

Maloyalty

Danyel Waro is the greatest contemporary voice of maloya – the music that they call La Réunion’s blues. Jon Lusk travels to catch him in action in Paris.



In a back street of Paris, not far from Bastille Metro, is an intimate venue called the Café De La Danse. Judging by the size and impatience of the crowd outside, when I arrived one drizzly Saturday night in May, the place has comfortably sold out of all 500 tickets. It's the last of three gigs by Danyel Waro and his band, who have brought their tropical *maloya* rhythms all the way from an island in the Indian Ocean called La Réunion.

Inside, there's an excited buzz running around the audience, a good many of whom have obviously made that same 11,000 km journey at some point. The dimly lit auditorium is filled with a confusing mélange of French and Kreol. Eventually, Danyel and two others shuffle into a well of light on stage, playing a delicately fluttering intro on two-foot wide *malbar* frame drums. Soon all six performers are in place behind a bewildering suite of percussion instruments. Two hours later, the small circle of sweat at the top of Danyel's green t-shirt has spread all the way down his torso. Throughout almost every song he sings in an urgent impassioned tenor, he rocks a rectangular *kayanm* shaker back and forth in his hands, scattering hypnotic maraca-like rhythms. I later learn that he needs to hold a 'playback *kayanm*' – one without the rattling seeds inside – when he's only recording vocals, because for him this motion and the act of singing are almost inseparable.

To the left stands Didier Thomas, tapping out a tick-tock tattoo on a thick section of bamboo – *le pikér* – and beside him is Danyel's nephew, Jean Didier. The young singer has a wonderful voice, but as the band's newest member he keeps a fairly low profile, perhaps out of respect; the others have been playing together for eight years. Behind him, Loran Dalleau leans over a set of congas, sometimes picking up the small *oulké* drum. He changes its pitch by squeezing the cords criss-crossing its hourglass body. Next to him, Serz Dafreville straddles a huge *roulér* drum which looks just like an old barrel that's been washed up on some lonely coast. Its cow skin face has a rounded 'W' pattern that's been literally drummed onto it by sweat-drenched palms. On the right is the imposing figure of Tikok Vellaye, bashing out biscuit tin beats on a roughly improvised, hollow rectangular metal thing called a *sati*. Now and then he switches to second *kayanm*, or twangs away on *le bob*, which is much like a Brazilian *berimbau*.

You might expect monotony from such a percussion-heavy group, but almost no two songs use the same instruments,



Photo: Jon Lusk

and the moods range from hard partying dance workouts like *Bat La Min* (as featured on *fRoots 19*) and *Adékalom* to poetic, almost a cappella incantations. The fluid musicality of Danyel's Kreol words and his expressive gestures transcend the language barrier when he recites *Mouramour*, backed only by Loran's subtle improvisations. And his jokes, speeches and introductions make at least half the crowd laugh out loud. He invites Aimée Douste De La Salle and Kathryn Clark onstage for brief vocal cameos, and later the music takes an experimental direction, underlining why *maloya* is often called the 'Réunion blues'. Loy Erlich brings the booming resonance of a very rustic-looking Moroccan bass *gimbri* to *Bino*, and then Olivier Ker Ourio joins in on harmonica for a radical version of *Barmine*. It works surprisingly well. While Loy is back onstage for an encore called *Wayo Monmon*, Olivier explains to me that it's a dedication to Alain Peters, a much missed pioneer of Réunionese music, who died from alcohol-related illness in 1995, and was an important early influence on Danyel. (There's an excellent track by Alain featuring Loy's *gimbri* on Network's recent *Island Blues* compilation.)

The following day at the offices of Cobalt, who have just released his wonderful new CD *Bwarouz* (see review, *fR 228*), Danyel recalls his musical baptism, with translation and pertinent interjections from his co-producer Philippe Conrath. But first, he outlines a short history of the island. "From the beginning, this is not a story of groups, it's the story of a mixture, whether by force or by love," he explains in his quiet nasal tones.

Before 1693, La Réunion was completely uninhabited. The earliest colonisers were the French, who brought Malagasy slaves with them and initially established a spice trade. When sugar cane became the main industry, that of course meant more slaves, this time from Mozambique and India. Though the British abolished slavery in 1810, it was not until 1848 that the French followed suit in La Réunion, after which the slightly less barbaric practice of 'indentured labour' met their insatiable needs. Unlike the slaves, these workers were allowed to keep their names and maintain their cultures and religions. Most were Tamils from South India, and some even came

from China. Many eventually left, but many more stayed, like the Indian Muslims who came to establish businesses. In 1946, the island became a *département* of France. The end of the colonial period triggered a whole new wave of immigration from France, as a ruling class of administrators and associated professionals arrived. Again, some only stayed a few years, while others put down deeper roots.

"There are a lot of hard stories and a lot of love stories, and maloya reflects this mixture. Maloya comes from Africa, but there is immediately something Indian to maloya – the way to dance, the way to play certain instruments like the tambour. And maloya is played in a ceremony, a ritual for the ancestors called a *service kabaré*. There are a lot of names for it, like *service malagasy*, *service kaf*... *kabar* is the name of the meeting – a place to dance and to hear maloya."

Despite all this mixing, there are still words unique to the local Kreol which denote racial identity, such as *kaf* (black), *malbar* (Indian), *yab* (white), *zoreille* (French) and *zarab* for Indian Muslims. And, like those anywhere else, local politicians have tried to widen existing divisions for their own purposes, as Philippe adds: "This is the reason why Danyel is not 'white', he's not 'black'. He's Réunionese. This is maybe the only place in the world so totally mixed. You can see the group of Danyel, there is yab, kaf, malbar..." "The way syncretic religion thrives there, also shows what a melting pot La Réunion is. "Somebody can go to the Catholic church on Sunday, but he also goes to a service *kabaré*, and even goes walking on coals like Tamils... so, who is he?" asks Danyel.

Presumably, then, you grew up surrounded by the traditions of maloya? "No, not at all. Before the '60s maloya was played very openly, very freely, principally by people whose origins were in slavery – the malbar and the kaf, very poor people. But there was the beginning of a political movement of liberation at the start of the '60s and the French considered this very dangerous and subversive. So they forbade maloya."

Since Danyel was born in 1955, he only heard about this secret music as he was growing up. "There was only *sega*. I knew there was something else, but I didn't hear it. Not only me, because I'm a yab, but nobody else could hear it." Except, of course, a few families such as those of contemporary maloya stars Firmin Viry and Granmoun Lélé, who held onto their traditions, conducting secret services in private. Danyel's father was a poor sugar cane worker and a prominent member of the Réunion Communist Party, which was also banned. But by the beginning of the 70s, the oppressive political climate had lightened to such an extent, that the party was able to openly resume its activities. In 1972, they invited Firmin Viry's family to organise a *service kabaré* as part of an event focusing on culture, music and identity. Thus, at the impressionable age of 18, Danyel heard maloya for the very first time.

"It was a big shock for me to hear Firmin Viry. My heart went out to him. I knew there was something there. I could dance, I could cry and that was the beginning of my artistic development." Though Danyel had always had an interest in music and enjoyed singing everything from *sega* to *variété* and the songs of Georges

Brassens, the idea of becoming a professional maloya singer was far from his mind. What on earth would a yab boy who knew nothing of the tradition have to offer? "At the beginning I just danced, and I was the only white person who did that. But at the same time, I was a militant, an activist. I used to talk in front of groups, public meetings, in schools... I was very engaged, but for me, when I danced alone, it was also a political act. I love words, poetry, I am a poet... so I tried to write something around this music."

At first it came slowly. Not until 1975 did he write his first maloya composition. But he spent the following two years in a prison in Rennes for refusing to serve in the French army, and while he was there he really began to write. By the time of his release, things were beginning to get interesting on the music scene back home. Just as punk was taking off in the UK, the growing mood of autonomy in Réunion was throwing up its first wave of radical new home-grown music, by the likes of Zis Kakan, Ti Fock and Alain Peters. By the early '80s, artists like Peters, who had their roots in '60s and '70s rock, were beginning to create startling Kreol fusions. "When maloya became strong, it was sort of a way to create an identity for the people of Réunion – it's a light to the meeting, the cement of community... and there were a lot of young musicians who were influenced by it. This was the beginning of the new music of Réunion. There are a lot of groups who take maloya and bring to it rock, folk and jazz, everything."

By 1987, Danyel's first album, *Gafourn*, had been released on cassette. There have only been three CDs since, so at what point did he become a professional musician? "Never," laughs Philippe. "That's the truth," Danyel adds. "I never thought about becoming a professional. In the beginning I was a political singer, and afterwards I became an artist and a poet and a songwriter. And little by little, I started to make enough money from the music to eat, but during this period and even now I also build instruments."

One obvious difference between Danyel, and artists like Firmin Viry and Granmoun Lélé, is that the latter two largely adapt existing songs from the tra-

ditional repertoire. While Danyel does perform some of these, he writes most of his own material, and since he wasn't born into the tradition, he's better placed to experiment with new song forms and instruments. When we spoke, he was planning to record some jazz-flavoured arrangements of his songs with Olivier Ker Ourio, as a way of opening up maloya to a wider audience. Writing his own lyrics has also allowed Danyel to tell stories not generally heard in the world of tradition, like the outstanding *Aneil* on *Bwarouz*. "That's for my mother," he explains. While his father was respected by the community for his political work, and an important role model for Danyel, he had a less positive side. "He was also a drunkard, and when he came home there was always a row, and for me it's very important [to record this]. My mother was a victim of domestic violence, and we needed love, but we hadn't love from my father. The family atmosphere, it was violent. It's the story of many other wives in Réunion; there is a big problem with alcohol."

Danyel can also address political issues more freely and directly than pure traditionalists. What then does he make of the system of 'départementalisation' which still links Réunion umbilically to France? "At the beginning, it was a way to move on from the misery and poverty of colonialism and to receive electricity, and have progress, modern life, technology, a way to be part of the world. They put all the French habits into Réunion, but they don't want to see that there is something very special in Réunion. They say, 'this is good for Paris, it's good for Réunion'. Since I was young, I have been in favour of autonomy for La Réunion. We don't want to receive political orders from Paris. We want to keep our identity. The problem is that people have become too well assimilated. Everybody is thinking like French people. They are conditioned by school, TV, travel, everything. I think now the way forward is to fight for the Kreol language... to recognise it." So far there have been only token moves by the French authorities in this direction during the last 15 years.

Finally, how does Danyel feel about the recent gains for Le Pen's far right National Front party in France? "Personally, I'm pro-independence, so I didn't participate a lot in the French political story. The first round with Le Pen, Chirac, Jospin and everybody, I stayed at home because it was not my story. But two weeks after... [when Jospin was eliminated], it was not just a French story, it was a human question, important all over the world. It's republic against racism. So I voted for Chirac, naturally. People say this [Le Pen] party can't make any headway in Réunion, but I say 'you are not immune from racism. Be very vigilant'. Even though we are very mixed, we must think about this problem. Something very bad could also happen in Réunion. And this is the reason why I sing, 'I am a bastard'." In Réunion, when someone's parents are, for example, kaf and yab, the children are often called 'kaf / yab bastards'. As a way of reclaiming this insult, Danyel invented a new Kreol word as the title for his powerful 1994 album: *Batarsité* (*Bastardism*). "Everybody is thinking this 'bastardism' is like a sickness, that it's not a power. I want to say to people 'we are rich because we are mixed'. It's not a problem... quite the contrary." ■



Photo: Jon Lusk