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PARIS COMBO

France's Funky 'Attraction'



Angélique Kidjo's *Black Ivory Soul*
Mexican Narcocorridos
Orchestra Baobab
Béla Fleck on DVD
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How do you categorize Paris Combo, the eclectic five-member group based (naturally enough) in the City of Light?

You could call them a jazz group. After all, their sound is reminiscent of both the fiery hot jazz made popular by Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli and the neo-swing of groups like the Cherry-Poppin' Daddies and Lavay Smith and Her Red Hot Skillet Lickers. Or you could dub them a cabaret act for the way lead singer Belle du Berry's style recalls sultry French cabaret torch songs of the 1930s. You could even call them worldbeaters: the grooves of North Africa, Brazil, Latin America, West Africa, and ska all skitter across their tunes. On some level, all of those descriptions could fit—more or less. Sure, there's a little bit of all of those things in Paris Combo's sound, yet their sound and material are totally unique.

So how do they themselves want to be known?

"We're comfortable with being called a world music group internationally," says David Lewis, who plays trumpet and piano. (The two of us are speaking while Paris Combo is on tour in Australia.) "I think that being marketed as a jazz act would result in a narrower audience than the one we have." Fair enough, considering that, with a few exceptions like Diana Krall, smooth jazz reigns on the charts. "We do play songs with a jazz influence," he adds. "But above all, Belle's a songwriter."

So just how does being stamped with the amorphous "world music" tag sit with Paris Combo?

"In truth, the world-music label did open a lot of doors for groups like us," says Lewis. "I actually wonder if twenty years ago Paris Combo would have found it as easy to get a foot in the door in the U.S.?"

The group's members have far-flung backgrounds and musical interests. Belle du Berry, the French lead singer and occasional accordion player, has a sweet, light voice that completely belies the sharp pen of her lyrics. Although she did not come from a musical family, and had no formal training in music growing up, she eventually found herself attracted to the club scene. "Around 1988," she says, "I started singing in various groups around Paris, particularly in the post-punk underground scene with bands like P.P.I. [Pervers Polymorphes Inorganisés] and Les Endimanchés." Although post-punk pop has left a deep imprint in her music—she regularly cites the B-52s as an important influence—she is equally engrossed by Weimar cabaret. Some of her most provocative idols come from earlier generations of musicians, including Billie Holiday, the French icon of film and cabaret, Arletty, and the relatively unknown Romanian torch singer Maria Tanase, who passed away in 1963.

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Belle du Berry's interest in cabaret and jazz fortunately coincided with a French style setters' trend. "In the early 1990s," the singer says, "there was an underground interest in 1930s' jazz, which eventually seeped into the mainstream. Apart from that, though, in France there has always been a strong interest in Django Reinhardt and *jazz manouche*—Gypsy jazz." A shared love of France's hot jazz propels much of Paris Combo's music. The self-taught guitarist and banjo player Potzi plays solos that reflect his adoration of Reinhardt. In addition to his work with Paris Combo, Potzi—who identifies himself as a Gypsy—continues to play regularly with Gypsy musicians in France, further immersing himself in the jazz manouche tradition. Aside from his Gypsy influences, Potzi's personal background adds yet another flavor to the group's sonic brew. Both of Potzi's parents came to France from Algeria, and he heard quite a bit of North African music growing up.

The other members of the band have also cultivated diverse influences. François-François is an adventurous percussionist and singer whose father was a bandleader. Given his background, his interest in swing is a natural progression, but he's also very interested in funk. Mano Razanajato, the group's bass player and a vocalist, hails from Madagascar. Like François, he has played in various swing bands in Paris, but one of his primary areas of interest is Latin music. Lewis, an Australian émigré, arrived in France to study classical trumpet at the Paris Conservatoire. After finishing his studies, he moved into the ranks of the city's freelancers and became more involved in Paris' jazz scene. At that point, Lewis began to work in many styles, playing with groups that ranged from big bands to small jazz groups to African bands, including Manu Dibango's celebrated group. "I've been really influenced by African music," Lewis enthuses. "The stress on rhythm and the musicians' expressiveness in singing and musicmaking was important. Meeting these musicians and making music with them was a revolution in my own development."

The group was formed in 1995, although several members had known each other and been working together for much longer. "Several years ago," Lewis remembers, "I was playing in a cabaret band called Cabaret Sauvage. One of the featured guests with that band was Belle du Berry, and that's where we met up. At that time, she had a band with our guitarist, Potzi and François, the drummer. They invited me to come sit in with them, and that's how I became involved in the band. Potzi knew Mano from the music scene in Paris. Once Mano joined us, we became Paris Combo."

From the outset, Paris Combo was interested in creating a unique approach. "When we met," recalls Lewis, "Belle and the guys were doing quite a lot of covers, especially French songs from the 1930s and 1940s, which often had a swing beat. So they were already doing that kind of stuff. When I joined the group, we started focusing on playing originals—that's when we started developing our own sound. We started to get away from a typical swing beat, and began to explore other rhythms and other compositional styles." Listening to their songs is like taking a whirlwind tour across the world, track by track, and Lewis' observations about each members' backgrounds and personal interests are equally globetrotting.

Apart from the rich cultures and heritages that each Paris Combo member brings to the band, life in an ever-increasingly multiethnic France must add certain flavors as well. "That definitely is part of Paris Combo," Lewis confirms. "It's so obvious in a metropolis like Paris—or in a place like New York or Los Angeles, for that matter—that there are all these different ethnic influences and musical communities. Paris attracts musicians from all over the world, whether from South America, the States, Eastern Europe or wherever else. All that definitely adds to the musical environment of Paris. Each person's personal background is important, but even just being in that city leads you to

music that has nothing to do with your own history but still inspires you. When you come to a place like Paris, that sort of thing just happens."

On the other hand, Lewis is quick to point out that Paris Combo's sound is not merely a pastiche of global styles. "Despite our differences, and although each person has his or her own history and experiences, we do have a common love of jazz and experience in jazz," he says. "I think that grounding helps us mix in different influences. The history of jazz itself is like that. It's a music that is able to incorporate other influences and styles very easily. I also think that the fact that there's improvisation in every tune, and the fact that we have a flexible approach onstage, shows that jazz influence." While it's possible to pinpoint certain influences, their sound is one of a kind. Individually, they are all remarkable musicians, and the energy that they create together is truly incandescent.

What is perhaps even more remarkable is that their music is inevitably the result of a group effort—their approach is not the brainchild of any one player, although the seeds for a tune usually germinate with one member. "Whoever brings a tune to the band, we always wind up arranging it as a group, and we usually do this in rehearsal," Lewis comments. "I think that's what gives our group its sound. There's a variety of composing methods that we use. Sometimes Belle will bring a song for which she's already written lyrics and music, and then we arrange it. Other times, Belle will have written lyrics, and I write music to them, such as on 'Trois petits points [Three Little Points]' and 'Dans les bras d'un loup [In A Wolf's Arms].' Sometimes someone will just bring a tune, and then the lyrics will be written. There's even one tune on *Attraction*—'Retroviseur'—that started out as just a riff that Potzi played during a soundcheck."

For du Berry, writing her own material for the band represents a kind of musical homecoming. "I started out doing originals with the bands I worked with in the late 80s," she remarks, "but in the early 1990s I joined Champêtres de Joie, where our work consisted mainly of covers. So Paris Combo is a return to a more personal approach for me."

So far, the combo has released three albums to great critical and popular acclaim in France. The first two, *Paris Combo* and *Living Room*, were issued on Boucherie. The second record went gold in France. Their latest, *Attraction*, was released on Polydor, and was scheduled for release in the United States by Mondo Melodia/Ark 21 in April. American fans also have the opportunity to see them live this year; plans were to have them tour the U.S. in April and May and then return in September. Taken together, their three discs are, rather remarkably, less a chronicle of a young group's search for a unique identity and style than a testimonial to their consistency. From the first album to the most recent, their recorded output showcases the honing of their sound, not leaps from musical identity to identity.

Lewis agrees. "I think the evolution of our sound has happened pretty naturally," he says. "We recorded all three albums in the same studio, with the same engineer, so it's really only the sound of the group that you're hearing evolve. When you do a first album, of course that's a milestone—and often you have material that goes back as far as, say, ten years to include on that first record. It's your chance to record all those songs that you've always wanted to record! So the material on our first album, *Paris Combo*, is quite varied. By the time you get to recording a third album, the material is much more compact. The rehearsal and recording time for *Attraction* was a four- or five-month period. Some of the material was older than that, but the actual preparation time for the album was quite short. I think that compactness gives an opportunity to present a unified style and coherence to the album. *Living Room*, our second album, falls somewhere in between in terms of time taken."

But it's their most recent album that will undoubtedly garner the most



attention in the United States. *Attraction* fairly shimmers with energy. Like a diamond that flashes a rainbow in the light, the myriad styles that flicker across each track throw off different colors. The opening song "Mais que fait la Nasa?" combines growling horns, 70s-funk keyboards, and light-as-a-feather vocals. "Trois petits points" has a sexy tango inflection that's lightened by an occasional North African ornamental lilt. "Traits de caractères" roams from a smoky Parisian boîte to the sunny shores of the Mediterranean. The title track grooves on an Afro-Cuban beat, set off by a sparkling Django guitar line. The speed and dazzle of the Hot Club of France sound emerges on the fun instrumental "Escapade."

As one might expect from a jazz-influenced group, playing live is a central focus for Paris Combo. Much of their in-studio effort lies in capturing the spontaneity of a live show. Much of the material for *Living Room* emerged from what the group had been playing live in the year or so before it was recorded, for example.

"For *Attraction*," says Lewis, "we had more time to rehearse the material for the record, and we had time to develop it as a recording project. On the first two albums, we came into the studio with songs that we had performed onstage that now needed to be adjusted for record. For *Attraction*, on the other hand, we thought of it as a recording project, and we recorded ourselves a lot during rehearsals to see what it would sound like beforehand. But we also had a lot of little concerts for friends during that time as well, so as not to lose the live feeling either." He notes, "the next album will probably be a live album to be made in the next year, although that's nothing definite yet. We might do a series in Paris and record that."

Speaking of live audiences, how do their foreign audiences compare to their French fans? Lewis says that, for the time being, they're distinctly dif-

ferent crowds. "The audience in France is pretty large, and not what I would call a jazz audience," he says. "It goes from very young kids to school-age kids up to any age, really. Since we've had more exposure over the last couple of years, we've found a younger audience at our concerts. Compared to our audiences in the United States or Australia, the French audience is younger. In France, because we've had major record label distribution, our music has had a much wider audience; although our audiences abroad are varied, they do tend to be a little older."

Although the band's members don't find their French lyrics to be an insurmountable barrier for international fans, they are still sensitive to their listeners around the globe. Lewis asserts that other bands have actually paved the way for Paris Combo. "This whole 'world music' phenomenon has opened up doors for people, so that they are more open to listening to music that's in languages other than their own. We get the same question asked a lot in France, actually!" he chuckles. "The French are rather skeptical that American audiences would be interested in listening to their music. I think ultimately that it's not a barrier, but we would like to start working on that more, by providing translations of the lyrics in our liner notes, since there is some aspect of our work that is lost on our audiences who don't speak French. That's a pity, because Belle is such an interesting lyricist. But when we perform live in the States, Belle has a patter in English that she does between songs, so that helps audiences get into the spirit of the music."

When all is said and sung, Paris Combo's style transcends language gaps, national borders, and even marketing efforts. Call their music jazz, call it world, call it whatever you want—in the end, they can't be stuffed into any one musical niche. Their geographical home base might be Paris, but their musical territory encompasses the whole world. **R**