

# Portland's prince of kompa

*A talk with Eddy Cange about his homeland of Haiti and his Portland band, Balans*

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Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The environmental and political travesties there, coupled with the devastating natural phenomena that have pelted the country are documented over centuries. And with the recent landfall of Hurricane Sandy, it would seem that there is no end in sight for the struggling country.

Eddy Cange, a Portland-based musician and member of the all-Haitian band Balans, knows about the harsh realities of life in Haiti all too well. He grew up there, leaving when he was 24 years old to come to the United States after his parents disappeared and were presumably assassinated in the mid-1980s.

It has been a long road for Eddy Cange, one paved with grief, death, devastation and joy — experiences that fuel passionate and political songs. He has found a home in Portland, where he and his wife can raise their children without the constant, unsettling feeling that everything they have could be swept away with one horrific event. Now 46, the Haitian-American musician has found an outlet for the feelings he has about his homeland — making music. Cange's band, Balans, will play in a lineup of bands at the Someday Lounge in Old Town, Saturday, Nov. 24.

*\* Sue Zalokar: Tell me about your band, Balans.*

**Eddy Cange:** We have seven players. All of us come from Haiti. I'm a singer and a drummer. I play conga, cowbell and drum set. At first we started like a gospel band. We made two CDs. After that, all the players went to school because they are young people. They all went to college and the band kind of broke down. And then we re-group again, so we make the band we have now. We play Reggae, American music and Haitian music — but mostly Haitian music.

**S.Z.:** For those who don't know what Haitian music sounds like, how would you describe your music?

**E.C.:** The beat is very fast. It is much like a salsa but it's called kompa.

We write the songs — me and Jean Claude, the band maestro.

**S.Z.:** The songs are written and sung in different languages.

**E.C.:** Yes. English, French and Creole. Some are about love. And then, you know Haiti is a small country and very, very beautiful, but we have a lot of problems. There are very poor people there. So most (of our) songs we talk about the poor people. We mostly sing about the Haitian people. People who are hungry, they don't have a place to live.

**S.Z.:** You were in Haiti this year for two weeks. When you were back, what was the situation for people after the horrible earthquake two years ago?

**E.C.:** Last year when I went to Haiti, it was so bad. A lot of people they don't have a room to stay. When I went after the earthquake, I saw people sleeping on the street. But this year when I went, Haiti has a new president. The government is starting



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

*Eddy Cange's band Balans will be playing at Someday Lounge Nov. 24.*

to build houses for the poor people. I think that is very nice. So, it's better.

I don't know about the countryside, but where I come from in the city (Port-au-Prince) that is what was happening. The city is where the rich people live too. If you go to Port-au-Prince — an area called Pétienville, you see nice cars — the same like the U.S. Big houses. But when you go to Cité Soleil that's when you are going to see the poor people. But if you go to Pétienville it is just like the houses we have in U.S.

**S.Z.:** How did the earthquake affect you?

**E.C.:** I lost a cousin and my little brother. My parents' house collapsed. All the rest of my family is OK.

**S.Z.:** I'm so sorry. Where does your family live now?

**E.C.:** The land where the house of my family was, we have still. My cousin lives there. We rebuilt the house (after the earthquake).

**S.Z.:** And your parents?

**E.C.:** My dad used to work for a radio station. He was killed by the government. My mom and my dad were both killed. That's why the U.S. government took me and my sister.

**S.Z.:** I'm so sorry.

**E.C.:** My father was a radio journalist and that is why they got him. They didn't like what my father was saying on the radio.

They grew up in the countryside, my mom and dad. A place called Jacmel. They came to Port-au-Prince after they married. My dad was working and both of my parents went to school in the city. My dad ended up working in the radio station. But he didn't like the way the government treated the people — the poor people. That's why he got in trouble.

One day in 1986, before we went to school, my mom and my dad they go to the market — Eagle Market — to get food for our family. They never came back. My dad's car was outside the building. They were nowhere to be found. The government said they were going to give a \$25,000 reward for information about my parents. And we waited and waited and waited. But we never heard anything. After a while, like in 1994, the American government said, OK, we have to take you guys out of the country because it is not safe for you.

**S.Z.:** How did you feel about that?

**E.C.:** I was kind of young. I was a singer then too. When I was in Haiti, I was a star, because I was playing in a big band. So, everybody knew me. At that point (six years after my parents died) I was so happy to come to America. I knew when I came to America, I was going to make a bunch of money singing. My dad never wanted to leave Haiti. His partner told him once, "you

say too much, man. You have to leave" My dad refused. He felt he was fighting for the poor people. "I'm not going to leave. I'm going to stay in Haiti."

I never thought I would be in the U.S. But in Oregon, the Haitian community is kind of small. If I was in Florida or New York, there are a lot of Haitians living there.

**S.Z.:** What made you decide to come to Portland?

**E.C.:** New York was too big for me. It's too busy. I was looking for a small town. I have a brother in Oregon. He said it was very nice so I came to Oregon in 1994.

**S.Z.:** The politics of Haiti are confusing and violent. What hopes do you have for the future of Haiti?

**E.C.:** I don't know really, because when I was in Haiti, any time we have a president, it seems that they never do anything for the people. The guy right now we have for president, he is a singer. His name is Michel Martelly. He was known as "Sweet Mickey." In his band, he used to sing and make jokes about being the president of Haiti. I'm the president of kompa (he would say). Now he is the real president in Haiti. He's the only one, my friends and family tell me, who does good things for the Haitian people. I hope he is still doing good. He is trying to make the government in Haiti similar to the government like we have in the U.S.

**S.Z.:** I read in the Angola Press that Michel Martelly is going to appear with Julio Iglasias in the Dominican Republic for a fundraiser for a charity Martelly founded with his wife, Sophia. What about the relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti?

**E.C.:** When I was there, I noticed it is very different than it is in Haiti. It is very beautiful and they have a lot of business. It is way better there. There are not so many poor people. The problem in Haiti — at least when I was growing up in the eighties — is corruption. For example, my last name is Cange (kahn-jay). If I am the president, then you will see all of the Cange family in the government. That's the problem.

**S.Z.:** What role does music play in your life?

**E.C.:** My dream is to play music. When I sing, I feel so happy. All of my songs are about the Haitian people. I have a song where I ask God, "When are you going to come to help the Haitian people?" There is another song I just wrote to all of the Haitians living in the U.S. I ask them, Everyday you say Haiti is not going to die, but why don't you do something for Haiti? If all the Haitian people in America gave one dollar, that can do something for the Haitian people. So give a dollar. What is the government going to do for us? We might have to do it ourselves.