

The Heartbeats of Sierra Leone

Posted At : March 31, 2008 11:45 PM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

Related Categories: Sierra Leone

Ever since our weekly radio program 'Music Time in Africa' first hit the airwaves, back in 1965, Geraldo Pino and the Heartbeats of Sierra Leone have been part of the show: for the last 43 years our opening and closing theme has been a guitar loop taken from the Heartbeats song 'Zamsi'. Over the course of two long sessions, in November and December of 1964- at the VOA African Program Center in downtown Monrovia, Liberia-the Heartbeats recorded over thirty songs, virtually their entire repertoire at the time. These were not the group's first recordings (those were made around 1963, in Freetown, at the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service), but they were the last made by the 'original' Heartbeats.

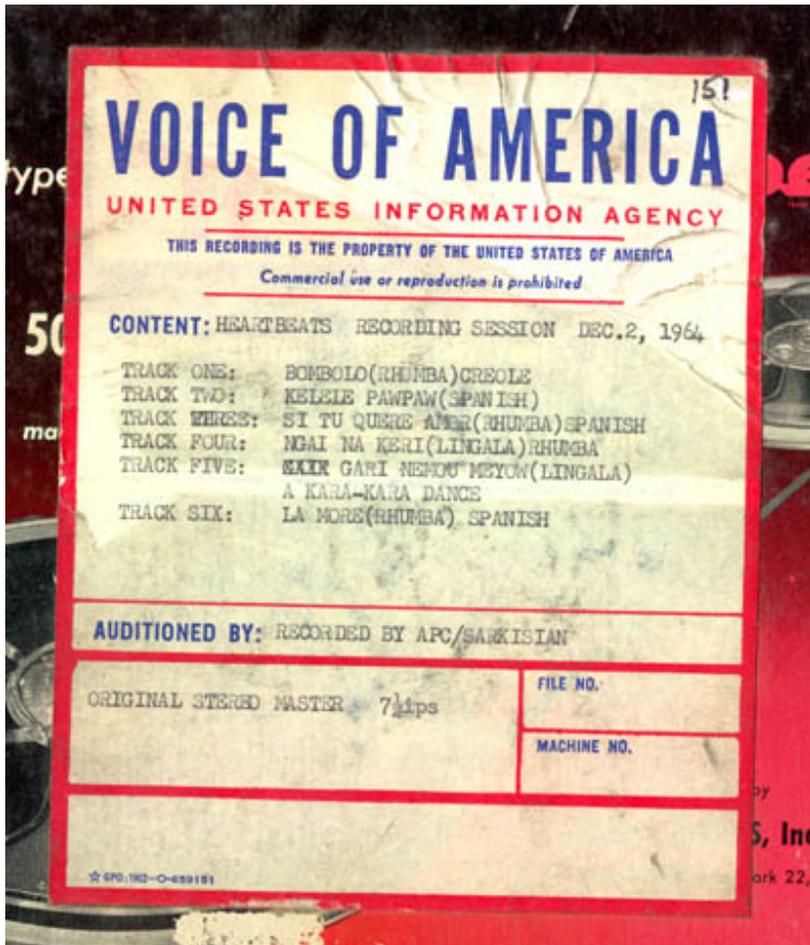
VOICE OF AMERICA	
UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY	
THIS RECORDING IS THE PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	
<i>Commercial use or reproduction is prohibited</i>	
CONTENT: HEARTBEATS/RECORDING SESSION NOV. 26, '64	
1) MERENGUE - MORE TIME(English and Creole)(3:29)	
2) CHA CHA CHA CHA BLOCK(SPANISH)(3:04)	
3) " " " " " " " " " " " "	
4) FATOU(RHUMBA)(WOLOF) (3:23)	
5) PACHANGA NO.1(LINGALA) (3:33)	
6) MERENGUE AH-YAH(LINGALA) (3:27)	
7) KAYI-KAYI-PACHANGA(LINGALA-SPANISH) (2:49)	
8) GINA(RHUMBA) (LINGALA) (2:57)	
9) EGUANTANAMAR(PACHANGA)(SPANISH) (2:37)	
AUDITIONED BY: RECORDED BY SARKISIAN/APC	
MONAURAL	FILE NO. 7 1/2 ips
	MACHINE NO.
☆ GPO : 1964-O-728-402	

The Heartbeats were formed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, back in 1961, by Balogun 'Dr. Dynamite' Johnson-Williams and Gerald Pine. Dr. Dynamite remembers first running into Gerald at a meeting of the 'Reveler's Club', a social club that often organized musical events. Gerald showed up one afternoon with his electric guitar and started to play covers of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly songs. By the end of the day, Gerald and Dr. Dynamite had decided to form a band, and were soon rehearsing together at Gerald's house on Shalot Street, where he lived with his mother and sister. Their first recruits were bassist George Keister, singer Hassan Deen, and drummer Reuben Williams, who was soon replaced by percussionist Francis Fuster. Their early repertoire, which consisted of covers of songs by the British Pop sensations 'Cliff Richard and the Shadows', changed drastically after the Congolese group 'Ry-Co Jazz' arrived in Freetown in the early 1960s (probably in 1962). The Merengues, Cha-cha-chas, Mambos, and Rumbas performed by the Congolese group sparked the imagination of all of Freetown's young musicians, and the Heartbeats soon jumped on the Rumba bandwagon.

Over the next two years the Heartbeats became one of the most popular groups in Sierra Leone, performing frequently in Freetown, and up-country, sharing bills with the Ry-Co Jazz, the Ramblers from Ghana, and Keletigui et ses Tambourinis from Guinea. As the group became more successful, Dr. Dynamite and Gerald-who by that time had adopted the name Geraldo-started to disagree about finances, and in January of 1964, Dr. Dynamite left the group. Dr. Dynamite's replacement was Tom Brown, a Kru from downtown Freetown, remembered as an imposing (even menacing), and relatively uneducated man; and a fiercely talented guitar player. By the end of 1964, Geraldo had brought the Heartbeats to Monrovia, Liberia, where they landed a six-month engagement at the Ducor Intercontinental Hotel.

It was at the Ducor Intercontinental that the Heartbeats crossed paths with the Voice of America. Leo, who had just recently arrived in Liberia, caught the group's set one night and invited them to come down to the

Voice of America studios in downtown Liberia. Leo was interested in recording young groups he could feature on his programs, and Geraldo was interested in a set of high-quality recordings that he could issue as 45-rpm singles. During the first recording session, which was held on November 26, 1964, the Heartbeats recorded twenty-one tracks, with only one second-take. The second session, which was held on December 2, 1964, yielded sixteen tracks, with only two repeats from the November sessions. For reasons that no one can any longer remember, some of the recordings at the November session were made in mono, and others in stereo.



The Heartbeats repertoire in 1964 could be divided into four different styles; original material, covers of popular Latin hits, covers of Congolese songs, and covers of British and American popular music—especially the hits of Cliff Richard, Elvis Presley, and perhaps Buddy Holly. The recordings they made at the Voice of America feature their entire repertoire except for covers of British and American popular music: Dr. Dynamite thinks the group did not record this material for fear of copyright infringement—Pino was planning on releasing these recordings. (I don't know whether the Heartbeats VOA recordings were, in fact, ever commercially released. Geraldo Pino told me they were not, but 'Jet' Arnold Nylander, the guitar player who replaced Tom Brown in 1966, and remained with Pino until 1972, insists they were. Many of these recordings, however, were definitely played on radio in Liberia and Sierra Leone.) Interestingly, none of these recordings seem to feature the voice of Geraldo Pino. The main appeal of these recordings, over forty years later, has got to be Tom Brown's guitar playing.

One of the highlights of the sessions is 'Tom Brown's Gamal' a guitar Merengue. Tom Brown tears it up on a cherry-red Fender Jaguar, running through a Dynachord amplifier with a wicked tape-loop echo.

↔ [The Heartbeats 'Tom Brown's Gamal' \(Merengue\)](#)

Next up is 'More Time', an original composition by Geraldo Pino. This recording features the voices of Hassan Deen and Francis Fuster.

↔ [The Heartbeats 'More Time'](#)

The next track is an original Heartbeats composition written, and sung, by bass player George Keister. He sings, in the Temne language, 'Girl, I love you. If you love me, let me know right away'.

↔ [The Heartbeats 'Wa Tibera Yo'](#)

The only other original composition the Heartbeats recorded during these sessions was 'Zamsi', written by Francis Fuster. This is the song that Leo used for 'Music Time in Africa's' theme song. There is a great percussion break a minute into the song.

↔ [The Heartbeats 'Zamsi'](#)

The Heartbeats definitely took these next two songs from the Ry-Co Jazz repertoire. First up is 'Give Me Bombolo', a song that Ry-Co Jazz wrote while they were in Freetown, and that became a huge hit for them in Sierra Leone. (The Ry-Co recording of this song was made in 1963, and can be heard on the Ry-Co compilation released in 1996, by RetroAfric.)

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'Bombolo' \(Rumba\)](#)

The Ry-Co Jazz often performed covers of popular Congolese songs. This next track 'Kayi Kayi Pachanga' is a Dr. Nico composition, that was recorded by the African Jazz in the late 1950s, and that Ry-Co Jazz probably performed. This song again features Hassan Deen, who was hired to sing the group's Congolese material.

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'Kayi Kayi Pachanga'](#)

The Heartbeats repertoire in 1964 included songs in Spanish, Creole, Lingala, Fanti, Igbo, Temne, and Wolof. This next track is a cover, sung in Wolof, of 'Fatou Diouf' by Gambia's Super Eagles. Before coming to Monrovia, the Heartbeats may have performed in the Gambia (Dr. Dynamite thinks they did).

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'Fatou Diouf'](#)

The next three selections are covers of popular Latin hits. All three former Heartbeats I spoke with (Dr. Dynamite, 'Jet' Arnold Nylander, and Geraldo Pino) identify Ry-Co jazz as the source of these songs. These are all Cuban compositions that were probably part of the Ry-Co repertoire. First up is 'Alto Songo', a Cuban Son-Montuno that was composed by Luis 'Lili' Martinez Grinan, who became famous as Arsenio Rodriguez's long-time piano player. The most popular Cuban version of this song was recorded by Felix Chappotin's popular conjunto. This song was also recorded by Johnny Pacheco and his Charanga in 1962, it was the flip side of 'Acuyuye', the track that, Johnny says, 'took me to Africa. It was a huge hit over there'.

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'Alto Songo'](#)

This next song 'El Que Siembra Su Maiz' was composed in 1928 by Miguel Matamoros, the founder of the legendary Cuban group the Trio Matamoros. In the late 1950s this song was recorded by 'Le Grand Kalle' and his African Jazz, and was probably part of the Ry-Co Jazz repertoire.

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'El Que Siembra Su Maiz'](#)

This final recording is called 'Cha-Cha-Cha Block'. I have not been able to trace this song. If you have any idea who composed this song please let me know!!

↩️ [The Heartbeats 'Cha-Cha-Cha Block'](#)

Two years after these recordings were made the Heartbeats went through dramatic changes. In 1966, during their second trip to Liberia, Tom Brown left the group. (I am not sure what became of him. One story is that he left Monrovia to return to a girl he was crazy about. He may have subsequently joined the Liberian army, and may have passed away several years ago.) More importantly, however, it was during this trip that the new Heartbeats line-up, which included guitarists 'Jet' Arnold Nylander and Emile Walsh, started to perform the American soul covers that would make them so popular throughout Ghana and Nigeria in the years to come.

By the time the 'original' Heartbeats broke up in 1972, they had performed for packed crowds throughout all of Ghana and Nigeria, famously influencing a young Fela Ransome Kuti. Today, Geraldo Pino lives in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (he has been there for the last twenty years) and continues to perform with his 'Heartbeats'. Of the other 1964 Heartbeats, Hassan Deen passed away in Freetown several years ago, and Francis Fuster (who went on to perform with Hugh Masekela and Paul Simon-the Graceland tour) and George Keister live in London.

I would like to thank Balogun 'Dr. Dynamite' Johnson-Williams, 'Jet' Arnold Nylander, and Geraldo Pino-all 'original' Heartbeats- for their time and generosity.