

Malou Beauvoir: *Spiritwalker* – Liner Notes

Spiritwalker, by Haitian-American singer-songwriter Malou Beauvoir, is an homage to the Vaudou spirits and to her Haitian culture. It is also a clarion call urging us to rise up against the forces that seek to polarize and divide us, a call to awaken to our spiritual heritage, drawing from its guidance, support and inspiration.

Releasing several jazz albums earlier in her career, Beauvoir has also recorded the music of her roots. A spiritual quality rooted in Haitian music has always infused her art, but is now more pronounced; it has come to represent the essence of her sound, and is fundamental to everything she does — both in music and in her community work, taking on a new sense of urgency.

On this new album, Beauvoir combines treasured folk songs written for the spirits (*Lwa* in Kreyol), with original compositions inspired both by contemporary social & political issues, and by the ancient spirits of Haiti, whispering in her ear.

Beauvoir's awakening to these whispers began many years ago. "My uncle, Max Beauvoir, was my guide and spiritual father along this journey," she recalls. "His death, and the subsequent passing, within a few short years, of an entire vital branch of my family (all pioneers and recognized scholars of Vaudou) shocked me profoundly. It made me realize that we cannot let our culture and our memories simply disappear. We have a responsibility to research and transmit the traditions that have been handed down to us as purely as they are received."

"I've always known, from the time I was eight years old, that the spirits walk with me, and I walk with them," says Malou. "For me, **this is Spirit Walking**; simply being in touch with the spirits that surround us and communicate with us, having that openness to the other world, with which we are all in contact every day."

"I wanted these songs to evoke the past, my childhood, while offering new appeal to younger generations," Beauvoir says of her choice of material, and of its treatment. The arrangements, principally co-created by Chico Boyer, Cheff Loncher and Beauvoir, incorporate dance beats ("Rassemblement"), hip hop and Cuban flavors ("Kouzen" and "Yoyo," respectively), and tempos ranging from ballads to Yanvalou and Petro — Haitian rhythms rooted in Vaudou.

While the songs themselves are important, "more so are the discussions they raise," notes Malou. "We need to fight to save the culture of Vaudou from annihilation and vilification by those who have only scratched its surface, and also to remember that Haitian Vaudou was an essential ally to the Haitian people in bringing 300 years of slavery to an end. The spirits can inspire us to act responsibly and take our destiny into our own hands, as they did in 1804," she says, alluding to the Haitian revolution leading to emancipation, and to the establishment of the first free Caribbean nation.

For Beauvoir, this spiritual awareness reaches far beyond Haiti. “There are many conflicts emerging around the world right now. We are being forced into polarizing around extremes by governments and socially irresponsible leaders. There is a call to action for spiritually-minded people.” Beauvoir believes that our evolution into a better future requires an awareness of where we’ve come from, and of the messages and lessons of the past.

The opening song, “**Rasenblemen**,” was written by Haitian actress and singer Toto Bissainte (b. 1934), known for her unique amalgamation of traditional Vaudou and folkloric themes with modern forms of music. The term itself holds a double meaning: “A *rassemblement* is a rally, or gathering,” explains Beauvoir, “but in the context of this song it means *join hands in unity* or *rally together* — to find out what happened to “les vieux frères” (the ancestors), meaning the African tribes decimated during slavery. Bound and coerced into separation, they were torn from each other and scattered all over the world.” With Paul Beaubrun joining Malou on vocals, the song is transformed into an up-tempo, impassioned battle cry for all disinherited peoples to unite, and bring about awareness and change.

Featuring a stirring solo by Japanese pianist Yayoi Ikawa, the traditional “**Papa Loko**” (Kreyol for “Father Loko”) invokes the Vaudou spirit of initiation and first Vaudou priest, who confers the *Asson* (sacred rattle) — the gift of knowledge — to all new priests and priestesses. “He is a powerful spirit we look to for guidance or miracles,” explains Beauvoir. The lyrics, inviting Papa Loko to lift us above the waters and carry our souls to Lord Agwe — spirit of the sea, and to deliverance, are expressed by Beauvoir with a warmth and tenderness coupled with a sense of urgency, also reflected in the rhythm change following the bridge: from Yanvalou — a rhythm and dance originally performed for the Vaudou deities, to the fierce, up-tempo Petro rhythm.

“**Kouzen**” is another traditional song receiving a fresh treatment. “Kouzen is the *Lwa* [spirit] of the land and of agriculture, of hard work, and consequently of money and riches, explains Malou. “He is a peasant, very simple — but also powerful, transforming his land into wealth, and is attached to basic values: honesty, diligence, humility.” Reggae and hip hop vibes introduced by co-producer Cheff Loncher, and a rap by Malou, give this traditional song a brand-new feel, bringing it into this era.

The plaintive mid-tempo “**Nwayé**,” co-composed by Beauvoir and Haitian roots-blues musician Paul Beaubrun, is one of the most powerful tracks on the album. The title’s Kreyol version of the French verb “to drown” (*noyer*) literally alludes to the hurricanes that have devastated Haiti, and figuratively to the fact that “we are getting out of our depth, drowning in all the nonsense we are fed everyday by people trying to control our minds and actions,” Malou illuminates. “We call on Erzuli [the spirit of love] to give us hope, help us keep a level head and make the right call.” Reacting to the ostracism of gay people in Haiti and other cultures around the world, Beauvoir’s lyrics speak to the gay community, and to anyone persecuted for their sexuality, physical appearance or beliefs, asking us to look deep inside ourselves and accept others as they are, her voice a heartfelt cry of revolt:

*What kind of people try and tell you who to love?
Do they think they are wiser than the gods above, who created us?*

. . .

*Why do we believe their lies?
Instead of hearing our brothers' cries
For dignity, and hope, and love*

*But I know it's not too late to open up to our fate
Stand up for what's right, and finally see the light*

*How can we close our eyes to the ignorance and the lies that surround us?
Like the chains that bound us*

*But I know that we can change and find a better way
Stand up for what's right, for the time has come to fight.*

Two traditional Haitian songs follow: **“Yoyo,”** translated by Beauvoir into English, introduces us to this bad boy, selling his “goods” on the street, with dynamic jazz-timba-funk pianist Axel Tosca Laugart adding Cuban inflections on piano and vocals. **“Gran Bwa”** (Ancient Tree) is the venerable tree spirit “who watches over the dominion of the forest, seeing and hearing everything during the hundreds of years he has lived. This is one of the most ancient and powerful Vaudou spirits,” explains Beauvoir, whose deep affinity for this venerated deity is communicated through the depth and expressiveness of her vocals. “The song calls on us to respect and pay attention to Grand Bwa, for his wrath will be felt if we don't. The deforestation problem in Haiti is immense; I hope this will serve as a call to respect our forests.” The song's arrangement was inspired by traditional Haitian vocalist James Germain's haunting version of the song on *Kréole Mandingue* (2010).

“Simbi Dlo” is another song co-written with Paul Beaubrun, speaking to Simbi, the Snake Spirit of the river. “The Simbi are a large and powerful family of ancient Haitian water spirits, all very strong, some vengeful. Simbi Dlo is the guardian of fresh water, and as such, a guardian of life, for we all need fresh water to live. In this song, he simply reminds us who he is, calling upon us to remember that we act in his name in all that we do,” reflects Malou. The tune features guitarist Jon Gordon (known for his work with Suzanne Vega and Madonna), who also mastered the album.

“There's a Man” was originally written by Beauvoir at the time of her awakening to the spiritual world. “I was troubled by visions of a man and a child I could not recognize,” she recalls. “They spoke to me of peace, and of love for my fellow man.”

On the closing tune, Beauvoir revisits **“Papa Damballah,”** composed by Raoul Guillaume (b. 1927), one of the pillars of Haitian folk music, in honor of the Vaudou spirit of creation. “This spirit is a giant white snake who created the mountains and valleys,” explains Beauvoir. “When his work was done, he shed his skin, forming the rivers and oceans. As the mist rose, he saw a rainbow, which he named Ayida Wedo, and claimed for his wife. Together they completed the

creation of the world. Damballah is my guardian spirit. I always sing for him. He is the ultimate spirit of wisdom and knowledge (*la connaissance*), transmitted from generation to generation through dreams, visions and rituals.” Beauvoir’s tender, profoundly emotive vocals reflect her gratitude and love for the spirits.

Re-engaging with these folkloric songs and memories, Beauvoir aspires to conjure the spirits’ different characteristics “so that people remember that the spirits are part of our life, our inherited culture, our roots, bringing us strength and direction, teaching us how live together.” It is her hope that these songs will serve as reminders that Vaudou is not just about rituals and ceremonies, but is actually “everything around us – the trees, the air, the earth, the water — which all have a soul... and a memory.” It is also her hope that the album will urge listeners to stand up to the politicians and so-called spiritual leaders who divide and manipulate us, to use the strength, spirituality and lessons passed down to us, to free ourselves from the chains of indifference and ignorance, and act on our beliefs.

Beauvoir’s is a bold, beautiful and important voice, not only in her invocation of Vaudou tradition, but also in fostering a new kind of spirituality and social responsibility stemming from our roots, wherever they may lie.

— *Sharonne Cohen*