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GÉDÉ enters the camera.

PHOTO BY TINA GIROUARD, 1995.

THE WANDERING MIND:
JOURNALS & DIARIES

DEATH DANCES TINA GIROUARD

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI 1994

Off the Rue Macajoux in Bel Air, a labyrinth of footpaths meanders through a maze-like tangle of hovels. Once a hilly forest of homes and gardens that overlooked Port-au-Prince and the vast, horseshoe bay of La Gonave, Bel Air is one of Port-au-Prince's worst slums — solid walls of shotgun style dwellings without even an alley between them. At crossroads, the corridors widen to mini-plazas where cooking, washing, laundry, bathing and social gatherings occur. In 1918, the St. Louis family moved to Bel Air, and after becoming a Vodou priest around 1920, Ceus "Tibout" St. Louis built his temple in 1946. Always filled with elders and children — a combination home for the aged and day care center — the turquoise and orange temple bears the scars of broken walls, leaky ceiling and a cement hard, packed-earth floor that testifies to 50 years use as a Vodou family house and site of thousands of Vodou rituals and celebrations. Today, a big healthy black goat with a purple satin sash around its horns is tied by the altar.

Societe Lececoule Jour Malonge, the name of the St. Louis Vodou family/society translates from Kreyol to mean "people who go with the flow live longer." I became friends with Tibout while interviewing him

about the origins of Haiti's sequin arts. Our mutual respect grew over time, and after being pressured to initiate into the Vodou society, Tibout finally pronounced me a "Mambo of Art" — telling the rest of the family that I was already one of his "Fey" (leaf) on the tree of the society. After his death, his widow Carmen became the leader of the temple, and honored me by asking that I become "President," the one who raises money for the three major ceremonies that must be performed annually to keep the temple a legitimate home for the Lwa (saints or spirits).

The first GÉDÉ I sponsored was for Tibout, in 1994, after his death at 92. Today's ceremony is dedicated to Allison Miner, a founder of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival. She brought music, dance and merriment to millions, and was now fighting cancer and due to undergo a bone marrow transplant in November — GÉDÉ month. On leaving New Orleans for Haiti, I asked Allison to give me something very close to her to take along for the ritual. She handed me a porcelain statuette of the only American Indian saint, St. Catherine Tekakwitha. Looking around, I spotted some socks on the floor. Allison laughed at the literalness of an object "close to you," and allowed me to wrap the statue in the

socks as her essence to be delivered to GÉDÉ.

Vodou ceremonies have been evolving for hundreds of years. In the Caribbean island of Haiti the liturgy, dance, song, persuasive drum rhythms, and the art, architecture, costume and decor of Vodou temples are ingrained in the consciousness from infancy to old age. The finesse of an experienced Vodouist is to maintain a balance between uncontrolled possession and open communication between the spirit apparition and all present, an equilibrium between personal control and abandon (uncontrolled possession resembles a seizure). Mambos and Houngans are most adept at walking the tightrope between physical and metaphysical worlds — they see and live in both worlds, performing spiritual and aesthetic feats. So natural and essential is the performance that it compares to a virtuoso jazz concert. Vodou celebrants spontaneously improvise seemingly wild departures without ever abandoning the baseline of the ritual performance.

From last year's GÉDÉ ceremony for Tibout, I know the goat has been ritually preened for seven days and will be sacrificed. A few will partake of blood from the testicles for ancestral procreation. A Houngan will then go around the temple making the

sign of the cross on foreheads with the blood. This purification anointment has its counterpart in Catholicism on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. A family feast will follow the ceremony, and for several days ample amounts of food have been prepared; cabrit bukane (barbecued goat) will be the main entree.

GÉDÉ DANCES

GÉDÉ, Master of the Dead, mitigates between life and death. GÉDÉ's varied spirit forms are what Hollywood portrays as representing all of Vodou's pantheon — probably due to GÉDÉ's sensationalist associations with sex, death, and cemeteries. GÉDÉ is no killer, though. The opposite is true. When illness strikes, GÉDÉ is called upon as a doctor. He has great healing powers. At death's door you want GÉDÉ beside/inside you as an escort to the "other side." Putrefaction of the Dead and Procreation of the Living are both his domain — as one transits between earth and the ether — being born to one place requires dying in another. Slaves departed from West Africa into a watery unknown, and much of Haitian Vodou belief system has roots in Guinea, hence death is an ancestral trip, a voyage "under the water" home to heaven, to Ginen.

Purple, the universal color of royalty, and black, white and silver are GÉDÉ's colors. A black rooster or a goat are his supreme offerings. I think of him as the spirit of Saturday night whom we all meet from time to time: hilarious, grotesque, lewd, charming, demanding... In both the art and apparitions he wears a black top hat, bola or wig, carries a cane, drinks rum, wears sunglasses and smokes sometimes two to three cigarettes at a time. In possession performances, cloth is wound around the belly to give an appearance of pregnancy. The mouth is often stuffed like a corpse so words are hard to understand — bleating, a ramming stampede at death, GÉDÉ is fierce and fearless.



GÉDÉ - Veve and Offerings dedicated to Allison Minor, January 11, 1995.

PHOTO BY THOMAS GARDNER, 1995.

GÉDÉ CEREMONY, NOVEMBER 11, 1995, 11 AM

The ceremony begins when Edgar Jean Louis (priest and sequin artist), paints GÉDÉ's Veve (magic symbol) on the temple floor at the base of the Poto Mitan (center pole). Methodically painting with flour the form of a cross with a coffin and skull on the dirt floor, Edgar gets annoyed by the cacophony of shouts and squeals coming from the children. He finishes making the magic door for GÉDÉ (the Veve painting), writes Allison's name above the cross, and lights seven candles. He places her symbolic essence in a niche in the Poto Mitan, and handing him Allison's photo, I weep. Edgar's eyes are also brimming with tears, and he says Allison is capable, has the power to reach Ginen. He makes me laugh at my fear of death.

Taking my usual place at the top of a bleacher-like roost in a corner above and outside the ceremonial space, I note the entering celebrants. It's easy to distinguish the Hounsi (initiates) who are bare-footed and dressed in white, from the Houngans and Mambos who bring offerings to the Veve — bottles of secretly prepared libations, cups and bowls of liquid offerings, cigarettes, cigars, and kleren (raw rum). Kwi (split calabash bowls) are filled with other spiritual foods such as corn, rice and beans. Two young priests labor over a vegetable that resembles a bone hard cucumber. An elder Houngan, Tibout's lifetime companion, Joseph "Boss Toe" Fortina (credited as starting the sequin Vodou flag tradition), snatches away the knife and rhythmically hacks a grid pattern into it, then slices off slender layers. The tiny morsels are mixed together with special leaves and coarse ground, yellow corn grits. The goat must eat the offerings or it is considered an unfit sacrifice to GÉDÉ, an indication that the ritual has not achieved a state of grace and the ceremony will have to be repeated.

Luc "Daniel" Cedor (Houngan, sequin artist and Tibout's son-in-law) begins chanting the "Action du Grace." Other priests join the chant and take their special seats around the Veve, sitting in ritual wood and sisal chairs called "chaise bas." The Hounsi answer the priests' chants in a call and response similar to the beatitudes in a Catholic ritual. The Master of Ceremonies holds in his right hand the scepters of Vodou, a bell and the asson (sacred, bead covered gourd rattle). Heads are reverently bent, with the left hand covering the eyes, while the asson and bell are sounded. At stages everyone makes the sign of the cross on their chests and touches the ground in unison — humbly kissing the earth at a preordained moment. As this haunting chorus of invocation comes to an end, the drummers begin to pound out an exploding invitation for GÉDÉ to descend down the Poto Mitan, enter the temple and find a "horse to ride" (possess someone).

One by one the Houngans and Mambos, assisted by a candle bearing Hounsi, salute with their asson and bell, pour a liquid potion and kiss the ground at the base of each of the three sacred drums: Maman Tanbu (Mama Drum), Segon (second) and Kata or Boula (the smallest). This premier blessing empowers the drums and drummers. There is a precise, ancient choreography that precedes each salute — a side step and bow at the knees while facing skyward, back bent, raising the candle, asson, bell, and potion aloft in a gesture of praise. The salute is repeated facing each celestial cardinal point. The Vodou leaders leave the drums to circle the Poto Mitan continuing the salutation/blessing, now taking the liquid into their mouths to spew a fine spray upward three times for each sip in each cardinal direction. Finally, they spew the liquid over the heads of the Hounsi, in much the same way Catholics throw holy water from golden scepters over the heads of the congregation — an anointment.

DEATH DANCES IN HAITI

A head flings back as if jerked by the hair, eyes widen to a glare, the body gets rigid and arches, trembling as it appears to fly away in reverse. It is GÉDÉ who bounces the body backward, and others rush to prevent a fall. The spirit mounts. Crack! The body snaps forward in a standing fetal crouch, the head shakes thrashing from side to side — saying, No, no, no. Slowly the torso makes a serpentine rise, writhing with the drum beat — hands grab at the hem of the ruffled white dress gathering it up the legs — the belly pushes out — the throbbing drums proclaim GÉDÉ's arrival. Born by a human body, GÉDÉ arches his new "horse" in an acrobatic backbend — eyes open to bare slits emanating a blade of energy stabbing at the drummers. GÉDÉ keeps wiping his mouth as if it is full of dirt from the tomb. He listens intently to the pounding drums — begins to undulate to the rhythm — then stops — shaking the head — even wagging a finger No. The drummers are not powerful enough yet. Again and again the Tambours and GÉDÉ battle towards enchantment. Boom! Crack!

GÉDÉ explodes into a furious dance blending intricate foot movements with undulating waves that course through the body from under the earth, through the feet and out the top of the head — all perfectly attuned to the relentless drummers who have shed their shirts and fling sweat off their heads. GÉDÉ's performance provokes the music to an intensity equaling fire. Finally, GÉDÉ's face breaks open in a wild grin of ecstasy. Hunched over, hands on thighs, GÉDÉ teases and implores the drummers with shimmying shoulders and grinding pelvic revolutions as he thrusts at the big Mama Drum.

GÉDÉ bangs and bumps against Maman Tanbu fucking the big drum — Maman Tanbu thunders back as all present feel the climax in every cell and sense. Maman Tanbu delivers a final knockout punch and the music stops dead silent as GÉDÉ collapses on drum and drummer in an embrace. Moments later the pounding rhythm asserts its power as another Hounsi feels the weight of GÉDÉ jumping his new horse.

GÉDÉ's first mount today was Celia St. Louis, a short sturdy woman of about 60, who is a Mambo

SPRING 1996 63

ANAT EBGI

and Tibout's niece. GÉDÉ keeps possessing new bodies as Celia/GÉDÉ go to another level of the possession performance. A burlap bag stuffed full of GÉDÉ's favorite clothes, colors and accoutrements, has been laying dormant on the pulpit of the Poto Mitan. Celia pulls everything out and begins selecting what GÉDÉ wants to wear. In the end she has on three pairs of broken sunglasses, one upside down, a wig, a hat and yards of black fabric wound around her belly. She forces her legs into small black tights, grabs a cane and starts going around the room demanding cigarettes, rum and money and chastising. Everyone who has anything to give, gives. GÉDÉ shouts epithets, mocking people in the room who seem to deserve the insults, and who laugh in relief now that a secret is out in the open and off their chests.

The serene chorus of Hounsi, who chanted so recently before, are now storming around the temple



Private altar to GÉDÉ.

as GÉDÉS. What seems like chaos to the uninformed is really celestial choreography — a spirited, spiritual embrace of life and death. The GÉDÉ's gang up on me in my corner and force me to give up necklaces, money, water, cigarettes, and my purple drawers. In anticipation of an attack by at least one GÉDÉ, I have come prepared with purple and black Mardi Gras beads gathered at Carnival parades in New Orleans and extra pairs of underpants — knowing GÉDÉ always goes for the Ko Ko and the Zo Zo (pussy and cock).

Mambo Carmen comes as yet another GÉDÉ to rescue me but I do not recognize her. GÉDÉ transformations include a white powdered face achieved by packing flour (the same used to paint the Veve on the floor) onto wet faces sweaty from dancing. I give Mambo Carmen the money, and she ushers me down to the temple floor where, bracketed by Luc and

Edgar I face the gang of GÉDÉS still grunting and barking indecipherable utterances. Maman Tanbu beckons but I fight off GÉDÉ's entry which feels like warm water flowing up my lower back. I take the photo of Allison from the niche in the Poto Mitan. Speaking in my own unintelligible tongue, English, I beg the GÉDÉS to focus on her. Edgar, Luc and Carmen urged the GÉDÉS to concentrate, one of them snatches the photo and kisses it. Soon all the GÉDÉS are kissing Allison, sending her image traveling around the temple to be kissed and kissed. Knowing that this was what I had come for and fearing being mounted by GÉDÉ, I recover Allison's picture and leave to shouts of AIBOBO (Alleluia).

DEATH DANCES IN NEW ORLEANS, JANUARY 7, 1995

GÉDÉ escorted Allison "under the water" on Saturday night December 23rd, gracefully rolling and rocking her toward Ginen. One can imagine her spirit being greeted at the Pearly Gate by Professor Longhair's glittering golden smile, sitting at a platinum grand piano with diamond and onyx keys, 100 flyin' fingers banging out his unsurpassable fire-brand Boogie Woogie to welcome his dear friend home. On earth, she had saved Fess' life and spread his music all over the world. It's only fitting that he be her squire in the netherworld.

At a "Celebration of Life," death danced down the streets of New Orleans at what is usually called a jazz funeral. Held aloft at the head of the parade were a huge photo of Allison dancing up a storm and a gold and black satin banner reading, "New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival—1970." The "Furious Five" came next, strutting and dancing to the driving sounds of a brass band — at least 20 musicians playing trumpets, clarinets, saxophones, trombones, tubas, and drums. The "second line" of family, friends, and admirers danced, swayed, swooned and cried, shared stories, laughed and hugged its way down Carrollton Avenue. Among the loving entourage were cultural dignitaries from the city and the Festival organization. Performers, who later gave their musical salutes at an indoor ceremony, included: the traditional jazz band, "Spirit of New Orleans," and avant-garde jazz by "Astral Project"; Cajun balladeer David Doucet and the "Klezmer All-Stars," led by Cantor Stephen Dubov of Touro Synagogue; "Rebirth Brass Band"; and the magnificent gospel group "Zion Harmonizers." Among the many artists whose lives Allison had profoundly touched were two of the most revered Mardi Gras Black Indian chiefs — Bo Dollis of the "Wild Magnolias," and Monk (Indian Red) Boudreaux of the "Golden Eagles." This star struck "second line" was followed by a frilly white carriage drawn by a horse appropriately named Lady. The carriage held a wreath of flowers and Allison's ashes. She was cremated on the day after her death.

The dominant color worn on that cold, crisp day was black; however, by "coincidence," a wave of purple unfurled for the mourners, unaware they aided GÉDÉ's manifestation in the march. Dressed in purple shirts and silver gray suits, the Furious Five (five furies) carried a black velvet shield, surrounded by a purple garland of satin tufted ribbon with the word FURIOUS written across the top. The five dancers wore black hats and each carried a foot tall, tufted purple satin F, used like divining rods as they

pranced onward. At intervals along the way, the Furious Five stopped, threw down a black hat and performed choreographed dances accompanied by the brass band and choir of second liners. "Ask for what you want" was my favorite chorus line. Our destination was a lagoon in City Park where Allison's ashes would go "under the water" as requested. As we approached, the Furious Five set a dirge cadence and slow, slide-step motion, adopted by the second liners. A hush fell over the crowd as the musicians wailed farewell. Allison's sons, Rashi and Jonathan gave their mother to the water and set the wreath adrift. It was a halcyon day, crystal clear and the mist from a spouting fountain cast a rainbow over the lagoon.

Allison Miner came to New Orleans at 17 to become a singer and instead became an enchantress who relentlessly pursued majestic music and musicians who were being overlooked, like Professor Longhair. She was a siren whose powers magnetically attracted the world to the sounds and the city of New Orleans. Vodou is a new syncretic religion, inclusive of elements of many belief systems from Africa, indigenous Arawak Indians of Haiti, and from the European Catholic slave masters. Masonic, Protestant and Jewish elements play a role in Vodou's ever evolving spiritual practices. Allison embraced many forms of sincere spiritual expression. I found solace by reading the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* when my stepson was murdered in 1981 and returned to it when mourning Allison. On the fourteenth day after death, the Four Female Door-Keepers drink from a blood-filled skull bowl. Among them is a White, Tiger-Headed, Goat-Holding Goddess. It is the day one's soul is said to face a multitude of forces more gruesome than any concocted images of Vodou. If these awesome furies are recognized as emanating from within and are embraced, the soul achieves Nirvana. Perhaps our "Celebration of Life" that same 14th day, helped Allison's spirit soar free.

Existing only in time, music emanating from deep within equals fervent religious expression. The day of tribute ended with a blues song sung a *capella*, by Allison at a House of Blues benefit last year. "Something Within" was written by an imprisoned woman who found "something within" herself that could not be defined, captured or destroyed. Something within us all is unknowable and unchangeable. My father's farewell letter emphasized this sentiment: "I will finally know what I am, I will know the rest of the story." The ethereal quality of Allison's steady singing voice, unaccompanied, was an affirmation that life and death form a whole as we flow along our mystical voyage — a delicate, solo dance.

¹ Among the 401 Iwa are Legba, who governs the door between Physical and Metaphysical; Danbala, the Great Life force; Erzulie, Power of Love; Ogou, Protective Warrior; Simbi, who Governs Flow of Fresh Water and all Currents; Marassa, Guardian of Children; Agoue, Protector above Water; La Sirene, protector Below Water; Bosou, Fertile Earth; Azaka, The Farmer; Grand Bois, Spirit of the Forest; and Papa Loco, Treasurer of the Temple, Giver of the Asson and currently symbol of the movement toward democracy in Haiti. ☺