking chairs. It just feels emblematic of Haitian social dynamics from colonial times right up through today.

Musically speaking, this is what's known as a rara song, which is a particular tradition of music from Haiti that's like revolutionary music. It's festival music. The rara bands are like marching bands that play in a particular style called hocketing, where the instruments will play two note phrases that are interlocking in really interesting rhythmic patterns. I just love that music and my guitar work is kind of emulating that here.

7. EKZILE

I interviewed Michèle for the project, and she told me about how they went into exile in the early 1980s. In the theater performances, I can only play one instrument at a time, so I really relished the opportunity to stack several cello voices as a way of getting more into the emotional core of the journey of being exiled from your home and being seen as a threat there.

8. POUKI

This song was written by a man named Manno Charlemagne, who was like the Bob Marley or the Bob Dylan of Haiti, just this epic poet. The title translates to “Why,” and I just thought it was so beautifully written. There are these lines like “Why does life break into us like it’s tearing through a basket? Why do I drink ‘til I get drunk? Why is the noose on the tree? Is it for me to hang myself?” And the last one is, “Why does love taste like pain?” I actually found the whole record on one of the Radio Haiti tapes in the archive and was just struck by how powerful and beautiful it was.

9. YOU DON’T KNOW ME

During the pandemic, I fell in love with this Caetano Veloso album called *Transa*. Caetano wrote the record while he was exiled from Brazil in the early ’70s, and I saw an interesting through line with Haiti and these journalists who were exiled by the regime there. I love Brazilian music, and I feel like those Tropicália artists were grappling with a lot of the same things that Haitian artists were: migration, exile, censorship.

I remember asking my dad if he ever went to Studio 54 in New York, and he told me no, but that he’d worked at a parking lot across the street. I could just imagine this song playing in some of those moments. There’s so much discrimination in the United States against immigrants, so much implicit and explicit bias, and that song must have been how people arriving from Haiti in the US felt. You don’t know me.

Caetano sings the original song in English and Portuguese, so I adapted it to be in English and Kreyòl. I decided to talk about the roots and the founding of Haiti and how the country came to exist, so I’m singing lines like, “I was made in Haiti, the child of a slave / My father slept in the house, my mother slept on the floor.” The effect of the transatlantic slave trade is always a part of the conversation when it comes to Haiti, and it’s such an important part of this complicated identity we have as Haitians.

10. JEAN AND MICHELE

This is a mashup of some of the jingles they played on Radio Haiti along with the sound of Jean and Michèle’s voices. We hear Jean say that they try to electrocute us, they try to suffocate us. This has been happening for 200 years and is there any reason for it to end now? And he says yes, there is a reason. Things need to change, and then he gives the Radio Haiti tag for the freedom of the press. He had such a vibrant, magical way with words, and it felt so powerful to bring their voices together.

There’s a part in the theater work where Michèle talks about Jean’s assassination. She says he hasn’t been assassinated, he’s been sent into the hills with his pipe, and his pipe has made his disappearing spell happen.

11. VINI WE

This is the only real love song on the record. Michèle says that Jean was madly in love with her and she was madly in love with him, and that's just how it was. I thought that it was really beautiful and important to remember that they were a couple and that there's a love story that goes with all of this, too. "Vini We" means "Come See," like "come see the sun rise." People would say to Michèle, "How can you be with this guy Jean? He seems like a lot." And she'd say something like, well sure he's getting me up at 4am, but he's bringing me coffee and I want to be there with him and hear his editorial.

People think of poverty when they think of Haiti, but there's also these beautiful beaches and the most beautiful sunrises and sunsets. And that got me thinking about the things that can't be taken away from us as humans. There might be oppression and there might be censorship, but the sun is always rising and if we're alive to enjoy that moment then we should.

12. ARTIBONITE

"Artibonite" was written by a singer named Sanba Zao, who's a major figure in Haitian roots music. Sanba in Haitian Kreyòl means poet, and there are a lot of different sanbas out there. Samba Zao was close to Jean and I found a lot of his performances in the archives. When I heard this piece, I just loved the melody and wrote some English words as a tribute to Jean.

13. STILL LOOKING

This piece comes from an interview I did with Michèle about her life. Part of the idea behind the sound design for the theater work was to incorporate stream of consciousness reflections that I'm having while I'm exploring the archive. I was talking to Michèle and I told her that I was really questioning if Radio Haiti was my story to tell. And she said, "Well why wouldn't it be? There are so many Haitian-Americans just like you who are looking for their roots, who are still attached to Haiti in some way and trying to figure out how. Why wouldn't you be the right person to go through that? This is exactly what we need you to do." I really resonated with that idea that the world is full of people still looking for their roots. I think that's true of every generation, no matter where you come from. I think even our grandparents were looking for their roots.

14. MEMORY SONG

I wrote this song while thinking about my own struggles to understand my memories of Haiti. It's the sound of me trying to figure out if these memories even exist or not. I was thinking a lot about ancestral trauma, too, the things we inherit and how we develop our various neuroses and attachment styles. So much of that is tied into memory, both the things we remember and the things that we can't. Grappling with the things I could and couldn't remember was such a big part of making this album. That's what brought me to this idea of "How much does a memory weigh?" That's how

the song was born, from me trying to ask myself questions about who I was to tell this story, and in the process becoming more confident in my own storytelling.

15. BOUKMAN'S PRAYER

This was originally a poem written by a runaway slave named Boukman who came to Haiti from Jamaica. He was an enslaved person who knew how to read, which was extremely rare and supposedly how he got his name. It was said that he recited this poem as a prayer during the revolution. I decided to treat it almost like a patriotic kind of song and set the words to music. It's basically a call to avenge the wrongs that have been done to the Haitian people by white colonizers. It's very direct. In the last line of the poem, he says, "Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the heart of us all," and I loved that, because I do think we all have that voice inside of us.