

FRISNER AUGUSTIN*Drums of Vodou*

White Cliffs Media 9338

JOHN AMIRA*The Music of Santería*

White Cliffs Media 9346

MILTON CARDONA*Bembe*

American Clavé 1004

Since the days of the first great Olatunji records, and before, labels have tried to make recordings of drum-centered religious music. Quite often they fail, usually because no recording can capture the feeling of the room itself while drum ceremonies are going on in it. But one of these works comes close and, in the process, becomes a drum album worth putting beside Olatunji on any shelf.

The master Haitian hand-drummer Frisner Augustin does not try to trip his listeners out on *Drums of Vodou*. All he does is present musically accurate renditions of the various drum pulses that undergird the vodou ceremony, offering them purely as music. And as music, these pieces succeed admirably — as distinct, variegated and masterfully entertaining as anyone could want. For the first four tracks Augustin even brings in jazz soloists on brass and reeds, and the combination of massed drums, each playing a specific polyrhythm within an overall rhythmic structure, and wailing horns on top (with no keyboards or other instruments of the standard jazz rhythm section) offers a loose, improvised rebuttal to the scholarly tone of the book of the same title that accompanies the recording.

The Music of Santería is on the same label, White Cliffs, and it approaches the same subject, drum-driven religion, but the results are quite different. For one thing, the various pulses used in the Afro-Cuban faith are presented in 32 tiny snippets, none long enough to get any kind of groove going. And the ensemble is made up of only three drummers, so the polyrhythms are fairly limited and the seeming lack of improvisation is another crippling debility.

Milton Cardona's "Bembe" is an actual unedited recording of a Santería ceremony held in New York City. But here, in contrast to *The Music of Santería*, the chants and drumming seem to go on forever, lacking focus or dynamic. This is presumably because the participants in the ceremony are not musicians, per se. And, although they are certainly inspired by the music they perform, they do not possess the musical skills to inspire the listener to the heights attained by Frisner Augustin and his group. *Drums of Vodou* is one of the best recordings of the year so far. The other two are not. — PS