

LAKOU MIZIK

Lakou Mizik is a multigenerational collective of Haitian musicians formed in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 earthquake. The group includes elder legends and rising young talents, united in a mission to honor the healing spirit of their collective culture and communicate a message of pride, strength and hope to their countrymen and the world.

Music is at the core of Haiti's sense of identity, and musicians have always played an important role in society, both in documenting the country's history and helping to shape its path forward. Today, a young generation of artists is keeping this tradition alive, narrating the world they live in through music that is made in their neighborhoods, villages and post-earthquake camps. Lakou Mizik brings together these musical generations in celebration of the cultural continuum while using Haiti's deep well of creative strength to shine a positive light on this tragically misrepresented country.

The idea for the band was hatched in 2010 on a hot November night in Port-au-Prince. Haiti was still reeling from the earthquake, a cholera epidemic was raging and a political crisis filled the streets with enough tire burning ferocity to close the international airport. **Steeve Valcourt**, a guitarist and singer whose father is one of the country's iconic musicians, singer **Jonas Attis** and American producer **Zach Niles** met in Valcourt's muggy basement studio and agreed that Haiti's music and culture could serve as an antidote to the flood of negativity.

Niles, who ten years previously was part of the documentary film and management team that introduced **Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars** to the world, had traveled to Haiti to explore ways in which music could help play a role in recovery and empowering social change. According to Niles, "I always wanted to use music and story of musicians to create a deeper connection to the country than either the one-note negative press or the falsified hope-and-inspiration NGO stories that get pushed to the public." Niles, Valcourt and Attis assembled an exceptional lineup, creating their own musical A-Team, a powerhouse collective of singers, rara horn players, drummers, guitarists and even an accordionist.

Over the next few years, the band honed their electrifying live show, presenting hours long concerts that blended the soulful spirit of a church revival, the social engagement of a political rally and the trance-inducing intoxication of a vodou ritual. Finally, after building a devoted local fan base, the band headed to the Artists Institute in Jacmel, home to a beautiful new recording studio and music school built by the We Are the World Foundation to help develop Haiti's music industry.

Two veteran music producers joined the group to help produce their debut album: **Chris Velan**, a Montreal singer-songwriter and producer responsible for producing two albums for Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars, and British producer **Iestyn Polson**, famed for his work with **David Gray**, **David Bowie**, **Patti Smith** and others.

The resulting album, *Wa Di Yo*, reflects the African, French, Caribbean and U.S. influences that collide in Haiti. The spirit-stirring vodou rhythms and call-and-response vocals are supported by the French café lilt of the accordion. Intricate bass lines and interlocking guitar riffs mesh mesmerizingly with the joyful polyrhythmic hocketing of rara horns. These powerful layers are topped by sing-along melodies with inspiring, socially conscious lyrics. The end result is a soulful stew of deeply danceable grooves that feels strangely familiar yet intensely new -- and 100% Haitian.

In Haitian Kreyol the word *lakou* carries multiple meanings. It can mean the backyard, a gathering place where people come to sing and dance, to debate or share a meal. It also means "home" or "where you are from," which in Haiti is a place filled by the ancestral spirits of all others that were born there. Each branch of the Vodou religion has its own holy place, called a *lakou*, where practitioners may come together in the shade of a sacred

Mapou tree. With *Wa Di Yo*, Lakou Mizik invites listeners to join them in their *lakou*, to share with them the historical depth, expressive complexity and emotional range of the Haitian people. Emerging from one of the darkest periods in the history of a country with many dark periods, Lakou Mizik presents a feeling of joy, hope, solidarity and pride that they hope will serve as a beacon for a positive future in Haiti.

The nine members of Lakou Mizik range in age from late sixties to early twenties and come from across Haiti's musical, social, religious, and geographic spectrum.

Steeve Valcourt is the son of Haitian musical legend Boulo Valcourt a blues, jazz and roots musician who found fame in the eighties with the band **Caribbean Sextet** and has even played the White House. Steeve grew up partially in Haiti and partially on Long Island where he went to high school and college. Steeve grew up surrounded by the top stars of Haitian music and absorbed it all. He cites influences as varied as Carlos Santana and George Benson to Haitian protest singer John Steve Brunache. His love for Haiti runs deep and while so many Haitians are looking for way out of the country, Steeve has tasted life in America and now wants only to be in his homeland. Steeve had some fame as an artist with his *compa* band **Vod'k** but found his niche working with his father producing young artists, often for free. The list of artists that Steeve has produced in Haiti reflects a who's-who of the biggest stars of this generation and they all owe him a debt of gratitude. One can't walk through the streets of Port-au-Prince with Steeve without people calling out greetings from a passing tap tap taxi, being inundated by people wanting to shake his hand or have their picture taken with him. But it's through Lakou Mizik that Steve is finally getting a real star turn of his own - coming out from his dad's shadow and getting the popular respect as an artist that he deserves. Steeve is pushing the rediscovery of traditional Haitian music through Lakou Mizik while showing his deep appreciation and respect for those that he learned from. Steeve currently teaches music production and Haitian music history at the Audio Institute in Jacmel.

Jonas Attis was born in Jeremie on the southwest coast of Haiti. Known as "The City of Poets," Jeremie has a history of spawning politically engaged artists. Raised in a musical household by a family that practiced vodou, Jonas was surrounded by the country's deep traditions. He started writing songs at a young age - including a local rara band hit when still in his teens. In 1993, Jonas embarked on an ill-fated voyage with his grandmother, a famous leader of a local rara band. They boarded an overcrowded ferry called the Neptune that shuttled passengers from Jeremie along the coast to the capital city of Port-au-Prince. When bad weather caused the ship to capsize, the voyage turned into one of the greatest maritime disasters of recent times with the loss of as many as 1500 lives - including Jonas' grandmother. Jonas spent 3 days floating at sea - on barrels of oil, on buckets of charcoal and on the back of a bloated cow carcass - before being saved by a Cuban rescue team that brought him back to Jeremie. He arrived on the wharf in Jeremie just as his family was saying their last prayers for him, thinking he was among the many who had perished. Jonas has spent the last years working in the music field - often singing chorus on the hits of other big name stars. But his signature style is traditional rara and vodou mixed with reggae and pop. To this day, Jonas thinks of his grandmother every time he writes or sings a rara song. He has become known throughout Port-au-Prince as a passionate and soulful singer with infectious energy on stage. Jonas is one of the lead songwriters of Lakou Mizik and his unique style walks the line between roots music, pop and hip-hop. His songs blend pointed political lyrics with sing-along choruses and never fail to get a crowd moving.

Nadine Remy grew up in the Christian evangelical community. Her family, also originally from Jeremie, were vodou practitioners before her grandmother converted to Christianity when arriving in Port-au-Prince. Nadine's pure voice made her a star of the church choir and gave her the motivation to go seek out the professional guidance of the legendary Boulo Valcourt - Steeve's father. Boulo, impressed with young Nadine's talent, started giving her lessons and eventually invited her to sing back up for him. During the 2010 earthquake Nadine's house was destroyed, and by the slimmest of margins her whole family escaped unhurt from the tragedy. The family was forced to live in a post-earthquake displacement camp and then was moved to the dusty new settlement known as Canaan just north of the city. It was during this period that Nadine started collaborating with Steeve, Jonas and Zach on the Lakou Mizik project. At first Nadine's Christian background made it difficult for her to sing songs in the vodou tradition; she was concerned what her family and peers would think. But with the encouragement of the other Lakou musicians and the eventual support of her family, Nadine has grown into

one of the most powerful roots singers in the country. Whereas once she was afraid of the mystical vodou singer Sanba Zao, they are now like father and daughter.

Sanba Zao (Louis Lesly Marcelin) is a legend of the *racine* (roots) music movement in Haiti. A founder of the Sanba and back to the earth movements in Haiti, Sanba Zao has been on the musical scene for nearly 30 years. He is not only a master drummer with an encyclopedic knowledge of traditional songs and rhythms; Zao is a ferocious front man with the energy of artists half his age. Zao became involved with the Lakou Mizik project through mutual friends. Originally, he came to give guidance and suggest collaborators, but as time went on Jonas, Steeve and Nadine started seeing him as their mentor and a portal to the lost traditions that they were seeking to revive. Jonas' soulful pop sensibility blended with Zao's deep knowledge of traditions immediately gave youthful rebirth to old songs that had long been relegated to the archives. As the Lakou Mizik collective began to take shape Sanba Zao invited his son Woulele in to the group.

Woulele's prodigious talent builds on his father's traditionalism while injecting youthful energy and modern rhythms to the mix. He started playing drums at age 5 and he has quietly become one of the most sought after *tanbou* session players in the country. While he is pushing into new musical territory, Woulele is deeply respectful of the heritage he has inherited.

Peterson "Ti Piti" Joseph and **James Carrier** are the young rara maestros that serve as the engine of Lakou Mizik's rhythm section. Rara is a traditional street music that has remained relevant and vibrant to this day. During rara parades, packs of young men march through the streets, competing for the title of best band. Ti Piti and James are the stars of "Silibo Tet Syel," a band from the poor neighborhood of Jalousie that sits right next the upscale Pétienville area of Port-au-Prince. Friends since grade school, their parents initially forbade Ti Piti and James from spending time together, but their brother-like bond was unstoppable. Their close relationship makes it possible for them to weave intricate melodies with single-note rara horns. Extremely proud of their craft, Ti Piti and James speak often of the dream of giving the simple rara cornet the same respect as trumpets and trombones. They hope to see cornets in churches and concert halls around the world. Jonas was introduced to Ti Piti and James by a mutual friend in 2009 and started incorporating them into his rara-pop arrangements. Jonas brought them into Lakou Mizik in 2011 and they have become a defining element of the band's sound.

Lamarre Junior is the Lakou Mizik bassist. He grew up playing in church and continues to lead church bands throughout Port-au-Prince. But for him there is no conflict between vodou and church music - his faith is something personal he is proud to be playing his country's cultural music.

Belony Beniste arrived recently into Lakou Mizik after the sudden death of original accordion player Allen Juste. Beniste plays with the country's best-known twoubadou singer Ti Coca and comes with a deep wealth of knowledge of Haiti's classic repertoire. Beniste represents a growing number of Haitian accordion players who are keeping the vintage twoubadou tradition alive in Haiti.

For more information, music samples, or to arrange interviews, contact:

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Press materials, photos, biographies and more available at www.cumbancha.com/lakoumizik/press.

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