

ROLAND TCHAKOUNTÉ
NGUÉMÉ & SMILING BLUES

Robert Pete Williams, one of the great African-American poets of the blues, discovered in a Louisiana prison farm at the end of the 1950's, described his art as "air music": "*The sound of the atmosphere, the weather changes my style. The atmosphere, when the wind is blowing, carries music along,*" he once explained. Roland Tchakounté's music—and this is no small feat—is endowed with the same atmospheric airiness that reaches the universal.

Born in Cameroon, but a world citizen at heart, Roland treads the bridge that links the blues to Africa on this new album. As was the case with Roland's five previous sets, *Nguémé & Smiling Blues* makes use of two idioms to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the First Continent: *bamiléké*, his mother tongue, and the blue notes that changed his destiny forever the day he heard a John Lee Hooker recording for the first time: "*Hearing him was a true revelatory moment. At first, I thought he was an African artist who had Americanized his name. The spontaneity, the apparent lack of structure, the fire and raw energy, the honesty I was hearing changed my whole perception of music, and I knew on the spot what direction I wanted to give to my music from then on.*"

Nguémé, the Cameroonian pidgin synonym of *hardship* that gave its title to this set, is a sure sign of Roland's concern for the suffering of the world: "*I've always been affected by the downtrodden and the oppressed,* he says. *This new recording is an open letter to them, a way of giving them the strength to stand up and keep their heads up high.*" In that respect, Roland remains faithful to the cathartic spirit of the blues. In keeping with the

African-American blues tradition, his music deals with grief and sorrow as a way to transcend them. The 13 original compositions that make up *Nguémé* don't deal exclusively with sadness ("Melena," "Misery") and unrequited love ("Meden Mbibou," "Oulen Nefa Fide"). They also celebrate the moments of being that give their full meaning to our lives ("Nju Bwoh Man," "Tchuite Blues," "Noum Seou"), and generally praise Africa in a way that's rarely done by condescending Westerners. "Chubata Africa," the opening track, is a perfect example of Roland's proud outlook on a continent that gave the world outstanding heroes such as Nelson Mandela, the leader of Ghana's independence Kwame Nkrumah, trailblazer Thomas Sankara from Burkina, or famed anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop whose groundbreaking work brought to light the African origins of Ancient Egypt. Roland envisions *Nguémé & Smiling Blues* in an energetic and positive way. Strongly inspired by the flamboyant atmosphere of the electric Chicago blues school relayed by Mike Ravassat's scorching guitar and the inspired keyboard work of Damien Cornelis from the Malted Milk band, this album is yet another paean to Tchakounté's original touch. A strong singer in the Taj Mahal tradition, Roland is one of a handful of creators who have successfully built a bridge between Africa and Black America's ultimate art form, the blues.

"Nju Bwoh Man," its emotional atmosphere enhanced by its majestic choir, is a critical proof of this achievement. Especially when you know that *nju bwoh man*, in bamiléké, means "Life is beautiful."