

Mats Lundahl

When Jazz Came To Haiti: Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh

Issa El Saieh made two substantial contributions to the culture of Haiti, in two different fields¹. The most important one was in music. Issa fused traditional Haitian musical genres, especially *vodou* music, with modern jazz and Cuban mambo during approximately one decade from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. He was not a great soloist himself but an orchestra leader with an exceptional ear for talent and for musical material that could be reshaped and fused with other music. His records are among the best ones ever made by a Haitian orchestra.

¹ The article was originally published in Swedish in Mats Lundahl and Åsa da Silva Veghed, eds., *Inte bara samba och reggae: En antologi om latinamerikansk och karibisk musik*. Stockholm, Carlssons Bokförlag, 2013 (English translation is by the author). For a more complete biography of Issa El Saieh, see Mats Lundahl, *The Man Who Brought Jazz to Haiti: The Story of Issa El Saieh*, Montréal, Les Éditions du CIDIHCA, 2019; originally published in French as *Et Haïti découvrit le jazz. L'histoire d'Issa El Saieh*, Montréal, Les Editions du CIDIHCA, 2018. Frantz Voltaire has made a wonderful documentary about Issa: *Maestro Issa, Un film de Frantz Voltaire*, Productions CIDIHCA, no number, 2009, edition@cidihca.com. The best general introduction to popular music in Haiti is that of Gage Averill, *A Day for the Hunter; A Day for the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

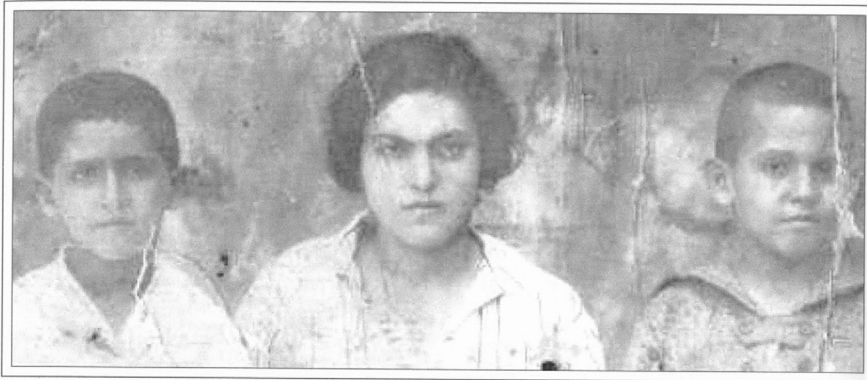
Issa's second cultural contribution consists in being the most successful art gallerist in Haiti after leaving music in the 1950s until his death at the beginning of 2005. He played a decisive role for a number of the most well-known naïve Haitian painters. He discovered them and he provided them with regular contracts with his Galerie Issa. Thereby they obtained a financial base which made it possible for them to concentrate on their painting. The result is to be seen in museums, art galleries, auction houses and private collections all over the world.

The First Years

Issa El Saieh came from a family of businessmen. The family, which is Roman Catholic, originally comes from Bethlehem. Issa always emphasized that El Saieh was a translation of the Italian *pellegrino*, pilgrim, and that his father Joseph was a descendant of Italian crusaders who had come to Bethlehem and that his mother came from a German family of crusaders who had also come to live in Bethlehem. Little is known about Issa's father's family, but his mother's relatives had left Palestine for Brooklyn in 1896. Thereafter, some members of the Talamas family had arrived in Haiti some time at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Haiti, the family sold textiles. Issa's grandfather, Moussa Talamas, imported the cloth from his relatives in New York. Issa's father as well was in the textile business but in the little town of Petit-Goâve on the southern peninsula, and when Julia Talamas married Joseph El Saieh, the couple settled down there.

Issa El Saieh was born in Petit-Goâve on 22 February 1919. Two years later, Joseph El Saieh died. Julia Talamas was alone with three children: Élias Noustas from her first marriage, Issa and André. She was, however, a skilled businesswoman, and she had loyal employees. Things went well for Julia. Her success, however, partly came at the expense of the children. Issa first went to school in Petit-Goâve, and when the family moved to Port-au-Prince, he was enrolled in the prestigious Saint-Louis de Gonzague school. Julia, however, could not cope both with her business and her children, so Issa and André were sent to a boarding school in the United States in 1928, the Lake Champlain Academy in the state of New

York. But André made so much trouble there that after less than a year the brothers were sent to St. Peter's in Lowell, Massachusetts and thereafter to The House of the Angel Guardian in nearby Jamaica Plain. Issa spent his last school years there before graduating from high school at the end of the 1930s. There he began to play music, first Eb clarinet and thereafter the somewhat bigger Bb clarinet. A few years later, he began to play alto saxophone.

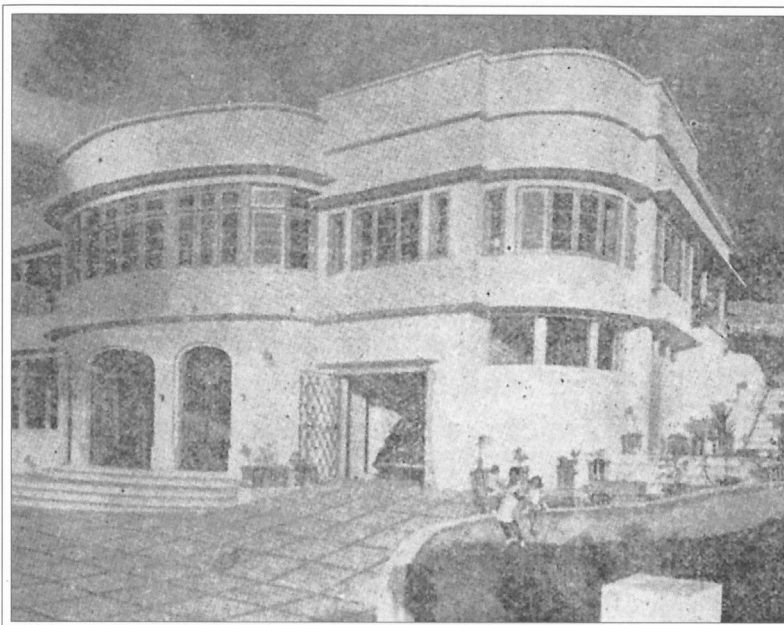


Issa, his mother Julia Talamas, his brother André © El Saieh family

After high school, Issa went back to Haiti. His mother thought that he had had enough education and she needed help in her textile shop. Issa, however, soon began to work for his half-brother Élias Noustas instead. In December 1948, Élias opened the first department store in Haiti: La Belle Créole, a store with a first-class supply of goods. The store had three departments, one with male clothing, one with female clothing and one with perfume and tourist goods. In the center of the store there was a soda fountain. Since Élias Noustas was an American citizen, he could not formally be the chairman of the board of La Belle Créole SA; Issa had to take on that task, becoming a partner at the same time.

In the meantime, he continued his musical activities. At the beginning of the 1940s, Issa played with Daniel Rouzier's orchestra, but when Élie Lescot became president of Haiti in 1941, Daniel's brother Gontran became undersecretary in the Department of the Interior and the entire

Rouzier family was dragged into politics; thus the band was dissolved. Therefore, the same year, Issa set up his own orchestra. It would soon be one of the most popular bands in Haiti. Together with Jazz des Jeunes,² Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh dominated the music scene of the capital from the mid-1940s.



Avenue du Chili 1940 © Mats Lundahl collection

Both orchestras mixed traditional Haitian music – *méringue* and *vodou* rhythms – and American big band tunes. Their music can be seen as part of a wider cultural movement which had begun to take shape during the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Haitian upper-class culture was completely French-inspired. In spite of the fact that almost the entire population were descendants of

² *Jazz* in Haiti denotes a somewhat larger band with two or three trumpets, three or four saxophones and a rhythm section.

Africans, it was Europe and France that represented culture and refinement. French was a 'real' language. For the Francophile elite, *Kreyòl* was nothing but a vulgar *patois*.

During the occupation, however, things began to change. The Americans did not make much of a distinction between the elite and the peasant masses. Both social classes were black, and French culture was not appreciated. The awakening was brutal, and the younger generation began to look for its African roots. A cultural, mainly literary, reform movement, *Indigénisme*, arose in the 1920s and 1930s with Jean Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain as protagonists. Price-Mars in 1928 published his path-breaking study of Haitian folklore and religion, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*,³ where he accused his compatriots of simply imitating the French, in spite of the fact that they were fundamentally African, and he exhorted them to study the indigenous popular and oral culture instead: legends, songs, dances, vodou, mores and traditions.

Vodou had been suppressed both by Haitian legislation and the American marines. It was not until 1946 that it was fully legalized. In the meantime, however, the *Indigenistes* had begun to use it in their writings. In 1941, Roumain founded the Bureau d'Ethnologie in order to stimulate social anthropological studies, and he would repeatedly make use of vodou himself in his poems and novels.⁴ The new emphasis of the popular culture also spread to the musical sphere. Haitian composers began to seek inspiration in the treasure trove of Haitian folk songs, and Haitian dance troupes staged vodou-inspired performances.

3 Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, Ottawa, Éditions Leméac, 1973; for the English edition: *So Spoke the Uncle*, trans. and intro., Magdaline W. Shannon, Washington, D.C., Three Continents Press, 1983.

4 Roumain's collected works are found in Jacques Roumain, *Œuvres complètes: Édition critique*, coord., Léon-François Hoffman, Madrid, Collection Archives, 2003. His most well-known novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, was translated into English as *Masters of the Dew*, trans., Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook, New York, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947.

Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh

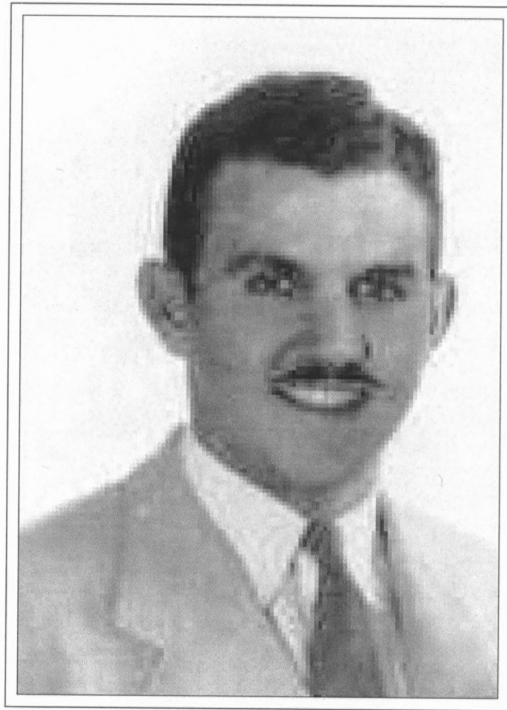
The cultural re-evaluation took place exactly when Issa El Saieh put together his orchestra, and it was of course inevitable that he would be affected by it. Issa was a precursor when it came to creating a repertoire for a modern, sophisticated orchestra which to a large extent was based on Haitian folklore and, not least, on vodou.

First, however, he had to put his band together. He brought a few musicians with him from Jazz Rouzier, among others the bassist Kénel Duroseau, who would play with the band throughout its entire existence; on drums he had Antoine 'Zanmi' Sénécal and his first trumpeter was Serge Lebon, later replaced by Alphonse 'Chico' Simon. The second trumpeter, Antalcidas O. Murat, was also an arranger and one of those who contributed most to the vodou-inspired repertoire before he left Issa for Jazz des Jeunes in 1947. Issa himself was in the sax section, first on alto and later on tenor, and his pianist was Emmanuel 'Ti Tonton' Duroseau.

With time, Issa's orchestra became a recurrent attraction at the Cabane Choucounne, the fanciest night club in Haiti, situated at the square of the upper-class suburb, Pétionville, and with space for five hundred people. The orchestra was well-rehearsed. While, for example, Jazz des Jeunes played in a rough, instinctive style which resembled that of the military bands, Issa put considerable emphasis on rehearsals, both section by section and with the entire orchestra. And then he composed. Issa saw to it that he got scores from great foreign arrangers: Budd Johnson, Bebo Valdés and Bobby Hicks, as well as stock arrangements from Pérez Prado. He invited foreign musicians to Haiti. The first one was the Cuban trumpeter Rubén Calzado, who trimmed his trumpet section at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945. Budd Johnson came regularly, from 1947; Bebo Valdés was in Port-au-Prince for four months in 1947–48 and Billy Taylor came together with Budd and Kenny Dorham in 1950.

Issa's orchestra was modelled on the Cuban bands. It played a mixture of Haitian melodies, American swing and sweet, as well as Cuban melodies. Cuban music was popular in Haiti thanks to the radio, and as early as 1939 or 1940, Issa himself began to go to Cuba more or less regularly. He went first to Santiago, where he befriended the saxophonist and

orchestra leader, Mariano Mercerón, and thereafter to Havana, where he met three of the really great contemporary musicians and arrangers: René Hernández, Dámaso Pérez Prado and Bebo Valdés.



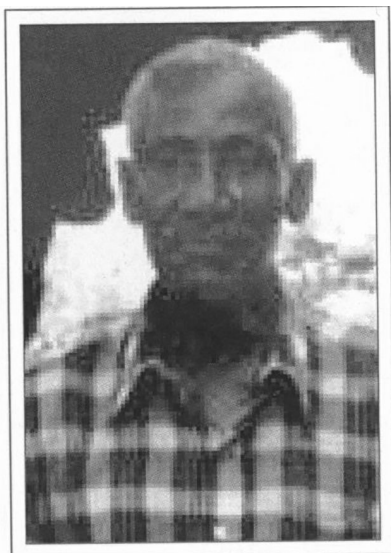
Issa in the 1940s © El Saieh family

New Musicians

In the mid-1940s, Issa's setup had changed. Alphonse 'Chico' Simon was still in the first trumpet chair, Hilario Dorval played second trumpet and Fritz Pierre third trumpet. From 1946, Raoul Guillaume was the sax leader, and his younger brother Roland played second alto. Both were still teenagers when they came into the band. Around the same time as Raoul, Guy Durosier joined, first on saxophone and later also as a vocalist. Issa himself played tenor and clarinet, Victor Flambert tenor, and Emmauel Duroseau still handled the piano part until Bebo Valdés arrived from Cuba in October 1947. When the latter left in February 1948, he was replaced by

Ernest 'Nono' Lamy. Kénel Duroseau played bass, Antoine Sénécal drums and Louis 'Coucoune' Denis *tanbou* (vodou drum) from the end of 1951.

The above, with minor variations, was the main setup of Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh from about 1947 to 1951. To this you had to add the singers, Joe Trouillot and, less regularly, René Dor, who also played *tanbou* and bongos from time to time, mainly on recording sessions, as well as the two *tanbou* stars, Marcel Jean 'Ti Marcel' and Raymond Baillergeau (better known as 'Ti Roro'), Haiti's Chano Pozo, who would become an international star when he played with Katherine Dunham and her dance troupe. For recording purposes, every once in a while, Issa also employed the singer, Herby Widmaier, mainly for background vocals.



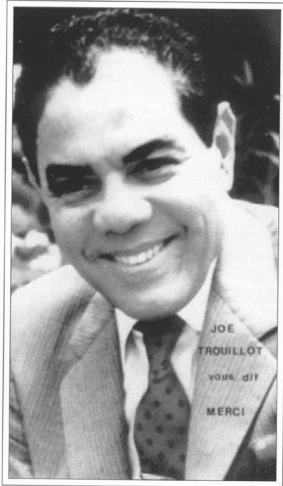
Ti Marcel 1960



Ti Roro © CIDIHCA collection

According to Issa himself, Ti Marcel was the very nerve of the rhythm section, while Ti Roro was the soloist who had problems falling in line and who liked to show off when he got an opportunity. He was the super star among the musicians who played with Issa. Internationally he epitomized the Haitian style of drumming, and jazz drummers like Max Roach took lessons with him. Guy Durosier and Joe Trouillot shared the vocal duties,

often with Durosier as the *chanteur de charme* and Joe in the bawdier, *double entendre* numbers, but they could also swap roles when the need arose.



Joe Trouillot © Joe Trouillot



Guy Durosier

Music Studies in New York

In 1947, Issa left Haiti to study music in New York. There, he took lessons from some former members of Cab Calloway's orchestra. The most important of his teachers was the tenorist Budd Johnson who would play with Issa's band from time to time. He arranged for the orchestra and recorded with it. Issa could not have had a better teacher. Budd gave him saxophone lessons, but more importantly, he taught him to arrange.

Budd Johnson was one of the most important musicians during the transition from swing to bop. The big bands involved in the process were those of Earl Hines and Boyd Raeburn (1942–44), Billy Eckstine and Woody Herman (1944–45) and Dizzy Gillespie (1945–46). Budd wrote for all five and also played tenor live with all the orchestras except that

of Raeburn. In addition, he was a member of the first regular bop band, that of Gillespie and Oscar Pettiford, at the Onyx Club in 1944. Leonard Feather calls him “probably the most underrated of the catalytic figures who helped bring about the full emergence of bop.”⁵ Issa brought Budd to Haiti in 1947, and he would keep coming back until 1956.

Issa also took clarinet lessons with Andy Brown, another Calloway musician, and tenor lessons from Walter ‘Foots’ Thomas, who had been Calloway’s musical director in the early 1930s. Eddie Barefield, as well, taught him to write arrangements.

Bebo

Issa El Saieh was the first Haitian orchestra leader to procure scores from foreign arrangers. One of the first to contribute regularly was Bebo Valdés, from 1944, and in late 1947 he arrived from Cuba to play piano with Issa. The orchestra was in acute crisis. Issa had a contract with the Club Zanzibar, a competitor to Haiti’s fanciest night club, Cabane Choucounne, but only a few days before the gig was to start, he found that he had no musicians. The owners of Cabane Choucounne had picked them from him in order to minimize competition. Issa then got in touch with Bebo. The two gathered a few musicians and began at the Zanzibar. The owners of Cabane Choucounne, who were in the front row, choked on their drinks when they heard what Bebo and Issa had accomplished, and Issa quickly had a full orchestra again. Bebo wrote arrangements of both Cuban and Haitian music for Issa. Soon the orchestra was contracted by Cabane Choucounne instead. Bebo stayed in Haiti from October 1947 to February 1948, and in 1955 and 1956, he was back for shorter stints with the band and for recordings. In 1957, he recorded his tribute to Issa, *Monsieur Saieh*, a *ritmo ibó*.⁶

Issa was no soloist. He was rather an orchestra leader like Jimmie Lunceford, Andy Kirk or Lucky Millinder, but he played in the band and wrote arrangements for it. The orchestra in principle played only on

⁵ Leonard Feather, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*, New York, Horizon Press, 1960, p. 270.

⁶ The tune is on Bebo Valdés. *Todo ritmo*, Egrem CD-0192.

Saturdays. Then Cabane Choucouné was packed. Every second or third week some foreign soloist appeared there, accompanied by the band, after just a few hours of rehearsal.



Bebo Valdés 1952 © Bebo Valdés collection

Le Bicentenaire

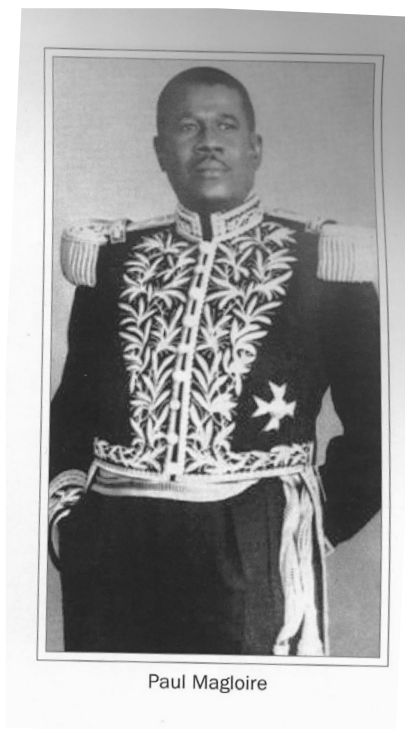
In 1946, Dumarsais Estimé became president of Haiti with the support of the black middle class that emerged in the mid-1940s. Three years later, Port-au-Prince celebrated its bicentennial. Estimé had a few slum areas near the harbor cleared and built a modern exposition ground there with pavilions, hotels, restaurants, night clubs and a casino. The capital underwent a face lift. Money disappeared right and left. The international bicentennial exposition was inaugurated in December 1949 and continued until June 1950.

Haitian culture was featured prominently: folklore, art and music. Tourists were attracted *en masse*. The exposition also had to have a more or less 'official' band. Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh was popular, but not popular enough. The job instead went to Jazz des Jeunes. The style of Issa's band was considered too 'white' and too polished, and many of

the musicians had an upper- or middle-class background, while Jazz des Jeunes was considered more popular and 'authentic'. The band was also politically close to the president.

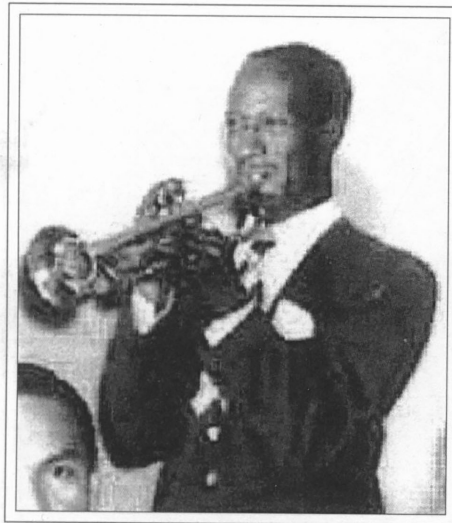
La Belle Époque: Magloire

In 1950, the military saw to it that Estimé had to step down from the presidency. He was succeeded by Colonel Paul Magloire, a triumph for the old, light-skinned Haitian elite. Although he was black himself, Magloire had their unconditional confidence. The economy was in comparably good shape during his first years and tourism continued to increase. Haiti entered its *belle époque*. In February 1954, *Time Magazine* featured Magloire on its cover. *Bon Papa* Magloire was a man who liked to have a good time. He danced and drank whiskey and was a steady patron when Issa played at Cabane Choucounne. Magloire liked the band and always left it a hundred-dollar tip when he left the club.



Paul Magloire

The orchestra was well worth its hundred dollars because it had an excellent repertoire. Issa arranged himself, and to this came, above all, what Budd Johnson, Bebo Valdés and Bobby Hicks wrote, and stock arrangements by Pérez Prado. Bobby Hicks was an arranger who is clearly worth a great deal more attention than he has received. The vast majority of the numbers recorded by the orchestra, above all in 1955–56, are by Hicks. Who he was has been a mystery for a long time, but he was a black American trumpeter, born in Saint Thomas, and during the 1940s and 1950s he played with and arranged for the band of César Concepción in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He quit music sometime in the 1980s to drive a taxi in San Juan or New York.

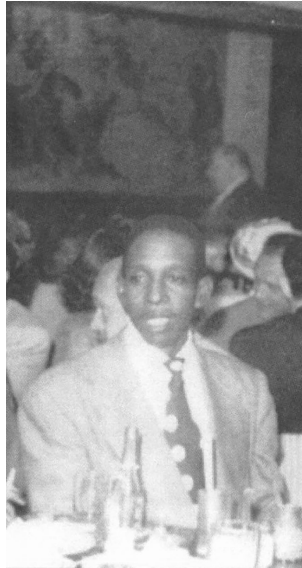


Bobby Hicks

Hicks' scores for Issa are extremely attractive, not least his use of *montuno*-like sections, what Issa used to call *mambos*, where the wind instruments play phrases that are repeated, somewhat longer than riffs, in order to whip up the emotion among the dancers. Issa's records are full of 'mambos', frequently more than one in the same tune, and most of the time they swing intensely.



Budd Johnson



Kenny Dorham



Billy Taylor

Issa resorted to his American contacts also during the 1950s. He was often in New York, two or three months at the time, and then he sometimes arranged recording sessions, for example with Budd Johnson and Billy Taylor. Budd came to Port-au-Prince in April 1950 with a sextet: Kenny Dorham trumpet, Budd himself tenor sax, Billy Taylor piano, John Collins guitar, Lloyd Trotman bass and Charlie Smith drums. This constituted the arrival of bebop in Haiti. Above all, Kenny Dorham had a great impact. The Haitian trumpeters had hitherto mainly been used to Louis Armstrong. The band stayed for a month, played concerts and organized seminars with Haitian musicians.

In 1952, Issa got so much work with the family business that he had little time for the band. He also had a physical problem, with his throat, since he played loud with a big vibrato. Therefore, he left the direction of the band to his pianist, Ernest 'Nono' Lamy, who led it under his own name until, in 1955, he turned it over to the vocalist Joe Trouillot. The band became the Ensemble Cabane Choucouné, and thereafter when it

left Cabane Choucounne for the casino, it became the Ensemble du Casino International.



Issa in the 1950s © El Saieh family

In 1955 and 1956, Bebo Valdés was back for a few weeks. He then played with a band which Issa had put together, at Cabane Choucounne, two evenings per week. In 1956, Issa went to Cuba to record. He brought arrangements by Bobby Hicks and the singers Guy Durosier, Herby Widmaier and René Dor, the drummers Ti Roro and Ti Marcel plus the trumpeter Alphonse 'Chico' Simon. Bebo Valdés supplied musicians from the band of the Tropicana night club.

In April 1957, Joe Trouillot brought six orchestra members on a European tour. The rest stayed in Haiti under the direction of saxophonist Murat Pierre until the touring musicians returned in October. The end,

however, was near for the band. Magloire had been forced to resign from the presidency in 1956, and the election campaign which followed and which ended with the triumph of François ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier, became violent. The air went out of the Port-au-Prince night life. When Papa Doc’s dark reign of terror began, most people preferred to stay at home in the evenings. In 1958, Issa broke his right index finger. He could no longer play, and during the following years the political situation sealed the fate of the band. It continued at the casino under the leadership of Trouillot until November 1961, when Joe left for Canada.

Issa had his own record company, La Belle Creole (without accent), and his records were sold in the department store with the same name. The company mainly recorded Issa El Saieh and His Orchestra, but also different bands put together with Issa’s orchestra as the base, led by Rodolphe Legros, Guy Durosier, Wébert Sicot, Bebo Valdés, Budd Johnson and Billy Taylor. The recording sessions took place in different venues in Port-au-Prince, at Cabane Choucouné, Radio Commerce or Ricardo Widmaier’s Radio Haïti (HH3W) – where his son Herby was the sound technician – as well as in Miami, New York and Havana, at Radio Progreso. At first, 700 copies were made of each record, and thereafter 1,000. According to Issa himself, at least fifty different 78:s were cut. The records were impossible to obtain for many years, but now six different CD’s exist: *El Maëstro*, *La Belle Époque Vol. 1*, *Vol. 2*, *Vol. 3*, *Vol. 4* and *Vol. 5*.⁷ Together they provide a good representation of what the orchestra sounded like.

Issa’s orchestra was often accused of being *boujwa* or *blan*, since several of the members had a bourgeois background and the band played at an elite night club, but also because of how it sounded. Issa employed first-rate arrangers and the band played in tune and with precision. He was more harmonically advanced than his competitors. Issa’s records do not contain very many solos. He did not gamble. It was mainly when guests like Bebo Valdés or Budd Johnson were present that there was solo space.

7 Issa El Saieh et Son Orchestre, *El Maëstro*, Mini Records MRCD 2028; Issa El Saieh, *La Belle Époque Vol. 1*, Mini Records MRSD-2021, *Vol. 2*, Mini Records MRSD-2022, *Vol. 3*, Mini Records MRSD-2048, *Vol. 4*, Mini Records MRSD-2049, *Vol. 5*, Mini Records MRSD-2050.

But the band had the singers and the drummers, and they were featured abundantly.

Love, Sex and Tradition

Issa's orchestra was a dance orchestra, and this of course was apparent in the repertoire. Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh played popular music, and the most popular musical theme in Haiti as everywhere else, of course, was love. Many of Issa's records contain love songs. An early example is *Dans tes bras*, probably from 1947. Alphonse 'Chico' Simon plays the muted lead. *Ti mômâ*, a méringue from 1950, is sung by Joe Trouillot and Budd Johnson plays short, but effective, tenor solo. *Ma brune*, a *bolero-béguine*, recorded in 1951, written and sung by Guy Durosier, has an AB structure, and the B rhythm resembles that of Ravel's *Bolero*. *Creole Fantasy*, with Durosier as the vocalist, is nothing but *Kouzen*, a traditional song about a man who wants to get married, but who first wants to live with the girl, while she wants a formal and classy marriage. Unfortunately, the couple lacks the money for the latter. Guy Durosier also sings in *Marié bon, marié la pas bon*, a song about what a lottery marriage may be and how the economic realities take over.

Herby Widmaier is the vocalist in Frank Loesser's *A Woman in Love*, his best record ever, made in Havana in 1956. In a style that resembles that of Billy Eckstine and Al Hibbler, and with the same natural ease as Frank Sinatra, Herby offers one of the best renditions ever of the ballad. *A Woman in Love* is a tune which easily becomes schmaltzy, but Herby's phrasing is perfect, and he does not overdramatize. Bebo Valdés is heard on piano and the arrangement is by Bobby Hicks. *Patience ma fille*, also arranged by Hicks for the Havana session, is a jazzy number about a girl who is keen on marriage and a shy suitor, with vocal by Durosier.

Love is of course related to sex, and Issa recorded a few tunes related to the latter theme as well. *Dodo Turgeau* is a well-known méringue with song by Guy Durosier and a fine tenor solo by Budd Johnson. The couple in the song have no place where they can make love. Their relatives are against the liaison, but there is a solution: going to the forest in Turgeau.

The most explicit sexual text is found in *Sharpshooter* by Antoine Radule, recorded in 1955. Bebo Valdés plays a long and varied piano solo and Joe Trouillot brags about what a great lover he is. Issa had problems when the record was released. No wonder:

Ou konnen m se yon bon vizè *You know that I am a good
marksman*

Yo medaye m kom sharpshooter *I have been decorated as a
sharpshooter*

Ay m ap bawou l *Ay, I'm gonna give it to you*
Nan tout pozisyon *In any position*

Pozisyon kanpe *Standing up*
M ap bawou l *I'll give it to you*
Pozisyon chita *Sitting down*

Mwen te met nan domi *Even sleeping*
M ap bawou l *I'll give it to you*

Another number that alludes to sex is *Pirouli*, from Havana 1956, on the surface a song about a cat sucking on a lollipop. A Swedish proverb states that a beloved child has many names, and that is obviously true in Haiti as well. *Anana* (also from Havana) refers not only to a pineapple, but Guy Durosier is eating something else as well. He is hungry and does not care too much about the quality of the product as long as he gets to eat. The arrangement is by Bobby Hicks, one of the finest in Issa's book.

Issa recorded a number of traditional *Kreyòl* songs, songs that all Haitians know from early childhood. Herby Widmaier sings Bobby Hicks'

arrangement of *Choucouné*, recorded in Havana in 1956 – the song which in English is known as *Yellow Bird* – perhaps the most beloved of all Haitian songs, and doubtlessly the most well-known Haitian poem. Michel Mauléart Mouton has put music to Oswald Durand's text about the man who meets the beautiful Choucouné, a girl with firm breasts and white teeth, and who falls in love with her. She, however, meets a white man with a wristwatch and a red beard, straight (not kinky) hair and pink skin. He speaks French, and Choucouné falls in love with him instead.



Issa's record label: La Belle Creole
© El Saieh family

Haiti, by Marcel Sylvain, also recorded in Havana in 1956, is another Haitian 'staple song' about exile and nostalgia. Guy Durosier sings powerfully and without sentimentality. *Pesé café* is another very traditional Haitian tune, a *congo* arranged by Hicks and recorded in 1955. This is arguably the best of all the tunes cut by Issa El Saieh and His Orchestra. It has all the best ingredients of his records: sinuous saxes, riffing brass, driving drums and swinging mambo sections. Guy Durosier sings the text about the little boy who has been sent to the market to buy coffee but who

is arrested by a gendarme and does not know what to say when he gets home.

Vodou⁸

Folk music based on vodou rhythms constituted one of the pillars of Issa's repertoire. He went to vodou ceremonies and saw to it that he had good relations with vodou priests and drummers. Issa wrote down the songs and rhythms.

In the vodou religion a distinction is made between spirits that belong to the *rada* family and spirits that are *petwo*.⁹ The latter are more violent and are reputed to be malevolent. They are hard and tough, while the *rada* are mild and protect the humans in different ways. Musically as well, there is a difference between *rada* and *petwo*. In *rada* ceremonies, three drums are used which are partly played with sticks; in *petwo* ceremonies, there are two drums which are played exclusively with the hands. The rhythms are different, more violent in the *petwo* case.

Macaya was recorded in 1951. The number has a *pétro* rhythm, mambo sections, dramatic screaming trumpets and song by Guy Durosier, about Makaya, who arrives with great noise and is received by the faithful. *Caréelite*. It is a song which is performed at the end of ceremonies for Gede (the spirits of the dead) and is about a *lwa* (vodou spirit) with the same name. It begins with a *pétro* drum figure. The arrangement is simple, riff-based, with a *tanbou* solo and mambo parts. Joe Trouillot sings.

Bebo Valdés is the soloist in *Magie nan caille* [Magic in the House], recorded in 1956 and arranged by Bobby Hicks, with a vocal by Guy Durosier. He also exchanges some phases with El Negro Vivar on trumpet and the trombonist El Tojo Jiménez in *Arona leve* from the same year. Durosier sings the text about a prostitute who has ended up in the

8 *Vodou* is a tricky subject. Good introductions are available in Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: 'The Living Gods of Haiti'*, London and New York, Thames and Hudson, 1953 and Alfred Métraux, *Le vaudou haïtien*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958.

9 *Petwo* is the *Kreyòl* spelling. I use it here as a religious term. The French spelling *pétro* is used for the musical rhythm.

cemetery with its guardian – Bawon Samdi – apparently by mistake, since Bawon begs her pardon. *Feuille* begins with pétro drums before the saxes begin to riff and Guy Durosier comes in. The text is about a sick child and its horrified mother and about the healing power of leaves. The pétro figure is repeated at the end of the tune.



Super Orchestre Issa El Saieh at the Rex Théâtre, early 1950s. Lower left: Joe Trouillot. Saxes: Issa, Ludovic 'Dodo' William, Raoul Guillaume, Victor Flambert. Between Guillaume and Flambert: drummer Antoine 'Zanmi' Sénécal. Trumpets (holding instruments): Fritz Pierre, Hilario Dorval, Alphonse 'Chico' Simon
© Marie Thérèse Joseph Dorval

Another number with a vodou theme is the *yanvalou Ministre Azaka*. Yanvalou is a ritual dance from Dahomey and Nigeria, and Azaka is the *lwa* of agriculture, usually dressed in blue denim clothes, like a peasant, rolled-up pant legs and a machete in a strap over the shoulder. Ministre Azaka is the pompous 'Minister of Agriculture' in the world of vodou, a fact reflected in the text presentation by Guy Durosier. *La Reine Soleil*, about the life-giving sun, from 1952, is a congo with a prominent role for the rhythm section. Joe Trouillot sings the lead. Possibly the arrangement is by Issa himself. Larèn Solèy, however, is also a vodou *lwa* of the Kongo

family; *Au dan n-a miré* (*Odan na mire*) is a yanvalou sung by Trouillot with two drum parts.

La Sirène, La Baleine, recorded in Havana in 1956, is about two sea spirits: the mermaid and the whale. The singer is trying to seduce the mermaid but falls into the water. If he had not fallen, he would probably have a fair chance of a dalliance, for Sirèn, the wife of Agwé, the god of the sea, is herself a bit of a love goddess, and she does not belong to the category of faithful wives. Sirèn is also related to Balèn, the whale, a somewhat diffuse figure in the vodou mythology. *La Sirène, La Baleine* is a very good tune. Guy Durosier sings and El Cabito Quersada plays an elegant alto sax obligato when the three vocalists, Guy, Herby Widmaier and René Dor, sing after the mambo part. The orchestra has been reinforced by trombones, which creates a fuller sound in the Bobby Hicks arrangement.

Madélia santi foula, with a tanbou solo by Ti Roro or Ti Marcel, is a song with incomprehensible African words rendered by Joe Trouillot, about a house where much *vodou* has taken place. Madélia is an evil *lwa* and the smell of *vodou* is strong. All smells are, however, not foul. *Basilica*, with Joe Trouillot, recorded in 1950, is about a basil leaf which is put in water to produce a pleasant smell. In the *vodou* borderland we find *Rele'm*, recorded in Havana in 1956, where a boy is complaining that somebody is calling his name. He suspects that somebody wants to hurt him and warns that he has powerful parents. His father is an *ougan* (vodou priest) and his mother a *mambo* (vodou priestess).

History

Issa played a number of traditional songs which allude to Haitian history. Exactly as in the vodou case, the texts are weird and cryptic. *Jacot*, from 1955, is a song about a parrot with golden feathers. The tune begins with a few piano chords, sax riffs and a brass fanfare which imitates the parrot. Joe Trouillot sings the text once. The rest of the tune is instrumental. The song probably goes back to the early independence period, sometime after 1806. It was allegedly composed by a poor woman named Défilée. Her

real name was Dédée Bazile and she had been a *vivandière* (sutler) and a prostitute during the independence wars. Défilée lost her mind after losing her family during the wars. Haiti's first ruler, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, knew and protected her, and according to tradition, it was Défilée who buried his body after he was assassinated in 1806.

Another number with a historical background is *Carolina Cao* (actually, *Caroline Acao*, or rather, *Caroline Acaau*), recorded in 1950, with a vocal by Trouillot about Caroline who dances a congo. Exactly like *Jacot*, the number appears to have a predecessor, composed in 1844 by a certain Lerezia, from Port-Salut. That year, the famous *piquet* uprising broke out in southern Haiti. Its leader was Jean-Jacques Acaau, probably the father of the dancer Caroline. The uprising failed, but the song survived.

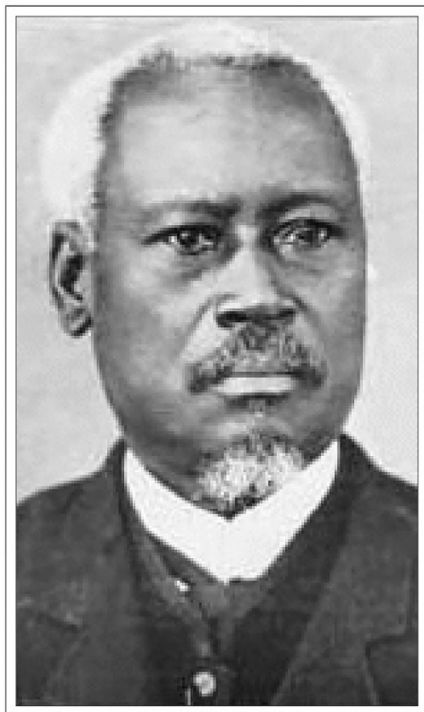
The well-known méringue *Panama 'm tombe*, also recorded in 1950, belongs to the category of 'historical' songs as well:

<i>Mwen sòti lavil Jacmel</i>	<i>I was leaving Jacmel</i>
<i>Mwen prale la Vallée</i>	<i>I was going to La Vallée¹⁰</i>
<i>En arrivan m Kafou Baint</i>	<i>When I got to Carrefour</i>
	<i>Baint</i>
<i>Panama m tonbe</i>	<i>My straw hat fell off</i>
<i>Sa ki deyè</i>	<i>Whoever is behind me</i>
<i>Ramasse li pou mwen</i>	<i>Pick it up for me</i>

According to the most common tradition, *Panama 'm tombe* (*Panama mwen tonbe*) is a song about President Florvil Hyppolite. On 24 March 1896, he was leading his troops toward Jacmel, where General Mérisier Jeannis had staged an uprising, when he was hit by apoplexy at Portail Léogâne on his way out of Port-au-Prince. He fell from his white horse, dead before he hit the ground. His hat fell off and Haiti got a new song,

¹⁰ The valley of Jacmel.

one of the biggest hits of all time: *Panama 'm tombe*,¹¹ a song which would be recorded by international super stars like Celia Cruz and Pérez Prado.



Florvil Hyppolite

Panama 'm tombe is one of Issa's best records. The number is built on sixteen-bar sections: the introduction, vocal – first the verse, then the chorus – with Joe Trouillot as the lead singer, followed by mambos, beginning with a magnificent fanfare-like trumpet part, and then saxes for eight bars and saxes plus trumpets for another eight before Trouillot returns for another sixteen bars, and then follows the last mambo part before the number ends abruptly. The arrangement hints that it is by Bobby Hicks.

11 This is the standard version. It is, however, possible that the song is from the colonial period and that it was sung by the Haitians who, during the wars of liberation, left for Cuba.

Guy Durosier is the vocalist in the méringue *Angélico* (actually, *Angélique, oh*). At the beginning, the number had strong political connotations. It was written during the American occupation of Haiti and the mean text refers to Angélique Cole, the wife of Colonel (later General) Eli F. Cole, head of the US Marine Corps in Haiti, who had been a laundress before she rose in social stature:

<i>Anjelik, o, Anjelik, o</i>	<i>Angélique oh, Angélique oh</i>
<i>Chita kay manman ou</i>	<i>Stay in your mother's house</i>
<i>Ti fi ki pa konnen lave pase</i>	<i>Little girl who cannot even wash and iron</i>

The Haitians had good reasons for targeting the racist Cole and his poor wife. The colonel thought that the Haitians in general were almost complete savages: “... fully 75 percent are of a very low mentality and ignorant beyond description [...] No matter how much veneer and polish a Haitian may have, he is absolutely savage under the skin and under strain reverts to type.”¹²

All the numbers that Issa recorded cannot be neatly classified. Some fall outside the main categories. In the méringue *Yoyo*, recorded in 1955, a song about a good *pratik*, who gives you ten when you ask him for five and fifteen when you ask for ten (*Chèche konnen Yoyo* [Try to get to know Yoyo]), sung by Guy Durosier and probably arranged by Bobby Hicks, Bebo Valdés gets a chance to stretch out at the piano. He also solos in two other numbers featuring Durosier, the congo *Merci Bon Dieu*, by Frantz Casséus, and the méringue *Oua mene'm allez*, both from 1956. The swinging *Feuille nan bois*, a pétro rhythm, is arranged by Bebo whose piano is also heard behind Guy Durosier (backed by Herby Widmaier and René Dor). The pétro *Con ça nou ye*, is also a Bebo Valdés score. Bobby Hicks has arranged *Au Perchoir*, an instrumental written by Issa as a tribute to the restaurant owned by his half-brother Élias Noustas. Both

12 Quoted by Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1971, p. 146.

these numbers are from 1956. *Cabane Choucounne*, written by Issa and Budd Johnson as a tribute to the night club, recorded in 1950, has a solo by Budd.

Contre-danse #1 features a vocal by René Dor. The number resembles the old *contredanses* from colonial times, with slow sections framing the faster main parts. The melody was arranged by Bobby Hicks for the 1956 Havana session. Issa argued that *Contre-danse #1* is a predecessor to the pumping *compas direct* rhythm that in the 1960s would be made popular by Nemours Jean-Baptiste, and which still remains one of the most popular Haitian music forms.

A good example of the tongue-in-cheek numbers that orchestra used to play is the méringue *Bam pa'm sans douce*, also from Havana 1956. The song tells the story of Manno who has become so ill one day that Father Astré has to be called to give him the extreme unction:

<i>Lè Pè Astré te rive</i>	<i>When Father Astré arrived</i>
<i>Li di: 'Saecula saecolorum'</i>	<i>He said: 'Saecula saecolorum'</i>
<i>Manno ki tande se 'wonm'</i>	<i>Manno who heard 'rhum'</i>
<i>Li di 'Ban m pa m san dous</i>	<i>He said: 'Give it to me straight</i>
<i>M a mete siwo ladann'</i>	<i>I'll put syrup in it'</i>

Joe Trouillot is the singer on *Aïda* which sounds like a Bobby Hicks arrangement. The text is very short: *Ayida o, Ayida kote ou pran tèt sa?* [Where did you get that hair?]. It has an ironic twist since there is a Haitian expression: '*Ayida tèt kwòt*' which is used to address women with very short and kinky hair. (The *lwa* Ayida Wèdo has long beautiful hair.) *Aïda* has a tanbou solo, by Ti Roro or Ti Marcel. *Roi tcha-tcha*, one of President Magloire's favorite songs, recorded in 1950, is also sung by Trouillot. The euphemistic text deals with people who think that the only thing that matters is money.

The La Belle Creole label was created to record Issa's own band. It was, however, also used for recordings with smaller groups led by Rodolphe Legros, Guy Durosier, Wébert Sicot, Bebo Valdés, Budd Johnson and Billy

Taylor.¹³ During the 1950s, Issa also organized two LP recording sessions, one for Capitol, *Hi-Fi Haitian Drums*,¹⁴ and one for Atlantic, *Voodoo Drums in Hi-Fi*,¹⁵ with folk music and vodou rhythms where, above all, Ti Roro and Ti Marcel play leading roles.¹⁶

Galerie Issa

During the 1950s, Issa's musical activities gradually declined. Instead, he became an art dealer. In 1944, the Haitian naïve art movement was born. In February 1943, the American artist, De Witt Peters, had arrived in Port-au-Prince. He found no pictorial art anywhere and therefore decided to set up an art center. Le Centre d'Art opened its doors in May 1944, and during the following years naïve high-quality art poured out in a steady flow.¹⁷ Philomé Obin, Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit, Castera Bazile, Wilson Bigaud and the scrap iron sculptor Georges Liautaud all emerged from nowhere. In 1949–50 the walls of the episcopal cathedral in Port-au-Prince were decorated by the naïve with frescoes in egg tempera.¹⁸

In the mid-1950s, Issa opened an art gallery, the most well-known one in Haiti. All tourist guidebooks had a section on Galerie Issa and its idiosyncratic and thoroughly sympathetic owner, where you could not haggle but where prices were OK. In 1964, the gallery was in place on Avenue Chili. It would remain there until Issa's death. A day at the gallery was like a day at the circus or at the racetrack with the Marx brothers. Just about anything could happen.

13 These are found on *La Belle Époque, Vols. 3–5*, Mini Records MRSD-2048, MRSD-2049 and MRSD-2050.

14 Capitol LP T10110.

15 Atlantic 1296.

16 Limitations of space do not allow us to deal in detail with these records here. The reader is referred to the two works by Mats Lundahl: *Et Haïti découvrit le jazz* and *The Man Who Brought Jazz to Haiti*, where they receive extensive treatment.

17 For an introduction to Haitian art, see for example, Selden Rodman, *Where Art is Joy. Haitian Art: The First Forty Years* [1974], New York, Ruggles de Latour, 1988.

18 Unfortunately, they were destroyed by the earthquake that hit Port-au-Prince on 12 January 2010.



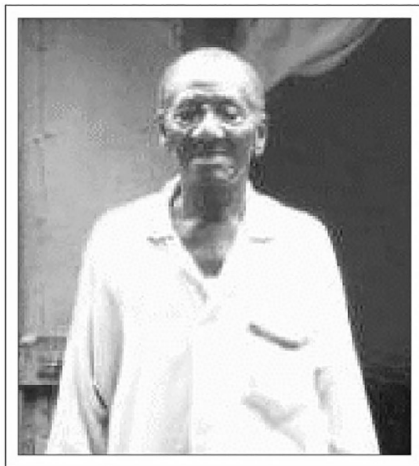
La Belle Créole in the 1950s © Elisabeth Noustas-Bugoni

In his gallery, Issa had paintings by virtually all the well-known Haitian artists. Many worked for him on a fixed-salary basis. Others came regularly with paintings for him. Artists like André Pierre, André Normil, Jacques Chéry and Seymour Bottex are inextricably connected with Galerie Issa. Issa's own collection must have been the best one in Haiti and probably also in the world.

Issa worked as a wholesale dealer — and he sold to other galleries in the Caribbean, the US and Europe, and to hotels and restaurants. Some people contend that during the Papa Doc years from 1957 to 1971, it was he who single-handedly kept Haitian art alive. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, he had some fifty or sixty painters on his regular payroll. Sometimes it was heavy. The period that Issa least of all looked forward to was when the schools started in the fall. Then he had an endless line of painters who needed money for school uniforms, shoes, books ... in short, everything that had to do with school. Issa also helped the painters with extraordinary expenditures ranging from house building and car purchases to hospital bills.



Michel Ange Voltaire
© CIDIHCA



André Pierre
© El Saieh family

At the end of the 1950s, Issa became acquainted with Graham Greene. In 1963, Greene was back in Haiti. He was then working on *The Comedians* and Issa became the model for Hamit, the Syrian, “who knew as many intimate things as a prostitute’s dog.”¹⁹ Things do not turn out too well for Hamit in the book. In the end he is found murdered in an open sewer.

In October 1964, Issa was thrown into jail for a month. Papa Doc had been taken to the cleaners for about a quarter of a million dollars in an arms deal and for some inexplicable reason Issa was blamed. He ended up in the notorious Fort Dimanche, a place from which very few people emerged alive. It was, however, soon discovered that Issa had nothing to do with the issue. After three weeks, he was moved to a military hospital, and only after yet another week was he released, having lost eighteen kilos and with half of his face paralyzed.

Issa was never politically active, but he yielded a contribution to democracy in his own sweet way. During the chaotic years at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, he offered lunches in his house for those more politically interested. They came, gossiped, exchanged information and seriously discussed how the hopeless political situation of Haiti could be straightened out.

Issa’s last years were darkened by Alzheimer’s disease and a weakened memory. The illness never grabbed him completely, but it was difficult enough as it was. Issa easily became furious at people around him, but there was an infallible way of immediately putting him in a good mood again: playing some of his old records. He smiled and his memory came back. He was one line ahead of the singer.

Issa El Saieh was a milestone in Haitian music. The musicians who were around during the golden age are touchingly unanimous. He was wrongly accused of destroying the traditional music, of wanting to make it ‘Cuban,’ but he was a progressive musician who was ahead of his time. He loved the traditional music as much as anyone, and before he set up his orchestra there were few orchestras playing the traditional tunes. He was one of the first orchestra leaders who used vodou drums in the band.

¹⁹ Graham Greene, *The Comedians*, New York, Bantam Books, 1967, p. 126.

At the same time, he modernized and polished the music with the aid of arrangers like Bobby Hicks, Bebo Valdés and Budd Johnson. It was Issa who made Haitians discover jazz, and it was he who created a modern big band sound in Haiti.

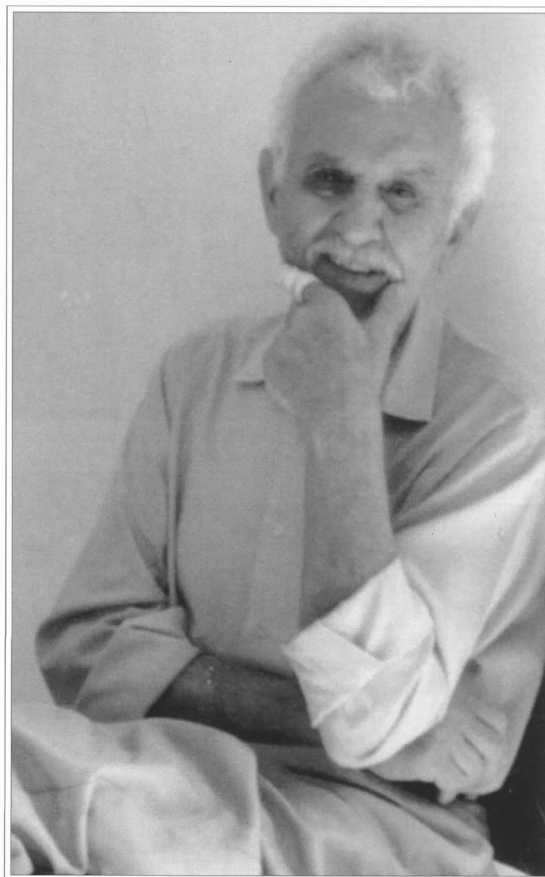


Issa and Mats, Stockholm, June 1993 © Mats Lundahl

Issa was kindness personified towards his friends. He was a bit of a Haitian saint. He could go out of his way to help those that he liked: musicians, painters, people in his neighborhood. But he could also become sullen and critical, especially when it came to competing art gallerists. Issa was a formidable institution, never pretentious, full of stories and he knew everybody. He became a legend in his own time. It was impossible not to like him.

On 20 January 2005, Issa was brought to the Canapé Vert hospital in Port-au-Prince. Three days later, after an eight-hour operation, a large tumor was removed from his esophagus. The operation went well and the doctors were optimistic, but Issa died on 2 February at two o'clock in the morning, twenty days before his eighty-sixth birthday. Galerie Issa closed.

Personally, I felt that going back to Haiti in the future would never be the same.



Issa, January 2004 © Mats Lundahl

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Mats Lundahl is Professor Emeritus of Development Economics at the Stockholm School of Economics. He obtained his PhD in Economics from the University of Lund (1979) where he taught until 1987, when he got his chair in Stockholm. His work spans a broad range of fields in economics, as well as economic history, the history of economic doctrines, and also biography. Lundahl has worked as a consultant for the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the UNDP, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Sweden), the Office of the Prime Minister (Haiti) and the Research Council of Norway. He has written or edited eighty-one books, eleven of these on Haiti, including his most recent, *Haiti: The Country that God Forgot* (2023) and two on the Dominican Republic: *Peasants and Religion: A Socioeconomic Study of Dios Olivorio and the Palma Sola Movement in the Dominican Republic* (2000) and *¡Olivorio no come pendejá! Tres estudios de religion popular y economía en la República Dominicana* (2020), both with Jan Lundius. He has also published books on music: *Bebo de Cuba: Bebo Valdés y su mundo* (2008), *Bebo de Cuba: Bebo Valdés and His World* (2015); *Et Haïti découvrit le jazz. L'histoire d'Issa El Saieh* (2018) and *The Man Who Brought Jazz to Haiti: The Story of Issa El Saieh* (2019).

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