

THE CHRONICLE

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

French duo combines best of soul

By JERI YOUNG
THE CHRONICLE

In the fickle world of R&B, Les Nubians shouldn't even rate a blimp.

Light and airy, the duo combine the hip hop sensibility of The Fugees with the socially conscious music of Myriam Makeba.

There's no cussing, no fussing, not even a line about the "Ben-jamins." Though the duo has yet to lay down the new souls stalwart - the "jeep beat" - Helène and Célia Faussart, two sisters from Cameroon by way of France and Chad, are lighting up the charts and breaking new ground in the battle to make international music more mainstream for black audiences.

And they're not even doing it in English.

All but one song on their recently released CD, aptly titled "Princess Nubiennes" - French for black princesses - is in the sisters' native French.

And while lyrics have left listeners scratching their heads, the duo's classic blend of soul tinged with quiet syncopated rhythms has propelled the CD up the charts. From the haunting "Les Portes du Souvenir" to their soft, silky remake of Sade's "Sweetest Taboo," "Princess Nubiennes" is the kind of soothing soul that would make even Al Green proud.

The duo says their international success is not really surprising. Though the group's lyrics are French, the sound is squarely

rooted in the music of myriad black artists from the venerable Makeba to Public Enemy. The duo also cites American jazz greats as powerful influences on their cool sound.

"Ella Fitzgerald, because her songs had so much depth," Célia said, "Ella Fitzgerald, because her songs had so much depth, she has such a soothing voice, she has such a soothing voice, she can say things that are hard to hear in a way that's easy to listen to because of her sensitivity and warmth. I have a lot of admiration for her technique."

"We see music above all as a way to communicate in the larger sense of the word, Helène, 24, said. "We'd like people to listen to the album to learn something - that it makes them question certain things, that they'll understand what it means when we talk about the queen of Saba, of Nubian princesses."

Born to a French father and Cameroonian mother, the sisters were exposed to a wide range of music from American pop and soul to traditional African fare replete with the sounds of djembe drum. They've dubbed their musical fusion "Afro-pean."

"We were born in France and lived (there) till we were 6 and 10, respectively," says Célia. "We watched 'Les Enfants Du Rock' (Children of Rock) thanks to our cousin. We are part of a large family with lots of kids, and we listened to stacks of music: The Jackson 5, funk, etc. Like every-

one in the '80s, we watched 'Starsky and Hutch.' Then we left for Africa - Chad, where there was a war on and no television - obviously a big change."

Célia says the CD, which features a strong Afro centric message, is an ode to the creativity of blacks around the world.

"Everywhere in the world where black people find themselves, there has been a tremendous surge in creativity, a strong desire to not forget their history, to make memories live on and to talk about their everyday lives," said Célia, 20. "In our songs, we talk about subjects that have not been brought up before in France."

Even the group's name, which means "the blacks," borrows heavily from the motherland.

"A Senegalese friend gave us the name because he felt it suited our music and our way of looking at things," said Helène. "When we started performing, our repertoire consisted mainly of cover versions. The idea behind our shows was to take the public on a trip through the history of black music and the African Diaspora. It covered everything from traditional music to gospel, including jazz, reggae, etc. That's what it means to be a Nubian. It means trying to recapture all the elements of African culture through music - its colors, sensations, etc. And, above all, to show that there is a bond between us, a black identity."

Though the duo has created a new sound that seems to have

struck a chord with listeners around the world, the sisters still consider their first album sort of an introduction to the world of the Nubians.

"Understanding all these elements makes it easier to position yourself in a society that tends towards internationalism, in which you don't fit in," said Helène.

What are they saying?

Searching the liner notes to figure out what the songs are about? Forget it. Following are a breakdown of the cuts on "Les Nubiennes" and a brief synopsis of what each means:

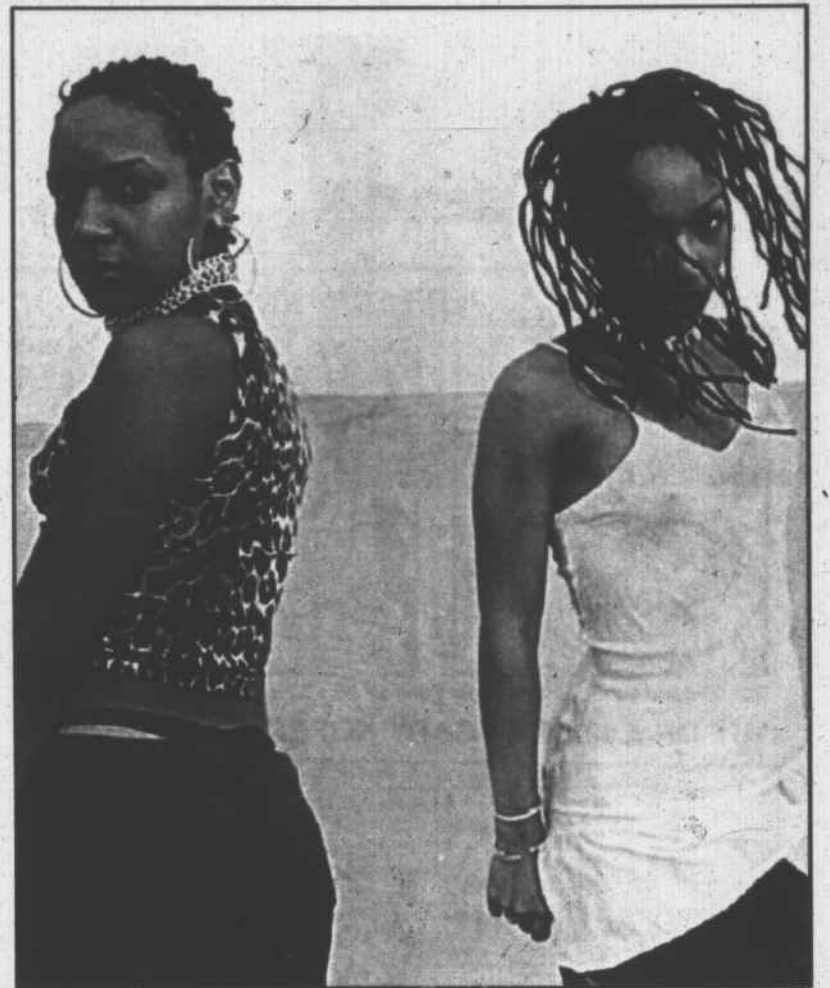
• **Demain (Tomorrow)** - The message: "If you want people everywhere to live in peace, you have to make an effort."

• **"Les Portes du Souvenir" (Memory's Door)** - The song is about the quest for love and what happens when you look back on past romances.

• **"Makeda"** - Makeda is the name of the queen of Saba. The song deals with the misrepresentation in history and the fact that Africa played a huge role in world civilization.

• **"Sourire" (Smile)** - Sourire is a song to wake up to in the morning and smile. Enough said.

• **"Princesse Nubienne" (Nubian Princess)** - Written by French rapper Souleymane Diamanka, the song deals with the



LesNubians - sisters Helène and Célia Faussart from Cameroon - are lighting up the charts and breaking new ground.

power of the knowledge of black-

ness.

• **"Tabou"** - A remake of Sade's "Sweetest Taboo."

• **"Embrasse-moi" (Kiss Me)** - Sensual song whose title says it all.

• **"Sugar Cane"** - The CD's only English cut.

• **"Bebela"** - A tribute to the

duo's mother and village. In

Ewondo, the duo's mother tongue, Bebela means "here lies the truth."

• **"Si Je T'avais Écoute" (If I had listened to you)** - The song is about abortion. It's the story of a young woman who becomes pregnant and how hard it is for her to

decide to abort the baby.

TV celebrity Roscoe Orman to portray 'Stepin Fetchit'

Special to THE CHRONICLE

Roscoe Orman, most known as Gordon on the internationally acclaimed television show "Sesame Street," will portray Stepin Fetchit, a character made famous by black film star Lincoln Perry in the late '20s and '30s when the North Carolina Black Repertory Company presents "The Confessions of STEPIN FETCHIT" in the Arts Council Theatre, 610 Coliseum Dr. in Winston-Salem.

Performances will be held at 8 p.m. June 18 and 19, and at 3 p.m. June 20. Tickets are available at the NCBRC box office on Coliseum Drive, or call 723-2266 for reservations.

Roscoe Orman began his acting studies at the Circle-In-The-Square Theatre School under Michael Kahn, where he made his professional debut with the Next Stage Theatre Company's 1962 production of "If We Grow Up." He has

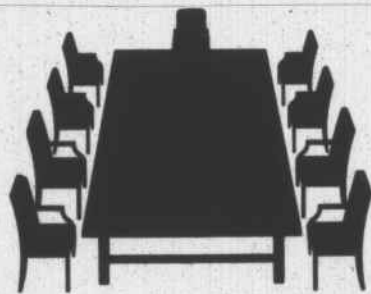
acted in more than 50 plays throughout his theater career. Orman made his feature film debut in the title role of Universal Pictures' 1973 film "Willie Dynamite" opposite the late Diana Sands. His other film credits included such featured roles as Gordon in "Follow That Bird," Sid McClellan in "Striking Distance" with Bruce Willis, Judge Simmons in "New Jersey Drive" and JoJo in the 1997 film "Full Court Press" with Ellen Burstyn. Orman has toured throughout the United States, Canada and the Caribbean with his one-man Gordon of Sesame Street Show and also as Lincoln Perry in Matt Robinson's one-character play "The Confessions of STEPIN FETCHIT," performing at colleges, regional theaters and festivals.

"The Confessions of STEPIN FETCHIT" was written by Matt Robinson, a writer and producer for "The Cosby Show." He was one of the original producer/performers on "Sesame Street" and an author of children's books published by Random House. He is also writer/performer on records distributed by CBS and Warner Records.



Orman

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NCBRC celebrating 20 years of professional Black Theatre, is a funded member of the Arts Council of Winston-Salem & Forsyth County and receives funds through grants from the North Carolina Arts Council.