

awakening spaces

French Caribbean Popular Songs, Music, and Culture

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2 creole, zouk, and identity in Kassav's optimistic songs

The high point of the Kassav' mania was in the 1980s. It was impossible to escape hearing one or more of Kassav's songs on the radio airwaves or even in the streets of the main cities of Martinique and Guadeloupe. In fact, my first contact with Kassav' and its zouk music occurred in March 1988 when I traveled to Guadeloupe. While walking along the hot, steamy concrete sidewalks near the waterfront in downtown Pointe-à-Pitre, the melodies and lyrics of "Mwen malad-aw" (I'm sick with love of it) and "Syé bwa" (Saw the wood) were heard over and over. Having lived in Zaire, a country located in Central Africa and the birth place of soukous, I assumed the band playing the two songs had to be Zairean. Subsequently, I accosted several people about the two songs I kept hearing.

"Who is that singer with that odd voice?"

"It's Jacob Desvarieux of Kassav', a Guadeloupean who grew up in Senegal."

"Is the band Zairean or Guadeloupean?"

"Neither one. It is a zouk band composed of Guadeloupean, Martinican, African, and French métro musicians."

Guadeloupeans were playing Kassav' records in their homes, and posters advertising Kassav's *Vini pou* (1987) were on display in the record stores. Curious, I grabbed several of Kassav's albums along with band members' Jocelyne Béroard's *Siwo* (1985) and Jean-Philippe Marthély and Patrick Saint Éloi's *Ou pa ka sav* (1985). I asked a record salesman in one of the stores for permission to listen to my selections. Determined to make a sale, the salesman bombarded me with

stories about Kassav'. Not having to be nudged, I purchased *Vini pou*, which was to be the first of my growing collection of Kassav's productions.

In 1994, I met with Sonia Marthély (Jean-Philippe's wife); she advised me to get in touch with Béroard (Kassav's only woman soloist), which I proceeded to do with a letter. One February morning I heard the phone ringing on the second floor where I was staying. I had just gone downstairs and opened the front door to catch a public bus. Regardless, I only hesitated for a split second before running back upstairs to answer the phone. To my surprise, it was Béroard telephoning from Paris to say that she had received my letter and was planning a trip to Martinique.

To give Béroard time to be with her family, I waited two days to call her after her presumed arrival in Martinique. Her father answered the phone and told me that his daughter had fallen ill and canceled her trip. Crestfallen, I called Béroard at her home in Paris and asked if she would be rescheduling her visit. Her response was that Kassav' was working under a time constraint to complete the mixing and dubbing of the upcoming *Difé* album. However, would it be possible for me to come to Paris? My answer, of course, was a loud "Yes."

In May 1995, I flew to Paris to spend a week with friends and to interview Kassav' at Studio Zorrino. For two days my body throbbed from the heavy bass on "Difé, soupapé" (Too much pressure). In between the dubbing sessions, I interviewed three members of Kassav'. All four of us were nervous. To my shame, I spoke with Béroard for two hours unaware that the tape recorder had not been turned on. Béroard had noticed the tape was not turning, but she was too embarrassed to tell me. Luckily, she was amenable to redoing the interview the next day.

That same day I spoke to Jean-Claude Naimro who plays the keyboard, composes, and arranges many songs for Kassav'. Naimro talked about his first solo album *En balaté* (1985) and his three songs: "Ou chanjé" (You've changed), "Pèd filaou" (You have lost your destiny), and "An mouvman" (In movement). Later that same day, when I interviewed Patrick Saint Éloi, I found him to be the opposite of Béroard and Naimro. His body language indicated that he was not thrilled about giving an interview. In the beginning his answers were monosyllabic. Frustrated, I told him that I was tongue-tied and nervous. Stunned by my admissions, Saint Éloi (who is actually a very shy and introverted person off stage) replied that he was just as nervous because he had never been interviewed by an American professor. After this revelation, the interview went smoothly, especially when I questioned Saint Éloi about the symbolism of light, rain, and dreams.

Ironically, I did not get to meet Claude Vamur, the Kassav' trap drummer, until another trip to Guadeloupe six months later. Vamur was in Guadeloupe with Kassav' to promote the *Difé* album. Just before a sold-out concert was to begin, Kassav' discovered that the microphones had been stolen. After heated exchanges and a three-hour search for more microphones, Kassav', to its discomfort, had to face a very angry crowd in the Baie Mahault stadium and perform with one microphone. Yet, as soon as Jacob Desvarieux struck the first chord on his guitar, the unruly, boisterous crowd settled down. Then a woman yelled out, "Vas-y, Jacob.

Amuses-nous bien! (Play it, Jacob. Entertain us well), a signal for the audience to dance and sing for the rest of Kassav's three-hour concert.

The next week I kept my appointment with Freddie Marshall at the Centre Culturel des Arts. Marshall had been one of Kassav's first promoters in the late 1970s. In his company was Vamur, who agreed to meet with me on another day to discuss his two solo albums (*Lévé mwen* and *Héritage pou . . .*) and work with Kassav'. A man of his word, Vamur and I did meet two days later, and we discussed, among many topics, the blending of the *gwo ka mendé* rhythm into zouk. To emphasize his point, he hummed and played the *mendé* rhythm on the dining room¹ table.

Creole is the main medium of communication in the Caribbean. We speak Creole. We need Creole. We cannot function without Creole. MERLE HODGE (1990, 204)

Within the political context of the French overseas departments, Martinicans and Guadeloupeans take opposing sides about the status and importance of French and Creole. Whereas Martinicans have been ambivalent about the use of Creole outside an informal setting, Guadeloupeans advocate Creole as a political banner. After centuries of being forbidden from speaking Creole in school, in other formal sectors, and in some "respectable" homes, French Caribbean people are now proud to speak Creole partially due to the impact of Kassav's zouk music for the last eighteen years, an interest that goes beyond local boundaries. For instance, after a 1990 visit to Martinique, Jean-Pierre Jardel, a French sociologist from the Université de Nice, commented on the changed status of Creole even in Paris:

When I was in Martinique, Creole did not officially exist. People spoke it only among friends, in their homes, etc. A movement began and drew in others in the 1970s. Then in 1976 I left Martinique for four years and had the biggest surprise to hear Creole spoken at Orly [Airport] to announce the departure of planes destined for Martinique and Guadeloupe.¹

No doubt about it, the use of Creole has been surrounded in controversy for much of the twentieth century. The arguments have centered upon its viability as a language and its usefulness in international circles. The controversy and arguments are tied into the ambivalence of, and silent acceptance by, French Caribbeans regarding their position as colonized subjects, since

primacy has traditionally been accorded to the French language. An insidious way of subjugating and colonizing the Caribbean subjects was to wipe out their indigenous language(s) and to invalidate the Creole language they created during forced enslavement. Without a voice or valid language, the colonized Caribbeans posed no threat to the French colonizers and their policy that French was the true language.

During the mid-1970s, the linguist Jean Bernabé and his team of teachers at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Martinique formed the Groupe d'Études et de Recherches de la Créolophonie (GEREC) which, through its journal publications *Espace créole* and *Mofwaz*, built up an interest in the study of Creole.² The GEREC group debated, but never resolved, two issues about Creole within its publications: (1) the creation of an orthographical system to transcribe Creole into written form and (2) the relationship between acrolect and basilect Creoles in connection with the emergence of other interlectal forms.³ Fully aware of these debates, the newly formed musical group Kassav' chose, just like its predecessors, to write in acrolect Creole, which closely resembled spoken French.

Situated between a rich oral tradition and a growing scribal one, the founders of Kassav' set forth to create an optimistic Creole space and simultaneously brought the intellectual debates to a closure in its music. Initially, a Guadeloupean group from the late 1970s until the early 1980s, its originators—Pierre-Edouard Décimus, George Décimus, and Jacob Desvarieux—were compelled to adopt a Creole term heard throughout the French Caribbean for its group and a Martinican Creole word for its music. Their decision to mix the two Creoles stunned the radicals and autonomists but fell clearly in line with the Guadeloupean Dany Bébel-Gisler's belief that Creole was a language of resistance and the “umbilical cord binding Guadeloupeans to Africa, to others, and to ourselves” (Bébel-Gisler 1989, 23). By pushing forward the open-endedness of Creole identity, language and music for creative exchanges, the newly formed Kassav' positioned itself squarely as an advocate for Creole, because orality functions as a counter discourse to assimilation, regionalism, and departmentalization. Kassav's Creole lyrics were situated in an optimistic space that was midway between French and basilect Creole, and its music allowed the group to decipher its own reality, bringing attention to events that were usually not visible.

Knowing that there have been battles over Creole and French, Kassav' deliberately takes the position that Creole is the more important of the two. Kassav's songwriters promote Creole by looking at its poetic beauty, rich imagery, and rhythmic wordings within the fluid rhythm of a line. To capture a larger international audience in the 1980s, Pierre-Edouard Décimus delib-

erated on how to make Creole as appealing as possible. He began to replace certain Creole sounds with others more easily assimilated by foreign ears. Having studied how to write Creole, Décimus was aware that “certain sounds in Creole could *heurter [les] oreilles* (offend the ears). He opted for a modified Creole that privileged the vowels i, a, è and o for a harmony that would express his *métissage culturel* (Western, African and Indian cultural mixing) leading to the formation of zouk music” (Ampigny 1992, 60).

Highly opinionated about Creole, Patrick Saint Éloi, one of the Kassav's soloists and songwriters, said: “It is imperative when one writes songs to follow the evolution of Creole expressions which are invented all the time. There is always a new word and it's necessary to be on the site to know it.”⁴ As for Décimus, he proclaimed, “We [Kassav'] do not compose in French for political reasons. I think in Creole when I compose my compositions and transcribe them in Creole on paper. I am not at ease with French and we [Kassav'] want to be known in Creole” (cited in Laurencine 1985, 18). The concept of “being known in Creole” is utilized in the natural rhythm and in the inflection of meaningful lyrics. Two examples are found in Jean-Philippe Marthély's “Ou pa ka sav” (You don't know) from *Ou pa ka sav* (1985) and “Ki non a manmanw” (What is your mother's name?) from *Gorée* (1986). In the first, Marthély conjugates the verb *savoir* (to know): “An pa ka sav / Ou pé ké sav / An pa jen sav” (I do not know / You will not know / I never know), and he repeats the ending of a phrase by producing subtle shifts to illustrate the versatility of Creole with the vowels “a” and “e.” In the second, “Ki non a manmanw,” Desvarieux, Saint Éloi, and Marthély insert the Guadeloupean “Ka ou fè?” (How are you?) and Martinican “Sa ou fè?” (How are you?) Creole greetings. This mixture of Guadeloupean and Martinican Creole within songs actually creates a new grammar for Kassav's compositions.

The popularity of zouk music, with its insistence upon Creole lyrics, is viewed as a social and political phenomenon. Max Jeanne states: “Cultural practices will take over as political acts and help to form a national consciousness” (cited in Ruprecht 1990, 121). To support Jeanne's statement, Kassav' and other zouk singers legitimize and elevate the status of Creole. Through their stage presence and concerts, zouk performers encourage a collective voice that creates a feeling of confidence and credibility. This stance appeals to the youth searching for a national identity. By establishing such an ideological space and pointing to Creole roots and identity, Kassav' and other groups—Taxikréol, Kwak, and Dissonance—empower their Guadeloupean and Martinican audiences to affirm an indigenous Caribbean cultural identity. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Rafaël Confiant speak

of Creoleness as an internal process of freedom and a new self-consciousness that enable the individual to envision his own depths: "That is to say: a freedom. And, trying in vain to use it, we perceived that there could be no internal vision without a prior acceptance of self. One could even say that the internal vision is the direct result of this acceptance" (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1989, 29). Without question, Kassav's internal vision is derived from a positive acceptance of self. This self-acceptance is reinforced in its insistence upon creating Creole lyrics.

Kassav's Discovery of Zouk

Kassav' is a French Caribbean group that has had a major impact on the Caribbean and world music industries. Having sold over a million records worldwide, Kassav' has created much interest in its sophisticated, complex, heavily layered disco-like music called zouk. It is a band that networks and listens carefully to other sounds across diverse landscapes. Kassav's curiosity about harmony and search for new sounds also result in a physical and psychological movement beyond a departmentalized landscape—a movement that shows that a shared cultural landscape does not depend on a specific fixed site.

Most often, Kassav's singers/composers write about social harmony, emancipation, cultural consciousness, hope, and respect between women and men. Ironically, these themes are the opposite of what is actually taking place in Guadeloupe and Martinique, where youth unemployment is extremely high and people are still migrating to France. There are constant strikes which affect the operation of the airports, hospitals, banks, and post offices. A steady influx of illegal migrants arrives from Dominica, St. Lucia, and Haiti. The sudden arrival of European Union (E.U.) nationals, such as the Portuguese, Spanish, and Italians, is seen as a potential threat to the locals. Already, in public and private construction sites, many local masons and carpenters are being replaced by E.U. nationals. Also, the divorce rate and family violence are rising rather than declining. Yet, the most frequently heard music on the radio and television in the region is the lively, jumped-up zouk. The reason is defined by guitarist Jacob Desvarieux: "It is a language; it is a permanent festival. It indicates a mind-set rooted in joy, communication, and happiness" (cited in Plougastal 1986).

By teasing its audience with double-coded messages in tunes steeped with Caribbean landscape images, Kassav' manages to reveal the opposing sides of happiness and despair by firmly placing itself both inside and outside of the Caribbean. Through zouk music and lyrics, the multiracial band ex-

presses a yearning and a hope for a return to social harmony with nature in connection with an identity that transcends confined, false, colonial boundaries. Kassav' also struggles with the domination of local and multinational record companies to establish its own creative landscape. Therefore, this chapter will explore how Kassav' creates an optimistic space with its zouk messages about identity centered in the Creole language.

The Creole name *kassav*, according to Kassav's only woman soloist, Jocelyne Béroard, "refers to a crushed cassava mixed with coconut and sugar to make a cake. . . . There is a kind of poison in it. You've got to know how to extract this poison before you eat it. . . . So because they had to extract what was poisoning Martinican and Guadeloupean music, they called it Kassav'."⁵

In the mid-1970s Pierre-Edouard Décimus, a sound technician and bass player for the Vikings de Guadeloupe for over ten years, became restless and wanted to create a new sound to counteract the Haitian influence. He enlisted his younger brother George (another bass player), and they released their first album, unavailable today, *Caso et Vikings de Guadeloupe Exploration* (1978). After leaving their producers, Freddie Marshall of Guadeloupe and Jacky Nayaradou of 3A Productions in Martinique, Décimus moved to Paris to start anew. In his efforts, he needed help from someone who could play Caribbean and other types of music, as well as be familiar with studio work. He found this person in the much-sought-after guitarist, Jacob Desvarieux, who had previously worked with him and Guy Jacquet (guitarist for the Vikings de Guadeloupe). Décimus, his brother, and Desvarieux added a horn section and modified the sound after listening to certain American groups—Kool and the Gang, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, and Earth, Wind, and Fire. This search for a new sound became an obsession, causing Décimus to utter the following:

It's true that I conceived the idea. But without Jacob Desvarieux (to whom I pay homage on my next record) and my brother Georges Décimus, Kassav', without a doubt, would not have had the success it has had. . . . I had been Kassav's founder, bass player, and manager. I have done all I could possibly do within the group. . . . The music speaks directly to people's hearts. (Cited in Ampigny 1992, 60–61)

In Paris, in the late 1970s, the frustrated but determined Décimus continued his search to end the preference for Haitian music over the Guadeloupean and Martinican local music scene. Finally, in 1978, the three musicians launched a successful musical career that would break the dependence

of Guadeloupe and Martinique on Haitian pop styles and have commercial appeal beyond the French Caribbean. First, after much sound experimentation and a close listening to other Caribbean music, as well as to South American, African, and African American music, the trio released Christmas and carnival records under the name *Soukoué Kô Ou* (Shake your body), utilizing the Guadeloupean *gwo ka* (or *ka*). Second, after enlisting Freddie Marshall's support as a musician, producer, and radio personality, the trio released *Love and Ka Dance* (1979) and *Lagué moin* (1980) under the name Kassav' and named their music "zouk." This new sound, according to Gene Scaramuzzo, was a marriage of "traditional Antillean musical elements with outside influences, all treated to the state-of-the-art Paris studio technology with which Desvarieux is so adept" (Scaramuzzo 1994, 30).

The choice of the term *zouk* and of the name *Kassav'* was strategic. *Zouk*, a Martinican Creole word, refers to a party at which the greatest freedom of expression is permitted. Since French Caribbean music is associated with singing and dancing, the hot, loud, and intense tempo of zouk encourages its listeners to jump-up in the streets, especially during Carnival time. Bearing this in mind, the formation of bands in Guadeloupe and Martinique previously had followed nationalistic lines. The Décimus brothers and Desvarieux, on the other hand, carefully selected singers and musicians over a five year period (1979–83) based upon their qualifications rather than a French nationality.⁶

Kassav' songs deal with love and hope while revealing a need to free themselves from the imperialistic chains of the music and recording industry. Careful attention to Kassav's *An-ba-chen'n la* (1985) reveals tracks about how zouk puts a person in such a frenzy that she/he is sick with love of it ("Mwen malad'aw"); how a man sees a female *matador* and falls to his knees ("Filé zèrwal");⁷ and how a woman wakes up to a bad day and derives comfort from her music ("Mové jou"). Each song introduces its listener to a different fusion of musical styles. As each song unfolds, it draws the listener into a world of West African highlife, Congolese soukous, African American blues and jazz, or Haitian compas. However, the heavy bass is always there with horns, a snazzy keyboard, a mixture of drum rhythms, and a hard rock guitar. In zouk, rhythms are built on top of each other, making it the most frequently heard music on the radio and television in the French Caribbean region and causing Edouard Glissant to observe that "the contemporary artist is engaged in becoming the spokesperson of the collective consciousness of the people, recalling lived history and inspiring future action" (Glissant 1989, 236).

Colonialism, imperialism, and transregional migration have devastated

the Caribbean region economically and left its populations struggling for survival. Fully aware of the ongoing struggle to weather the effects of colonization, Patrick Saint Éloi, one of Kassav's soloists, synthesized a concentrated use of images to compose the title song, "An-ba-chen'n la" (Weighed down by the chains). This song recalls a landscape that carries a turbulent and violent history:

Byen, souvan nou ka pati lwen
 Lwen di péyi nou
 Pou nou pòté mizik
 An nou alé
 I ja lè pou lè mond savé
 Kè léz Antiy ka ègzisté
 Kè sé lanmou ki ka koumandé nou
 Asi pon an
 Nou si solèy
 Adan tchè nou
 Nou ni tanbou
 Farin manniok, épi koko, épi shalè
 I ja lè pou lè mond savé
 kè léz Antiy ka ègzisté
 Kè sé lanmou ki ka koumandé nou
 A nou piti tou piti

Ni on sèl solèy
 Ni on line
 É ni on sèl Kassav'
 Osi kon sé le di
 Van la van la ja ka tounen
 Zouk la pwen on lòt direksyon
 Pou èksplozé
 Pou inondé lè mond antié

Nèg la téja konèt nèg la
 Manyè dansé bòd lanmè la
 Tou sa pou yo té pé maré yo
 Anba chen on bato-w
 Démaré! anba chen'n la maré
 Anba chen on bato-w

Ni dé sièk
 Bato la rentré,
 Ni sa ki janmen rivé
 Eskè lèspri an nou maré
 Toujou anba chen on bato
 Démaré!

Sé la bato la ladjé mwen
 Bon djé mési mwen byen kontan
 Si zòt vlé mwen ké di sa
 Pouki sa mwen pé ké janmen pati
 Pouki
 Di nou pouki
 Sé la kè mwen apwan lavi
 Sé la kè mwen konèt lanmou
 A si on pyé fwomagè non
 An é non an mwen téja maké

Anba chen-la maré
 Anba chen on bato-w demaré
 Anba chen la bato
 Sé la listwa menné nou
 Jòdi la sa ké vini

~~~~~

(Quite often we travel  
 very far from our home  
 to make our music known elsewhere.  
 It's about time for the world to know  
 that the Caribbean is a part of it,  
 and that we breathe love from it.  
 On the bridge we have the sun, and  
 in our heart, the drum  
 as well as manioc, coconut,  
 and heat.  
 It's about time for the world to know  
 that the Caribbean is a part of it  
 and that we breathe love from it.  
 Too small, too little

There's only one sun  
 and one moon.  
 There is also only one Kassav'.  
 The wind turned,  
 and zouk arrived  
 to explode and inundate  
 the entire world.

The Black man already knows  
 his Black brother led him  
 to dance along the river  
 so that they can be prisoners  
 chained in the boat.

Two centuries ago  
 the boat arrived.  
 Many did not finish the journey.  
 Are our spirits still chained  
 to the bottom of that boat?  
 Unchain yourself.

It is here where we disembark.  
 My God, how pleased I am.  
 If you want, I will tell you  
 why I will never leave from here.  
 Why?  
 Tell us why?  
 It's here where I learned about life  
 It's here where I encountered love.  
 Under the *fromager*  
 our names were already written.  
 Chained.  
 We were chained in the bottom of the boat.)<sup>8</sup>

Saint Éloi additionally evokes a landscape of chained bodies, facing horror, punishment and death during the Middle Passage. He brings to the surface that people far from home should hear Kassav's music. Then, with confidence, he offers the hopeful solution that zouk will seduce and captivate the entire world. Saint Éloi predicts a continuity through the musical medium of zouk that crosses the landscape between the colony and its colonizer and the

internal landscape within the Caribbean islands and the African diaspora. Paying homage to the supernatural world, the singer also refers to the burial of the slaves' name underneath the *fromager* (a sandbox tree associated with obeah and known as the hiding place for zombies).

Kassav's tour to Senegal in West Africa provided Saint Éloi, the talented musician, singer, and songwriter, with the venue and subject material for "An-ba-chen'n la." One of the most memorable excursions for him was the visit to the museum on Gorée Island, where slaves had been held in abominable conditions for exportation to the New World. Saint Éloi saw the cramped rooms, the rusty chains, and "the window of no return." This museum had a direct impact on his music after he listened to the rhythms of Senegalese drums. According to Saint Éloi, the visit to Gorée Island caused him to have haunting dreams about slavery upon his return to France.<sup>9</sup> He could not enjoy a peaceful sleep until he wrote "An-ba-chen'n la." By actively writing and singing the song, Saint Éloi threw off the shackled chains (haunted dreams) and underwent a rebirth. Therefore, for Saint Éloi, zouk negates the colonial acculturation that prioritizes French cultural elements, proving that *delving within* rather than outside one's own African ancestry and French Caribbean landscape provides the answer for the future.

### Harmony and Hope

Zouk is primarily a dance music, and its rhythm is more important to its French Caribbean listener than the lyrics. Consequently, people are quick to say that Kassav's songs are nonsensical and "lightweight." As soon as one pays attention to Kassav's compositions, it is obvious that great care is allocated to the wording. The songs' themes range from nostalgic references and a longing for one's island landscape to social commentary, male/female relationships, and harmony and hope. In 1983, Desvarieux's song "Banzawa"<sup>10</sup> on the album *Banzawa* with George Debs Productions was popular, but it was George Décimus' hit "Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni" (Zouk is the only medicine we have) on *Yelélé* (G. Debs 1984) which boosted the band to international stardom (see chapter 5).

Kassav's abandonment of the "mother" islands for France brings forth a strong form of nostalgia for the very landscape it left. The self-exiled Décimus, Naimro, and Saint Éloi are alienated and suffer from the cold French weather and people. Yet the three performers recapture and reinstate their islands' traditions in alternating open, oblique, or subtle ways. In Pierre-Edouard Décimus's "Wonderful," found on *Kassav' #3* (1980), a woman and man's intimate communion with the island landscape lives in their

blood. Every time Décimus has the chance, he returns to Guadeloupe. The tune "Wonderful" expresses his exact emotions:

Lè mwen débaké  
En tè kon, on boug fou  
Paskè mwen touvé péyi la wonderful

~~~~~  
4

(When I landed,
I was like a fool
because I found the country to be wonderful.)¹¹

Clearly, Décimus neither finds France to be beautiful nor wonderful. He continues with "Senti jan sé moun la yé / Sé moun la yé / Yo ka limé difé / Lè yo ka dansé / Gadé jan sé moun la yé / Jan moun la yé" (Feel the people's energy / the way they are / Feel their heat / when they dance / Just look at way they are / the way they are).¹² For Décimus, Guadeloupe is a place where people openly express their feelings and dance with abandon. He becomes spontaneous in this familiar landscape imbued with bright colors that stimulate his psyche.

Jean-Claude Naimro's first recorded romantic ballad "Korosol" (Sour-sop) from *Yelélé* recalls his love for Martinique with its exotic fruit, the *korosol*. He explains he deliberately chose korosol because it is indigenous to the Caribbean while pineapples, coconuts, and mangoes are found also in Asia and Africa.¹³ Korosol is a bumpy, thin-skinned delicate fruit with a unique, sour flavor that, when sweetened, is appropriate for a homemade sherbet or a delicious drink. Equating his nostalgia for Martinique with korosol is like contrasting the cement walkways, skyscrapers, hectic pace, and anonymity of France with the lush greenery, sandy beaches, and slower rhythm of the Caribbean. In short, korosol is his solace after he has resided in France:

"Korosol" is a title that speaks about the return to one's country because Antilleans who are in Paris suffer from nostalgia. I wanted to translate the people's emotions who live in France and can no longer return to the French Antilles. It is why I get angry with God so that I can return home where it is hot.¹⁴

In 1992, Kassav' starred in Euzhan Palcy's film *Siméon*, which relates the tale of a French Caribbean man who desires to be known as a guitarist,

composer, and creator of a music that would be popular worldwide. “Mwen alé” (My departure) and “Mwen viré” (My return) are two of the songs written by Béroard for the movie and that appear on *Tekit izi* (1992). In “Mwen alé,” Siméon, the main character in the film, recites the mixed feelings that he encounters upon leaving his island for France. His departure is linked to those who have already left before him. The mothers who remain behind cannot be forgotten, for they cry out at night for their children’s safe return. Upon Siméon’s departure his daughter’s parting statement of encouragement, “Ou pé alé / Trasé chimin-w / Woulé é é” (You can leave / Follow your path / Go there),¹⁵ echoes that of the mothers. Siméon’s response is “Mwen la ka tchembé / Pas a pa lòt bò / An té ké vlé mò / A pa lòt bò / An té ké lé mò” (I am holding on / because I do not want to die / far from my country / It isn’t over here / where I want to die).¹⁶

Later, in “Mwen viré,” Béroard sings of Siméon’s desire to leave behind the greyness of Paris in order to feel some sun on his skin because, like a tree, he cannot grow if his roots are cut off. Stable tree roots promise growth and recovery associated with courage. As a result, Siméon recalls his island’s familiar geography to offset the insecurity of living abroad and to avoid experiencing a cultural discontinuity. Also, it is music that sustains Siméon, brings him fame, and enables him to return to his island home in triumph. What Siméon has in his heart is expressed in his fingertips on the guitar. The drums make him vibrate; the island rhythms flow and surround him.

The Soloists’ Love Songs

Enhancing his career with several solo albums, Saint Éloi, called *chanteur de charme* (singer of charm) and *kréyòl lover* (Creole lover), attributes his career boom to “West Indies” from his *Misik-cé lan mou* (1982). Composer of double-coded, poetic songs of hypnotic imagery, he invents a vital, sensuous, and vibrant Caribbean. Also, under the guise of delivering a song about the Caribbean, Saint Éloi’s lyrics duplicate copulation: “Lè mwen santi an ti lodè vanille / Mwen sav sé-w / ki ka vini doudou” (Whenever I smell vanilla / I know that it’s you, darling / who is coming).¹⁷ Associating the smell of vanilla with sweet things, soft textures, and sensual pleasures, Saint Éloi proceeds with “Mè doudou ou tèlman dous aprè lanmou” (But darling you are so sweet after making love) and ends with “An dékolaj’ ankò / pou nou sa monté, monté, monté” (Another trip together / so that we can get higher), intimating that the love act will be repeated more than once. The couple vibrates to the sensual quality of the Caribbean landscape, is entangled and interconnected with the landscape, and moves toward a mutual burst of life.

This fusion of man, woman, and landscape reveals Saint Éloi’s passion for a land, symbolizing a receptive woman’s body. His vision of the Caribbean, and in particular Guadeloupe, is caught between sensation and memory, for “Ti zouézo ka shèshé flè pou butiné” (Birds are looking for flowers to gather nectar). The ascending melodic phrase of “West Indies” accentuates Saint Éloi’s voice as he pronounces “an dékolaj’ ankò” (another trip together) to set the stage where passions are enacted.

The romantic relationships, explored in Saint Éloi’s lyrical texts as well as those by Jean-Philippe Marthély, establish a new rapport between women and men. Instead of projecting a macho image to support the rumor that there are three women for each man in the French Caribbean, the two songwriters equate love with vulnerability, doubt, fear, and respect for women. With great emotion and much tenderness, Marthély, a second tenor, sings about a man’s deep love for his wife in the beautiful ballad “Bèl kréati” (Beautiful creature) from *Touloulou* (1984).¹⁸

Épi ti mélodi ta la, sé sèl manyè
Mwen ké fè-w wouè, ou ké konprann ou ké sézi
Bon djé sa mwen ka fè, si ou pa la

~~~~~

(This song is my only way of making you see,  
understand and grasp.  
God knows I’m lost without you.)<sup>19</sup>

So dependent on his wife’s support, Marthély, without hesitation, also sings “Mwen ka tatoné mwen avègle / Sé tròp pou mwen / San ou doudou pa ni jou pa ni lannuit” (I grope along like a blind person / I need support / Without you, my love, there’s neither day nor night). In retrospect, Marthély does not think that he would be as successful as he is if his wife had not helped him to build up his self-esteem in the tough world of entertainment.

Switching from this slow, tender, and very personal ballad, Marthély moans, groans, shouts, and scats on the sexy “Sé pa djen-djen” (It’s not a joke) from *An-ba-chen-n la*. Again, the message is about a loving relationship between a man and a woman, but this time Marthély extends it to encompass a fusion of the spiritual and the physical:

Sé pa sèlman kò dan kò  
Sé tèt la ki pli enpòrtan

Gadé ki jan i ka ba nou bon la fòs  
 Pou nou pé wouè douvan nou  
 Ko nou ka dékolé tchè  
 Nou toujou ansamn menm'  
 Menm' lè nou lwen yo ka bat menm' jan

~~~~~

(It's not only our bodies together that count.
 The way we treat each other is more important.
 Look how we're getting stronger
 to think clearly about the future.
 Our bodies rise with our hearts together.
 Even when we are apart,
 our hearts beat to the same rhythm.)²⁰

The Creole expression *djen-djen* (making fun of everything) implies foolishness and childish behavior. Reinforced by the chorus with a heavy bass, Marthély places a great importance on the absence of *djen-djen*. He begs the woman to *gadé* (look at) him so that they can *réfléchi* (reflect together) as a couple. The verb *réfléchir* (to reflect) is repeated twice with an emphasis on the first syllable. Then Marthély adds "*réfleksyon* (let's reflect), acknowledging that both parties are actively engaged in their relationship. To assure the woman that he loves her, he coaxes her with "Wouvé zyé / lèvé tèt / pa kitè douvan prann-w" (Open your eyes / Lift up your head / Think ahead).²¹ If she looks directly at him, she will surely know that their love is planted in a firm ground.

Saint Éloi reveals that men feel, hurt, and betray as do women. For example, on his fourth solo album, *Zoukamine* (1994), he relates the tale of an older man who loves a younger woman in "Ki jan ké fè" (What am I going to do?).²² Reversing the stereotypical male power role within a relationship, Saint Éloi introduces a man who loves a younger woman who has left him. He tries to persuade her to return, because "Tou sa ki senp / toujou pli bèl / Nou té ja konprann sa / Pou enmé pani laj" (Simple things / are always more beautiful / We had understood this / Love does not care about age).²³ Saint Éloi's lyrics, writes Jocelyne Guilbault, "are considered by many Antilleans of both sexes to be a true revolution in the song-text traditions of their countries" (Guilbault et al. 1993, 158). This baring of Saint Éloi's soul about a man's vulnerability when he loves establishes a pattern and inspires other French Caribbean men and women to compose such lyrics.

Saint Éloi's metaphors of a wounded bird who cannot fly, a hat blown in the wind, and a cloud on his life are combined to describe the disappointment and hurt that creep into a relationship in "Pa douté" (Don't doubt). To explain his choice of metaphors, Saint Éloi says:

The image of the wounded bird is weak, but it is also a bird that can leave. There are two connotations and I frequently return to them. When one counts on someone, it is with the expectation of being appreciated. Sometimes external elements disrupt this joy because there are jealous people so one must be on guard. If the couple wants to get together again, the man only asks for one solution, which is for the woman not to doubt him and his love.²⁴

The man is both wounded and bewildered when the woman that he loves is incapable of accepting the fact that he has never been unfaithful to her. Refusing to give up, he affirms that "Mwen pa janmen menti ba ou" (I never cheated on you) and asks the open-ended question: "Poutchi ou ka douté di mwen" (Why do you doubt me?).²⁵ Hence, he, the wounded bird, does not evade flight but has a confrontation with the object of his love. Though the rain cloud obscures the woman's vision, it can bring, at the same time, light and trust.

Working with Béroard gave Saint Éloi and other male members of Kassav' a certain amount of sensitivity toward women. On a RFO television show in Guadeloupe, Saint Éloi stated: "As a composer you must pay close attention to your surroundings and details, be observant and aware of the illusions."²⁶ What attracted Saint Éloi to women were their eyes. For "Si cé oui" (If it's yes) from *Bizouk* (Zouk kiss), a woman was told that "Sé en dé zyé-w ka mwen ké konprann sa" (It's through your two eyes that I will understand). To make sure that his point was well taken, the sentence, "Ou sé an mòso a mwen ki dous é ki sa fè mal" (You are a part of me that is soft and hurts), had to be repeated four times. For the duet "Silans" (Silence) on *Difé* (1995), Saint Éloi alternated between Creole and French with the guest singer Della Miles. His and Miles's voices blended together as one as they narrated the story of lovers who engaged in a silent communication with their eyes. Saint Éloi categorically announced in Creole, "Silans-la ka palé an zyé-w" (Silence speaks through your eyes); Miles responded in French, "Et tes yeux qui disent toujours je t'aime / Je t'aime, en silence" (And your eyes which still say I love you / I love you silently).²⁷ The two engaged in a call-and-response and harmonized well along with the chorus. The silence, in question, needed to be broken so that the man could sing about his unflinching love despite the

woman's downcast eyes. He cautioned his beloved to remember to "Sonjé byen sa nou té di / Si nwasè tonbé asi nou / On limyè kè nou té séré toujou la pou lanmou" (Remember what we said / should a sad fate befall us / A hidden light within us / will always be there for love). Sounding like a film score with thirty-five violins, "Silans," the last song on *Difé* (Heat), with Saint Éloi's bilingual creative lyrics, was appreciated after the intensity of the other eleven songs.

In "Ou chanjé" (You have changed) from *Tekit izi* (Take it easy), Naimro relates how distance and mistrust can creep into a relationship when the husband is unfaithful.

Mwen ka dan lavi sa ka konté
Séki ou rivé viv on armoni
Sa pa fasil mwen té konprann
Nou té ja dépasé
Sa lé zòt' pa ka rivé kontwolé
Mé aktyalman mwen konstaté ou chanjé
Palé-w di sa pa menm branché
Poutchi mwen menm mwen sé an nonm osi

Mwen té pé mò pou mwen pé sa gadé-w
Pourtan fout ou chanjé
Ou toujou ka révé ni de jou-w ka sòti
Mwen kabyen risanti ki ou prèsé pati
Mé, fout ou chanjé
Mannyè palé-w chanjé
Ni de nouvo silans épi nouvel absans
Pa djè retéw paysans
Ou byen chanjé, chanjé
Ou di mwen bonswè san menm jété an zyé
Ou ni mal tèt
Ou pa lè mwen palé
Mwen douvan-w ka fè sanblan
Mé mwen ja konprann
Zyé mwen ka wouè zimaj mé tèt mwen ka pansé
Ki janmen di mwen-w chanjé
Palé-w di sa ou ja troublé
Poutchi mwen menm sé nonm osi

Mwen té voudré twouvé an moun
Pou di ki sa pa vré
Ou byen chanjé

Dousè zyé-w chanjé osi
Mwen ja ka diviné
Ki tchè-w an balans
Soufrans mwen koumansé
Si ou chanjé, chanjé
Pètèt mwen menm osi chanjé
Dé lè mwen tou jenné
Difè-w dé ti karès
Lè ou sòti lan mès
Ou byen chanjé
Sonmèy ou ajité
Lavi mwen chalviré, préokipé

~~~~~

(I think that what counts in life  
is to be able to live in harmony.  
It is far from easy.  
I believe that  
we have surpassed  
what others have had a hard time controlling.  
But now, I've noticed you have changed.  
I have tried to talk to you about it.  
Tell me why you avoid a conversation.

I am only a man who would give  
his life to keep you.  
How you have changed.  
You are always dreaming.  
Some days when you are going out  
you are in a hurry.  
How you have changed.  
Even the way you speak has changed.  
There are new silences, new absences,  
and you are hardly ever patient.  
How you have changed.

You told me "Good night"  
 without even looking at me.  
 You have a headache.  
 You don't even want to hear me speak.  
 I am too near to you to pretend,  
 but I already understood.  
 My eyes saw the picture, but in my head,  
 even your friends say you've changed.  
 When I spoke to you about it,  
 that troubled you.  
 Why?  
 I would like to find someone  
 who tells me that it isn't true.  
 You have really changed.

You no longer have a softness in your look,  
 and I suppose your heart is in balance.  
 So, my suffering is beginning if you change.  
 Perhaps I have changed, too.  
 I am feeling ill at ease  
 about caressing you  
 when you return from mass.  
 How you have changed.  
 Your sleep is troubled.  
 My life is pained; I am worried.)<sup>28</sup>

Accustomed to having his way, the husband is astounded when he notes how his wife indicates her disapproval. The clues are small exchanges in conversation with the husband, tinged with pauses and evasive answers. The wife's voice tone changes followed by a physical withdrawal from her husband upon her return home from a Catholic mass. Terms of endearment are replaced with the person's given name. The husband's betrayal causes the loss of harmony in his marriage. In addition, a return to the old familiar ways with his wife is not possible.

Enunciating each word with pathos, Naimro expresses the man's regret that he caused his wife's change of attitude. The movement from *ou* (you) to *lavi mwen* (my life) in the final line demonstrates the strain under which the couple lives. Nevertheless, since Creole lyrics have both a literal and figura-

tive meaning, a further reading of this song assumes that the wife is involved in an extramarital affair. Two clues are when she avoids looking directly at her husband and claims to have a headache. A third is when she refuses to discuss why or if she has changed. Given these three clues, one understands the husband's uneasiness and unhappiness when his physical gestures toward his wife are rebuked. According to Naimro, "A song on this topic was badly needed to demonstrate that there are some Caribbean men who regret the harm they inflicted on the woman in their lives."<sup>29</sup> Obviously, Naimro is correct in his assessment because this song garnered for him the 1993 Prix SACEM-Martinique as composer of the year.

Another version about how change creeps into a relationship is found on Béroard's solo album *Milans* (1992). Singing with precision and a suppressed passion, Béroard delivers a haunting but jazzy tune in her rendition of "An lè" (Take me higher). The opening lines are about a woman who regrets that she is frequently alone. Only the lingering scent of her man's cologne lets her know that he has been home. In spite of this, the woman does not despair, for she believes they can recapture the romance that once took her to the seventh heaven. She asks her lover, "Es ou sé lè mennen mwen / nou ké alé / an lè ya" (Would you lead me / so we could go / even higher?),<sup>30</sup> accompanied by an expressive chorus that strengthens Béroard's verses as they unfold and end in a communal experience.

### *Hope and Collectivity*

Undauntedly, Kassav' focuses on the individual, the couple, and the collective group. The singers and composers do not deny that love may hurt. Usually, they end their songs with the wish for reconciliation. Coming from a tropical climate, the group anchors its songs in a specific space and landscape. Images of the sun, the ocean, the wind, the boat, and the rainbow are metaphors for life patterns. The sea is a symbol of affinity where one sits and meditates. The boat is a means for bringing food (fish) or pleasure. As for the sun, Caribbean people either bask or suffer under its rays. Sometimes the sun can be quite brutal, burn up the crops, and dry up the water reservoirs. At other times, it energizes people, lifts up their spirits, and causes much happiness.

For *Lagué moin* (Let me go), Pierre-Edouard Décimus wrote "Solèy" (Sun) which did not win the fans' attention until Béroard sang another version on *Vini pou* (1987). This new rendition of "Solèy" found Kassav' exper-

imenting with the verbs *chofé* (heat and reheat) and *kléré* (light up), underscoring Kassav's message of hope:

Solèy ki ka kléré  
 Ès' ou ké pé chofé ké a moun ka soufé  
 Ké a moun ka pléré  
 Lè yo pèd on zanmi  
 Solèy ki ka chofé  
 Ès' ou ké pé kléré kè a moun ki mové  
 Ké a moun ki pa janmen enmè dan lavi

~~~~~

(Sun, you who shed light.
 Could you heat up the hearts of those who suffer?
 The hearts of those who cry
 when they lose a friend?
 Sun, you who warm us.
 Could you shed light on
 the hearts of those who are evil?
 And the hearts of those who have never loved in life?)³¹

The nouns or the infinitives for hope, light, and heat recur frequently in “Solèy” to stress Kassav's optimism that the current inertia and despair that permeates the French Caribbean psyche will change. If the sun succeeded in making unhappy people happy and healing those who mourn, one ought to believe that life moves forward into an energetic space. Whenever a song begins with a bleak outlook, Béroard insists that it should end on a note of hope: “Yes, we have got to have hope. Lots of people, who don't understand our songs, catch just a little chord or word in French or Creole. Then they say, ‘It's music to be happy. Music of the sun. Music to dance.’”³²

Kassav' members work hard at their craft. Always rehearsing, changing, and evolving, they are not afraid to delve into feelings. Again, in Saint Éloi's “Zoukamine” (Zouk vitamin), the title song from *Zoukamine*, we hear a message of hope, warmth, and tender commitment:

Ni on tan pou ri
 On tan pou réfléchi

An ka poposé on térap
 Pou pé agi

~~~~~

(There's a time for laughter  
 and a time for reflection.  
 I propose a therapy  
 in order to take action.)<sup>33</sup>

Saint Éloi's lyrics are specific, offering a zouk vitamin for peace in the world with a percussive, spicy, Brazilian-tinged melody. In fact, the 1994 “Zoukamine” is both a response to the 1984 “Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni” and to Saint Éloi's disappointment in the escalating violence in Guadeloupe:

“Zoukamine” developed from a personal interest to which I attest. When I began to write this song in Guadeloupe, there were some violent incidents. People can be very evil. So I proposed a therapy in this music to think of other things.<sup>34</sup>

The song is positive, continuing with the vision of *bizouk* and now *zoukamine*. In “Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni” Desvarieux declares he is sick with love for zouk. Now, Saint Éloi offers a prescription to cure societal ills, stating: “A zoukamine is not dangerous for love. Savor it with moderation.”<sup>35</sup> The ever-present sentimental yearning to rediscover the Caribbean home landscape, a pristine environment that abounds with natural beauty and social harmony, offers an escape from the ambivalence of living in France and a continual search for a new, unfettered identity through the medium of zouk.

Since the Kassav' members are based in Paris, *Difé*, released in 1995, introduces tunes with up-to-date studio technology that are hummable and danceable, as well as accessible and thoughtful lyrics about racial prejudice, homelessness, and drug addiction. For example, Naimro's “Trop filo” (Enough philosophy) returns to the message that he imparted in “Pèd filaou” (You have lost your destiny) on his 1985 solo album *En balatè* (Buried) about who his friends are when he is feeling low. Co-written with Roland Brival, a Martinican actor, singer, and writer, Naimro asserts that a person needs to exude self-confidence and believe in what he thinks rather than rely on others who will not help him up if he stumbles. On the other hand, Marthély's meditative “Jijman hatif” (Snap judgments, or prejudices), backed up with hard underlying rhythms and exuberant singing, is a plea for social and

racial tolerance of differences. Marthély recalls how the French colonial educational system brainwashed him into believing that he was part of a condemned, inferior race. His retort, located in the third verse, is the following:

Lè ou pa konnèt  
 Pa fè labalèt  
 Ou ké prann-y an tèt  
 Lavi moun sé pa la fèt  
*Jijman hatif, sé jijman hatif* (× 2)

~~~~~

(When you don't know,
 don't spread bad news.
 It'll only come back to you.
 Don't play with people's lives.
Snap judgments are nothing but snap judgments.)³⁶

The line structure for “Jijman hatif” resembles an inverted pyramid. The final line of verse three is highlighted in bold print in support of Marthély’s annoyance and impatience with people who quickly judge and sentence total strangers out of ignorance. The final verse, “Kouto sèl ki sav / sé kouto tou sèl ki sav / Pa fè labalèt / ou ké prann-y an tèt” (When you don’t know / What’s inside another / Don’t misjudge him / It will come back to you), reinforced with a hard rock and inventive instrumental section, inflicts pain upon the listener in the creation of a sharp ending to jerk him into a sudden awareness. The full Creole expression is “Kouto sèl ki sav’ sa ki an tchè jiroman” (Only the knife knows what’s in the heart of a pumpkin), meaning “No one knows the pain of another.” Also, the reference to a knife draws attention to the expression that “It cuts like a knife,” which refers to the intensity of the emotional pain that is felt upon being unfairly treated.

Kassav’ has been very concerned about what is happening to today’s troubled youth, who constitute a large percentage of the runaways, drug addicts, and the homeless. During the past decade drug problems and teenage prostitution have been rising at an alarming rate in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and France. After much discussion Kassav’ chose the term *difé* as an album title and included it as part of the titled song “Difé, soupapé” (Too much pressure). With very eclectic music composed by Marthély and Philippe Joseph and lyrics by Béroard, a vision of a smoke-filled street with flashing red

lights, honking horns, and voices that soared above the harsh rhythm has been summoned up.

Di fé, soupapé
Difé, soupa soupapé
Di fé soupapé
E é é

An lo dézòd an lo makakri
 Dépi yonn douvan, fèy désann
 Zafè kò mèl ki pran plon
 A fòs domi adan “sakésif”
 A fòs fè sanblan
 Lèspwa désann
 An lè do malédisyon

Di fé soupapé . . . E é é (× 5)

Ti manmay ka brilé a lannuit
 Pèd an la fimèn
 Yo sé lè kwè
 Mé douvan yo an pangal
 Pou yo i za ta, é bagay la tchuit
 Lavi yo anchyen
 Asi la tè lèspwa ni gal
 Ki moun’ ki ké sa ba yo lanvi goumé
 Mété rèv yo pli woué pa ladjé
Di mwen ki moun’ si sé pa woué mwen
 Pou limyé yo kléré dèmen maten
Di fé soupapé . . . E é é
Pou di fé pa limé, an nou vwéyé dlo a monté
 woywo wowo

An nou vwéyé dlo a monté woy
 Wouzé-w, Wouze-w
 Fò wouzé yo, woy woy woy wouzé yo
 Bay an ti lanman
 Vwéyé, vwéyé dlo!
Difé, mé zòt shèché sa zòt touvé,

*Difé, di fé, di fé
Pou difé pa limé an nou vwéyé dlo a monté*

~~~~~

*(Too much pressure  
Open the relief valve.*

*We're lost in confusion and hypocrisy.  
Aiming to put down the one who reaches the top.  
No matter who gets fired.  
By macerating and doing things halfway,  
hope goes astray  
and we say it's our curse.*

*Too much pressure.  
Open the relief valve.  
Children are burning in the dark.  
Becoming drug addicts.  
Aimless in this future in ashes.  
They think it's too late.  
Cards are spread out on the table.  
What have we done with their future?*

*From now on earth, hope has got scabies.  
Who will give them the will to fight?  
To add ambition to their dreams and never give up?  
Tell me who can it be apart from you and me  
so their light can shine tomorrow?*

*Too much pressure.  
Open the relief valve.*

*If you want to avoid an explosion.  
Open the relief valve.*

*Open it now.  
Give them a hand.  
Give them love.  
Get hope back to them.*

*Hard times. We've got what we've been playing for.  
Too much pressure. Open the relief valve!!<sup>37</sup>*

Searching for a way to help these young people, Kassav' asked who can help the youth to reassess their priorities. While Kassav' expected the youth to feel better about themselves, the band did not think the youth should bear the entire burden of their disappointments. So, they asked adults to reach out and redirect those who took or might have contemplated the wrong path. If not, a lack of love without a helping hand could increase the youth's chances of becoming more self-destructive.

The urgency of this matter was stressed by Kassav' by placing several stanzas in bold print. Kassav' espouses a doctrine of social responsibility. However, the Creole lyrics are hidden beneath a complex web of metonymy, making it difficult for an Outsider to unravel their meaning. The text is also compounded with two points of view. The youth express their confusion; the narrator implores the adults to fulfill their parental responsibilities. The hard, driving beat of the bass dictates the erratic movements of the youth as they walk the streets. Desvarieux's heavy metal guitar documents the youth's fears. Béroard repeats "Difé, soupapé" (Too much pressure) more than ten times to put people on alert. The call-and-response pattern between Béroard and the chorus cries out the song's two messages: Open the relief valve before the youth explode, and give them something to hope for.

### *Trans-Atlantic Connections*

In 1982, Kassav' moved out of the studio for its first live concert in Guadeloupe, the country of its three founders. Soon thereafter, Kassav' evolved into the prime musical force whose appeal spanned the entire French Caribbean region due to its interdependent communication with other musical forms encoded in its live performances. By 1986, the group reached superstar status in the French Caribbean, Paris, and throughout French-speaking Africa. There were frequent grueling ten-month tours in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. The band released one or two albums per year, reaching nearly twenty-eight by 1987. In addition, Kassav's records were illegally pirated and dubbed, especially in French-speaking Africa and the Caribbean. These activities made the group the most widely heard popular entertainers in French-speaking Africa<sup>38</sup> and the Caribbean.

To express thanks for its fans' support and a pride in its Caribbean heritage (which provided the foundation for its music), Kassav' returned to Guadeloupe to perform a free concert on 23 February 1986 and to receive a gold

record. Before an enthusiastic audience of 50,000 (more than fifteen percent of Guadeloupe's population) Kassav' played its hit, "Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni."<sup>39</sup> Coming from a region where the sale of 3,000 to 5,000 copies of a single album was a major success, Kassav' made history by being the first French Caribbean band to sell enough records to win a gold record (France's Disque d'or).<sup>40</sup> With a sale of more than 200,000 worldwide, "Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni" was one of the biggest hit songs ever recorded by a French Caribbean band.

The song, listed on the local hit chart for six months in 1985, consists of two phrases, one for the refrain and the second for the verse. The song lasts for six minutes and twenty-four seconds. Desvarieux's gravel voice enters on the first verse, commenting on how hard life is and asking the question: "Ki jan zot fè pou pé sa kenbé?" (How do you manage to keep in shape?).<sup>41</sup> Décimus's voice is then amplified in response to Desvarieux's question, "Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni" (Zouk is the only medicine we have), to which a chorus replies, "Sa kon sa" (That's how it is). Desvarieux then requests, "Ba mwen plan la mwen pé sa konprann / Ba mwen plan la poko sézi / Si janmen an jou mwen tonbé malad" (Give me the secret for it so that I can learn / Give me the secret for I have not understood / so I'll know for the day I get sick).

Although Béroard insisted "Zouk-la sé sèl médikaman nou ni" did not embrace a distinct political ideology,<sup>42</sup> the song stimulated a lively public political debate in the French Caribbean. In the 1980s, the Nationalist party interpreted the slogan "zouk was 'the only solution'" to be a political attack on the state of local affairs. Zouk supporters, like the linguist Jean Bernabé, saw zouk "as a practice integrating fundamental elements of the Creole *convivialité*. . . . Such therapy, moreover, would fit in with the belief that the salvation of our countries must first go through a cultural revolution, a decolonization of minds" (Bernabé 1986, 15-16).

In this respect, zouk symbolizes a liberating influence that forges a trans-Atlantic link among dominated Blacks in colonial and post-colonial societies in the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. To resist assimilation into metropolitan French culture, most Kassav' members mingle with other immigrant musicians, family, and friends. By so doing, they also create unique cultural boundaries. As a result, a steady reinforcement of their own identity, zouk, and Creole, along with an infusion of different musical rhythms, sustains the band's global appeal.

Kassav's records enjoy phenomenal sales in Europe. As a place for the exchange of population and cultural commodities, the imperial capital, Paris, is an important site where African diasporan colonial peoples play a

vital role in the global economy and culture. Fully aware of this role, Kassav' recognizes that it has African diasporan, Asian, and European audiences. The sold-out concerts at the Zénith, a prestigious concert hall in Paris, in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993 and 1996, have anchored the group in the limelight. In 1986, the French press conducted numerous interviews which, among other things, generated an audience of more than 300,000 at the *Fête de la musique* in the outskirts of Paris on 21 June. This continuous positive response has reinforced Kassav's initial goals: to create a new sound, to succeed financially, to provide Caribbean people with personal and national pride, and to make the French Caribbean culture, Creole language, land, and values more widely known.

### *Capital Domination and Marketing*

For over nine years Kassav' has been struggling to enter the American market. The group first came to the United States in 1988 and played two nights before a Caribbean audience at the Club Ritz in New York.<sup>43</sup> Kassav's last tour was with the 1994 Africa Fête held in major American cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami. The initial decision to enter the United States market occurred with the signing with CBS (now Sony)<sup>44</sup> after eight consecutive sold-out nights at the Zénith in Paris in 1987. The November 1987 contract with CBS led to the release of the album *Majestik Zouk* in 1989, which garnered two gold records for "Doméyis" and "Raché tchè" (Heartbreak)—two songs derived from traditional music co-written by Wilfred Fontaine and Marthély, with music by Naimro.

Ironically, through the CBS/Sony contract guaranteed a constant production of Creole lyrics, there were fewer releases. The production of only one album every two years led to wild speculations; the band had broken up, had reached its peak, was no longer popular, or its special sound had died a quick death. In the French Caribbean a band was not considered to be popular if it did not issue a new album at least once a year. Always concerned about its Caribbean audience, Kassav' circumvented the CBS/Sony restrictions by issuing some albums under the names of individual members. Each Kassav' vocalist was recruited by other artists to be a guest singer for such projects as the 1992 Malavoi's *Matébis* (Cutting School) and Shades of Black's *Wonderful*; the 1993 Mario Canonge's *Trait d'union* (Connecting Link); the 1994 Tabou Combo's *Unity*. According to Gene Scaramuzzo, because the group found these limitations "anathema," upon reconsideration Sony "turned the band over to their Tristar label, a subsidiary whose main goal



was the United States promotion of Sony artists who were successful outside the States" (Scaramuzzo 1994, 53).

In the Caribbean, Kassav' has had to contend with disc jockeys and bèké and Lebanese sponsors who decide which song on an album is the best one to be featured. Because of the rapid turnover of hits, the local radio stations do not keep an archive and basically play only the most current hits. There is no time slot set aside once a week where the "oldies but goodies" are played on a specific radio station. Fearing saturation, Eric Andrieu of Déclit-Martinique suggests the alternative "to keep the group in the limelight by encouraging the local disc jockey to promote another tune from the already popular album."<sup>45</sup>

French Caribbean musicians want to be successful in their home islands as well as on the international market. The decision to move to Paris is viewed from two perspectives: on the one hand, musicians become dependent on the marketing whims of a multinational recording company; on the other hand, the French venue provides the platform and stimulus for further exposure and experimentation. It is a catch-22 position. The French metropolis imposes conditions that ignore a musician's cultural uniqueness and socio-economic needs. French recording companies only release new albums during the Christmas and summer holidays, whereas in the Caribbean there are three major seasons: Christmas, Carnival, and summer. Repeatedly, individual musicians or bands request a staggered release and an aggressive promotion of new albums to coincide with these three periods. Many négropolitains return to the Caribbean in February to celebrate Carnival and to spend money on records to take back to their homes in exile. The musicians and bands, based in France, wish to capitalize on this available income, but their requests for seasonal releases have so far been in vain.

Although there is no infrastructure for mass distribution of music in Martinique and Guadeloupe, there are local record producers.<sup>46</sup> These producers provide the initial funds for the making of records, but the singers and musicians do not earn any royalties until they have repaid the fees for the sound engineer, the rental of the studio, the production of the CD in France, the equipment rental, and the distribution and marketing of the album. For example, after "Pa bisouin palé" (No need to talk) sold over 129,000 and "Siwo" (A good man) 150,000 copies, Béroard received only enough royalties to pay rent on her Paris apartment for four months (Kpatindé 1989, 32). This accounting problem with Georges Debs Productions of Martinique, along with others, is one of the reasons Kassav' left and signed with CBS in 1987.

The power relations entailed in the CBS/Sony contract and the constraints

that Kassav' suffered are clear examples of the commodification and domination of cultural productions—in this case, zouk, by capital and industry. Today, with the CBS/Sony contract, Kassav' receives a monthly salary as a corporation, but the band did not have a signed contract with George Debs Production from 1984 to 1987. During this time period Kassav' recorded twelve albums and received other awards such as the Maracas d'or and the RCI Trophée beside France's Disque d'or and the Prix SACEM-Martinique. Very naively, the band thought that a verbal promise was sufficient.

As performers, the members of Kassav' promote a professional and cultural consciousness by demonstrating a solidarity with their compatriots in the French Caribbean and by reaffirming their Caribbean identity. Since Creole is primarily an oral language, Kassav's live performances become verbal readings of the lyrical texts. Consistently, Kassav' celebrates trans-Atlantic landscapes which provide creativity, nourishment, and life.

In 1987, Kassav' organized an annual talent contest called the *Le Rêve Antillais* (The Antillean dream), first in Guadeloupe and later in Martinique, to promote new talented amateurs with the promise of producing a record with the winner. Unfortunately, there were problems with the local sponsors and misconceptions so that *Le Rêve Antillais* was eventually canceled. Another Kassav' effort that was initiated by Jacob Desvarieux but quickly spiraled out of control was the zouk extravaganza called the *Grand Méchant Zouk* (Big bad zouk). Two shows were coordinated by Desvarieux in 1988 and 1990 with other well-known singers and musicians in Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guyana, and Paris. However, due to greedy promoters and some unpleasant incidents during the second *Grand Méchant Zouk* show, Desvarieux and the rest of Kassav' withdrew their support. Finally, in an attempt to discuss the zouk phenomenon in a formal setting, Kassav' helped to organize a symposium on zouk sponsored by the Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe on 25 August 1988. The topics ranged from the possibility of using zouk music to boost the Guadeloupean economy to the development of internal structures to export music. Guilbault's analysis of the conference was that traditionalists and separatists expressed concern about the use of music as a unit of production and exchange. An often heard question was, "Can zouk be treated as 'goods and services' and still promote cultural specificity and autonomy and reflect local social and political goals?" (Guilbault et al. 1993, 31). Kassav's answer was that Caribbean music was constantly changing; therefore, its music was a mixture of many musical genres that were evolving.

Kassav's slick, sophisticated, layered sound evokes feelings by touching the inner core and memories of both its musicians and audiences. Kassav's

mixture of Martinican and Guadeloupean Creoles forces a new language into existence. The speed and cry of “Zouk-la sé sèl mèdikaman nou ni” and the offering of a zoukamine create a new discourse for its listeners to rediscover the specificities of French Caribbean culture, history, and language through a celebratory union between body and music. Marie-Line Ampigny notes that Kassav’ “encourages the blossoming of talent, the emergence of sponsors and producers, increases the sale of records and cassettes, and guarantees nightclubs’ profits” (Ampigny 1987). Kassav’s Creole lyrics are constantly being reformed by combining elements drawn from other regions. Through Creole and its zouk music Kassav’ pushes the open-endedness of creative exchange with other cultures. Finally, with its multiracial group of musicians, Kassav’ proudly demonstrates in its optimistic Creole lyrics that zouk overcomes political barriers and encompasses social and cultural ties that are not yet possible in France’s overseas departments.



1. Jean-Paul Soime, former violinist for Malvoï and founder of Matébis. (PHOTO: PHILIPPE BOURGADE, 1990)



2. José Privat, pianist for Malvoï, in his brother’s living room in Didier. (PHOTO: BRENDA F. BERRIAN, 1995)