Frisner Augustin and Makandal

PREPARE
An Album Guide
by Dr. Lois Wilcken

Makandal
with Master Drummer Frisner Augustin

Classic Vodou Music from Haiti and New York

Prepare (10:09)
Rele Ountò (6:10)
Kouzen O (12:17)
Aochè Nago (11:44)
Afoutayi (11:30)
Papa Danbala (8:19)
Swa Kongo (12:45)

Frisner Augustin, manman (lead drum), fè (bell), lead and background vocals
Rozna Zila, lead and background vocals
Steve Deats, segon (second drum), manman, lanbi (conch shell), background vocals
Marc Etienne, boula (third drum), bas (bass drum), segon, fè, background vocals
Guy de Chalus, boula, fè, background vocals
Kesler Pierre, bas, fè, lanbi
Sandy St. Cyr, lead and background vocals
Smith Destin, Grann Nanna, background vocals
Donald Etienne, background vocals
Lois Wilcken, background vocals

Produced by Frisner Augustin and Steve Deats
Cover photo by Chantal Regnault
Design by Lois Wilcken
Photos of musicians by Lois Wilcken
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**Ounsi**

She was lost to the world for eight days, invisible to all but the initiated. Some felt certain she had died. "Prepare," the elders warned her. She dived into the abyss as they unfurled their ancient rap in a tongue she couldn't comprehend: "Ounsi la dogwe sa...sa...sa...sa..." For eight eternities she circumnavigated the void, mastering within each revolution one more note of the spherical harmony. The invisibles spun her into a palm-frond cocoon, and she dreamed on the spindle of necessity. She woke up in a meadow on the bank of a creek, face-to-face with the master of her head. To the timeless heartbeat of the drums, he escorted her to the other side of the water, and into the peristyle, where her community welcomed its new spirit bride.

**A Few Words About Haitian Vodou**

The word "vodou" transliterates from a term that some ancestors of the Haitian people—specifically, the Fon of modern Togo and Benin—conserved during and beyond the Middle Passage. One commonly writes "vodun" in the *fon*be language. We are less certain about the precise meaning of vodun, so much so that enigma belongs to its list of attributes. Odette Springer broadened its meaning beyond the cliché "spirit" to include calm in the face of difficulty, respect for nature, and the unknowable force behind and beyond all others.  

Among scholars it has become the norm to capitalize Vodou in recognition of its status as a major world religion. Do practitioners so compartmentalize their spirituality? Or do they simply "serve the spirits," the descriptive phrase most common in early documentation of Vodou? Is Vodou a religion or a way of life? Will essentializing the faith transform it into orthodoxy foreign to its heterodox and democratic roots? The answers to these questions live in the future—or not at all. For the present, Vodou lives as a vital, sacred voice in the conversation of humanity.

**What We Know About the Vodou Initiation**

The Vodou initiation serves as starting point for this album. One writes *inisyasyon* in Haitian Creole, but servants rarely if ever use the term. Furthermore, Maximilien reminds us that most servants forego the rituals that raise one to the ranks of *ounsi* (spirit bride) and *oungan* or *manbo* (male or female priest, respectively). But the options exist for those committed to making the requisite sacrifice of time, energy, and financial cost. Several public rites frame the central *kouche* (repose). Candidates lie down in a temple chamber called *djevò* for as long as eight days. Only the fully initiated may visit.

Several non-Haitian researchers and writers who have experienced the kouche have ignored the injunction not to reveal what happens in the djevò. Artist/anthropologist Katherine Dunham, for example, shared intimate details. Such accounts, along with descriptions of the framing rituals—including but not limited to *bat gè* (beat war), *mare pakèt* (bind medicine packs), *lave tèt* (head
wash), and *leve* (rise, wake up)—render a fair approximation to what actually happens. Nonetheless, much remains of...

...What We Don’t Know About the Vodou Initiation

Evidently, the Vodou initiation cycle prepares the new ounsi for a role in his or her Vodou sosyete (society, or community), and for a possible elevation to the priesthood. It insures the future of the sosyete. The functions of the rituals apropos to the individual alone are not so evident. The rites separate the person from ordinary life and place her or him in seclusion, and during that time the candidate comes face to face with the sundry aspects of the self in a way that everyday life does not permit. Vodou identifies these corporal and spiritual dimensions, but the kouche also identifies transcendental forces that attach themselves to the personality, the strongest known as the *mèt têt* (master of the head). Some believe that one can go through such identification without the effort and expense of kouche, while others claim the process works only for those born into the traditions. Real life reveals diverse models, suggesting the need for further exploration—or perhaps, as with vodun, enigma must remain an attribute of the kouche.

Why a Prepare Album in 2004?

The late Master Drummer Frisner Augustin (1948–2012) conceptualized the *Prepare* album in 2003 in anticipation of the bicentennial of Haiti’s independence. Haiti’s declaration of independence, enacted on January 1, 1804, banned for the first time in human history the enslavement of people. It contradicted the notion that human beings constituted units of production, to be exploited in the same fashion that capital could exploit the land, the sea, and the air. Two hundred years later this revolutionary idea needed ongoing exposure. Makandal seized the day, drawing a parallel between the birth of the personality in the Vodou womb and the birth of a nation of free citizens.
**About the Artists**

In 1973 a group of young artists from the neighborhood of Belair in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, formed La Troupe Makandal, naming it after a renowned eighteenth-century revolutionary and mystic. They created a repertory that drew from Haiti’s revolutionary legacy, and from oral tradition around the figure of their namesake. The company left Haiti in 1981 and regrouped in Brooklyn, New York, where it attracted new artists, both Haitians and friends of Haiti who are inspired by the company’s dedication to black history and culture. Most significantly, compatriot Frisner Augustin, resident in New York since 1972, became its Artistic Director during Makandal's first year in the city.

In 1984, together with musicologist Lois Wilcken, Augustin incorporated the company and secured its not-for-profit status in the State of New York. Over the next two decades the original eight artists who brought the company to New York, with the exception of dancer Smith Destin, went on to other places and activities. The maestro replaced, but also expanded the corps. Drummer Steve Deats began to study with Augustin in late 1983 and soon became part of the ensemble. Sandy St. Cyr, Deats' cousin by marriage, joined the company as a dancer but distinguished herself on vocals as well. Several musicians, among them the brothers Donald and Marc Etienne and Guy de Chalus, came into the drum ensemble by way of Makandal’s drumming workshop at Hunter College. In the mid-1990s artist Kesler Pierre began to study with Augustin and showed a talent for the handheld percussion parts. (Pierre continues to work for Makandal as a graphic artist.) Just before the company recorded *Prepare*, the outstanding Rozna Zila joined the musicians as lead vocalist.
During its tenure in New York La Troupe Makandal has served the public with performances and educational programs that link Haitian history and culture, challenge ingrained stereotypes, and preserve and develop the remarkable music and dance traditions of Haiti and the Haitian community of New York City. It has distinguished itself in the United States and abroad for its theatrical representations of Vodou. Master Drummer Frisner Augustin won several significant awards, including induction into City Lore's People's Hall of Fame (1998) and an NEA Heritage Fellowship (1999). Since Maestro Augustin's passing in 2012, Makandal has endeavored to keep the spirit of his legacy alive in ongoing educational, performance, and research services. The Prepare album now belongs to the Frisner Augustin Memorial Archive, and proceeds from its sale will help keep the work and the spirit alive.

**The Music**

Haitian Vodou assumes oneness among the forces of nature, the forces of human nature, and the transcendental. In the conviction that all phenomena embody life, Vodou music reinforces the theory that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: drums, percussion, and the voices of soloist and chorus render a totality more than the sum of its beats, its melodies, and its lyrics. They constitute an eloquent, all-embracing power.

We offer some context to get you started on the individual tracks. As you listen, note the call-and-response structure, the patterning of which allows and encourages interplay, including the textual ad libs of the soloist and the exuberant comments and interjections of the chorus. Listen, too, for conversations among the instruments. When the spirit moves you, feel free to join in.

**Prepare** (Prepare, the same meaning and spelling in Haitian Creole and English) presents five songs in Rada styles that came to Haiti from the Gulf of Guinea region and are characterized by stick drumming. The first three, in yanvalou style, speak to the initiate, urging him or her to prepare, learn, remember. The last two, in mayi style, express the need for help and the promise of a new life. Comments throughout refer to the bicentennial of Haiti's independence. "We're getting ready, 2004, we're getting ready."

**Rele Ountò** (Call the Drum Spirit) uses the same styles heard in the first track, with the first song in yanvalou and the second and third in mayi. The first summons the drum spirit, Ountò, for protection, while the others address the drummers. "Strike the drum where you please!" And, "The drummer plays for me, the sun rises." At 3 minutes, 4 seconds we hear Frisner Augustin say, "Lè m mouri, y a wè longè m, ountògi sa." ("When I die, they will understand my power, this Vodou drummer.")

**Kouzen O** (Oh, Cousin!) consists of five songs, this time in the styles djouba (first three) and abitan (last two). Like Rada styles, they traveled to Haiti from West Africa, but one plays them with hands only. Both styles invoke spirits whose element is earth and who manifest as peasants. (Abitan means "peasant.") Because he's casual and unpretentious, Vodouizan refer to the Djouba
spirit Azaka Mede as "Cousin." The songs in this set address a variety of quotidian issues, from food to communal dancing to sending children to school.

**Aochè Nago** (By the Grace of the Nago Spirits) shares five songs, three in the *nago* style and the last two in *mayi* and then *zepòl*. Historically the Nago migrated from Nigeria, leaving behind compatriots who would call themselves Yorùbá. They settled in the Dahomey region under the name Anago, shortened to Nago in Haiti. The attributes of the Nago spirits are iron, the color red, and a militant nature. One calls on them for protection. The songs on this track invoke the Nago warriors Ogou Achade, Pyê Aleman, Jan Pòl Nago, and Ogou Feray.

**Afoutayi** (Greetings!) departs from the compound metric styles heard so far (except for abitan) to present all four of its songs in *petwo* style. The Petwo nation came to Haiti with people from the Congo region. Oral tradition credits the successful insurrections of 1791 to Petwo rites. The listener hears the volatile nature of the Petwo spirits in the boisterous interplay of soloist and chorus, the offbeat rhythmic foundation, the piercing whistle that recalls and appropriates a symbol of slavery, and lyrics that speak of blood sacrifice and the life of the fugitive.

**Papa Danbala** (Father Danbala), popularized by the late Toto Bissainthe, calls on a powerful Vodou lwa of the Rada nation, Danbala. Looking at Haitian independence from a critical angle, it asks why the people have not yet won the liberty for which they fought. The opening section, performed to drum rolls and the blare of the lanbi (a conch shell fashioned into a trumpet, and a traditional signal to revolt) refers to never-ending labor. The body of the song, using a style called *afwo*, reminds Danbala that we are all his children, all deserving of justice.

**Swa Kongo** (Sweet Kongo) features six songs, all in the *kongo* style. Like petwo, kongo came to Haiti on slave ships arriving from the Congo region in the decades preceding the revolution (1791–1804). Like petwo, it uses a simple meter, albeit with a strong syncopation. Unlike the spicy and seditious petwo, it evokes courtship and gentle seduction. The songs in this set, with Frisner Augustin in the lead, celebrate diverse themes, ranging from enjoying the rain after a dry season to falling in love with a mermaid.

### Notes

1. Photos taken during a rehearsal for *Prepare* at Hunter College, Manhattan, in the fall of 2003. In order of appearance: (1) Frisner Augustin (left) and Steve Deats; (2) Rozna Zila; (3) from the left, Donald Etienne, Sandy St. Cyr, and Guy de Chalus; (4) Frisner Augustin; (5) Marc Etienne; and (6) Kesler Pierre (left) and Smith Destin.