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Seattle soukous: Freestyle shows how it's done

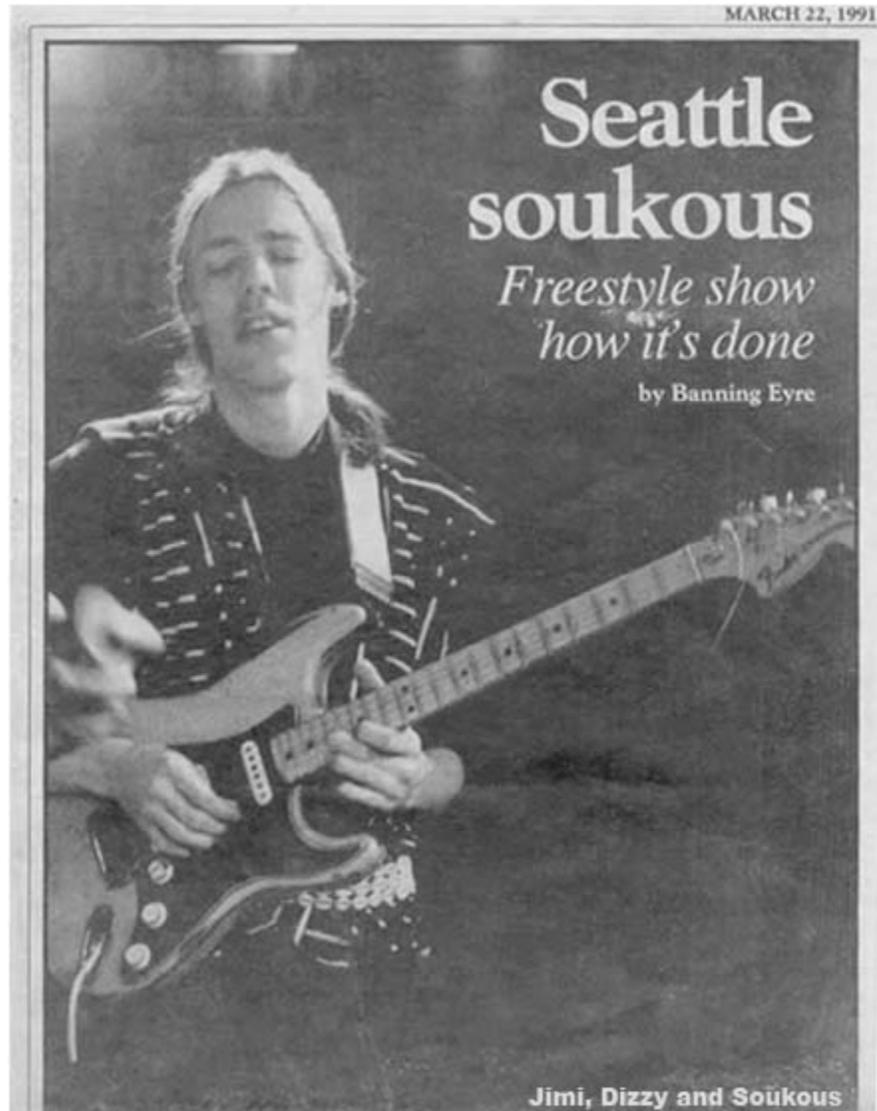
By Banning Eyre

This month at Anthony's in Somerville, Friday night is African night. You get spicy cuisine, an Afro-Caribbean DJ mix, and best of all, a band who play the hottest dance music on the African continent - Zairean soukous. But look again, Boston's only soukous band, Freestyle, may crank out singing guitar lines and giddy Congolese rhythms like true rumba rude boys, but there isn't a Zairean in sight. In fact, these guys come from Seattle, Baltimore, Tel Aviv, and Togo.

When I first heard about this band, I was skeptical.

Guys from Seattle playing soukous? But now that I've seen Freestyle, I have to agree with founder and guitarist Leif Totusek: the sound is not only convincing but "spiritual, hypnotic, and fun." Solid drums, percussion, and the limber bass lines of Totusek's old friend and Freestyle co-found Arne Livingston round out the groove. Yet the 26-year old Totusek, with his Zairean guitar riffs, is the star.

Ordinarily in soukous, honey-throated crooners take center stage singing tight harmonies, but Freestyle's Togolese vocalist Desire Houngues mostly just belts out the chants that rev up the "animation" section of a classic soukous arrangement. Whether by design or coincidence, Freestyle's emphasis on guitar/bass interplay and percussive cross-rhythms highlights soukous's most accessible side. This helps explain how the band can appeal to rockers at the Tam, jazz fans at the Middle East Cafe, and Irish music enthusiasts at the Plough and Stars. When Freestyle played Cantares on Valentines Day, Deadheads tilted and swayed happily among close-dancing West Indian and Nigerian couples - a sight for sore eyes in provincial Somerville



Totusek and Livingston formed Freestyle in Seattle in 1984, playing half soukous and half Africanized Wayne Shorter tunes. Since then, the band has relocated to London, and now to Boston. They're currently dance-oriented, but jazz roots survive in their repertoire. Totusek describes Freestyle's rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia" this way: "The head is in 6/8. The B section is bop swing, and the C section is rubato in the Arabic style -- that essential cry." Totusek plays the solo unaccompanied, a blend of free-blowing Hendrix and North African guitar.

Actually, Hendrix was Totusek's first inspiration: "I heard Jimi Hendrix play guitar when I was 14 and I started playing blues. I realized that a lot of what Hendrix was doing was very rhythmic. I also liked Dizzy Gillespie, and Dizzy always said that if you come from the rhythm, the notes aren't as important.

These notions naturally led Totusek to African music, and to musicians: "I was first exposed to African music by playing it with Africans." Ghanaian percussionist Obo Addy and Zimbabwean marimba master Dumisani Maraire both had bands in Seattle, and Totusek did stints with each of them before heading to Europe at the age of 21. In London, he discovered soukous when a friend invited him to come to a rehearsal of the band Somo Somo, which was led by Moses Fan Fan - composer, guitarist, and a veteran of the grandfather of all Zairean bands, Franco's TPOK Jazz.

"I walked into the rehearsal," says Totusek, "I saw three guitar players in the corner of a room, and I saw a trap set and percussion, singers, dancers, and horns. But when the guitars played by themselves it was just rhythmically beautiful." It blew Totusek away. And before he knew it, he had joined Somo Somo and was touring the British Isles intertwining his guitar lines with the great Fan Fan.

Totusek returned to Seattle to get Livingston. They relocated Freestyle to London, working on the side with the likes of Somo Somo and Nigerian fuji drummer Gaspar Lawal. The life was tough, since musicians' visas ruled out any other work, and, even in hip London, African music doesn't pay. So last year, Totusek and Livingston decided to check out the East Coast. They came to Boston to launch Freestyle III, at first a trio, now up to a quintet, and ever changing.

Totusek explains his arranging concept for the band. "The melting of the instruments is the most important thing-my rhythm with the trap set and the bass drum, Arne's rhythm with the vocalist. The rhythm of every instrument makes one sound together. In rock and roll, the drums play the beat, the bass locks up with the drums, and the guitar solos in any time figure. But when you have five musicians playing different melodies around one rhythmic concept, you create the weave. To me, the weave is the power and the beauty of soukous."

Easier said than done. But as more and more musicians discover the golden guitar grooves of Central Africa, unlikely combos like Freestyle are bound to etch new wrinkles on the face of American pop. Ironically, these are the sort of wrinkles that might help restore pop's youth and provide new direction. Far from being an anomaly, Freestyle may yet prove to be a sign of the times.