



(LYRCD 7446)

ACTION OF GRACE
THE SOUL OF URBAN VODOU
Bonnie Devlin

ACTION OF GRACE – ONE WOMAN’S PRAYER

“Vodou” has long been terribly misunderstood and often maligned by missionaries and Euro-centric anthropologists. Rather, the earth-centered ‘interactive’ faith of Vodou has a long history of facilitation both celebration and liberation in the lives of many people, and it has engendered my most profound respect. The title “Action of Grace” is derived from the French expression Action de Grace which means ‘thanksgiving,’ and is term often used to describe a Vodou ceremony.

This musical offering – Action of Grace – is a representation of what a Vodou service of thanksgiving might be. Every service in Vodou begins with extensive prayers, libations and invocations both of a corporate and also very personal nature. Most often we may begin a service outside, to encircle the grounds, or – in the urban setting – to acknowledge the ‘stoop’ and the entrance points to the house or apartment. As with most ritual we then proceed indoors, to the ‘inner sanctums’ of a houmfort or Vodou temple, wherein lie the sacred altars and offerings for the service.

As a highly liturgical belief system, in Vodou one must proceed in a cumulative fashion through a fixed series of song cycles, prayers and so forth. Far from the ‘chaos’ most untrained observers may note, the Vodou service is actually quite ‘high church’ in nature – involving a great deal of ritual and salutations, preserved impeccably through the oral traditions, with just enough flexibility and a unique openness to syncreticism to remain a very vibrant, contemporary folk religion.

Given the nature of my life in dance, music and theatre, I've always been part of an ensemble – and that in itself is a challenge and a joy. This however, was a rare opportunity to challenge myself artistically through both the Vodou music and the discipline of the recording studio. More importantly, this has been an expression of my deepest self, which I have waited for many years to finally offer, as an homage to my spiritual roots, to my creator and to all the saints and spirits which have grace in my life and lives of so many others. I can best describe this recording as a musical tribute to the spirit of Vodou, and also to the spirit of all faiths, which do not fear the passion of the soul. These drum rhythms and songs are a thanksgiving, they are my prayer, they are an action of amazing grace.

- Bonnie Devlin

VODOU – A ‘LIVING RELIGION’

Scores of literature have been written about the religion of Vodou, but even this vast corpus of literature cannot fully capture the dynamic quality of the living religion (although I would recommend Maya Deren's classic *Divine Horsemen* as the best account ever written).

Vodou (which is one of many spellings) – which is the Dahomean word for “spirit” – is the indigenous religion of Haiti, originating from primarily Fon and Yoruba religious customs, and influenced to an extent by Catholicism. Vodou is partially animistic, yet is premised on the existence of God or Creator, along with a pantheon of intermediary spirits called Loa. The Houngan or Mambo – priest and priestess respectively – preside over ceremonies for the Loa, assisted by the Hounsi or initiates. The Vodou ceremony, held in a Houmfort or temple, is noted by its sequence of invocations or prayers, the drawing of the ve've' (sacred ground drawings), music and dance. Possession, or contact with the Loa, is achieved through supplication by devotees, and is completed when the Loa ‘mounts’ the head of the priest/ess or initiates, acting through their bodies to communicate with the congregation. Vodou ceremonies are held for many reasons: for initiations, consultations and healings, and primarily for holding worship to celebrate and maintain contact with the Loa, who it is believed, will provide on-going protection and assistance for the Vodou Society (Societe) or members.

THE ‘SOUL’ OF URBAN VODOU

The survival of Vodou and its continued Diaspora in the New World has led it to many international urban centers outside of Haiti. The past two decades have seen a tremendous influx of Haitians to the United States, primarily around the New York Metropolitan area and Miami. A large proportion of migrated Haitians retained many of their indigenous cultural and social customs. I have found this to be particularly true in the expression of Vodou, where the cultural and religious traditions have remained virtually intact. The religious, cultural and aesthetic trademarks of Vodou remain pluralistic and adaptable to urban locations and circumstance. As my spiritual brother and houngan once said: “This religion has changed many times before and after coming to Haiti... Vodou is dynamic – your can't stop it.”

VODOU SONGS

Songs in Vodou are a key channel of communication by which spirits reveal themselves to men and women. The Loa are agents who teach us songs about the spirit world, occurring through dreams of possession. These songs always remain an expression of Vodou culture and an expression of community needs and daily experiences. One could say that Vodou songs have both an educative and liturgical function, playing an important part in the invocation, salutation, welcome and communication with the spirits.

VODOU DANCE

The Vodou ceremony, drumming and the dance are intimately bound together, where each family of loa or spirits has their own particular dances, with corresponding rhythms. In many ways the dance and music are inseparable, since they draw their energy from each other, while at the same time shaping a complete picture of sacred ritual and prayer through sound and movement.

VODOU DRUMMING

Finally, the driving force behind Vodou music emanated from the drum. The Huntogi and Tamboryiers (master drummer and assistant drummers) within a Vodou society undertake many years of training and apprenticeship in order to masterfully execute all the rhythms within Vodou. The drum is the intermediary between the worlds of the known and unknown, so in that sense the drums are regarded as a 'common language' to all.

VODOU INSTRUMENTS

There are many batterie or families of drums found in Vodou, the two most prominent of which fall under the Rada and Petro families. Rada drums, which are pegged, cowhide, conical wooden vessels, include the Manman (the largest and lead drum), the Seconde (middle drum), and the Bula or Peti (the smallest). The Ogan (bell or piece of iron) is also played to maintain a steady rhythmic pattern. The Asson, or Rada sacred rattle, is also employed musically within Rada rites.

The Petro family of drums are laced, goat-skin and conical drums, and include the Gro-baka (the largest-lead drum), the Ti-baka (middle), and often a Bula or Peti (smallest) is often played with hands or sticks to hold a steady rhythmic pattern along with the Ogan bell and the Cha-cha or Petro sacred rattle. The other drum families often used include the Congo, Ibo and Djumba-Martinique, which are all conical and laced.

TRACKS:

1. Action of Grace – 2:51 (*B. Devlin)

To invoke the power of Spirit is both an immense blessing and a responsibility. In this offering I share my personal invocation, along with a song "Vwa Guine" I wrote many years ago. Vwa Guine means the drum and the voice of our ancestral spirits and beyond. I can't imagine a world without that connection, and so through song, drum and prayer I invoke an 'action of grace'...

2. Bush Priestess - 2:43 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

The Vodou rites are highly syncretic, and in my spiritual family, was always infused with a great deal of Catholic prayers. In Vodou a person called a *prêt savanne* – or ‘bush priest’ is called in to recite the endless litanies of Catholic prayers and songs with set the foundation for invoking all the saints and spirits of Vodou. The song “Venez mon Dieu Venez” – ‘Come my God oh come’ – moves me the most, and so I arranged this version as a song-prayer.

3. Yenvalou Suite – 12:28 *Traditional (arrangement by Bonnie Devlin)

The Yenvalou – in its many rhythmic and song variations – is the most played at Vodou ceremonies. It represents the invocational cycle for all the Rada family of Loa, who have their respective styles of Yenvalou. Here I offer three different types, including songs for the Loa Legba (guardian of the gateways), for Hunto (The spirit of the drum), and for Minocan (the ‘essence’ of all the spirits). The often-heard call “Aiibobo!” – is much like a “halleluiah!”

4. Zepaule Refrain - 6:20 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

Every Yenvalou song and rhythm cycle is completed with the Zepaule, a vibrant dance and song offering to the Loa. The first Zepaule here is for the spirits of waters (Flau Vodou Dahomey), and the second cycle is for Hunto, the words which say: “Spirit of the drum, give me your sound, drummer give me your sound, Hunto give me your sound until the sun rises.”

5. Djumba - 3:19 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

This song/rhythm is for the spirit of agriculture and the earth known as Azaka Mede (or Couzin); the lanced drum is placed right on the earth and played with the heel of the bare foot, literally ‘pressing’ the rhythm into the ground.

6. Nago - 4:32 - *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

This song and rhythm is to honor the Nation of Ogu-Nago. The ancestral spirits of Ogu are numerous, and are seen as strong protectors of the community. I feel closest to these spirits of justice, so I wield my drumstick just a little more for them...

7. Maiis - 4:19 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

*The Maiis dance is celebrated when the Ogu family of spirits have been invoked and honored, and especially if an Ogu visits. This is a lively strong dance, matching the intensity of Ogu.

8. Ibo - 4:08 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

The Ibo are an ancient family of Vodou spirits; this song “Ibo gra muno” pays honor to the elder female Ibo. This Ibo song and drum rhythm are often performed as a liberation dance, depicting the breaking of chains of slavery, moving towards freedom.

9. Congo - 3:56 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

The Congo family of Loa spirits are fierce yet graceful. In this piece I sing a traditional song of the Congo dance and use both ‘city’ and ‘country’ timbale drums, along with the

‘cielle’ gliding finger across the skin head to accent the gestures of this strong yet fluid dance.

10. Yenvalou Ghede - 4:21 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

The Yenvalou Ghede is offered to invoke the presence of the family of Ghedes, the ancestral spirits of the dead. I wanted to sing a song for my favorite Ghede, Mazaka La Croix, because of his guidance and healing capabilities, and for my godfather Emmanuel, who best embodies this playful yet very wise spirit.

11. Banda - 3:55 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

Once the Ghede have been invoked, they are celebrated with the songs and rhythms of Banda. Although Banda is the dance of the dead, you would never know it, for it appears the most lively, erotic and energetic of all! The Ghede are the proverbial Tricksters of our cosmos, and take full advantage of their ‘vantage point’; they are perhaps the most jovial yet profound of all the Loa.

12. Petro - 5:18 *Traditional (arrangement by B. Devlin)

There’s an old expression, which says ‘you must fight fire with fire,’ and that is the essence of Petro. The African roots from the Kongo and Angola, combined with Caribe Indian, and infused with the rage of both groups fighting for their respective destinies in the New World creates the Petro family of spirits. One can almost hear the rage and liberation of a people within the driving Petro rhythms.

13. Spread the News - 3:23 (*B. Devlin)

What can one say after hours, days, of giving thanks to God and all the loa spirits? After seeing a community so energized, healed, united, renewed? Well, I for one wanted to run outside into the street and spread the news about it all! This song is dedicated to my first initiated drum, which was given the name “Nouveau Guyen” which means to ‘spread the news.’

NOTE: All instruments played on this recording by Bonnie Devlin are acoustical, and include the following: Manman, Seconde, Bula, Gro-Baka, Ti-Baka, Peti, Timbale, congas, basse drums, ogans/bells, Asson, Cha-cha rattle. All vocals are her own.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bonnie Devlin is a musician, composer, performing and recording artist, ordained minister, music therapist, and educator who has devoted her life to integrating spirituality and the arts for the enrichment and empowerment of people’s lives.

Bonnie is a well-known and regarded percussionist in the Afro-Caribbean Haitian, Latin and Brazilian traditions, and has been a principle drummer in numerous folkloric dance troupes both in Haiti and throughout the East. She is the only woman ever initiated as a

Huntogi (ceremonial drum master) in the Haitian religious Vodou tradition where she is also an initiated Sou-Mambo (woman Priest), having drummed at hundreds of Vodou ceremonies.

Bonnie is also a noted music designer, dramaturge and director for theatre in off Broadway and regional theatres. She was the recipient of the New York State “Meet the Composer” grant for a contemporary dance score, and won the Audelco Black Theatre Award for her efforts in musical design/direction for the acclaimed production of “Black Medea.”

Bonnie has studied and drummed with such artists including Frisner Augustin, Luis Celestin, Jean-Lean Destine, Lavinnia Williams, Nana Dinizulu, Louis Bauzo, Chief Bey, DChuck Davis, Charles Moore, and with Babatundi Olatunji in the project ‘Drum, Dance and Pray for Peace.’ She has performed and recorded with Retumba Con Pie; La Troupe Makandal; the Songweavers; and The Bamedele Dancers and Drummers; she has also worked with Troupe Shango; Troupe Marassa; Pe de Boi Samba; and many other collaborations. She has performed at many universities, cultural centers, Symphony Space, Soundscape, Prospect Park Festival; Michigan Women’s and other women’s music festivals, at Lincoln Center, and many other community, religious and political events.

A SPECIAL THANKS

This project would not have been possible, were it not for Randy Crafton – producer, fellow percussionist of immense talent both on stage and in the recording studio. I offer a most special thanks to Nick Fritsch, Gudrun and Lyrichord Discs for believing in the purpose of this recording project and trusting in its outcome; also to Amy Platt, Paul and Sue Crafton for their incredible hospitality, fine dinners and great conversations. For all my students, my large and wonderful extended drumming family, and for every member and friend of The Society of the Golden Flower, my spiritual godfather, Emmanuel, and the Blessed Creator.

PRODUCER’S NOTE

I first saw Bonnie Devlin perform in Washington, D.C. as one of the featured artists in Babatunde Olatunji’s “Drum, Dance and Pray for Peace.”

I was particularly impressed when she called out to the spirits with a simple request, “open the clouds and let the sun shine through,” and they did for only 5 minutes out of that cold day. I am very happy to help her to “Spread The Word” by capturing this ceremony on CD. May you find the same inspiration listening, which I found in making this recording. - Randy Crafton, Producer

CREDITS

Bonnie Devlin plays most percussion brands,
including Remo drums.

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