

Samputu Interview.txt

Interview with JEAN PAUL SAMPUTU
Interviewer: MARK GREENBERG

PART I:

MG: Let's go way back to the beginning. When were you born and tell me a little bit about your life in Rwanda when you were young and growing up, what life was like there.

JPS: I was born in Rwanda in 1962, in Butari. Butari's a small town and I grew up there, I started there. I went to school in B, and I start to sing professional when I was 15 years, and uh after finishing my high school I decided to do my university in the music.

I was stopped by the wars and genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and after the was I continue to promote my music, my traditional, my traditional African music, Rwanda music, in Uganda, in Burundi, in Kenya. And in 1993 I was invited to Europe to perform and I recorded an album there. When I came back to Rwanda after genocide I started the band and the music. And just last year, 2003, I won Kora Award from S. Africa, which award is very, very popular. It's like a Grammy award in America.

PART II:

MG: Tell me a little bit about the Rwanda traditional music. What part did it play in the life of the people?

JPS: The music from R, the dance from Rwanda is unique. We have many, many awards from all over the world. When I was a child I was singing in church. I grow up with that music. And Pygmy, the traditional music of Pygmy, I grew up listening to Pygmy, how they play, how they sing, and it helps me to listen to different style of music. And now I can tell you that I combine all style of the region, different region of R. My music is a fusion. It's a fusion of all the styles from all different region of R, even from Uganda, from Burundi and Kenya.. Our music, our traditional music is not known, but I can tell you that it's very, very unique. Rwanda is small but I'm surprised also how we can have many styles of music. The country is 80 million only and small country....Because every region has his own style of music, how they sing, it's different like other spot. How they dance different.

MG: You said you sang in church. You were raised in a Christian church?

JPS: Yeah. Catholic. You know, I was young. I was singing in the church. I was serving in the church. And I was in the seminary. When I left seminary, I didn't finish seminary, I went to study in the Pedagogic Institute and there were Pentecostalists, Pentecostalists they pray and the sing for gospel. And it was another...I discovered another style, different like Christian. It helps me. And when I was in the Holy Days in our family, I listened [to] Abatwa. Abatwa, they are Pygmies. I had all that kind of music, different, it helps me grow up with fusion of different styles of [the] country.

PART III:

MG: Maybe this would be a good time to talk about the different ethnic groups. Who are the Hutu? Who are the Tutsi? Who are the Twa?

JPS: Rwanda is constituted with Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. The Twa came Rwanda before. It's like the India, India, they came before in the United States. The Twa was also they called it primitive, and sometimes they say they are owner of the country.

MG: So, they were like the first peoples.

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JPS: The first people. And 2nd the Hutu came after the Abatwa, and the Tutsi came after. And when they came, the Tutsi they came with cows. They were nomad. And because they have cows and they have milk; they start to rule the country. And the king came from the Tutsi until 1896 when Germany came to colonize Rwanda. And after Germany it was the Belgium. But I can tell you that our culture is one culture and one language. Tutsi, the Twa, and the Hutu, they are the same people, with a good culture and with a good governance.

MG: Yet they have different music traditions, musical traditions.

JPS: Ahhhhh yes, there is a kind of music of the Hutu, a kind of music of the Batwa, a kind of music of the Tutsi. It's different kind of music but with the same language. Even within the Bahutu. The Bahutu of south they can't sing like the Bahutu of the east or the west. It's different. And the Batwa, it's the same. Batwa is very, very strong. I like the music of the Batwa because it's very powerful and very rich. We have the rhythm like 5/8, 7/4, it comes from the Batwa. And how they organize their voices. When they sing like twin, they know how to organize voices. They didn't learn music but they can organize the voices like someone who was in the school of the music. And sometimes if you tell them to just improvise, to do something, they can d... they can compose a song in 3 minutes. They will sing, and they will dance. And how they dance 5/8, if you see how they dance, it's not easy, but it's very nice to look and to he... to hear.

MG: You had other musical influences as well, I know. And those came from Western sources.

JPS: Mmmmmmmmm

MG: So at the same time you were hearing American and perhaps European music on recordings and the radio?

JPS: Mm, mmm.

MG: How did that get into your musical sensibility?

JPS: When I was young, when I started to to play guitar, at the age of 15, it was 1976 and 7, I was listening to Stevie Wonder, and I was listening to Bob Marley. Bob Marley was popular in Rwanda.

MG: Bob Marley.

JPS: Yes, Bob Marley. Radio Rwanda was playing Lionel Ritchie and Stevie Wonder and Bob Marley. Now, people knew the music of those stars, and at the concert, in the bar, or at the stage, your high school or university, you go to perform, you have to play 1 or 2 songs from those stars. It helps me also to to have all the style from outside, when you mix with our traditional music, you have a package.

MG: What was it about any of those people or that music in general that appealed to you? What did you like about it?

JPS: You know when you discover another style of music it's different [than] yours. It's good and Bob Marley like he said, the reggae, the reggae it's have some of that kind of style of Africans, it's from Africa. I was happy to discover another kind of music. My favorite singer here in America or the world is Stevie Wonder. He's still the best. It's amazing.

PART IV:

MG: Let's go back to the political question. Let's start with where the genocide originated. What was the cause of the genocide?

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JPS: Historically we have three ethnic groups in Rwanda the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. They were living in harmony, in peace. But they say, when you want to rule, you divide. When the Belgium, came to colonize Rwanda, they start to teach Hutu you know, "Tutsi, they are, they are in power many years. They have the majority. You have to fight for your revolution. You must...." They started in 1995, they killed the Wamito, who was the king. It started there.

Even now, we take him like a hero of the country, because he wanted independence. He wanted Rwanda to be not under Belgium. He wanted Rwandans to have their own democracy. And they killed him, and the Hutu started to kill Tutsi. I can say that the genocide, it started there.

MG: How did the Tutsi respond? Weren't there a lot of Tutsi exiles in Uganda?

JPS: They decided to say, "No. We have a country. We have to come back to our country." They started to fight. When they start to fight [in] 1994 what happened you know. Everybody knows. But the genocide's not only for Rwanda. It's the crime for humanity. We have to help Rwanda, we have to heal the people. And it's the responsibility of all the countries, because the genocide yes, it's Rwanda genocide, but the world is genocide.

MG: Can you talk about it from your own personal perspective? What happened to your family?

JPS: I can say that I lost my father and my mother and 3 brothers and one sister in genocide. And I can't, I can't forget that. And I was in Uganda uh...When I arrived in '94, I went to our house, to see what happened. And I asked the neighbors, "Where is the body of my father?" And they say, "No. We don't know where is the body of your father, your mother....." After that I just asked God, "Where were you?" Composed the song "Where Were You, God" because we have the proverb in Rwanda that says "God spends the day away but comes back Rwanda at night." My questions was to ask God, "Where were you God that time"?

MG: So you were angry with God?

JPS: No. I was angry at that time, but because now I know God I know who caused the genocide. It's not God. God created us and gave us everything, and there's ruler ...have to follow.... If you don't respect the law, you kill yourself or you create war, you create problems. It's yourself. It's not God.

MG: So it's people who create these problems.

JPS: People, the world, Belgium. You know, you come [from] outside; you come to teach us the word of God, the Bible. You come in Africa to colonize, to show us how the civilization. We have to ask who teaching us? Who educated us? It's the colonialists they are responsible.

MG: It's now 10 years after the genocide. What still needs to be done? And how do you see your role in this?

JPS: We want to educate people. They need to be educated. That's why I decided to dedicate my music to the children of Rwanda because I know they are the future and my mission is to bring hope to the children of R, to the people of Rwanda. Because when there's no hope, there's no vision. The genocide: why genocide? Because the country [had] no vision. My songs my music, we help, we heal the people of Rwanda. Protect children. Give them the good education. We are going to educate those, those children to avoid another genocide. You know, we don't want another genocide, not only in Rwanda, in the world.

PART V:

MG: Let's talk about the CD. Tell me about "Rehema," "Muslim Girl." It begins with what seem like very traditional sounds.

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Music: "Rehema"

JPS: This rhythm, it's from southwest of the country. They call it Cyangugu. I was there in 1986. Amazing for me, how they dance, and the rhythm is 6/8, very powerful, and I was very, very, very, very excited. All those songs or the rhythm or the dances, they start by [ululates, makes sounds]. It's very good. I started the song like they started when I discovered the rhythm.

MG: What about the song itself? What is it about? It seems to me that this is a kind of central idea.

JPS: Rehema was Muslim girl. And, she was beautiful. And there is a guy who fall in love with a Muslim girl, and he's Christian. And it's hard to get married if you don't share the same religion. It was difficult. And he loves, he loves Rehema. And in the song, I'm saying that because of love I'm going to change religion. And to change religion, Christian to Muslim also it's terrible. You can't do that. But I wanted to show that the power of love can change everything. Nothing can be impossible when we love. Maybe genocide also. I want to show that love is very powerful.

PART VI:

MG: "Twararutashye"

JPS: Yes.

MG: Tell me about that.

JPS: We have returned home, coming home after genocide, the Rwandans, many as, many as refugees. They came back home. It was exciting, and I composed a song. I was outside the country, so I went, "yes, we have come back home. We are at home now." And, eh, it's a hit song. It's very known in our country.

It's a dance song., and it's simple. Everybody sing it, children [sings] It's very simple. Everybody knows that song in Rwanda.

MG: The next one is "Migabo"?

JPS: Ah "Migabo" is ...

MG: Warrior?

JPS: It's like Rwandan blues. It's a mix of Rwandan blues. And when I sing, I sing like Pygmy. It's courage warrior, who has a mission to guide and to protect his people.

MG: Did you listen to the blues?

JPS: Yeah. My brother, he's a musician, and he was in Europe, and he sent me a book and songs of the bluesman Memphis Slim. But at that time it was difficult, difficult to love that music. So I said, "Pah, what kind of music...?" But it was something similar of our music also. But after 10 like years in 1992, when I start to play music in the bars, I discovered that the same blues I'm listening have something similar like our blues. We have singers like Rujindiri, Kayirebwa. They sing blues if you listen [to] their music. They sing blues. The blues came from Africa.

MG: Can you say a little more about that. What is it that's similar? What do you hear that is similar between the music of your country that you're talking about and American blues?

JPS: Just..... [SINGS]..... This is Rwanda. But this is blues also. You can hear Memphis Slim.

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You can hear Ray Charles, but this is, this is Migabo.....[SINGS].....I can't explain that musically [laughs]....

PART VII:

MG: The next one, "Karama Mwana," "Cherish the Children."

JPS: Yes. I like that song because the message is very strong. It's like, I say, Mwana, child, it's you who will change the world. Not only Rwanda, the world. Our children, they are the world of tomorrow. All children are the same. Hold them so high. Let me sing it for you.....[Sings].....Hold them so high. Don't let them fall. All children are the same.

MG: Why is the song "Ten Years Remembering" on the CD twice once a capella and once with instruments?

JPS: It is 10 years now after genocide, I feel that I have to compose a song, and I was here March 22nd just arrived, and I said, "Oh, 10 years remembering." I went to the television. Ten years, Rwanda genocide. And I composed the song that I'm saying, "Now 10 years are over. We still remember." And my producer and my manager, he said, "I like this song. You have to do two versions for me. This version a capella because the voices, it's....it's Rwanda. But this 2nd version because there is a guitar in it, it's different. It's going to remind us that the genocide is bad.

MG: And that producer you just referred to is Stephen McArthur of.....

JPS: Stephen McArthur, yeah..

MGof Multicultural Media.

PART VIII:

MG: The next song on the CD is "Rwanda Rwiza," "Beautiful Rwanda."

JPS: I'm just singing the beauty, the beauty of Rwanda, how Rwanda is special mountains, valley, animals. We have gorilla. You know Rwanda has the only country in the world where you can find gorillas. I'm singing just the beauty of Rwanda, and beauty, and ask God also to continue to bless the country.

MG: What about, uh, the next one, "Aliwokoka.?"

JPS: Yeah, "Aliwokoka." Aliwokoka, to me is he is saved. He decided to stop to be a sinner, to serve God and follow Jesus. And that, he is me. It's Samputu. Samputu is saved.

MG: "Mana Wari Uri He?" "God Where Were You?" seems religious, political, and also very personal.

JPJPS: Yeah. That's a song I composed just after genocide, when I realized that my father and my mother they were killed and my brothers and my sister, then I just asked God, "Where were you [at] that time?" In Rwanda we say, there's a proverb that says, "God spends the day away, but returns home [to] Rwanda, come back and sleep in Rwanda." And I was asking God, "Where were you [at] that time? Where were you, God?"

PART IX:

MG: "Singizwa"

JPS: "Singizwa" is very traditional, Pygmy 5/8, strong song. And I like the world to discover that kind of rhythm. It's special and unique for, for Rwanda many voices and Pygmy. And in my head

or soul I think God likes Pygmy's style that's [laughs] more than other style[s], because when I sing, I feel also the presence of God when I'm singing the song.

MG: Then we have "Ngarambe."

JPS: Ngarambe is a funny man. They give him everything. He refuse. He doesn't want to eat. He doesn't want to drink. He does just what he wants. "Ngarambe, can you drink, can you take a cup of tea?" "No" "Ngarambe, do you want a beer?" "No" "Ngarambe, do you want juice?" And he say, "No." "Ngarambe, do you want, what do you want, Ngarambe?" He want just to go some way in Shisha, it's east of country. They took him. They went that place. "But Ngarambe, now you are here. What do you want? They want to give you beer and everything." They give everything, he say, "No." "Now what do you need?" But after they got an idea. They brought a woman. She just passed, then he start to smile. Then they say, "Oh, Ngarambe, now we know what you want."

We don't know who composed the song, our ancestral, our grandparents. We have those kind of song, many songs, traditional and we don't know who composed the songs.

MG: That's what we would call a folk song.

JPS: Yah, folk songs.

MG: "Tamara"

JPS: I have a friend, and a very good friend. It was hard for him to have a child. And he called me. He was in France, Paris, and he says, "Samputu, you know I have a child." I just asked, "what her name?" because my idea was to compose a song. Her name is Tamara. And five minutes after his phone I just composed a song. The melody came. I don't know how it came but just after 5 minutes..... [SINGS]

MG: "Tuzagera?"

JPS: "Tuzagera" is a gospel song, very known. In Rwanda they sing it everywhere, even.. in the bars, when the people they start to get drunk, they start to.....[SINGS]..... It's a song about we are asking God, "When are we coming in the heaven, God, where you were to dance, because the Bible says that we are going to live another one thousand years. Everybody knows that song. It's a strong, Congolese soukous style.

PART X:

MG: Can you talk a little bit about the work that you've been doing about AIDS, the AIDS epidemic that is throughout the world and especially strong in parts of Africa?

JPS: Yeah. It's another war. We have many wars we have to fight in Africa. When you say AIDS, for me it's like genocide. I have many songs, I have recorded albums against AIDS. I teach people how to fight against AIDS and educate people. Music's powerful. Even people who are AIDS, it's good for them. It helps them, to give them hope, to help.

MG: Do you have plans to return to Rwanda?

JPS: Yeah. The people of Rwanda need help. They need to be healed. If you want to heal the country, you have to visit. I am committed to work for the children of Rwanda, I have to go there. I have to go to see the people. I have to go to sing for the children, sing for the people. Now I have to go to give them the report of what I have done here in America, my first recording in America, my first acoustic recording. I have to go to show them: see, your culture, now has something, yeah.

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MG: What else would you like to say? What would you like the world to know about you and your music?

JPS: I have something I would like to share with the world, with the people who are listening. What people think, when they say Rwanda they see, ah, genocide. Oh, they start to say, a war, a country, no peace there, genocide. I want just to change that. I would like people to discover, the world to discover our traditional music, our culture, because it's unique. If you see how, how we dance, how the girls dance, how the boys "in tour," they call it, you can now know Rwanda through our culture. I feel bad when they say "Rwanda" and puff, directly you think "genocide," you think "to kill," no. That's why I'm here in America, because God want me to be the ambassador of this culture of Rwanda.

Through this amazing culture, we are going to be able to unify the people, Rwandan people. The best way to heal our people or educate our people, the best way is music, is, is culture. That's why my mission is to bring hope to Rwanda, to the people of Rwanda. That's why I thank God every day, every night. He gave us the best gift, our culture.

MG: So, thank you so much.

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