



Mardi Gras judge with lawyer/cheat, Jacmel 1995

Photo by Leah Gordon

A democracy made of cardboard

Nobody with an understanding of the Haitian political scene believed that the return of President Aristide last October would mean that the struggle for democracy was over. The restoration of the legitimate president was a step forward, but just a step. Six months later, few could have imagined that the balance sheet would make such depressing reading.

With a short or long term perspective, at the level of formal or grassroots democracy—whichever way one looks at it—there is cause for serious concern.

The immediate demands and expectations of Haitians who suffered during the three year coup regime remain unanswered, unfulfilled. Victims of human rights abuses committed by the Haitian military are still awaiting justice. FRAPH members and other pro coup thugs remain at large, and right wing violence is now on the increase again. The economic situation, already dire following UN sanctions, continues to deteriorate.

In this context the outlook for the parliamentary and local elections due in June is far from rosy. On the one hand there is a genuine fear that supporters of the coup regime will use violence to disrupt campaigning and polling. On the other, a daily struggle to eke out a living leaves people with little time or energy for politics.

The low turn out for voter registration indicates a lack of enthusiasm for the elections that may go deeper still. One man told Associated Press, "I voted in 1987 and it ended in blood. My choice for president in 1990 was ousted by the army. What good does voting do?"

He may well ask, for although Aristide is back there is little sign of the programme he was elected to carry out. It's true that Aristide has split the Haitian military into a civilian-controlled police and a much reduced army. But every other principle and point of the 1990 Lavalas election platform appears to have been vetoed by the US advisers and planners who now call the shots.

The themes, 'Justice, Openness and Participation', which heralded a new society to be built by the previously disenfranchised poor majority, are out of place in today's Haiti. Instead UN troops are overseeing a political solution of reconciliation with those who backed the coup, and an economic plan directed by the World Bank, the IMF and the US Agency for International Development.

What future for Haitian democracy when US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, can openly boast at March's Senate Foreign Affairs Committee meeting, "I assure you, Mr Chairman, even after our exit in February 1996 we will remain in charge by means of USAID and the private sector."

A RAW VISION

contemporary Haitian art

Most of the Caribbean has a rich tradition of art, but none of the islands are as prolific and unique as Haiti. In comparison to its size and population Haiti has an abundance of artists, predominately painters, but also metalworkers and voodoo flag makers.

Much of Haitian art has been classified as 'naïve' or 'primitive' because of a simple, almost childlike style, usually without the use of perspective.

Even though the plethora of creativity is considered something of a phenomenon, as well as producing some of the world's best art, Haiti also churns out some of the worst. Stalls in front of Port-au-Prince's central post office and hotel foyers are flooded with bad and indifferent work. These rural scenes are mass-produced for the tourist market and are on a par with kitsch souvenirs the world over.

History can supply some explanation for the rare talent that distinguishes Haiti from the rest of the region: the slaves' revolt which culminated in independence in 1804 isolated Haiti from the rest of the Caribbean and also from an overpowering colonial cultural stranglehold. While the mulatto élite have always preferred to aspire to European cultural interests and style, the peasants have been unaffected by any such influences and have retained their African spiritual vision.

The Voodoo link

The major factor that contributes to the singular vision of Haiti's artists is their inextricable link with Voodoo in everyday life. Before Haitian art was 'discovered' the artisans served the loas (voodoo spirits) and the hougans (voodoo priests) with their talents. Their painted murals decorated the walls of the hounfours (temples), and the elaborate sequin flags were used in the ceremonies to summon the loas. "It is the special circumstance—the existence of a limitless source of spiritual inspiration...which has made the art of Haiti so effective and important," wrote Sheldon Williams in his book *Voodoo and the Art of Haiti*.

The concept of marketing this creativity as art was of course imported from the 'West'. An American school-teacher, De Witt Peters, can to a certain extent take the honour of having discovered the wellspring of creativity in

Haiti. Until his arrival in 1953 some of Haiti's potentially great artists were blacksmiths or decorators, occasionally constructing metalwork crosses for the cemeteries or painting the spirit gods on the doors of local shops. (Visual art is an important aspect enhancing everyday life and death and respecting the spirits.) Peters was working as a teacher in Port-au-Prince, but was also trained in the arts. He recognised the extraordinary flavour of the primitivist and helped the artists to develop their skills by setting up the Centre D'Art.

Hyppolite's dreams and visions

Hector Hyppolite, considered Haiti's greatest painter, was discovered by Peters, when he and a friend spotted some paintings on a cafe door while passing through the town of St. Marc. Above the door was a prophetic sign which read 'Ici La Renaissance'. Finding the artist, they invited him to join them at the Centre D'Art, and soon Hyppolite was producing his intense and strange works on canvas.

Hyppolite was a hougans and his works were inspired by his rich dreams and visions. He never lost his allegiance to voodoo during his years of success. Truman Capote wrote, "because he is the most popular of Haiti's primitive painters, Hyppolite could afford a running-water house, real beds, electricity; as it is, he lives by lamp, by candle in the Trou de Cochon slum, and all the neighbours, old withered coconut-headed ladies and handsome sailor boys and hunched sandal makers, can see into his affairs as he can see into theirs....this is the reason that I find Hyppolite admirable, for there is nothing in his art that has been slyly transposed,



he is using what lives within himself, and that is his country's spiritual history, it's singing and worships."

Oil drum sculpture

Another artist (and soon after, a new art form) discovered by De Witt Peters was Georges Liautaud. Whilst driving through Croix-des-Bouquets he was intrigued by strangely fashioned iron crosses protruding from many of the raised tombs in the town cemetery. The author of these works was a local blacksmith and in his small forge Peters persuaded him to try his hand at a free standing cross with a figure bound to it. Once he was free of utilitarian boundaries Liautaud's imagination and work flourished.

Croix-des-Bouquets, one of the recognised centres for most Haitian religious practices (voodoo ginen), magic (voodoo makanda) and secret societies (sandwel, zobop, bizango, vlingblingding), is now the heart of the Haitian metalwork movement. The two master sculptors, Gabriel Bien-Aimé and Serge Jolimeau, were trained by Georges Liautaud,

and now their various apprentices are producing new works all forged from recycled oil drums.

The writing's on the wall

One aspect of art in Haiti which cannot be marketed is the tradition of painting murals with a political content. Most of these appear overnight and the artists remain anonymous. The departure of Baby Doc in 1986 inspired a profusion of murals depicting the joys of loosing the yoke of dictatorship and hopes for a new social structure. The mural tradition continued during Aristide's campaign and election, many depicting the rooster (the symbol for Aristide) defeating the guinea fowl (the symbol for Duvalier). During the coup years most of these murals were lost, crudely daubed over with grey paint by the military, but recently new ones have appeared. Some depicting a hand putting an egg back inside a chicken are a direct reference to a comment by a pro-coup parliamentarian who said "There is as much chance of Aristide returning as there is of an egg going back into a chicken".

Any discussion on Haitian art must open up the debate on Naïve art and the effect

that Western commercialism has had on it. As Tom Wolfe said in 'The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamlined Baby', "...those poor bastards in Haiti, the artists, who got too much, too soon, from Selden Rodman and the other folk-doters on the subject of primitive genius, so they're all down there at this moment carving African masks out of mahogany—and what I mean is, they never had an African mask in Haiti before Selden Rodman got there."

However careful exponents of Haitian art, such as Peters and Rodman, have tried to be, it is a story certainly not lacking in exploitation. In the Seventies the vortex of creativity shifted to Soissons la Montagne where the Saint Soleil artists commune was set up by the Haitian intellectuals, Tige Garoute and Maude Robart. The artists were all peasants and their paintings, in fitting with tradition, depicted the loas. These representations were not in costume or in a Catholic likeness, but were depicted as form and energy. This was the avant-garde of Haitian art. The group included Prosper Pierre Louis, Louisianne St. Fleurant, the mother of Stevenson and Ramphis Magloire, and Levoys Exil.

Garoute and Robart wanted the artists

to avoid the increasing commercialism of Haitian art, and proclaimed that "true artists do not paint for money". Whilst Garoute was espousing his theory that artists would be contaminated by receiving just one penny of profit, he was receiving high prices for Saint Soleil's works on the international market. The commune broke up when the 'Cinq Soleils', as they were then called, discovered that their paintings were selling abroad for very large sums of money, yet they were getting nothing. They were exploited for the very 'naïvety' that made them popular. They moved out, sold to the highest bidder and let the art critics decide whether or not their souls had been tainted by making a decent living.

Recovering from the coup

During the coup years life was hard for Haitian artists. Tourism fell to an all time low which seriously damaged the artists' livelihoods and due to the embargo materials became scarce. This affected the metal workers of Croix-des-Bouquets dramatically as the oil embargo reduced the import of oil drums to nil. Some began to experiment with sheet metal, and Bien-Aimé began incorporating other bits of scrap metal in his work—car parts and wheel hubs. Sequins also became very rare and in desperation some flag artists began using much larger sequins in order to cover ground faster. The flags produced were unattractive but are considered a rarity as they are a product of those three hard years.

Now, since Aristide's return, life has certainly improved for the artists. Materials are more readily available and the market is picking up again due to an increase in foreign visitors. Whether the artists continue to be exploited for their 'naïvety', or begin to take their production and distribution into their own hands, relates to a wider question—when will Haitian working people as a whole gain control over their own economic future?

Bibliography

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- Spirits of the Night: The Vaudun Gods of Haiti* ● Selden Rodman & Carol
Cleaver Spring Publications
- Sequin Artists of Haiti* ● Tina Girouard
Contemporary Arts Centre New Orleans
- Forgerons Du Vodou: Voodoo Blacksmiths* ● Alain Foubert
Deschamps/Ulys Edition



● Left: Metal sculptor, Michée Rémy, Croix-des-Bouquets (Picture: CHARLES ARTHUR) ● Above: Sequin flag maker, Edgar Jean-Louis, Port-au-Prince. (Picture: LEAH GORDON)

Christian Wisskirchen, who visited Haiti in January, found growing opposition to US economic plans.

President Aristide has returned and UN sanctions have been lifted but the prices of staple foods such as rice, corn and beans are up, the hours of electricity each day are down again, and there is a general deterioration in the economic situation. Many Haitians are asking themselves what has improved apart from a certain decrease in the number of human rights violations.

The international community has been quick to make promises and slow to deliver on them. The government has agreed to the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment plan yet little of the US\$900 million that is supposed to flow into Haiti has so far arrived.

Some believe that, since privatisation is at the centre of the plan, the money, rather than being used to build a long-term future for the country, will anyway end up lining the pockets of the rich. According to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) the idea is to "prevent increased concentration of wealth", but—as Ed Vulliamy pointed out in *The Observer* last October—"quite how the population...are to raise enough money to join a shareholders' democracy is left to the imagination".

It is not surprising that the patience of many poor Haitians is running out. While the majority are suffering, those who supported the coup are still getting richer by aligning themselves with the US-led drive for an export-oriented economy. As far as the few super-rich and their US business friends are concerned, developing Haiti means little more than investing in the Port-au-Prince industrial park.

Haiti's only resource is its people, two-thirds of them peasants, and the fight is on over how it will be used. Those who fought to bring about political change during the 1980s, and who then survived three years of systematic attempts to destroy the nascent self-help structures, are not giving up now.

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American products, where Haitians work for Americans. To do that they have to destroy our food self-sufficiency, combat our own development plans and make us dependent on them....It's a plan for the death of the Haitian people".

Yet Jean-Baptiste exudes confidence, claiming that the MPP was not as hard hit during the coup years as many thought. While the destruction and theft of property damaged the organisation considerably, very few members joined the paramilitaries or fled—thanks to the MPP's provision of safe houses and other security measures.

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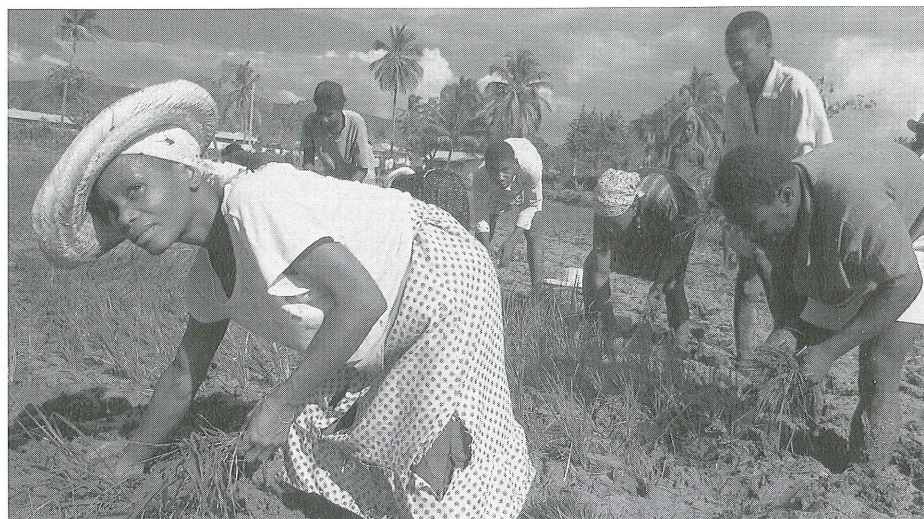
Ignoring the MPP's concerns, Sarah Clark, deputy director of USAID in Haiti, declares that Haitian and US interests are the same. She believes that this is now Haiti's "last best shot", because "how many more times will outside powers come in and make this kind of commitment?"

In Mare Rouge, in the north-west, however, even the remotest peasant is doubtful about such commitment.

Father Brunet Chérisol, who together with the local population has built a clinic, a teacher training centre and a local radio station, is clear that US policies are ignoring local people. The peasants he works with told of their humiliation at being dependent on a US aid agency for food. They would prefer to get the raw ingredients and cook the food themselves.

The US is using a lot of money to co-opt local leaders and turn them into agents of their 'development' plan, but they may once again underestimate the capability of Haitians to subvert these policies. The first round in the development battle has gone to the donor governments who tied the Aristide government to structural adjustment. The next round will feature another player—the Haitian people who are fed up with plans made abroad for the benefit of the "blancs".

■ Faudener Simon, a driver for the MPP since 1990, was shot dead in Port-au-Prince on March 1. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste issued the following statement, "Faudener's death is a blow to MPP, to the popular movement, and to democracy based on participation by the people. This cowardly killing clearly shows that the macoute forces are not participating in reconciliation. On the contrary, they continue to kill, to intimidate, and to block the road to democracy. His killing is a warning to MPP from the forces of death." Jean-Baptiste called for increased vigilance by democratic community groups.



Planting rice in the Artibonite Valley

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● Phone & fax: **0181 201 9878**
● Email: **haitisupport@gn.apc.org**

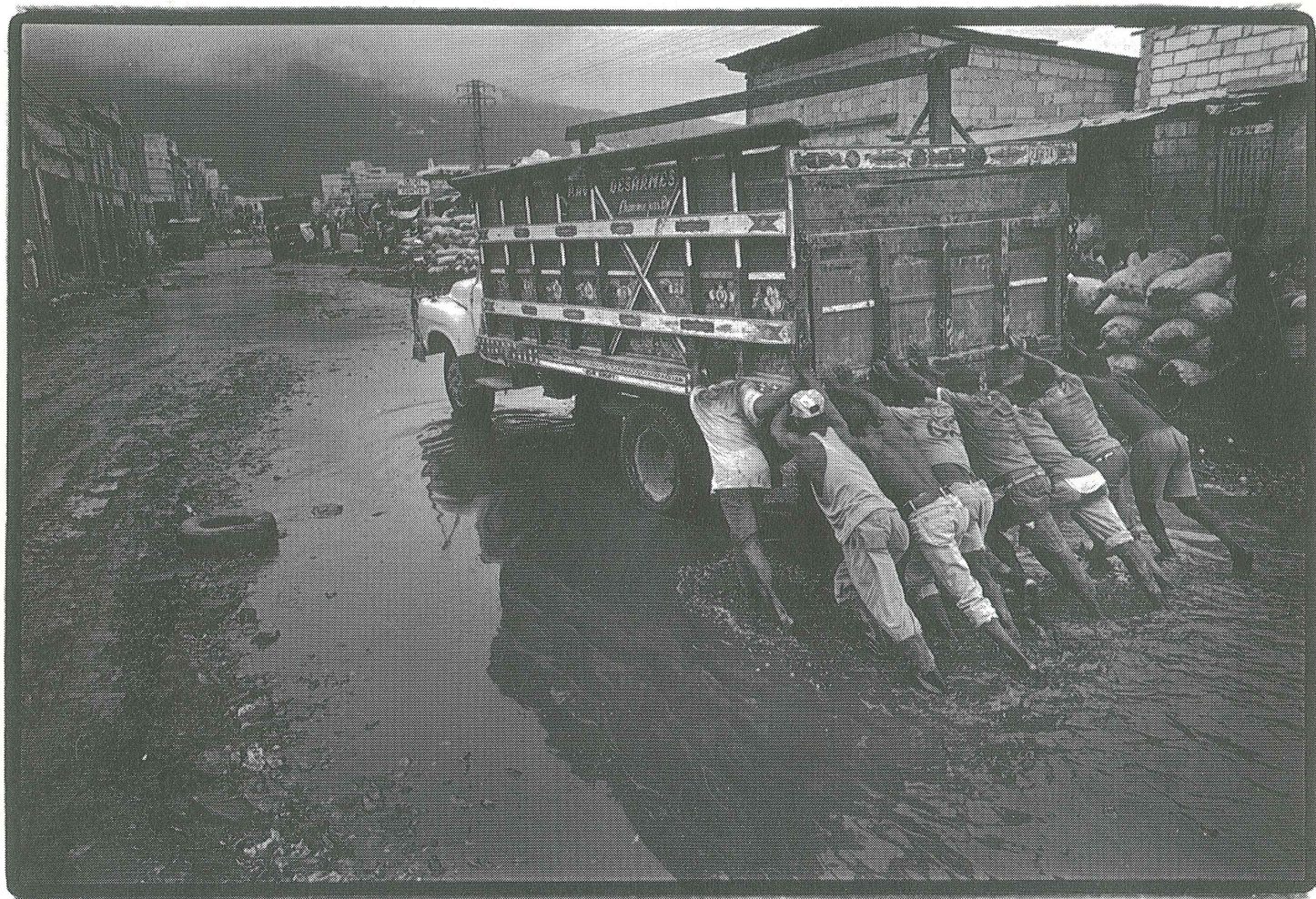
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*The Haiti Support Group
in collaboration with the
October Gallery presents:*

The
HAiTi 
Support Group
SUPPLEMENT April/May 1995

Haiti: Photos Paintings Ironworks

27 April—17 June 1995



As well as paintings and ironworks by Haitian artists, the exhibition features photographs of Haiti by twenty international photojournalists, here previewed by *The Guardian's* Maggie O'Kane

**Above: Flood in downtown Port-au-Prince, October 1994,
● Photo by Rob Huibers**

"I was trying to photograph a body of a man who had been shot in the head and dumped on the streets and I felt someone tapping hard on my shoulder. I turned round and there was this old woman trying to sell me a thermos flask."

American photographer Michelle Frankfurter's experience of working in Haiti gives some insight into the brutal and crazy years between 1986 and 1995 when the work for this exhibition was produced.

Since 'Baby Doc' Duvalier's flight into

exile in France, there have been thousands of bodies to photograph in the street - the lady with the thermos flask has seen it all before.

The darkness of those years is captured in Alex Webb and Maggie Steber's brooding and saturated cibachromes, and Jerry Berndt's almost surreal reflections of the Haitian condition. But this is also an exhibition about life and sustaining it in a country that has been choking on terror and exhausted by poverty for generations.

There have been times in these years when Haiti's people did get the chance to breathe. The jubilant elections in 1990 when Aristide gained power have been recorded by Minotti Bucco and Marc French, whilst Aristide's strangely subdued return in October

1994 is portrayed in the photographs of a stunned nation pressed up against the bars of the Presidential Palace -not quite believing what they are seeing.

The real celebration of this exhibition is that it is happening. The days when fingers were waved at photographers like Maggie Steber by people who said they would remember her face are over. The sombre photographs reflecting the dark nights when no-one moved after nightfall are also past - for now.

This exhibition is a celebration of life and art. Haiti is still in danger. There are those within the country that wish to see its fragile rebirth into democracy ripped apart. Those are photographs that, hopefully, will never be taken.

The October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AL.
Tel: 0171 242 7367 ● Gallery opening hours: Tuesday—Saturday 12.30—5.30pm

'OUR HOUSE IN HAITI'

During Bishop Romelus of Jérémie's visit to the parish of St Margaret Mary's, Liverpool, in November last year, the Faith and Justice Group accepted a challenge—to raise £4000 to build a house for a woman in the Bishop's diocese. The woman, already the mother of six children, recently

gave birth to quads. The group named the project "Our house in Haiti" and approached all sections of the parish to assist.

All parishioners were asked to buy bricks at £5 each and over the next months a variety of fund-raising activities took place: women's and youth groups organised sponsored walks, the Brownies a "Bring and Buy" sale, the local Junior School a no-uniform day, and so on.

So far £9000 has been raised thanks to generous donations and much effort on behalf of participating parishioners. The Faith and Justice Group hope to close the appeal at £10,000. ■ *Contact Veronica McAllister, St Margaret Mary's, Pilch Lane, Liverpool L14 0JG.*

'Beyond the mountain, another mountain'

Following successful runs in Cardiff and London this exhibition of photographs from Haiti will now tour around the country. The exhibition is raising money for a school in the small town of Limbe in northern Haiti.

The exhibition comprises 75 large format photographs of Haiti and its people, accompanied by extensive text covering Haiti's history, politics, culture and religion.

Proceeds from the touring exhibition and the sale of souvenir photographs will go directly to support L'Ecole Bethseda, a primary school founded in 1986 by Francilien Paul in his home town of Limbe. Paul, who fled Haiti at the time of the 1991 coup and is at present living in Cardiff, hopes to raise £7,000 for the repair and upkeep of the school.

■ *For more details about the exhibition contact Phil Cope, photographer and coordinator of the Valley and Vale community arts team based near Cardiff, on 01656 871911.*

Haiti at the crossroads

As part of the programme Latin American Saturdays organised by The City Lit and the Latin America Bureau, the Haiti Support Group will host a day school, 'Haiti at the crossroads', on Saturday 20 May. After last year's US intervention and the return of President Aristide, members of the Haiti Support Group will discuss the prospects for genuine democracy and social justice. With video and slides.

The Venue: The City Lit, Stukeley Street, London WC2. Tel: 0171 242 9872

Course: Haiti at the crossroads. (SH1461)

Saturday 20 May 10.30—16.30. Fee £17.50 (£9.25 concessions)

Haiti films

at the Rio Cinema, London E8. Three films showing Haiti from different perspectives. Sunday 11 June.

● *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* - Maya Deren's surreal documentary film of Haiti's voodoo rituals and dances. (1951) 1.45pm

● *Haiti: Killing the Dream* - award-winning documentary about the Aristide phenomenon and the 1991 coup d'etat. "Emotionally gripping and politically profound" - Jonathan Demme. (1992) 2.50pm

● *The Man by the Shore (L'Homme sur les quais)* - Haitian director Raoul Peck's feature film is hard hitting and intense. The story of the tyrannical oppression of a community acutely conveys the atmosphere of Haiti during the Papa Doc Duvalier dictatorship. (1993) 4.00pm

Tickets: £4.50 (£3.50 concessions) ■ *Contact the Rio Cinema, 103 Kingsland High Street, London E8. Tel: 0171 254 6677*

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