

Frisner Augustin, interview by Rafael Smith of WKCR-FM, Caribbean Magazine
New York, NY, broadcast March 30, 1986 (taped in advance)

[Program opens with first minute of "Nasyon Kongo" from *A Trip to Vodou*, with Caribbean Magazine intro overdubbed.]

S: Frisner Augustin is a director of La Troupe Makandal, a Haitian dance troupe. During his interview Frisner told me about his background as a folkloric Haitian drummer. He felt that his ability to play the drums well was strongly influenced by his Haitian Vodou religion.

S: You say you've been playing drum all your life and you decided that you're going to go into, to learn different instrument. What make you decide to do such a thing.

A: All my life, you know, in Haiti, you know, I started to play drum time I was seven years old. And I know it so good because I know Vodou tune, and I know *konpa* tune, and I know all of them, you know, all instrument. Because in Vodou tune you got *boula*, and you got a *segon*, and you got the *manman*, and you got bell, you know, to play, and you have *tanbourin*, it's called bass. And I know all of them. And also, and I come to New York because I be travel all my life, too. I go to Mexico, and I go Puerto Rico, and I go Guadeloupe, and I go Martinique. And I come to New York 1972, and I decide to stay for a little while, and I decide to open school and to teach people the thing I know, and to share it with people, same like, you know, in my music is the thing to share with anyone, if you really like it.

And I keep playing, and I say, "Okay, now I decide to try to learn another instrument." But I love saxophone. That's why I decide to play saxophone.

S: Do you think that you're going to be able to keep the Vodou rhythm when you're playing saxophone like you did in the drums.

A: I'm going to try to learn saxophone not to play in konpa band and not to play jazz, and to play Vodou rhythm. I have to learn what to sing on the saxophone, you know, my religion rhythm.

S: We spoke about how the Haitian community take your music. Are they supporting you, or are they not?

A: Haitian community, like I tell you before, and they don't really appreciate Vodou rhythm is a music. You know what I mean? Because I don't think maybe they might afraid of a name if you call something a Vodou. You know, a lot of them might be afraid about it. I understand. But time I used to play drumming with a lot of dance troupe in New York, with Ibo Dancer, and one group called Shango, and Destiné, Louinès Louinis, and I play for all those group, and I play drum for those group, and soon I have

Makandal around, and I told them I have to make a little time for Makandal and to push Makandal. And anytime I try to get festival in the Haitian community, I just got just few Haitian in the audience, because they say, okay, that my music and I know it, and I don't want to go listen to Frisner playing. And a lot of them make mistake about that.

S: What make you decide to take over the Makandal group?

A: I used to got a group 1976 with one dancer named Serge St. Juste, and I open dance class with them in Manhattan. And me and that guy, you know, working together because this guy's Haitian and I'm Haitian. And sometime I tell him something to do, and he don't listen to me. Sometime he tell me something to do, and I see the way he's talking, he's not talking to keep my culture alive. And I decide to break that group down with them. And I still teach people drumming.

And time Makandal coming to New York in 1981, and I say "Okay, let me try to take some chance with Makandal just come from Haiti and come to New York, and try to help them out to see if we can work together with them." And he work so good with me, and I still have it now.

S: When did Makandal come to New York, exactly?

A: 1981.

S: And you've been performing how many years before 1981?

A: Oh, that! I can't remember. I can't remember those things because— You just tell me, how long I be playing before I know Makandal. But that's a long story because I always be on the stage in Haiti time I was ten years old. I used to play for Lavinia Williams, because a lot of you might know Lavinia Williams, and time I was playing for Lavinia Williams, I don't have long pants. Because in Haiti little boy got short pants, right? And if you get grown up, you have long pants. I used to play, you know, El Rancho, Choucoun, Ibo Lele, Castel d'Haiti, and I play in a big college in Haiti, St. François d'Assise, École Mère Sacre Cœur, St. Louis Gonzague... You know, I play all those place.

The first album I decide to make just for a little experience, just to see if I can leave something before I die. And the second album I decide to make because I meet a lot of friend in my drumming class, and a lot of them play instrument, play piano, play trombone, and play saxophone. And I always sit down with them and teach them what to play on the trombone. I teach them what to do on the saxophone. And I teach the bass guitar also, because this guy is American. And I try to make a little tape with them, and I listen to it, and I say, "It's going to be good." Because the way I used to play with Troupe Folklorique Nationale in Haiti, with Jazz des Jeunes, so that's the same way I want to keep, continue my working.

The first one [album] is like real Vodou ceremony. Because in Vodou ceremony you only play with drum and the bell and *tanbourin*, you know, and people just singing.,

and the spirit coming, and drinking... But the second album I'm going to make, I'm going to make that second album to anyone can hear it. A lot of Haitian family don't listen to Vodou album in their house. You know what I mean? But I try to work on their mind to the second album I'm going to make, I'm going to put a horn, I'm going to put bass guitar, and they're going to love it better and to get my work continue.

S: Can you tell me the reaction of the American audience to your work?

A: First performance I do, only Makandal, in Soundscape. But Soundscape, Verna, you know, the manager of the place, want me to do my, my religion thing, same like Vodou thing. She don't want a band. She just want the same way I used to play in Haiti, used to do in Haiti. So I play for her, and a lot of American audience happy about that. And also for Rara time— You know, I don't know if you heard about Rara in Haiti, celebration in Haiti, and I do some Rara, too, in there, and you got *New York Times* do some interview with me, and the *Voice* do interview with me. Lois tell me, "Oh, Frisner, Makandal going to play in SOB's. And do you want come tonight to see another group playing, and to see what you're going to do?" Because Lois know Makandal got only three drum and the sing and the dancer. Right? Okay, to play in SOB's you should to have horn, and you're supposed to have bass guitar. Because you're supposed to bring the audience get up and to dance your music. That's the audience SOB's have.

And I say to Lois, I say, "Listen, I used to play in Troupe Folklorique Nationale in Haiti, and with Jazz des Jeunes. And Jazz des Jeunes play this, he play that, he play this, he play that. So I'm going to try to get somebody and to teach them what to play and to go in SOB's." And Lois say, "If you think it's going to be good, do it." And I tell Lois, "I try to put Makandal up, and also I try to put my name up because I tell everybody I'm the master drummer, and I want to prove it. You know? And I get a couple of friend together, and the drummer, I teach them to play drum for me. And he got his brother play trombone. And also in that day another guy play drum for me, and he got a friend play bass, and all of them get together in my house. You know, I don't read music, and I don't write music, I just tell them the music, and they write them by themself. And also Lois help me to write some chord. And boom! I go to SOB's to play.

And first night I play in SOB's, and I see all audience get up and dance. That night Makandal is same like a band, same like a real band. Konpa band, what you call a *konpa* band in my country. It's a thing, you know, commercial group, and to play every weekend. And I tell Lois, "Don't worry, Makandal going to be like that one day." And all, a lot of Haitian say, "Oh, Frisner, how come you put trombone?" Because those Haitian tell me that, and they never see Troupe Folklorique Nationale in Haiti. They think I'm the one to put those thing up. And I say, "Yeah, I put the trombone in there because I used to play with Jazz des Jeunes, and Jazz des Jeunes don't play *konpa* and is always play folklore. And I've got a lot of experience in that.

SOB's really appreciate the way Makandal play with them.

S: Can you elaborate how the music world see you because you do not read music or had any formal training as a musician?

A: In my country you don't really have to read music and to be the master. Because if you play drumming, because all drum in Haiti, but you got trap drum— I don't know about trap drum, because I don't play trap, I don't play trap drum. But if you have a trap drum, you only have a job for me to play trap drum, I will try to play it. You know what I mean? Because I just play it by ear, just listen the music and do something in it. So the congas, the one I play, and you don't have to read music and to play it. Because you just play it by the feeling, by your blood. You know what I mean? Because time I play, I put all my energy out to make people see me.

But a lot of people used to see me before playing, and they think I read music the way I play. You know, I put all my energy out, and I kill myself on the drum, to make you see I do a lot of thing important. You know what I mean? To make you appreciate the thing I'm doing. But I don't read music.

S: What advice would you give to any student trying to follow your footsteps?

A: I teach them to make them know where I'm coming from. Any weekend, I play in real Vodou ceremony. I bring them with me, you know, to see, okay, this rhythm you play it for this spirit, and this one you play for that spirit, and this one you play it for this spirit. And I'm always show them my spirit is my power.

[Program ends with first 2.5 minutes of "Simbi Dlo" from *The Drums of Vodou*.]