

JULY 1994

The HAITI

Support Group



Photo by Leah Gordon

Is the US serious?

The United States has added teeth to the new United Nations sanctions imposed in May by announcing it will assist the Dominican Republic to seal the border it shares with Haiti, and by suspending commercial flights and banning money transfers. Supporters of President Aristide welcomed these measures, but it remains to be seen whether they will be enough to persuade the Haitian military to stand down. Even after the new UN sanctions came into effect ships and tankers continued to arrive at Jacmel. This port on the southern coast receives over 40% of the estimated four million gallons of gasoline being smuggled into Haiti. The Clinton administration at last appears to be losing patience with Haiti's military leaders and speculation is mounting that if the sanctions don't work there will be some sort of US military action.

Meanwhile, the US has unveiled its new plan to deal with the thousands of Haitians fleeing the country. Refugees intercepted by the US Coast Guard will be processed aboard ships moored off Kingston, Jamaica, and the British Grand Turk Island to the north of Haiti. In an agreement signed with the British Turks and Caicos

Islands authorities the US will establish an onshore refugee processing centre on Grand Turk in exchange for a cash payment. The Turks and Caicos Islands Chief Minister Charles Missick claimed that the agreement would "provide assistance in helping us rid ourselves of the large number of Haitian illegals who are already here." Between two and four thousand refugees have arrived in the Turks and Caicos Islands since the 1991 coup in Haiti.

Refugee advocates claim that the US eligibility requirements will prevent all but the highest profile political activists from even qualifying for an asylum hearing, and that at least 95% of the refugees will be repatriated. In effect the so-called 'new' policy will merely mean a change of venue. Whereas previously the only processing of asylum applications occurred in Haiti, now it will also take place on the ships and on Grand Turk. Returned refugees will remain highly vulnerable to illegal arrest, detention and worse once they are put ashore in Port-au-Prince. As ever the solution to the refugee problem remains the restoration of democracy and therefore prompt return of Aristide.

music of the haitian revolution

by Leah Gordon

Six o'clock and the shooting starts. It must be time for the first rum punch of a long evening. Sometimes the balcony of the Hotel Oloffson seems far removed from the turbulent Port-au-Prince that it overlooks. But then a shot bursts out from close

the Congo.

"In Haiti, wherever you are, you can hear the drums", says Theodore 'Lolo' Beaubrun, one of the founders of Boukman Eksperyans, Haiti's premier roots band. "This music we play, this is trance music, this is sacred, this is music

political revolution.

Richard Morse, one of the lead singers of RAM, came to Haiti in 1986. The son of a Haitian dancer and a Yale University academic, Richard used to be in a punk band in New York. Opening for bands like the Gang of Four and Bow Wow Wow did nothing however to prepare him for the political minefield in Haiti. He started managing the fabled Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince, the setting for Graham Greene's novel, 'The Comedians'. The hotel was the perfect vehicle for the music. "Boukman, Sambayo, Foula, were hanging out, but when I acquired the hotel I created a venue from which to push the bands." This was the break that the Racines bands needed.

RAM have been called a "Velvet Underground with Voodoo drums". Recently one of RAM's songs, 'Ibo Lele', was chosen for the soundtrack for the Jonathan Demme film, 'Philadelphia'. The current military dictators haven't been quite so enthusiastic about RAM's biggest hit in Haiti, 'Fey', (creole for faith). The lyric goes, "I only have one son and they made him leave the country", and can be read as a veiled anthem for the return of President Aristide. Richard has been rung up and told, "For 50 cents you're dead." More recently some members of RAM have taken to changing address as habit. Richard is adamant, "If they will stop what they're doing, I'll have no need to

LIVE AND DIRECT FROM HAITI

"Perhaps the most original music to come out of the Caribbean in the last few years"
New York Times

BOUKMAN EKSPERYANS

MONDAY
25TH JULY
DOORS 8PM

THE
garage
Highbury
Corner, Holloway Road
(Highbury & Islington tube)

tickets in
advance £8
available from Haiti
Support Group

Credit card booking & information 081 201 9878

other outlets:
• Sterns, 116 Whitfield Street W1
• Rhythm Records,
281 Camden High Street, NW1

Boukman Eksperyans are also playing at WOMAD, Reading, July 22-24. We have a limited number of discount tickets for sale. Contact the Haiti Support Group

sing what I'm singing - it's that simple."

Another Racines band, Boukman Eksperyans, wed hypnotic Voodoo rhythms with fierce electric guitar, afro-pop, reggae, acid and gospel music. The ten-piece band are named after a native Voodoo priest whose dream of liberation precipitated the overthrow of the French colonialists by the slaves, and the birth of the world's first black republic. Singer Lolo hopes to dispel the myth of the doll-stabbing, zombie-held Voodoo state of Hollywood invention. "In Haiti Voodoo is not just a religion, it is a way of life," he says. When Boukman play in Haiti it is not uncommon for members of the audience to become 'mounted by the loas', or possessed, during the performance, thus blurring the barriers between sacred and secular events. Boukman decided to remain in Haiti after the coup and regularly make the news with their struggle against censorship and intimidation. Their lyrics carry messages about



Boukman Eksperyans - music that makes dictators sweat

cultural pride and resistance to oppression. 'Kalfou Danjere' (Dangerous Crossroads), their 1992 Carnival entry was banned by the military authorities as "too violent" and they were excluded from official celebrations. They have been banned from state television and radio, at times arrested and kept under constant surveillance. "We sing about the death of the state, because the state that we have in Haiti is a state against the people," says Lolo. Soldiers and attachés (neo-Macoutes) have

become a regular fixture at their concerts. In April 1993, during a concert for about 10,000 people, Boukman received an ultimatum from the police commander to leave the stage in five minutes, but they played on. Soldiers lobbed tear-gas into the audience, causing a stampede towards the exits, but most of the youths refused to leave. They tied their bandannas over their noses and mouths, and kept on dancing. Boukman truly seem to embody the Haitian people's spirit and defiance.

Carnival—the peoples' party

Whatever deprivations the Haitian people must endure, no authority would dare to deny them their carnival. "Carnival is the only institution in Haiti that cannot be negotiated," said Abouja, a Voodoo priest and drummer who is an authority on the country's popular culture. "The government that pulls off carnival feels that it is securely in power, but history tells us that this is not necessarily the case."

During the pre-Lenten carnival the streets of Port-au-

Prince fill up with people until they flow like rivers. Dancers wear fabulous costumes and revellers sing along to the many bands that appear. Most bands compete for each year's carnival song prize with a specially composed song. In 1990 Boukman Eksperyans won with 'Kè-M Pa Sote' (My Heart Doesn't Leap/I'm Not Afraid). This song was then taken up as a national anthem of resistance to General Prosper Avril and sung by people all over the country. This, many say,

contributed to his downfall soon after, and so paved the way for the elections won by Aristide. At carnival this year, which was jokingly dubbed the 'Nine Millimetre Carnival' due to the leading role that the military and FRAPH were taking, the lyrics of many bands merely reflected the views of those in charge. But amongst the mass of shirtless young men in the crowd hostility toward the army seemed to be rising. "We're just dancing", said a twenty year old, moving to the

music and smoking a cigarette, "This is the army's party and we have accepted an invite but that is all." Referring to the army another man said, "Let them finish up all their money on the carnival and then the sooner they will fall." It is not forgotten that General Avril was brought down after carnival. "Don't let the words that the people are singing fool you. Nothing would make the people happier than to see history repeat itself", a smiling dancer winked.

SINCE THE COUP

Not all of Haiti's musicians have survived the coup. Manno Charlemagne, a political singer/songwriter in the tradition of Woody Guthrie or early Dylan, was arrested and beaten by the police and released only after pressure from Jonathan Demme and

other celebrities. He has left Haiti and lives in the US, occasionally singing for Haitian exiles on Miami's South Beach. Charlemagne knows what he would face if he returned under this regime. "They would kill me," he grins. A more sinister

form of censorship is now taking place. Some bands feel that the only way to continue performing is to mouth the threats of the far right. Security forces gunned down the lead singer of one band, Koudja, and the rest of the band fled into hiding only

to re-emerge this year singing the praises of FRAPH, the new death squad organisation. The bands that are surviving the danger are those protected to a certain extent by their notoriety. Life is highly perilous for some of the less prominent bands

from the slums. Yet they continue to voice their protests in allegory and metaphor, which still have the power to make dictators sweat. As Richard Morse commented, "Parable is essential in a society where there is great repression."

What we do...

If you have ever wondered what the Haiti Support Group (HSG) does, here is a brief resumé of what we've been up to in the last few weeks.

HSG members' news film

Two members of the HSG filmed a news piece about the situation in Haiti in May which was broadcast on Channel Four News, by Sky TV and RTE (Ireland). Their report included news of the appalling use of rape as weapon of political terror and of the repatriation of Haitian refugees from the Bahamas.

Meetings

Members of the HSG have spoken at public meetings about Haiti in Oxford, Bradford and Harpenden, Herts, and have participated in meetings organised by Caribbean Labour Solidarity, Black History for Action, Camden Nicaragua Association and the City Lit. Institute. A full colour visual display consisting of eight lightweight boards covering Haitian history, politics and the human rights and environmental situations is now available for use by local groups. Please contact the Haiti Support Group for details of the visual display and to book speakers for meetings.

HSG member in the news in Haiti

A HSG member who worked as a United Nations human rights monitor in Haiti last year made the news when the Haiti Progrès weekly newspaper and Radio Tropic FM both picked up on an interview published by the British Campaign against Militarism. The interview includes his suspicions that the UN civilian mis-

sion was used to gather information about political activists, and his belief that the UN policy as a whole is having a very negative effect on the popular movement in Haiti. It was published in full in Haiti Progrès, one of the three weeklies distributed in Haiti, and reported as a major news story by Tropic FM, the only station broadcasting independent news. A spokesperson for the Haitian Information Bureau commented "...it comes at a crucial time when more and more people are (finally!) realising the real game going on here."

Bishop Romelus for the Nobel Peace Prize

Bishop Willy Romelus of Jérémie has been officially proposed for the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize. Bishop Romelus is the only Catholic bishop in Haiti to fully support the oppressed and speak out against the repressive regime established after the military coup. He is one of the few members of the Catholic Church hierarchy to have continued to search for information and express himself in a just and brave manner, usually at risk of being imprisoned or losing his life. The HSG has written to the Nobel Peace Institute in support of the candidacy of Bishop Romelus. For more information contact the HSG.

The Refugee Council

In May the Haiti Support Group briefed the committee of the Refugee Council on recent developments in Haiti. Expressing concern about the repatriation of Haitian refugees by the US Coast Guard and the Bahamas authorities, the HSG encouraged the Refugee Council director Alf Dubs to take part in an international delegation to the region in July and recommended that the delegation visit the British Turks and Caicos Islands. Up to four thousand recently arrived

Letters to the papers

The HSG sent the following letters to national newspapers:



Haitians face imminent repatriation from the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Teachers wanted for Haiti resource

Haiti—the richest colony in the Caribbean—the first successful slave revolt—the first black republic—occupied by the US—ruled by the Duvaliers—inspired by Aristide's vision—and now suffering under military rule.

We would like to produce a small resource for use in the English, Media Studies or History parts of the national curriculum. If you are interested in helping this project - writing, advising or some other form of support—please contact us. We are open to suggestions. Please contact HSG or Margaret Burr - Tel: 081 981 0183 extn. 4980.

Join the Haiti Support Group

Please help us to continue our work by becoming a member of the Haiti Support Group. In addition to receiving our bi-monthly Haiti Briefing we can provide you with all the up to date news from Haiti and the US on request.

Published by the Haiti Support Group

Trinity Church, Hodford Road,
London NW11 8NG
Tel & fax: 081 201 9878

Printed by East End Offset Ltd, London E3
Tel: 071 538 2521 Fax: 071 538 0018

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