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**From rock in France to French rock  
The creation process of an original style (1)**

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This presentation will analyze how French bands have integrated Afro-American musical styles and especially rock'n'roll in their music, and the creation process of an original French style out of those foreign styles once copied.

First, I will point out some important dates in the evolution of perception of Anglo-Saxon popular music by the French public and how French artists took them over. Then, I will illustrate this phenomenon with two examples of French bands: Les Négresses Vertes and the Little Rabbits.

When rock'n'roll first arrived in France in the second half of the 50's with such artists as Elvis, Bill Haley and the Comets and the Platters, it was seen by the music industry as "Music Hall for youth" (2). As it was done with American music hall hits, the best selling rock'n'roll songs were translated, and French versions were recorded with the musical background adapted to the public's taste. Various testimonies show that producers and impresarios could replace some of the bands' members or refuse sound effects to stick to the then pop music standards, which often frustrated the artists.

The "cheap" sound remained a typical French rock'n'roll trademark until the late 80's. Until then, the few bands that had gained either the public's or the critics' recognition were among those who had made the trip to London or New York to record their music.

R'n'b has contributed to create a new market segment in popular music: music intended especially for young people with bands like Les Chaussettes Noires or Les Chats Sauvages. Nonetheless, it was soon replaced by yé-yé style, with less subversive lyrics and less aggressive music. Most specialists agree to say that the change took place in 1963 (Looseley, 2003).

1963 is an important landmark to us because of the split of "youth music" in two subcategories: *variété française* and Anglo-Saxon rock music (3). This split lasted until the late 80's. Those two categories did not leave room for a specific French rock or r'n'b.

The Rock (4) bands were only supposed to copy Anglo-Saxon songs. Therefore, they were interesting neither for the media nor for the labels.

For that reason, the new musical press that started mentioning Rock, Blues, Soul and Folk music in 1966 did not consider seriously French bands like Triangle, Variations or Martin Circus.

In the early 70's, Journalists of Rock'n'Folk magazine, who liked such artists as Bob Dylan, considered that French folk would be George Brassens' music rather than the new progressive folk bands like Melusine or Malicorne (Vassal, 1971). At that time, major record companies were using this lack of French rock to sell Anglo-Saxon records. After EMI, RCA (future BMG), and Philips (Polygram future Universal), CBS opened a subsidiary in France in 1963 and Warner in 1971 through an alliance with Filipacchi Media.

After 1977, the burst of a punk wave and then the new wave and heavy metal, mostly in the Paris area, gave birth to a lot of bands singing in French (Téléphone, Trust, Starshooter, Metal Urbain, Taxi Girl...). Some labels then started to recruit such bands but the hype did not last long, and music critics pointed out that French citizenship and rock did not go along together.

For both the public and the music industry, opinions started changing during the second half of the 80's, when *rock alternatif* came up. Some of those bands, disregarded by major labels and mainstream professionals, set up alternative ways to be heard. Among them, some sang in English and their style compared to garage or English pop (i.e. labels Closer and New Rose) and remained underground, while others got some credit singing in French. Although they were punk-rockers, they did not always stick to the guitar, bass, drums standard. Among this last category, Bérurier Noir, Ludwig Von 88 and les VRP on Bondage Records and les Garçons Bouchers, Pigalle and Los Carayos on Boucherie were the most popular bands.

Some members from those bands, willing to include various musical influences in their music such as instruments used so far in ethnic music, soon created a new generation of bands. On the label Boucherie, Manu Chao, former member of the Hot Pants and Los Carayos founded La Mano Negra, Helno from Bérurier Noir created les Nègresses Vertes and Bruno from Ludwig Von 88 became the leader of Sergent Garcia. Bondage started distributing Massilia Sound System and the first tape of the rap band IAM.

The use of broken French language to sing comic or more politically conscious songs was common to the two generations of groups.

This transformation of the musical background was made possible partly thanks to the birth of the world music category in the major labels, which helped to promote them. World music (then called "sono mondiale" in French) was promoted in France since the early 80's by the Actuel magazine. African artists such as Ray Lema, Salif Keita, Geoffrey Oryema, Youssou'n'Dour recorded this music in Parisian studios. Simultaneously, in Great Britain, Peter Gabriel, his label Real World and Woomad festival also promoted world music.

At the same time, the liberalization of FM band radio and the birth of the "Free" radio stations (5) also greatly helped spreading both *rock alternatif* and *sono mondiale* music, for example Radio Nova, related to Actuel. World music had a critical role because it made bands take an interest in other cultures, and at the same time look for their own roots.

For example, while at the beginning of the 70's accordion was completely out of fashion among progressive bands because it seemed too conventional, such bands as les Endimanchés, Pigalle and les Nègresses Vertes gave it new credit. In a way, French post-alternative music gained a new, original stamp, and became a "truly French" style. In the year 2001, David Byrne's world music label Laika Bop produced a compilation of French popular music titled Cuisine Non Stop featuring les Têtes Raides, Mickey 3D and Lo'Jo Triban.

French groups now understand that in a global music market, they must have a specific identity different from Anglo-Saxon rock, punk or pop if they want to be able to compete with major international bands.

This trend is somehow speeded up by some government actions. The Bureau Export, funded by the music industry and the Culture Ministry is dedicated to organizing tours abroad, which helps boosting record sales. In 1994, the law on French music quotas on the radio was passed. Since its implementation in 1996, all radios have to air at least 40% music sung with French lyrics.

First criticized as a threat to liberty of expression, it is now accepted and defended by all parties. It helped French rap rise and questioned all amplified music professionals. A strong debate has existed between people saying that no rock is possible if it is not in English, and those who thought that a French band can only be of some interest if singing in French but the former seem

to have lost and dropped out. In 1995, only 51.3% of records sold in France were French music. It is now 62%, which is the highest rate in Europe for local music (Année du disque, 2001, p. 135).

All the structural changes mentioned plus others, like the artists getting older in average (which allow them to be inspired by a higher number of influences and assume their maternal language for creation) were important for the construction of an original French style.

The examples of the French bands les Négresses vertes and the Little Rabbits will help illustrate the changes I have been talking about.

First ,Les Négresses Vertes is a good example of an original expression between punk and *chanson réaliste* (a kind of French world music). The band was created in 1987, the peak in the *rock alternatif* wave. Some musicians were former members of the cold wave band Les Maîtres whereas lead singer Helno had been playing in the punk groups Lucrate Milk and Bérurier Noir. The band became famous thanks to the song "Zobi la Mouche" which was played on Radio Nova and published on a Bondage compilation. Les Négresses Vertes had about ten members, like Bérurier Noir's La Raïa and La Souris Déglinguée inspired by the Sex Pistol's Bromley Contingent.

They say about their music (6):

"Helno: There's a Parisian axis Helno-Cavanese, a Mediterranean axis Mellino and also Paulus represents rock and soul. When it gets more like valse, accordion, it's Cavanese and when it sounds rumba it's Mellino. We do a little bit of everything, and it's good !

Mellino: Paulus is great at playing funky guitar. I try to play rock'n'roll with my accordion. Helno sings in a traditional French way. We influence each other. But when you play our music, you know it's us.

Cavanese: Our own World Music, it's Parisian folklore. And we grew up with Italians, Spaniards, Germans, Polish people... we are from various origins ourselves. "Chanson *Française* [imitating Arab accent] rules", but, I mean, England and America are fine, too. ("Les Inrockuptibles, 1992, p. 52)

The second example is quite different. The Little Rabbits mix a "swinging London" pop sound, parts of the French culture of the 60's like Nouvelle Vague movies and singers like Serge Gainsbourg, Jacques Dutronc or Brigitte Fontaine.

The band was created in Nantes in 1989. The first two albums were sung in English, in a very English indie-pop style. They didn't expect such a success for their first album: (7) "We were not a live band, we used to buy a pack of beer and play every weekend." they said (Les Inrockuptibles, 1998, p. 30) .

At that time, they were about 20 years old and did not really focus on lyrics. They used to record their demo tapes in "yogurt" (meaningless fake English). After going through troubles and changing label, a deep change occurred while recording their third album in Tucson, Arizona with Jim Waters (engineer for John Spencer Blues Explosion).

As Gaëtan (bass player) explains (8):

"In France, for the two first albums, we were always considered as sub-something. In Tucson, nobody would talk about that, and people would notice our difference. Even when we were singing in English, people thought there was a special French feeling in our songs, we were quite proud about it." (Les Inrockuptibles, 2001, p. 33)

They then decided to use French, but not in a conventional way. Refusing *chanson française* and French classical literature, they picked-up various influences from underground and pop culture. As said Frederico, the singer (9):

"Everything we are interested in and we want to include in our songs was already featured in Nouvelle Vague movies: very deep dialogues that seem improvised, casual songs like France Gall's, nature noises, happiness hiding a disillusion. On our record, we wanted all that, plus a Russ Meyer touch, this more American style. That symbiosis of two cultures strongly tied one to the other was, after all, quite similar to our own story. Both for lyrics and music, we try to create our own range. " (Les Inrockuptibles, 2001, p. 34)

We can see here how acculturation helped the Little Rabbits to find out their own culture. A process that les Négresses Vertes made in France but with immigrant musicians and world music.

The way rock music was used by French artists as a real mode of expression is a process well known by ethnomusicologists. They first copy and imitate (a model), then take in local elements until they create original modes of expression, recognized as genuine by the public (Mortaigne, 1995, p. 38). It seems that independent labels support these new sounds, before they become overground.

If we can pinpoint something singular in the French music, it could be the weight of the legitimate traditional culture, and the cultural background associated with French language. Most of the bands refuse its connotation and history and though find a way to assert their national identity.

(1) I would like to acknowledge the advice of Samuel Etienne, Line Grenier, Lorraine Kolendowicz and Gaétan Guibert

(2) "Music-hall des jeunes"

(3) French *chanson* is considered a music for adults

(4) From the mid 60's to the late 70's, rock was referred to as "pop music" in French

(5) "Les radios libres"

(6) "Helno : Il y a un axe parigot Helno/Cavanese et un axe méditerranéen Mellino et aussi un axe Paulus qui est plutôt rock-soul. Dès que c'est un peu valse/accordéon c'est Cavanese et quand c'est plutôt rumba c'est Mellino. On fait un peu de tout. Et c'est bien !

Mellino : Paulus joue super bien de la guitare funky. Moi j'essaie de jouer du rock'n'roll à l'accordéon, Mellino chante dans la tradition française. On s'influence les uns les autres. Mais quand tu joues notre musique tu sais que c'est nous.

Cavanese : nous, notre world music, c'est le folklore parigot. Et puis, on a grandi avec des Italiens, des Espagnols, des Algériens, des Polonais, et on est nous mêmes de toutes origines « c'est génial la chanson française » (avec l'accent arabe). Mais attention, l'Angleterre et l'Amérique c'est bien aussi."

(7) "On n'était qu'un groupe de répétition, on achetait un pack de bières et on jouait tous les week-ends."

(8) "En France, avec les deux premiers albums, on était toujours considéré comme des sous-quelque chose. A Tucson, personne ne nous parlait de ça et on mettait au contraire l'accent sur notre singularité. Même lorsqu'on chantait en anglais les gens trouvaient qu'il y avait une rare sensibilité française dans nos chansons, on était assez fiers de ça"

(9) "Dans la Nouvelle Vague, il y a déjà tout ce qui nous intéresse et qu'on cherche à intégrer dans nos morceaux : des dialogues très écrits qui paraissent improvisés, des chansons légères à la France Gall, des bruits naturels, une joie de vivre qui masque en fait une désillusion. Sur le disque, on voulait retrouver ce climat en y apportant une touche plus Russ Meyer, ce côté beaucoup plus Américain. Cette mise en parallèle de deux cultures, l'une étant de toute façon intimement liée à l'autre correspondait finalement assez bien à notre propre histoire."

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