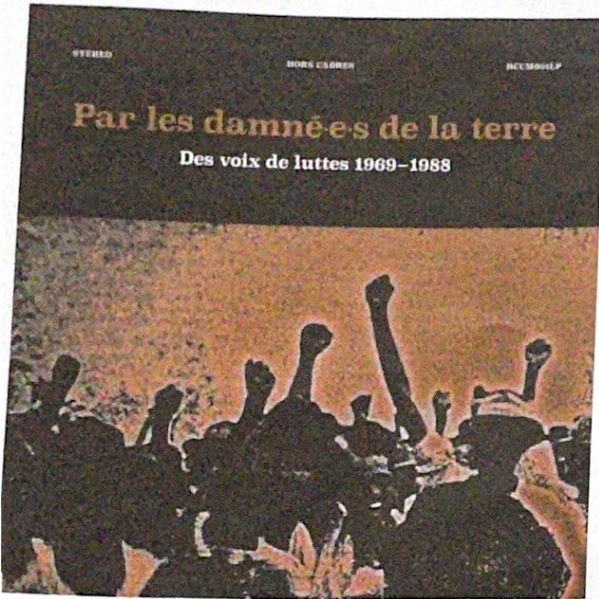


# BY THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH: MUSIC AND THE IMAGINARY OF THE LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

A CONVERSATION WITH ROCÉ  
TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY LÉOPOLD LAMBERT



left. Cover of *Par les damnés de la terre* curated by Rocé (2018). Right. Rocé posing with several Algerian records (2021).



*Rocé's rap is regularly resonating within the walls of The Funambulist's office, and, when elaborating the contents of this issue, his name came out immediately. We are therefore happy to begin this dossier about Music and the Revolution with him. We talk about his illustrious parents, his rap, but also about the various projects he built around the songs of the movements of liberation on the African Continent, in Palestine, Kanaky or Viet Nam, but also within the eye of the empire, in France.*

**LÉOPOLD LAMBERT:** Rocé, if you don't mind, I would like to ask you to tell us about your parents. Not to try to understand yourself — you said in an interview that your father had transmitted less in terms of political history than one might think — but because, somehow, you are one of the best people to tell us about these two amazing people.

"[MY FATHER] WAS NOT EVEN 18, YET HE HAD ALREADY WORKED AS A DYER, SO HE KNEW HOW TO REMOVE CERTAIN INKS WHICH INTERESTED THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT."

**ROCÉ:** Sure. My father [Adolpho Kaminsky] was born in 1925 in Buenos Aires. His parents had fled Russia. His father was in the Bund — that Jewish, communist, anti-Zionist organization that existed at the beginning of the 20th century, if not a little before. At the time, he was already seen as an anarchist and a communist. They fled Russia and arrived in Argentina where my father was born. Then, they came to France with their Argentinian passports in 1925. My father therefore grew up in France, and then under the Vichy regime, he was in a concentration camp in Drancy. He was not even 18, yet he had already worked as a dyer, so he knew how to remove certain inks which interested the resistance movement. He managed to get out of the camp because Argentina had not yet signed the agreements. He left and joined the resistance movement because he had this ability to know how to erase inks from identity documents. Little by little, it became his specialty: my father became the one who did the false papers for the Jews, to ensure that they could have other papers when they left the camps.

Once the war was over, many resistance fighters returned to their former lives. They were going back to their jobs, going back to their families, etc. My father didn't really have a life before. So he continued to do what he knew best, but for other liberation struggles, in particular that of the FLN, the Algerian Liberation Movement. He joined the FLN and continued doing fake IDs. He also made counterfeit money to put pressure on France, to create a balance of power, and to blackmail by saying that he could flood France with counterfeit money.

One thing led to another, from the resistance under Vichy to the FLN, he became the forger of the liberation struggles in many countries in Africa and South America, but even in European countries like Greece. He was also training other forgers. In the 1970s, he went to Algeria to be a trainer and photographer, etc., and that's where he met my mother [Leïla]. She is Algerian of origin from Adrar, in the south of Algeria, but lived with her family in Blida. They met in an association fighting for the liberation of Angola, then stayed a long time in Algeria and that's where I was born. I arrived in France at the age of 4 with Algerian papers and Argentinian papers, and I received French citizenship only from the age of 18. That's for family history! [laughs]

**LL:** Thanks a lot for the story. We can perhaps also add that your mother is part of the Black communities of Algeria, which is far from a politically "neutral" identity in a country like Algeria, or in the Maghreb in general?

**R:** Let's say that in Algeria there are many Black people, but since the Algerian immigration in France tends to be Kabyle (and therefore Amazigh too), from France we tend to think of knowing a country through its diaspora when often it is people coming from the same regions, the same villages, etc., who arrived in France to work in the factories... We think we know a country through its diaspora, when actually we only know one corner of the country. When we tend to generalize about a particular country, we think we recognize its diaspora. But in reality, we only see a part of it. We only see one region. So yes, there are a lot of Black people in Algeria. There is the entire Algerian Sahara that is immense, but it is not this diaspora that we see in France.

**LL:** Perhaps also because French colonialism itself saw the country in this way, that is to say the three departments in the North and the said "Southern territories" embodying a

gigantic part of the country, which was interesting for the French only for hydrocarbons and nuclear tests.

**R:** Exactly.

**LL:** Now that things are a bit set-up, all of my following questions have to do with what I call "the imaginary of struggles." What I find remarkable about your work is the way you use various formats to mobilize this imaginary. Perhaps starting with the most explicit, which is the project *Par les damnés de la terre*, i.e. By the (Female and Male) Wretched of the Earth, I found it really interesting the way you combine Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Léon-Gontran Damas and other figures — either intellectual and/or political — of decolonization, also with workers' and immigrant voices, especially Algerians. It's really very present in the project. So I wanted to know if you could present the project to us in general, but also this specific approach.

**R:** The title of the project refers to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. I added "By" because it is they who speak for themselves, by themselves. These are their songs, their voices. We hear them, utter their cries or their laughter. These are the pieces that they wrote, to speak for themselves about their struggles. The idea was to find these musical, artistic testimonies, and to put them on one and the same project with a common point, which is the French language — despite the fact that some of them may have done only one piece in French. These are not necessarily artists who have made their career in this language, but who have done, at one point, a song or two in French. Time is also a common point. The idea was to stay in the era of decolonization of the 1960s and 1970s to ensure that this project really has a common 'color.'

Musically, being a rapper, I wanted to find songs that were more clamored than sung, like The Last Poets or Gil Scott-Heron on some of their songs, and make it sound good. What matters a lot is that it's good music, not just songs with good intentions, to which one lends an ear just out of politeness by saying "yes, they were thinking well, they were well-intentioned." Those had to be songs that we could listen to because they are good songs. For me, art does not forgive.

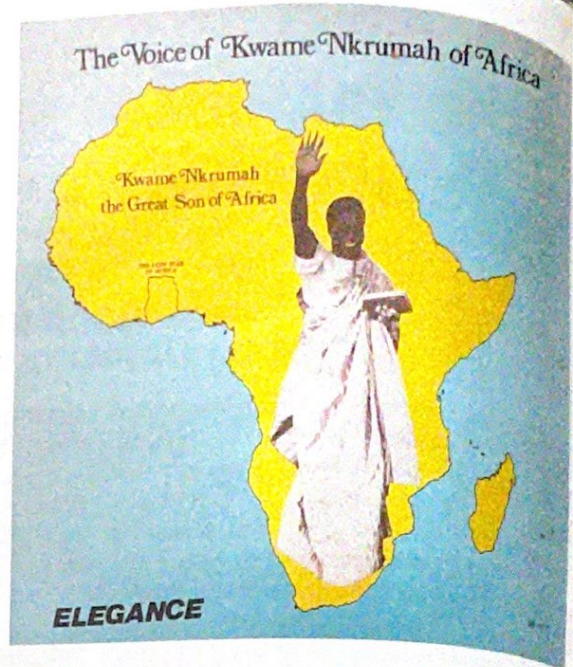
**LL:** There is the wretched of the earth of colonized countries as described by Fanon, but in your record, there are

"[MY PARENTS] MET IN AN ASSOCIATION FIGHTING FOR THE LIBERATION OF ANGOLA, THEN STAYED A LONG TIME IN ALGERIA AND THAT'S WHERE I WAS BORN."

"THESE ARE THEIR SONGS, THEIR VOICES. WE HEAR THEM, UTTER THEIR CRIES OR THEIR LAUGHTER. THESE ARE THE PIECES THAT THEY WROTE, TO SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES ABOUT THEIR STRUGGLES."



**Left.** "The Palestinian Revolution sung by children, a record from 1975.  
**Right.** "The Voice of Kwame Nkrumah of Africa," a record from 1976 / Both photos are courtesy of Rocé.



"I NEEDED A UNIVERSE WHERE THERE WAS BOTH NORTH AFRICA AND SOUTHERN AFRICA, AND ASIA WITH VIET NAM. FRANCE WENT TO COLONIZE EVERYWHERE AND I KNEW THAT I WAS NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO ALLUDE OR PAY TRIBUTE TO ALL THE COUNTRIES, AS THIS IS NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE PROJECT."

also those we could call "the wretched of the earth of the interior," which reminds me of your song *The Nomads of the Interior*. This refers to immigrant workers for instance, and in the record, you also mobilize police crimes like the police murder of Mohamed Diab in Versailles in 1972. Can you tell us about this dialogue between these two categories of wretched of the earth?

**R:** I didn't do that on purpose. It's just that it's linked in reality: in the diaspora or in the country of origin, where there is colonialism, there is colonialism. When France colonizes Algeria, the Algerians who are in France are also in danger. This is because when France colonizes a country, whichever the country, its diaspora will also be in danger in France too. An American will never feel in danger in France because he knows very well that he can go to his embassy and that his embassy is strong. It is not the same for a Malian. It is not the same for an African-American in France at the time, or for a Malian in France at the time. The difference is here: France will not be accountable to a child exiled from its country who arrived in France, when it might to an expatriate child coming from another Western country. Even the names are not the same: an expat is not an exile because an expat comes from a country that has a balanced power relationship with France.

**LL:** As a rapper, words are of course very important for you. And so it is not by chance that the places from where these voices of the wretched of the earth come, have their indigenous names: Kanaky for New Caledonia, Ayiti in Taino for Haiti, Karukéra for Guadeloupe's Basse Terre, Madinina for Martinique, Al Djazair for Algeria (the famous DZ!)... Could you tell us a bit about this geographic imaginary?

**R:** When I started the project, I had to find songs in French. I was able to find the most French pieces from

the working class, from peasants... Then I started to find a piece of Benin, a piece of another country, etc., but there was not enough depth. So at one point, I decided not to shy away from a subjective sorting. Some might say it was arbitrary how I did it, but I essentially told myself that I had to find a Haitian piece, for the history that it represents and what it will give symbolically in the project, and another piece from somewhere else for another reason, etc. And that's how I continued the project, telling myself that anyway, objectivity does not exist. My research was carried out mainly through researching vintage records. So either I complied with the randomness of what I was finding, or I was the one who extended my research more deeply into such and such a field. This is what I did with Viet Nam, where I found these interludes, and this is what I also did with Burkina Faso for example, where I found tapes to restore. The idea was to scatter the search field like that. I needed a universe where there was both North Africa and Southern Africa, and Asia with Viet Nam. France went to colonize everywhere and I knew that I was not going to be able to allude or pay tribute to all the countries, as this is not an exhaustive project. But the idea was to still produce something large enough to show some depth.

**LL:** Among these geographies there is Kanaky, which as you know, is very close to my heart. In *Problèmes de mémoires* (Memory Troubles) you say: "Kanak people? No one teaches about them." In the song *Tenir Debout* (Standing Up), you quote Jean-Marie Tjibaou with Frantz Fanon, Harriet Tubman and other illustrious revolutionaries. Jean-Marie Tjibaou also opens *Par les damnés de la Terre*. We heard him open the Mélanésie 2000 festival of Kanak culture in 1975. For me, it's extremely important that we talk about Kanaky as much as possible, so I wanted to ask you what was your relationship with the country's liberation struggle?

**R:** These are things that I knew like everyone else — no more, no less. I am neither a historian nor a Kanaky specialist, but Jean-Marie Tjibaou's testimony spoke to me. It is a testimony found in a documentary and it spoke to me a lot, like most of the testimonials that I had to cut for the project, which as a whole revealed this relationship between politics and culture. They say that if we are culturally invisible, we also will be politically and vice versa. Tjibaou said it clearly at the opening of the festival that he organized, *Mélanésia 2000*. This is why I found it interesting to place it first in the record. Then he was assassinated [in 1989], like many people in this project elsewhere. To use his testimony, we contacted the Tjibaou Cultural Center of Nouméa. I was touched by how kind people were, and how implicated they feel about the project, like most of the people we contacted for it.

What struck me, beyond all that and beyond this project, is that when I continued my research on it and listened to the generations of young singers of the 1980s — it was before the arrival of rap, so we're talking about rock at the time — there is this really sadly, touching common point between these rock singers of the 1980s, whether they are in the *banlieues* of Noumea, in the Parisian *banlieues*, or in the *banlieues* of other colonized regions. We realize that it is exactly the same patterns of working-class neighborhoods, that ultimately the same youths emerge from: they wander around and they rock because they get bored. No need to cross seas and oceans: imperialism has created the same things all over the place.

**"NO NEED TO CROSS SEAS AND OCEANS: IMPERIALISM HAS CREATED THE SAME THINGS ALL OVER THE PLACE."**

**LL:** You have another project called *Disques en Lutte* (The Records of the Struggles), which I wanted to talk about because it once again leads to another format. Obviously, there is the format of the music, it is quite obvious. But there is also a particular care brought through the covers of the records themselves, which led to an exhibition you did. I wanted you to tell us a little bit about this iconography linked to the political imaginaries of the liberation struggles, in particular, pan-African ones, in this exhibition.

Records from Algeria, Cape Verde, and Guinea Bissau. / Courtesy of Rocé



"A RECORD COULD ALSO MEAN A UNION FIGHTING WITHIN ITS FACTORY, GOING ON STRIKE, AND MAKING A RECORD WITH TWO SONGS ABOUT THE STRIKE ON IT."

"RATHER THAN ENTERING INTO A COMPETITION OF STRUGGLES, IT IS REALLY ABOUT HAVING A VAST FIELD, A VAST VISION, ESPECIALLY TO FOCUS ON THE FORMS OF SOLIDARITY THAT HAVE EXISTED."

**R:** When doing the project *Par les damnés de la Terre*, we found the tracks mostly in records. I was frustrated that by only choosing records in French, I was putting aside all the records that have superb covers sung in Portuguese, English, Spanish, Vietnamese, etc. So I told myself that because there were so many interesting covers, there had to be something to do with them. At the time, making a record didn't mean you had to be James Brown. A record could also mean a union fighting within its factory, going on strike, and making a record with two songs about the strike on it. On the back of the cover, there would be a copy of the leaflet that explains the reason for the strike. That's also what making a record meant at the time. And it was the same for the peasants, it was the same for the Comorian students in France, for the Guadeloupean students in France, etc.

It goes very far. It was the same for record labels such as Folkways, Paragon, Chants du Monde, which were often very close to the communist parties. They had a kind of socio-anthropological function of travelling to see other colonized countries, trying to recover testimonies, and a political function — which was to say what these testimonies were and to say it also on the cover. Algerian labels for example, would be distributed in Yugoslavia with the support of a French association... And the cover would tell us all that. The cover will also tell us what the fraternities were, what the links between these countries were. The cover itself, when it speaks, gives a sort of manual of the struggle. This is why I wanted to exhibit them.

The idea of the exhibition, just like for *Par les damnés de la Terre*, was to make sure that I have my own subjectivity. This means not putting them randomly on the walls, but really to recreate, through the covers, a history of struggles and emancipations. This also meant decentering Europe. For example, rather than starting with May 68 in France, I started with the national strike and massacre in May 67 in Guadeloupe. Rather than starting with Europe, I started with the Mandingo Empire, already in the 1800s... We also trace the history of Pan-Africanism, which is a powerful and vast chronology that echoes other emancipations where, in the end, European struggles have their roles, but they are not the main one.

It is a question of seeing histories within a globality that is a bit more balanced in my opinion, and in any case to make certain histories a little more visible. Rather than entering into a competition of struggles, it is really about having a vast field, a vast vision, especially to focus on the forms of solidarity that have existed. This is also what is important: creating a kind of memory or manual also means emphasizing fraternities.

**LL:** There is one last format I wanted to talk about, which is something inherent to rap: the samples. You still use a lot of instruments for each of your tracks, but we can recognize some samples in your work (which we will not mention here as these things are meant to stay "under the radar"). Could you please tell us what is your relationship

Various records from Haiti, Gabon, Guiana, Algeria, Palestine, Guinea Bissau, the Congo, Black America, immigrant workers' France... / Courtesy of Rocé





Youth of Massy (southern Paris banlieue) visiting the exhibition *Disques en lutte*, curated by Rocé (2019).

between your rap and what we could call this "musical pantheon" that you mobilize through these samples?

**R:** When I started rapping, about 20 years ago, my brother was producing music with a sampler, and the sample was the music of the poor. You have records because it's like that — because you're a DJ, your big brother is a DJ — and that's how you're going to make music. The question did not arise in real life. It's part of an art that was built like that, and because we could not hire a drummer, a violin, a keyboard... We made do with what we had, like in the United States. We imitated the Americans, but it was also easier in a way.

And of course it became a passion, and finding the right sample also becomes a passion. Today, the tools for making music have evolved so much. Some people are really attached to the sample, they don't want to let go, but today everything has become possible, unlike back then. Today, with a cheap laptop and free software, you can do a production without taking a sample, and your production can be really good, you can even mix it on your laptop. But at the time, all this was not necessarily possible. A sampler was expensive, but that's what everyone used. So it was not a personal choice, nor was it even a question.

Today, I continue to sample from time to time. It's more complicated than before in terms of requesting rights, it's not like back then. At the time, you didn't care. I was not famous in any way, so I sampled without asking myself any questions. Today, I don't use samples the same way. When I use one, it may be something that is not too well known, or that is so

well known that they will not come and piss me off because I am not famous. Or, I will rework it. Or, the sample will be taken because it is an homage... At the end of the day, my relationship to the sample is my relationship to music. It's my relationship to the love of music, to making homages, or to use something because I think it's good.

Sometimes I ask for authorization, and sometimes I don't. That's at my own risk. It also comes from a certain era. The sample is a mark of an era, and today it is used differently. When a super famous producer uses a sample, it is perceived as an homage. Either way, there will be a statement that goes with it, and it's almost seen as a feature, even with someone who is dead. For example, if Jay-Z samples Marvin Gaye in a chorus, it's almost like a feature in reality. But it's just a sample in a way. When DJ Premier takes something, it's a sample because he's going to cut it up in his own way. As far as I'm concerned, I don't have the means to be like Jay-Z, so I'm going to do like DJ Premier — and then, little by little, I'll add to it. ■

**Rocé is known for his researched writing, but also for his surprising projects! After four albums of French rap between 2002 and 2013, he undertook to create a collection of francophone political songs under the title *Par les damné.e.s de la terre - des voix de lutte 1969-1988*. Starting July 2020, Rocé came back to rap with several songs he spontaneously released on various platforms. Finally, he released his EP *Poings serrés* in June 2021 and announced an album for the next year.**

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