



Movie review: 'Mahaleo'

Tribune movie critic

Musicians who aspire to become commentators and poets as well as balladeers and pop stars almost always have a stronger hold on our emotions. And what the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder and a few others meant to Americans in the '70s and beyond has a parallel in Madagascar with the legendary local group Mahaleo.

Subjects of a wonderful documentary, the septet, together since 1972, is the absolute model of a folk-rock combo. They create their own songs, using them to reflect on the troubled politics of their land while going under an unabashedly idealistic name: "Mahaleo" (free in Malagasy, Madagascar's language). Their music, seething with romanticism, can be both catchy and lyrical, and their ballads have a wonderful quality that evokes both calypso and the Beatles. Their words are strong and their legion of admirers, as we can see in the film, is passionate.

One thing sets them apart, though, from almost any comparable professional musical group or musician: Each member of Mahaleo remained insulated from the vagaries of the music industry by pursuing careers outside music. Those "day jobs" include sociologist (for singer-songwriter-musician Bekoto, star singer-guitarist Fafa and percussionist Charle), surgeon (singer-songwriter-guitarist Dadah), doctor and farmer (singer-songwriter-guitarist Raoul), surgeon/hospital department head (bassist-arranger Nono) and independent member of the Malagasy parliament (singer-songwriter-guitarist Dama).

Directed and written by husband-wife documentary team Marie-Clemence Paes and Cesar Paes and co-directed by fiction-feature-maker Raymond Rajaonarivelo, the film follows both Mahaleo and Madagascar from 1972 onward. It lets us meet the musicians on stage and in their non-musical work, culminating in a tremendous concert given to an adoring, dancing crowd. If you've never heard of them, this film will come as something of a revelation-- about Madagascar's progress from colonial status to democracy as well as about seven friends who came together to make music and changed their world in the process.

By Michael Wilmington