

Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos

By Gary Stewart

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Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos By Gary Stewart

There had always been music along the banks of the Congo River—lutes and drums, the myriad instruments handed down from ancestors. But when Joseph Kabasele and his African Jazz went chop for chop with O.K. Jazz and Bantous de la Capitale, music in Africa would never be the same. A sultry rumba washed in relentless waves across new nations springing up below the Sahara. The Western press would dub the sound soukous or rumba rock; most of Africa called in Congo music.

Born in Kinshasa and Brazzaville at the end of World War II, Congon music matured as Africans fought to consolidate their hard-won independence. In addition to great musicians—Franco, Essous, Abeti, Tabu Ley, and youth bands like Zaiko Langa Langa—the cast of characters includes the conniving King Leopold II, the martyred Patrice Lumumba, corrupt dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, military strongman Denis Sassou Nguesso, heavyweight boxing champs George Foreman and Muhammad Ali, along with a Belgian baron and a clutch of enterprising Greek expatriates who pioneered the Congolese recording industry.

Rumba on the River presents a snapshot of an era when the currents of tradition and modernization collided along the banks of the Congo. It is the story of twin capitals engulfed in political struggle and the vibrant new music that flowered amidst the ferment.

For more information on the book, visit its other online home at rumbaontheriver.com—an impressive resource.

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Review
“The first really comprehensive account of the development of an African pop style.”—*Times Literary Supplement*

“The most comprehensive account written in English of the rich history of music from the Belgian Congo, Zaire, DR Congo, French Congo or simply Congo”—Charlie Gillet

“For fans and scholars alike, it is a godsend to have so much history packed into a single volume.”—*Boston Phoenix*

“A fascinating and tantalizing celebration”—*Herald*

“[Stewart’s] love and understanding of Congolese music is strikingly evident throughout his book. Few can match his encyclopedic knowledge.”—*International Journal of African Historical Studies.*

“[A]n enthralling dissemination of how changing times and ancient traditions blended to create a distinctive type of music along the Congo River.”—*Wisconsin Bookwatch*

“[Stewart] details the evolution of both the music and politics of the area and his accessible writing makes *Rumba* an important addition to the bookshelf of serious students of Afropop, African history, and popular music in general. The book is rigorously researched and dense with facts, which Stewart lays out in a readable style.”—*Seattle Weekly*

“[Stewart] has a way of describing a song that makes you want to stop reading and immediately cue up a forgotten track.”—Bob Tarte, *The Beat*

“Stewart pinpoints key elements in the music’s history, while neatly summarising broader historical events as a preamble to the genesis and growth of a onetime contender for the title of the world’s best dance music.”—Richard Henderson, *The Wire*

“[S]uperbly presented and eloquently written ... extensively researched.”—Martin Sinnock, *Songlines*

“Attention all sapeurs and devotees de la musique soukous or rumba rock. Here comes a handsome 400 page tome that celebrates the music of the Congo, from both banks of the river ... Gary Stewart is a deeply knowledgeable and passionate narrator.”—*Straight No Chaser*

"[A] gem...an encyclopaedic portrait of the flowering of Congolese music in Brazzaville and Kinshasa — or Léopoldville, as it was originally known...Stewart’s story is not just about music. It is also a depiction of the debilitating social, economic and political environment that is the canvas for this portrait." —Standard Media

About the Author
Gary Stewart is a writer who has lived and worked in Africa. His articles on African and Caribbean music have appeared in numerous publications including *The Beat*, *Option*, and *West Africa*. He is the author of *Breakout: Profiles in African Rhythm* and *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two*

Congos—for more information on the latter, visit rumbaontheriver.com.

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