

Haiti-Return To Hell

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

CARREFOUR, Haiti (AP) -- Evans Philogene didn't know about President Clinton's new policy on Haitian refugees when he boarded a wooden boat hoping to escape the nightmare his country has become.

All he knew was that his name was on a death list of the local army-backed civilian police and that if he didn't get away he would soon be dead.

But three days later, the tall, dignified 30-year-old man was forced home because a new U.S. policy giving refugees a chance to apply for political asylum hadn't yet begun.

All Haitians picked up on the high seas are still returned straight home. When he saw the Coast Guard cutter approaching his boat, Philogene said, "If I'd had a knife in my hand, I never would have gotten off the boat. I'd have killed myself."

He was among 150 boat people brought back to port Tuesday and then dropped off by Red Cross vehicles at a central bus stop in Port-au-Prince, the capital.

Barefoot and reeking of urine, each tired refugee carried a small bundle of possessions, a rolled-up blanket and \$5 from the Red Cross. They had to find their own way home.

Philogene, clad in baggy shorts and a frayed shirt, his right foot bandaged and his belongings bound inside a small blanket, accepted a ride to the Carrefour suburb five miles west of Port-au-Prince.

On the way he told his story.

An active supporter of exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Philogene has often found himself in trouble with the army-backed authorities.

But last week -- after his local political organization discussed its disapproval of Haiti's new military-backed President Emile Jonassaint -- Philogene learned he was marked for death by the local civilian police.

"My mother heard that, and she told me to leave," he said.

Philogene fled to the coastal village of Miragoane and heard a boat was leaving Saturday night from Petit Goave, a nearby port town 68 miles west of the capital.

"I had money in my pocket. I decided to go."

He paid \$70 to board the wooden boat, so crowded there was no room to lie down.

"I thought I'd have a chance of making it," he said, as the car carrying him home lurched over bumpy roads and splashed through deep puddles.

Philogene's boat was almost to Cuba when the Coast Guard cutter came into view Monday. Soon two more ships had surrounded Philogene's vessel, and by nightfall four small motorboats had joined them.

Philogene said the Coast Guard used Aristide's name in an effort to trap the boat people, calling in Creole that they had a spokesman for the populist priest and Haiti's first freely elected president aboard the U.S. boat.

"We said no, we want to go to Cuba, and they rammed the back of our boat with their speedboat," Philogene said in a low, hoarse voice.

"They tried to pressure us and we said no, we're not going to take any of your pressure. We're all in danger, we're all going to die anyway."

But amid high waves, the terrified refugees soon gave up, he said.

"After everyone got off the boat, they took it away and burned it."

A Coast Guard spokesman in Miami, Cmdr. Jim Howe, said he had no information indicating the Coast Guard translator misrepresented himself and added that such an act would be "completely out of bounds."

Howe said a Coast Guard cutter would not intentionally ram a refugee craft, although boats often "rub together or bump" during the transfer of boat people. The boat was burned because the craft was unsanitary, he said.

Since Friday, 768 Haitians have been repatriated, the fastest pace of returns since the Coast Guard began "Operation Able Manner" in January 1993.

On Tuesday, as the car approached Philogene's working-class neighborhood, a grimy slum by American standards, he said he hadn't eaten since Sunday.

His mother, Annette Thurmestir, standing in the dirt of the family's tiny cinder-block home, greeted her son quietly. She looked nine months pregnant, her stomach swollen by the weight of a massive untreated cyst.

Philogene's younger sister, dressed in a threadbare yellow dress, and his uncle stood by sadly. Neighbors were wide-eyed as they watched the man on the death list cross his own threshold.

Despite the failed attempt, Philogene said he'll try again.

"I do not want to stay in this country," he said. "I want to leave."

Women-Haitian Struggle

^Haitian Women: Victims of Discrimination from Birth<

EDITOR'S NOTE: One of the most pressing issues for delegates to the U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing is the plight of millions of women trying to survive and support families in poverty. The women of Haiti are typical.

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^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- Yves-Rose Lero's children haven't eaten for two days because wrenching pains in her chest prevent her from peddling bread on the streets to make a few cents.

Thin and tired, in a faded dress and with her hair twisted into haphazard tufts, Lero, 40, lives with three of her six sons in a tin shack on the muddy edge of a slum in this teeming capital.

She doesn't know the source of the pain in her chest, and can't pay for a doctor to find out. She can't even support three of her sons, so they live with her mother, 100 miles away.

"Sometimes I go a year or two without seeing them. It's difficult, because I want to go, but I can't find the money," she said.

Lero is like most Haitian women, who suffer discrimination from birth.

Welcomed less than a boy, a baby girl is taught almost as soon as she can stand upright how to balance a heavy basin of water on her head, beginning a life of drudgery.

"Women are paying the heavy price of poverty in this country and men are not shouldering the burden with them," said Dr. Reginald Boulos, director of the Centers for Development and Health.

The average Haitian woman bears 6.2 children, usually at home and without a doctor, said Boulos. Only 9 percent of Haitian women use birth control, according to the U.N. Children's Fund.

Forty Haitian women die for every 1,000 births, Boulos said. In the United States, the figure is 7.9 per 1,000.

Abortions are illegal in this Roman Catholic country, but women get them anyway, often by unqualified practitioners.

"They end up losing their uteruses and often losing their lives," Boulos said.

Fathers often impregnate several different women and spread venereal diseases and AIDS, but "there is no paternal responsibility," said Boulos, whose organization runs 12 facilities throughout Haiti.

"The men are playing dominoes while the women are sitting in the sun trying to sell some corn to make two gourdes" -- the equivalent of 25 cents.

Lero's six children, aged 2 to 18, are the progeny of three men. She was lucky to give birth in a hospital.

She has never used birth control, saying she does not understand how the pills work.

Like half of Haitian households, Lero's home has no running water, and she must make several trips a day to fetch it.

By age 14, one-third of Haitian girls are working, cleaning and cooking in wealthy households, selling gum at the airport or washing pans for street vendors.

By hawking bread, candles, candy and cigarettes, Lero earns 10 or 15 gourdes a day, the equivalent of about \$1. It's barely enough to feed her children and pay the \$6.50-a-month rent on her 10-by-12-foot shack.

Haitian law doesn't make the lives of its women any easier.

-- the age of consent for women is 15, when they're considered "physiologically nubile," while for men it's 18, because they need time to become educated.

-- Women caught committing adultery face up to three months in prison, while men are fined the equivalent of \$6.50.

-- Criminal law excuses a husband for murdering his wife if she is caught in the act of adultery.

Society permits men to hit their wives and 29 percent of women do not consent to their first sexual experience, according to a 1994 report by Haiti's Ministry of Planning, Cooperation and Public Service.

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has made tentative advances for women since his return in October from three years of exile in the United States.

Several Cabinet members are women, and he created a Women's Ministry. It says maternal health, improved sanitation and eliminating sex discrimination are top priorities.

Meanwhile, Lero frets over her idle, hungry boys.

"Sometimes they fight with other children. The oldest one got hit by a rock the other day," she says.

"I would like life to be different for my children."

^End Adv for Sunday, Aug. 27<

Haiti-Rape

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- The night soldiers came for her husband, they gang-raped Jasmine Pierre in front of her three children and then dumped her on a roadside. Staggering home in the dark, she was stopped in the street by two civilian auxiliaries of the Haitian army and raped again.

She hasn't seen her husband since.

The brutal attacks on Pierre, 29, are part of a disturbing trend: rape is increasingly being used as a weapon against supporters of deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, rights groups say.

The abuses are another facet of army-tolerated repression that has claimed up to 3,000 lives in political killings since soldiers overthrew the elected Aristide in September 1991.

A report released earlier this month by Human Rights Watch and the National Coalition of Human Refugees accused Haiti's military, police and paramilitary forces of using rape as a terror tactic. U.N. human rights monitors, kicked out of Haiti last week by the military-dominated government, made the same charges and documented several cases.

Many of the rapes involved women accused of supporting Aristide - women like Jasmine Pierre.

She nursed her 5-month-old infant Kathy while describing her ordeal to a journalist in the safe house where she is hiding while she tries to gain political asylum in the United States. She's been turned down once but has a second interview scheduled for Aug. 3.

Her other two children, 8-year-old Mackenson and 4-year-old Lina, are living with a cousin.

The attack that tore up Pierre's family happened the night of April 20, but harassment against the couple started shortly after Aristide was ousted.

Pierre and her husband, Vilman St. Juste, 27, were outspoken supporters of the populist priest. Pierre, who sold used shoes and clothing at a market in Gonaives, belonged to a women's group organized to help merchants.

After Aristide's ouster, the army came looking for his supporters, and the couple was forced to flee, eventually coming to Port-au-Prince.

"On the 20th of April at 2 o'clock in the morning, some people knocked on the door. We didn't open it," Pierre said. "They said, 'You bunch of pigs, you bunch of Lavalas, aren't you going to open the door?'" Lavalas is the name of the grass-roots movement that supports Aristide.

Four military men in olive-green uniforms forced the door open and started beating St. Juste. They handcuffed and blindfolded him, made the children lie face-down on the floor, and demanded money, Pierre said.

She was afraid to give them her purse because it contained pro-Aristide leaflets and her ID as a member of the deposed president's political party.

"My husband said, give it to them so they'll let us live," recounted Pierre, trembling. "Someone put an Uzi to my ear. I took the bag and gave it to them. ...

"Then all four of them raped me." She began quietly sobbing, clutching her baby to her breast.

"I was almost choking. My whole body hurt."

Throughout the ordeal, the children were lying on the floor of the same room and saw what happened, Pierre said.

When it was over, the soldiers carted the couple away in a pickup truck and dropped Pierre a mile away.

"When I was getting out of the pickup truck, one of the soldiers kicked me in the back," she said, wiping her eyes.

On the painful walk home, two civilian auxiliaries of the army stopped her.

"I could barely walk. I couldn't speak," said Pierre. "They laid me down in the middle of the street and raped me again."

Even more traumatic than the rapes, Pierre said, was the loss of her husband. "I never saw him again."

She sought the comfort of a cousin, then went into hiding.

One night in May, her brother-in-law was killed in the seaside slum of Cite Soleil, an Aristide stronghold. "Thirteen bullets to the head," Pierre said.

In this safe house, where Pierre has been staying two weeks, she feels secure. But she misses her children, and her future is uncertain.

The woman who operates the safe house, who asked that her name and location not be disclosed, said Pierre's is not an isolated story.

"We're getting more rape now," she said. She described several other recent incidents, including a young woman from the east coast town of Jeremie who was raped and beaten until she miscarried.

"They threw the fetus in the garbage," she said.

Letter from Haiti

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- It is the stench that assails you first when you enter Cite Soleil, the huge slum in Port-au-Prince. Burning garbage mixes with smoke from charcoal fires. The smell burns your nostrils.

Then the sheer volume of humanity stuns you.

Women balance big baskets of produce or what looks like garbage on their heads. A shirtless mother washes clothes in a sewer, her naked toddler splashing beside her in the mud. A man in green briefs bathes in a bucket of water in the middle of the road.

There's no escape from the squalor - or the fear. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, ousted as president in a 1991 army coup, seems farther than ever from returning to lead the people who elected him, many of them Haiti's poorest citizens.

Some of the most desperate have tried to flee to the United States in rickety boats, but U.S. policy mandates their return. The drowned bodies of four boat people washed up on Florida shores last week.

Military oppression has produced a spate of violence in recent weeks. The worst was the shooting deaths of at least 10 Aristide supporters Feb. 2 in a safe house where some had fled threats by an army-supported paramilitary group.

So most of Haiti's poor keep their heads down and drudge on.

Everywhere in Cite Soleil, people stand or crouch in front of shacks of aluminum, plywood, cardboard or cinder block, peddling wares or cooking food to sell.

It looks like a never-ending market, but it is not. People live in these hovels. Corrugated aluminum sheets cover some shacks. Others lack even a roof.

Everyone is an entrepreneur, peddling whatever they can get their hands on to scrape by.

The trouble is, no one has the money to buy.

"Sometimes we don't sell anything all week," said Margarete Saint-Hiler, standing at a bus stop waiting to go home after 12 hours of work.

She sells clothing at a market in downtown Port-au-Prince.

Eyes dull from exhaustion, she said she had sold nothing that day, and was depending on God and the generosity of friends to feed her three youngsters.

The world gasoline embargo, imposed to pressure Haiti's ruling military to restore Aristide to power, has driven fuel costs sky high. In turn, prices have soared for necessities such as food and public transportation.

But the poor in this poorest country in the Americas are accustomed to suffering. They live without electricity, running water or toilets. They must cook, eat, bathe and perform bodily functions outdoors, in sewers and crowded streets. By night they crowd into their tiny shacks to sleep.

There is a constant scramble for water.

A man stood in the middle of one intersection, lowering a bucket by rope into a manhole to collect water flowing from a broken pipe.

When the local Prestige beer factory released used water one recent afternoon, people came running from all directions with big buckets to get some. Some stripped and bathed right there in the creekbed below the open

pipe.

Many city jitney buses, called tap-taps, have tripled prices and shortened routes because of the fuel shortage. Truck owners idled by business shutdowns have jumped in to fill the void, driving people to the distant suburbs for the same price as a tap-tap.

People wait hours in blocklong lines, then pile onto the truckbeds and stand jammed together atop their sacks for the bumpy ride home. Riders hang off backs of loaded-down trucks, which almost scrape the road under the weight.

Others walk miles to and from work, school, the market.

Cows wander across roadways, goats chew grass in deserted gas stations, hogs slop in the sewer.

But once accustomed to the squalor, you notice something else, something unexpected: an element of hope.

A woman skips by, curlers under hairnet, planning to make herself pretty for later in the day. A group of jobless young men walk down the middle of the street talking and laughing. Girls in faded dresses point at a visitor and giggle.

A graying man, sweat coursing down his back, pulls a heavy wooden cart piled high with produce. A little girl runs by, her hair carefully braided with pink plastic barrettes. People sit gossiping in small groups. Their clothing is worn, but clean and well-tended.

In colorful paint, the tap-taps proclaim messages of faith: "Patience," "Love," "Glory to God," in French, the language of this former French colony. And after the sun sets, children are heard singing inside a church, the glimmer from their candles beaming hope into the dark night.

EDITOR'S NOTE - Lisa M. Hamm is a Caribbean correspondent for The Associated Press, based in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Haiti-Aristide's Obstacles

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- He came home to a mess after three years in exile. The National Palace was trashed, the parliament fractured, the reluctant caretaker prime minister impatient to leave on vacation.

With this, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was supposed to build democracy - and get off to a running start, too.

More than two weeks after Aristide's return, confusion still reigns behind palace walls.

"You cannot expect it to be workable just in 24 hours," government spokesman Jacques Gourgue said Monday. "That's not possible. No way. No way.

"You have to realize that everything has been totally disorganized and it will take a couple of weeks before things can run smoothly."

When Aristide and his contingent arrived at the National Palace on Oct. 15, three years after they were thrown out by an army coup, they found chaos.

"The palace had been ransacked," said Gourgue. "There were no computers, almost no phone lines working, almost no furniture. I think there was only one computer working. Very few typewriters. What a mess 3/8"

Even the toilets were broken, running water cut off, air conditioning gone. Historical artwork had disappeared, and hurriedly packed boxes sat in rooms ready to be carted away.

Aristide spent his first two weeks back living and working in the palace, with infrequent and haphazard contact with the journalist who would report his progress to the country and the world. His spokesmen seemed to change every few days.

His spokesmen blamed poor telephone lines and other logistical problems, but Information Minister Herve Denis raged about the disorganization, saying no one seemed to know who was in charge of what.

Haiti has no acting prime minister. The caretaker premier, Robert Malval, left on a long vacation Oct. 22. His departure left a void at the head of the government as Aristide labored to find a prime minister.

Criticized in 1991 for hastily naming close friends to key Cabinet positions, Aristide took more than a week and a half, conferring with representatives of all political parties, before settling on businessman Smarck Michel.

He dropped his first choice, Foreign Minister Claudette Werleigh, because she was considered too leftist. Although Michel is also a friend, his more moderate views make him a more acceptable candidate to the United States, conservative politicians and the business community.

But the ratification of the new prime minister is a multistep process that will likely take several weeks or more.

In January 1993, illegal elections were held to fill parliament with military sympathizers. Many of Aristide's supporters were forced to flee into exile, and they just recently returned to ransacked offices.

The 13 Cabinet ministries are also in flux. The departed military government stripped the buildings of telephones, faucets, photocopiers and much of the furniture.

The ministers don't know if they will be asked to stay on or replaced. Many of their employees were brought in by Emile Jonassaint, who was installed as president by the army in May but never recognized by the

world. Others named before the coup are asking for their jobs back.

In the Foreign Ministry, 500 employees of the Jonassaint government keep coming to work each day, despite a Malval government edict that voided their hirings. All but two of the state vehicles have disappeared.

The expense account left behind by Jonassaint's foreign minister, Charles David, is making eyes pop with its large sums spent on meals and the purchase of a luxury four-wheel-drive vehicle.

The Jonassaint-appointed head of the state teachers college took with him all the professors' paychecks.

Meanwhile, Aristide is focusing on reconciliation and development to raise a democratic Haiti from the ashes, Gourgue said.

The president has been meeting with people from across the political spectrum to plan upcoming elections for parliament and many local government jobs. He also has met with foreign diplomats to discuss aid.

But Gourgue emphasized that such consultations don't produce immediate results.

"You have to remember that this is a very poor country," he said. "In order to have the correct person in office, to have things running, there's no way to do that just in one day. It's impossible."

Haiti Life

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) -- Ten thin boys play an intense game of soccer, dodging, kicking, laughing, panting. "Goal!" they howl with joy when their team scores.

Now look closer. Only two have shoes. Their clothes are in tatters, already used when they came from a foreign charity and worn since by numerous older brothers and sisters. The skin of the small rubber ball was worn away long ago.

The field? It's a slab of cement where an aluminum shack once stood, one of more than 800 destroyed in a fire that swept part of the sprawling slum called Cite Soleil six months ago. The site is now a vast expanse of rocks, rusted metal, broken glass and fly-infested piles of garbage.

Cite Soleil means Sun City, and it's a worthy name: The sun beats down relentlessly on windowless aluminum shacks, separated by narrow dirt alleyways, that house about 25,000 people.

Political crises come and go in Haiti, but life in places like Cite Soleil just gets harder.

Makelo Marcelin, 8, will walk home from the soccer game at sundown to a one-room shack, slightly larger than a jail cell, that he shares with his parents and their seven children.

He ate just one meal on this day - a thin soup made of bread, oil and water that his mother cooked over a small charcoal fire late in the afternoon.

After dark, there is nothing to do but sleep. The single lightbulb in the shack sometimes works if you rig two wires together, but the family has no books to read or TV to watch.

Makelo has no homework because there has been no money for school fees since the tourists stopped coming and his father Jean's income as a guide vanished.

Most of the children will lie on a cotton sheet on the dirt floor of the airless 8-by-10-foot shack, but Makelo's parents will take at least one into the lumpy double bed. His two oldest brothers shared a narrow bunk until one of its thin aluminum legs snapped.

After bedtime, the coughing begins.

Jean, 49, has severe attacks of asthma every night. Madeleine, his wife, props her husband's frail, shaking body up on pillows as he heaves and hacks uncontrollably.

"Because he's suffering, we cannot sleep," said Mrs. Marcelin, a thin, serious woman of 38. "It's worse when there's a full moon."

"I cannot buy the medicine I need," Jean said wearily. "I have no money."

When it rains, which it does in torrents for half of the year, water pours through cardboard patches that cover holes in the walls and roof.

"It floods," Madeleine said.

During a hard rain, Jean puts the youngest two children, 4-year-old Gary and Margarete, 18 months, up on a tiny wooden table to sleep and sits beside them so they won't fall. Madeleine pulls a bucket on the bed to catch the water gushing through the roof and the family huddles together until the storm passes.

The floor has been built up with flat rocks so the water will drain out the door. Sometimes it works, but not in a hard rain.

In the morning, the sun is back. The Marcelins wake early, hang sheets

and clothing on ropes to dry, then go to a community toilet a few minutes' walk away that is open only in daylight.

When it doesn't rain, 19-year-old Madiana stands in line to buy five or six gallons of water, carrying it home in a wide red basin balanced on her head. The water must serve the whole family for drinking, cooking and washing.

In a clearing outside the house, Madiana crouches over a small bucket, holds her purple tunic in front of her breasts and soaps herself, calmly meeting the eyes of passersby.

After bathing, she dresses in a corner of the room while her brother Kims, 20, tinkers with a toy truck he made for Gary from metal cans that held donated food. On the hood, it says USAID. The wheels are made from old sandals.

Each day, Jean walks several miles to an art museum hoping to find foreigners he can refer to a craftsman of Haitian art, earning a commission. But few foreigners come around these days, so he usually brings home just a few coins from begging.

Kims also creates wall decorations by cutting intricate designs into sheet metal with a hammer and chisel, then painting the finished product.

"Sometimes my father finds people to buy them," he said.

Shortly before sunset, Jean heads for the market to get food for the next day's meal. Flies crawl on open baskets of grain, seeds and vegetables. Jean picks out two green breadfruit and buys some rice.

Roosters run around, dogs bark, people push and shove. Putrid smoke from burning garbage clings to clothing.

The children don't seem to notice. Boys kick a misshapen "soccer ball." A girl in a white kerchief jumps "rope," a twisted strand of rubber cut from a tire.

Two youngsters play makeshift flutes, one fashioned from an old vacuum cleaner hose, the other from a plastic pipe.

If they lived in another place, their talent might be rewarded with music lessons.

Not in Sun City.

Voodoo Rock

^'Voodoo Rock' Band Preached Love in Midst of Haitian Hell<

^By LISA M. HAMM=

^Associated Press Writer=

NEW YORK (AP) - Sometimes it takes great courage to make music.

Watching the exuberant "rara" band Boukman Eksperyans sing and dance onstage at Brooklyn College, it's hard to believe that performing such energetic, joyful melodies once put these musicians in grave danger in their native Haiti.

The Creole-language lyrics, stoked by a vibrant African drumbeat and effervescent singing that pull audiences to their feet, speak of death and tears and repression. But the words also carry the message that a higher power, inner peace and a return to your roots can give you strength to triumph over evil.

Such concepts were considered subversive during the three years that elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was in exile.

Aristide, who espoused liberation theology and empowerment for the poor, was democratically elected in December 1990. He was deposed by a coup the following September.

Coup leaders Raoul Cedras and Michel Francois controlled Haiti's 7 million people with brutality until a U.S.-led multinational force returned Aristide just over a year ago.

"The people ö nobody really stands up for them," said Theodore "Lolo" Beaubrun, leader and heartbeat of Boukman Eksperyans, after the band gave a concert at the Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts.

"The music is the biggest voice they can have, and that's why the music is so strong," said Beaubrun, a part-time street preacher, gazing intensely through wire-rimmed spectacles.

The group creates a dynamic weave of musical textures with a "rara" or "roots" rhythm born in west Africa. They use a melange of instruments: electric guitar, bass, piano, drums, saxophone and synthesizers; Haitian and African instruments with names like ogan and kata; and drums called katabou, tambou and manman tanbou.

Boukman's first CD, "Kalfou Danjere" ("Dangerous Crossroads"), was recorded in May 1992 in the midst of political mayhem in a studio in Port-au-Prince.

On a spring night in 1993, Boukman Eksperyans performed at a jammed Club Lakoup in the Port-au-Prince capital of Petionville. Outside, streets were dark from electricity shortages and empty of people, who rushed home to avoid army harassment.

Lights powered by a noisy generator fueled by black-market gasoline shone onto the stage as Boukman, its dozen barefoot members garbed in colorful costumes, performed.

Fearing Port-au-Prince Police Chief Michel Francois was there that night, quietly watching.

An army colonel who accompanied him told Beaubrun afterward, "Man, I love your music -- but I hate the lyrics" -- words like, "The day has arrived for us to stage a revolution."

Haitians have paid a high price for their tumultuous history.

Ripped from Africa and brought to the Caribbean island centuries ago as labor for French plantation owners, they waged several slave uprisings before winning independence in the early 1800s. Finally free, they endured a series of repressive dictatorships as a tiny elite class enriched itself on the backs of the poor masses.

Their land has been decimated; their economy devastated. Most live in extreme poverty. Few live beyond age 45.

Even their restored president has not held out hope for much beyond "poverty with dignity."

But with an intermingling of African rhythms, traditional Haitian music, reggae, soca and rock -- and a strong dose of Africa's spirit-based voodoo religion -- Beaubrun and his future wife, Mimerose, set out in 1978 to help their people by preaching love and inner peace.

They gave their band a name that captured the essence of their message. "Boukman" was the man who led the war for independence from the French and unified uprooted Africans with Haiti's native Indians. "Eksperyans" is a Creole word that conveys a sense of unity among all creatures and of one "greatest spirit" on Earth.

Boukman's commitment to stay in its shattered country during army rule brought heavy sacrifices: Band members were arrested and harassed; some of their songs were banned, though an underground cassette industry got the music out anyway.

Rifle-toting soldiers haunted concerts, even throwing tear gas into a crowd attending a concert at downtown Canado School.

Boukman's 25-year-old percussionist, Michel Melthon Lynch, died of meningitis compounded by pneumonia in June 1994, after the trade ban made it impossible to acquire antibiotics.

The grief-stricken band left on a concert tour two weeks later, then was unable to come home because of a flight embargo. Stuck in Britain with their visas expiring, members sought refuge in neighboring Jamaica.

Island Records, which discovered the band in 1990, furnished the musicians with a mountaintop home, where they wrote and recorded their second CD, "Libete (Pran Pou Pran'L)" ("Freedom/Let's Take It!").

"It was like a therapy for us, to be in the mountains so close to our country," said Daniel Beaubrun, 32, who plays guitar, keyboards and percussion and arranges the music. "The songs just popped out."

Now that Aristide is home and shaky democracy is taking root, the evils Boukman castigates are greed, poverty and foreign influence diluting Haiti's culture.

The very multinational forces that restored Aristide threaten Haiti's culture at its deepest level, says Lolo Beaubrun.

"We want to give people more pride in who they are as Haitians," he said in an interview, folding his long legs into a narrow space beside the bed while his mother cooked Creole rice in the kitchenette of the tiny Flatbush apartment she shares with her daughter and baby grandson.

"We have to be proud of our culture, or we start to lose our culture."

Boukman's members finish each concert by returning to their roots with a tender Haitian folk song.

Beaubrun's sister, Marjorie, a tall, exotic woman with a jewel affixed to her hairline, sings a capella of a spirit living in Haiti and in its children. She cries for it to come back and "bring spiritual food and food for the body."

No matter where the concert is, be it Haiti or abroad, the Haitians in the audience softly sing along.