Choukoun
Lyrics: Durand Oswald*; Music: Monton Mauleart Michel*
Guitar arrangement & analysis by Don Fallick, translation by Accilien Jacques* & Joanne Timothe

Slow, gentle, Calypso strum, or pick:

C  GIII  C  CaddG  C°  G7
|---\0---0-------------|---\3---3---3---/2---|---3/-5-------/1-----|
|---/0---3---0---3---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---3---3---\3---|
|---/4---\0---4---/4---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/5---3---/5---3---|---/0---0---0---0---|---/0---0---0---0---|

8 |---\0---3---0---3---|---\3---3---3---\3---|---\3---3---3---\3---|
|---/4---\0---4---/4---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/5---3---/5---3---|---/0---0---0---0---|---/0---0---0---0---|

|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/0---0---0---0---|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

8 |---\0---3---0---3---|---\3---3---3---\3---|---\3---3---3---\3---|
|---/4---\0---4---/4---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/5---3---/5---3---|---/0---0---0---0---|---/0---0---0---0---|

Dè - yè yon gwo touf pen-gwen,  Lôt jou mwen kon - tre Chou - koun. Li

G7  G7addD  u  u  C  u  u
|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

sou-ri lè li wè mwen,  Mwen di "Syèl, a-la bèl moun!"  Mwen

di "Syèl, a-la bèl moun!"  Li di "Ou trou-ve sa chè?"

|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

Ti___ zwe - zo___ nan bwa ki tap e-kou - te

|---\0---0---0---0---|---\1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|
|---/0---0---0---0---|---/1---/1---/1----|---/1---/1---/1----|

Ti___ zwe - zo___ nan bwa ki tap e-kou - te
Kan mwen son – je sa, Mwen gen – yen la – penn, Ka de – pi jou sa

De pye mwen nan chenn, Kan mwen son – je sa, Mwen gen – yen la – penn,

__De pye mwen nan chenn.__

**CHORDS**
Using the Calypso Strum

This version of Choukoun does not use the Calypso strum, as it is intended as an instrumental solo. Just play the tab as written. For those who wish to play a more authentic version as background for a vocalist, you will want to use the Calypso strum. This is a special, complex rhythm, in which each measure contains two triplets and a Carter lick. The first triplet is accented on the initial note, the second triplet is accented on the second note, and the following Carter lick is accented on the first note, giving a kind of rollicking rhythm of / 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / where the accented notes are in \textbf{boldface} type.

This is accomplished by strumming with both the thumb and the middle finger, alternately. Here’s a visual representation.

\textbf{Key:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{DMF} = ACCENTED strum DOWN with the middle finger
  \item \textbf{DT} = ACCENTED strum DOWN with the thumb
  \item \textbf{umf} = unaccented strum up with the middle finger
  \item \textbf{dmf} = unaccented strum down with the middle finger
  \item \textbf{DMF} = unaccented strum up with the middle finger
  \item \textbf{DT} = unaccented strum down with the thumb
\end{itemize}

\[\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccc}
\text{DMF} & \text{dt} & \text{umf} & \text{dmf} & \text{DT} & \text{umf} & \text{DMF} & \text{umf} & \text{DMF} & \text{dt} & \text{umf} & \text{dmf} & \text{DT} & \text{umf} & \text{DMF} & \text{umf} \\
\hline
\text{\textbullet} & & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} & \text{\textbullet} \\
\end{array}\]

As you can see, each measure consists of three parts:

\begin{itemize}
  \item DOWN--down--up,
  \item down--DOWN--up,
  \item DOWN--up
\end{itemize}

\section*{LYRICS}

\textbf{English interpretation by Accilien Jacques* and Joanne Timothe}

\begin{quote}
1. Dèyè yon gwo touf pengwen
Lòt jou mwen kontré Choukoun
Li souri lè li wè mwen
Mwen di: "Syèl, ala bèl moun!"
Mwen di: "Syèl, ala bèl moun!"
Li di: "Outrouve sa chè?"

\textit{Behind a big grove of pengwen trees,}
\textit{the other day I met Choukoun.}
\textit{She smiled when she saw me.}
\textit{I said, “Heavens, what a beauty!”}
\textit{I said, “Heavens, what a beauty!”}
\textit{She said, “You like that?”}

\textit{Little bird in the tree who is listening,}
\end{quote}
Ti zwezo nan bwa ki tap ekoute
Kan mwen sonje sa
Mwen genyen lapenn
Ka depi jou sa
De pye mwen nan chenn

Kan mwen sonje sa
Mwen genyen lapenn
De pye mwen nan chenn

2. Choukoun se yon marabou

Je li klere kou chandèl
Li genyen tete debou
A si Choukoun te fidèl
A si Choukoun te fidèl
Nou rete koze lontan

Jis zwezo nan bwa te parèt kontan
Jis zwezo nan bwa te parèt kontan
Pito bliye sa
Se twò gran lapenn
Ka depi jou sa
De pye mwen nan chenn

Pito bliye sa
Se twò gran lapenn
De pye mwen nan chenn

3. Ti dan Choukoun blan kou lèt
Bouch li koulè kayimit
li pa gwo fanm, li gwosèt
Fanm konsa plè mwen touswit
Fanm konsa plè mwen touswit
Tan pase pa tan jodi!

Zwezo te tande tout sa li te di
Zwezo te tande tout sa li te di
Si ou sonje sa
Yo dwe nan lapenn
Ka depi jou sa
De pye mwen nan chenn

Choukoun’s little teeth are white as milk,
her mouth, the color of kayimit. [a purple fruit]
She’s not a big woman; she’s stacked.
I want her right now!
I want her right now!
Things are not what they were!

Bird, you heard all that she told you.
Bird, you heard all that she told you.
If you remember that,
they will be sorry,
from that day,
because of the chains on my feet.
Si ou sonje sa  
Yo dwe nan lapenn  
De pye mwen nan chenn

If you remember that,  
they will be sorry,  
because of the chains on my feet.

4. Nale lakay manman li  
Yon granmoun ki byen onèt  
Sito li wè mwen li di:  
"A mwen kontan sila nèt"  
"A mwen kontan sila nèt"  
Nou bwè chokola nwa!"

We went to her mother’s house,  
A grown-up who’s very honest.  
When she saw me she said:  
“This makes me happy!”  
“This makes me happy!”  
Let’s drink black chocolate!”  
[or, “If you want to be happy, drink black chocolate”  
(instead of marrying)],  
[or, “Hooray! He is black!”]  
[or, “Stick to your own kind!”]

Eske tout sa fini, ti zwezo nan bwa?  
Eske tout sa fini, ti zwezo nan bwa?  
Pito bliye sa  
Se two gran lapenn  
Ka depi jou-sa  
De pye-mwen nan chenn

Is it all over, little bird in the tree?  
Is it all over, little bird in the tree?  
Better forget it!  
It’s too much sorrow,  
from that day,  
from the chains on my feet.

Pito bliye sa  
Se two gran lapenn  
De pye-mwen nan chenn

Better forget it!  
It’s too much sorrow,  
from the chains on my feet.

5. Yon ti blan vini rive  
Ti bab wouj, bèl figi wòz  
Mont sou kote, bèl chive  
Malè mwen, li ki lakòz  
Malè mwen, li ki lakòz  
Li trouve Choukoun joli.

A little white man shows up.  
A little red beard, a ruddy face.  
A watch at his side; beautiful hair.  
Too bad for me! He wins.  
Too bad for me! He wins.  
He finds Choukoun pretty.

Li pale Franse, Choukoun renmen li.  
Li pale Franse, Choukoun renmen li.  
Pito bliye sa  
Se two gran lapenn  
Choukoun kite mwen  
De pye mwen nan chenn

He speaks French; Choukoun likes him.  
He speaks French; Choukoun likes him.  
Better forget it!  
It’s too much sorrow.  
Choukoun left me, [or, Choukoun release me.]  
from these chains on my feet.

Pito bliye sa  
Se two gran lapenn  
De pye-mwen nan chenn

Better forget it!  
It’s too much sorrow,  
from these chains on my feet.
Analysis

How to pronounce kreyòl ayisyen (Haitian Creole):

Much of kreyòl vocabulary is like simplified French, spelled phonetically. For those who do not speak French, kreyòl pronunciation is a little more complex:

- a sounds like the a in father.
- e sounds like the e in Olé!
- è sounds like the oo in look.
- i sounds like the i in Lori.
- o sounds like the o in token.
- ô sounds like the o in or.
- j sounds like the s in pleasure.
- y is always a consonant, as in yes, never a vowel, (as in busy).

- ay sounds like the ay in Aye-aye, Sir!
- ou sounds like the ou in you. (U never appears by itself.)
- ch sounds like the ch in caché (or the sh in shop).
- an sounds like the on in gong, minus the end of the final g. Like the French nasal an.
- en sounds like the an in anxious. Like the French nasal in.
- on sounds like the French nasal on. You can approximate the sound by pronouncing the word “own” while pinching the nostrils shut.
- enn sounds like the enn in Tennessee. (NOT nasal.)

All other letters are pronounced exactly as in English. Most words are accented on the last syllable. Thus Ayiti (“Haiti”) is pronounced a-yi-TI.

About the song

Durand Oswald* is known as the national poet of Ayiti. Choukoun is his masterpiece. It can be read as a silly, romantic ditty, a sardonic commentary on love and infidelity, or a serious indictment of cultural, sexual, and linguistic domination of black Haitians by white Europeans. The title is often rendered in French as Choucoun or Choucune. It means, “like a cuckoo”, a bird which lays its eggs in other birds’ nests, and hence symbolizes unfaithfulness.

Monton Mauleart Michel*’s musical setting has inspired many popular songs, most notably, Yellow Bird, which captures some of the whimsical flavor of the kreyòl original, without the serious, political side. It also omits about half the music. Don’t Ever Love Me, by Harry Belafonte, does include all the music of Monton’s original, but is very different in tone. It captures the wistfulness of Choukoun, without mentioning her by name, but misses the whimsy and the biting satire. Great poetry cannot be translated satisfactorily.
The politics of race and language are hard for non-Haitians to imagine. Tiny Ayiti has TWO official languages: kreyòl ayisyen, language of the people, and French, the school language of the educated upper class. Choukoun’s preference for a white man who speaks French is a telling commentary on the culture of submission to white European domination. As Choukoun’s mother intimates: “If you want to be happy, drink black chocolate!” (Stick to black “sweets!”)

The poetry of Choukoun follows a pattern that seems simple, but is actually very complex. Each of the five verses consists of fifteen lines, in groups of six, two, and seven, with the following line structure and rhyme scheme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Lines repeated within verse:</th>
<th>Rhyme:</th>
<th>Repeated between verses:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Rhyme specific to verse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Rhyme specific to verse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Rhyme specific to verse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Rhyme specific to verse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Same rhyme in all 5 verses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Same rhyme in all 5 verses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Same rhyme in all 5 verses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Line NOT repeated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Line identical in all 5 verses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Repeats line 9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Repeats line 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Repeats line 12.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The specific sounds of rhymes A and B change from verse to verse. C, D, and E do not change, but are invariant in all verses. In each verse, line 8 repeats line 7. Furthermore, “chains,” the final word of lines 9, 10, and 12 (and 13, 14, and 15, which repeat them) is the same in all five verses. Line 15, “from the chains on my feet,” is repeated, in its entirety, word for word, in all five verses, but a changed stress pattern from line 12 to line 15, which are otherwise identical, gives them slightly (but importantly) different meanings. In the final verse, for example, in line 12 he is begging for release from his chains of love, while in line 15 he is stating that her love is not worth the pain it causes. There are similar subtle differences in the other verses.

The changing meanings belie the apparent simplicity of these repetitions. Because of the circumstances within each verse, and the idiomatic nature of kreyòl, Durand is able to convey different meanings in different verses, using exactly the same words.

The meter is also complex, with subtle regularities:
The last syllable of every line is accented, though Durand uses three different kinds of poetic “feet”** to achieve this. Lines 12 and 15, containing the same words in the same order, have two different meters, depending on which word-- *pye* (feet) or *chenn* (chains)-- is stressed. Such changing stresses are normal in kreyòl, as they are in English, when there are different shades of meaning. Think of the difference between “a bad year” and “a bad year,” to see how stress can make the same words mean different things.

A constantly changing structure, complex rhyme scheme, plus subtle double- and triple-entendres, make the poem function well on three distinct levels, with increasing seriousness, without ever sounding forced. Truly an amazing literary feat!

--Don Fallick

* Haitians customarily give their family name first, given name last. Thus, in most Western cultures, the poet would be called Oswald Duran, the composer Michel Monton Mauleart, and the translator Jacques Accilien.

** A “foot” is a unit of verse containing stressed and unstressed syllables. It may contain two or three syllables, which ever is the minimum needed to show the pattern of stresses. Duran uses one foot (STRESSED-unstressed-STRESSED) which he apparently invented, and which I have dubbed a “calypso foot”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>line:</th>
<th>meter:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. / x - / - x / x - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. / x - / x - / x - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. / - x / - x / - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. / - x / - x / - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. / - x / - x / - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. / - x / - x / - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. / x - x / - x / - x / - x /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 8. / x - x / - x / - x / - x / | x -/ = trochaic foot
| 9. / x - / x - x / | - x/ = iambic foot
| 10. / x - / x - x / | /x - x/ = calypso foot
| 11. / x - / x - x / | /- x/ = anapestic foot
| 12. / x - x / - x / | |
| 13. / x - / x - x / | |
| 14. / x - / x - x / | |
| 15. / * / - x / - x / | |

**KEY:**

- x = stressed syllable
- = unstressed syllable
* = unspoken pause called a *caesura* in poetry.
= separates “feet”**

It is stressed in the music, but not spoken.