

Tsearching for Tshala

BY KEN BRAUN

I was in Kinshasa in 1987 the first time I heard Tshala Muana. It was the week that *La Vie est Belle*, the first feature film made in Zaire, had its Zairean premiere. Of course I went to see it as soon as tickets became available. A musical comedy starring Papa Wemba, the movie showcased some of the biggest stars of Zairean pop in the 1980s: Zaiko Langa Langa, Pepe Kalle and a few others besides Wemba. Swell stuff, but typical.

One song, though, stood out from the rest of the soundtrack. The rhythmic syncopation was unlike *cavacha*, *soukous*, *kwassa-kwassa* or any of the many variations on the rumba that had been the basis of Zairean pop for nearly three decades. The singer was a woman: M'Bilia Bel? M'Pongo Love? No, her voice had a rough edge that the reigning primadonnas of Zaire had long since polished away. I strained to listen over the dialogue but found I couldn't understand what she was singing. I'd been living in Zaire, immersed in Lingala, for more than a year, but the language of this song was not Lingala. That in itself was extremely unusual since Lingala is the language of Zairean pop.

The credits at the end of the movie identified the song as "Lwa-Touye," written and performed by Tshala Muana. Outside the theater I asked my Zairean friends about her. Although they were true Kinshasa *sapeurs*, they'd never heard of her. "It sounds like a Luba name," they said. The next day I stopped in the best record stores in the city and at the sidewalk tables of the pirate-cassette sellers. No Tshala Muana. A week later I returned up-country to the village where I worked (and where the music was something else again), and after a while I could no longer recall how "Lwa-Touye" sounded.

Then in 1989 I made my first visit to southeastern Zaire—part of Luba country. Sitting under a thatched parasol in a beer garden in Lubumbashi one sweltering afternoon, I was feeling drowsy in spite of the Empire Bakuba records the barmaid was playing on a jerry-built broadcast rig. Suddenly the unvarying soukous beat gave way to a deep-toned roiling rhythm, a brass fanfare flared up, and a female voice full of urgency burned through the humidity. In an instant I was revived. I called for another cold Tembo, and when the barmaid brought it to me I asked her about the song.

She smiled broadly. "It's called 'Tshibola,'"

she said. "The singer is Tshala Muana."

We were speaking Lingala, which told her I wasn't from around there. "The language is Tshiluba," she continued. "Tshala Muana is a daughter of Lubumbashi, like me."

She showed me the jacket of the album we were listening to: *La Divine*, on Espera, a Belgian-Zairean label. I was taken aback a bit by the cover photo of Tshala—the vivid blue eye shadow and orange lipstick, the firework streaks of color in her leonine mane. "I haven't seen anyone who looks like this is Lubumbashi," I remarked.

"She spends a lot of time in Paris now," my host replied. That explained not only her fashion sense but also the studio sheen on her music. Synthesizers were mixed in with the peppery horns and chiming Zairean guitars, and digital samplers accompanied drums hit with sticks and the palms of hands. But in spite of the high-tech instrumentation, "Tshibola" sounded much like traditional Central African dance music played on log drums and calabash rattles, wooden xylophones and antelope-horn trumpets. The singer punctuated her song with whoops and ululations, like village women do when they dance. Unlike Papa Wemba, Sam Mangwana and most of the other Zairean musicians based in Paris and in vogue in Kinshasa, the "daughter of Lubumbashi" sounded firmly rooted in her homeland.

I asked my companion to tell me more.

"The song is in the style of dance we do called *mutuash'*. It's very old."

"The song is very old?"

"No, the song is new. But the style is one that Baluba women have sung and danced since the time of our ancestors."

"Will you show me the dance?" I asked.

She laughed and shook her head. In my three years in Zaire I had learned that there are some dances women do that are not for men to see. I wondered if *mutuash'* were one.

"No, but I can't do it. I lack the training. If you see Tshala Muana, though, she does it beautifully."

Much to my disappointment, Tshala was not in Lubumbashi at the time, but my friend at the beer garden told me where to buy records and I went there the next day. "Tshala Muana!" cried the shopkeeper. "All her records are sold! Finished! Here she is more popular than Franco!" Franco had been the Zairean star of stars for 30 years. The shopkeeper's words were like John Lennon's about the Beatles being more popu-

lar than Jesus: blasphemy.

On my return to the States later that year, I resumed my old habit of rummaging around the record shops, vast and tiny, of New York City. The market for African music had grown considerably in this country since my departure in 1986, and I was delighted to find albums of Zairean music that I'd never seen in Zaire. I'd been back six months or more, however, before I finally got hold of a Tshala recording. It was just one track on an album but it revived a faded memory and confirmed my initial impression: Even in the company of three big hits on the soundtrack of *La Vie est Belle* (Stern's), "Lwa-Touye" demanded attention—and got it.

Later, in a Haitian establishment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, I came across a Tshala 12" single made in Ivory Coast in the early 1980s. On one side was "Tshebele"—not to be mistaken for "Tshibola," but undoubtedly in the *mutuash'* style. ("Mutuash'!" Tshala calls mid-song. "Wantama'jes! Aie! Ooooo!") On the other was "Amina," which, being in Lingala, I could understand. (The singer gently addresses her rival for a man's love: Don't despise me when he stays with you one day and with me the next; we should be allies.)

If I hadn't been a confirmed Tshala devotee before then, that record made me one. Like Stanley searching for Livingstone, I looked everywhere for any sign of her. In the grimy bins of a record shop crammed into a corner of the Times Square subway station, I found *La Divine* and another Espera album, *Nasi Nabali*, which proved to be the treasure that made the dig most worthwhile.

In addition to the original, longer version of "Lwa-Touye" and the sassy Lingala title song ("Guys, I've gotten married, so quit grabbing me as I pass by. . . Husband, let me feel the weight of your body"), *Nasi Nabali* contained "Ndeko ya Samuel," one of Tshala's occasional soukous numbers and an extraordinary rendition of the style. It starts with the singer confessing in a plaintive voice and agitated beat that she's in love with her friend's brother, who rejects her. Working the groove, her passion rises and makes her bold: "Take hold of me!" she beseeches. When the song reaches full pitch, she drops Lingala for Tshiluba (as if only her mother tongue can give voice to her strongest emotions), so I don't know whether she gets her man or it no longer matters. But no language is needed to understand the exultant climax in the vertiginous whirl of guitars, drums



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and keening voices that takes the song out.

I played "Ndeko ya Samuel" at a benefit dance I deejayed in New York awhile back. The record jammed the floor and got people coming up to me afterward—when they'd caught their breath—to ask: "What was that? Who sang it? Where's she from?"

People may not have to ask who Tshala is much longer. Her star is clearly ascending and is shining all over Zaire, as I discovered when I returned there at the end of 1990. In Kinshasa her songs were on the radio, street vendors sold pirate cassettes of her Belgian and French albums, and her voice permeated the city night, rising from countless open-air bars and dance clubs. Even in the remote village where I spent most of my visit, friends looking over the tapes I'd brought with me picked out Tshala's and asked to hear it over and over.

On my way back through Kinshasa three weeks later, the talk of the town was the gathering movement to overthrow President Mobutu Sese Seko and Tshala's upcoming appearances at the Palais du Peuple. I would

be gone by the concert dates (in any case, they were already sold out) but I did catch her on a tv talk show, during which she performed the title cut from her newest album, *Biduaya*. Small compensation for the missed concerts but at least I saw that she fully deserved her reputation as a dazzling dancer.

Biduaya was not yet available in Zaire so I picked it up in the African quarter of Brussels during my layover there en route back to New York, only to find the same Celluloid album in the import section of my local Tower Records for \$5 less than I'd paid in Belgium. But seeing that one of the biggest U.S. retailers stocked a Tshala record pleased this fan. It signaled possibilities: Maybe others would show up soon.

Another *has* arrived, and it has got me excited. *Soukous Siren* is not an import; Shanachie has pulled together tracks from several of Tshala's European releases to make an almost perfect American debut.

Almost. The title is disputable: a siren, yes (I would probably wreck my ship trying to hear more of Tshala), but soukous is only one

of her styles and not the one for which she is most acclaimed in Zaire. (I suppose *Mutuash' Maestro* lacks commercial appeal.) The label bills the album as "a collection of some of her greatest recordings," and this too demands a caveat. It does indeed include four superlative pieces—"Lwa-Touye," "Tshibola," "Nasi Nabali" and "Ndeko ya Samuel" (misspelled "Ndeka")—but the other four are less than great. All of the tracks have been drawn from the period between 1985 and 1988, although Tshala has been recording since the mid-'70s. It would have been interesting (at least) to hear some of her earlier work and one or two of her most recent recordings.

Finally, I must take exception to Shanachie's claim (echoing Ronnie Graham's *Da Capo Guide to Contemporary African Music*) that Tshala "stands today with M'Bilia Bel, Abeti and M'Pongo Love as a leading light of Zairean music." Tshala stands head and shoulders, breasts and hips above them. Since Franco's death and Tabu Ley's decline, there is no Zairean pop musician more exciting than Tshala. She ranks among Africa's best.

But these gripes should not discourage anyone from getting *Soukous Siren*. Unless you have the opportunity to hunt through record shops from Crown Heights to Brussels to Lubumbashi, the album is your ticket to hear Tshala Muana. You may never set foot in Luba country but you shouldn't miss the trip on this record.

New York writer Ken Braun has been listening to African music since he was a year old, when his family moved to Ghana.