

FRANCIS BEBEY

Francis Bebey was Africa's "Renaissance Man," a multi-talented artist who made his mark as a poet, writer and journalist as well as a singer, songwriter and guitarist. The Cameroonian star, who died of a heart attack in Paris in 2001, played an instrumental role in getting African music recognised on the world stage.

Born in Douala in 1929, Francis Bebey grew up surrounded by music from an early age. His father, a Protestant minister who played the harmonium and the accordion, taught him to sing. He also brought his son up listening to classical music from the western world. Young Francis thus appreciated the fugues of Bach and Handel's "Messiah," but the young boy was also closely in touch with his African roots, soaking up traditional melodies from his homeland. Unbeknownst to his parents, Francis used to sneak round to a neighbour's house at night to play the mouth bow and the traditional African harp. Before long, African music had become the young boy's overriding passion and it would soon become a lifetime's commitment, too.

Francis started out mastering the art of the banjo, but in 1947 he abandoned the instrument in favour of the guitar. Three years later, the young adolescent's life changed dramatically when he left Cameroon and moved to Paris where he enrolled at the Sorbonne to study for a degree in English. Francis launched his musical career at this point, forming a trio with his compatriot Manu Dibango and another friend. After the Sorbonne, Francis decided to venture further a field and live in the United States to take up a course in journalism and media studies. Meanwhile, things were progressing on the musical front as Francis finished his first composition for guitar, entitled "L'Été du Lac Michigan" (Summer at Lake Michigan).

Radio, journalism and poetry

As a qualified journalist and radio reporter, Francis Bebey went on to work in Africa where he played an instrumental role in setting up a French radio station in Ghana. After his stint in Africa, the young reporter moved back to France and scored himself a reporting job at Sorafo, the future RFI (Radio France Internationale).

But Bebey was a multi-talented artist whose talents were never confined to one domain. After working at Sorafo, he went on to run the music department at UNESCO. Meanwhile, he continued to write regular articles for newspapers and publish a series of short stories, poetry and novels. The latter included "Le Fils d'Agatha Moundio" (which won the "Grand Prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire" in 1968). Francis also pursued his activities on the musical front. In 1968, he performed his first Paris concert at the American Center, presenting a multi-lingual repertoire (in Douala, French and English) inspired by traditional Bantu songs and polyphonic Pygmy music.

The following year, he went on to publish a seminal music book entitled "Musique" (currently available in the English translation, "African Music: A People's Art"). Bebey also turned his pen to other formats, writing a series of stories including "L'Enfant pluie" and poems such as "Concert pour un vieux masque."

A Touch of Mischief

In 1972, Francis Bebey went on to release his first album, "Idiba." From 1974 onwards, he decided to call a halt to his other activities and devote all his time and energy to composing and songwriting. Committed to preserving the essence of his traditional music heritage, Bebey made sparing use of electric instruments, preferring to put the emphasis on traditional instruments such as the Pygmy flute and the *sanza* (thumb piano). This did not stop him from introducing a certain spirit of adventure and audacity into his musical creations, however. Bebey did not hesitate to take his signature instruments out of context, using them in unexpected ways. Thus in "Kasilane," a composition he wrote as a commission for the Kronos Quartet, he mixed the haunting sound of the Pygmy flute with a string quartet. He also wrote an innovative piece for *sanza* and cello for the young French cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton.

These compositions were appreciated by specialists, but Bebey enjoyed more mainstream success in 1980 with "Le Rire africain." The album featured his famous song "Agatha," a song ostensibly intended for comic effect but which contained a deeper level of meaning. Bebey later claimed his tale of "the coffee-coloured kid, not quite like the other village kids" was his own personal statement against racism. In fact, on songs such as "Agatha," "Si les Gaulois avaient su" and "La Condition masculine," Bebey managed to introduce a note of mischievous, provocative humour as he tackled more serious themes.

A Fixture on the International Concert Circuit

These ostensibly comic songs brought Bebey to the attention of French-speaking music fans across the world and he went on to win the prestigious "Prix Sacem de la chanson française" in 1977. But Bebey soon revealed another side to his talent, establishing himself as a major composer and international concert performer. Bebey went on to assure a hectic international tour schedule, appearing at prestigious venues worldwide. Audiences flocked to see him at the Maison de Radio-France in Paris, Carnegie Hall in New York, Radio Deutschland in Berlin, the Edvard Munch Museum in Oslo and the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco.

In the 1980s, Francis Bebey was invited together with Léopold Senghor to preside over the "Haut Conseil de la francophonie" created by the French president François Mitterrand. Meanwhile, Bebey continued a host of other activities, composing the soundtrack for "Yaaba," the second feature film made by the Burkinabe director Idrissa Ouedraogo. (The film, released in 1989, won an award at the Cannes Film Festival).

In 2000, Francis Bebey returned to the forefront of the Francophone music scene with the album "M'Bira Dance." In the summer of that year, he went on to make one of his last

public appearances, performing at "Les Suds" festival in Arles in the south of France. On 28 May 2001, the African music world lost one of its greatest performers when Bebey died of a heart attack at his Paris home.

The Spirit of Bebey lives on

In 2002, friends and admirers set up the Francis Bebey Association with the aim of preserving the artist's memory and releasing his work posthumously. The association is also committed to organising African music concerts and supporting research programmes in the domains of literature and music.

To meet Francis Bebey was to succumb to the charm of his agile mind and experience a lesson in humility, humanism and courtesy. In short, a lesson in life!

Source: http://www.rfimusique.com/siteEn/biographie/biographie_7475.asp

Autre chanson de Francis Bebey

La condition masculine

Auteur-compositeur: **Francis Bebey**
Editions: **Wedoo Music**

Tu ne connais pas Sizana,
Sizana, c'est ma femme
C'est ma femme puisque nous sommes mariés
Depuis plus de 17 ans maintenant.
Sizana était une très bonne épouse auparavant
Je lui disais : "Sizana, donne-moi de l'eau"
Et elle m'apportait de l'eau à boire
De l'eau claire, hein ! Très bonne !
Seulement, depuis quelque temps, les gens-là
Ils ont apporté ici la condition féminine.
Ils paraît que là-bas chez eux,
Ils ont installé une femme dans un bureau
Pour qu'elle donne des ordres aux hommes.

Aïe ! Tu m'entends des choses pareilles?
Et depuis, toutes les femmes de notre village
Parlent seulement de la condition féminine
Maintenant je dis à Sizana : "Donne-moi à manger, j'ai faim"
Elle ne m'écoute même pas hein,
Elle me parle seulement de la condition féminine.
Si je dis : "Sizana, donne-moi de l'eau".
Elle me répond seulement que... heu...
La condition féminine... heu...
Il faut que j'aille chercher l'eau moi-même !
Bref ! Il faut te dire que ma condition masculine est devenue très malheureuse ici.
Alors moi j'ai dit à Sizana :
"Ecoute, moi je ne connais qu'une seule condition féminine:
La femme obéit à son mari, elle lui fait à manger, elle lui fait des enfants.
Voilà tout".
Tu sais que Sizana s'est fâchée?
Elle est venue me parler à haute voix ! Comme si elle était un homme !
Moi je l'ai battue hein !
Elle a crié pour appeler tout le village
Moi je lui dis seulement : "Ne crie pas, ne crie pas hein !
La condition féminine, la condition féminine,
Tous les jours tu me parles de la condition féminine,
Moi je te donne maintenant la condition masculine.
La condition féminine... la condition féminine...
Hé ! Dis donc ! La condition féminine,
Est-ce que c'est même plus grand que la condition masculine !?"

Transcription libre: Benjamin Ngong (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities)