

African Music in the World

by

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Abstract: Sometime in the last million years or so a band of exceedingly clever apes began chanting and dancing, probably somewhere in East Africa, and thereby transformed themselves into the first humans. We are all cultural descendants of this first African musicking and all music is, in a genealogical sense, African music. More specifically, as a consequence of the slave trade African music has moved from Africa to the Americas, where it combined with other forms of music, from Europe but indigenous as well. These hybrids moved to the rest of the world, including back to Africa, which re-exported them.

Canceling Stamps	1
African Music	1
The Caribbean and Latin America.....	2
Black and White in the USA	3
Afro-Pop.....	5
Future Tense	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
References.....	7

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Canceling Stamps

In 1975 an ethnographer recorded music made by postal workers while canceling stamps in the University of Ghana post office (Locke 1996, 72-78). One, and sometimes two, would whistle a simple melody while others played simple interlocking rhythms using scissors, inkpad, and the letters themselves. The scissors rhythm framed the pattern in much the way that bell rhythms do in a more conventional percussion choir.

Given the instrumentation and the occasion, I hesitate to categorize this music as traditional; but the principles of construction are, for all practical purposes, as old as dirt. What is, if anything, even more important, this *use* of music is thoroughly sanctioned by tradition. These men were not performing music for the pleasure and entertainment of a passive audience. Their musicking—to use a word coined by Christopher Small (1998)—served to assimilate their work to the rhythms of communal interaction, thus transforming it into an occasion for affirming their relationships with one another.

That, so I've argued at some length (Benzon 2001), is music's basic function, to create human community. Sometime in the last million years or so a band of exceedingly clever apes began chanting and dancing, probably somewhere in East Africa, and thereby transformed themselves into the first humans. We are all cultural descendants of this first African musicking and all music is, in a genealogical sense, African music. That sense is, of course, too broad for our purposes, but it is well to keep it in mind as we contemplate Africa's possible futures.

African Music

In a geographical sense, African music is simply music played on the continent of Africa. Such music may have originated in Africa or it may have originated elsewhere, but the fact that it is being played in Africa makes it African in this sense. But this is not quite what we have in mind when we call music "African." Does the fact of being performed on African soil make a Beethoven piano sonata or an Indian raga into African music?

Not as this and similar terms are generally used. Such terms are understood to indicate some quality intrinsic to the music, some technical or expressive essence. "African music" is assumed to be a particular kind of music and, as such, it is different from other kinds of music, e.g. "Western music" or "Indian music." This is where things get tricky. Africa is home to over a thousand peoples, each with their own musical styles, some of which they may share with other groups, while others may be unique.

But that formulation—there are many African peoples—isn't adequate. I'd like to suggest a biological analogy. A naturalist might be interested in, for example, African birds; that is to say, birds living in Africa. But while birds living in Africa might share habitats and ecosystems, and interact in various ways, the category "African birds" is both artificial and accidental. The presence of this or that species of bird in Africa can be accounted for by historical and geographical causes, though the history may be almost impossible to reconstruct. "African birds" may be a geographical or even conceivably an ecological term, but it is not a taxonomical one; biological classification does not recognize such terms as "African birds" or "North American birds," or even "Pennsylvanian birds" or "Ghanaian birds." Taxonomy measures morphological and, ultimately, genetic similarity, and by that measure, African falcons are

much more closely related to North American falcons than they are to the African doves that are their prey. In the same way, types of musicking that originated in Africa and spread to other parts of the world retain their essential similarity across continental boundaries, while other types might be rather dissimilar despite being geographically “African.”

Such matters (i.e. the artificiality of formulations like “African birds”) are relatively transparent and unproblematic in biology, but not in culture, where geographic and historical labels are routinely used as though they designated the (natural) kinds of culture. Thus terms like “African music” and “Asian dance” are commonly used. Musicologists have discussed thousands of musical styles; but there is no recognized system for classifying these styles that is comparable to biological taxonomy (Nettl 1983, 118 ff.), though one finds more limited systems here and there (e.g. Keil’s outline of blues styles, 1966, 217-224). Further, when you consider how easily musical styles merge with one another, it’s difficult to see how we could ever construct such a taxonomy, which assumes that each kind (of whatever is being classified) has only one parent (cf. Benzon 1996).

What this means is that the notion of some generic “African” music is an ideological illusion born of the current exigencies of trade and geopolitical conflict. The peoples of Africa play music in many styles. Some of those styles are relatively free of non-African influences arising within the past two or three centuries, though they may reflect Arabic influence going back to the first millennium C.E. Other styles reflect the influence of 19th century European brass bands, 1950s Cuban pop, 1970s America soul and funk, and so forth. By the same token, peoples throughout the world play music using devices that originated somewhere in Africa. The African in music is thus everywhere and nowhere.

That notwithstanding, the most intense stylistic interaction has been that between Africa and the Americas. This interaction began with the slave trade in the mid-fifteenth century, became more intense during the late nineteenth century as Europeans began colonizing Africa, and exploded in the twentieth century with the proliferation of recordings, and radio and television broadcasts. For the first four centuries the direction of influence was primarily from Africa to the New World, following the dispersal of enslaved Africans. But a counter flow began in the nineteenth century and gained strength throughout the twentieth.

The Caribbean and Latin America

The Atlantic slave trade got most of its conscripts from West Africa and the Congo. When these men and women brought their music to the New World it came intertwined with religion and dance. As a result various syncretic religions emerged in the New World: Voudoun in Haiti, Santaria in Cuba, Voodoo in Louisiana, and Candomblé in Brazil are the most obvious examples (Simpson 1978). These religions draped the outward forms of Catholicism over African animist belief and ritual practice and served as a cultural anchor for Neo-African music and dance. Thus, in contrast to the situation in the United States of America (which we will examine in the next section), societies throughout the Caribbean and South America perform music in styles which resemble traditional African styles as closely as the Asian elephant resembles the African. Various dances which we think of as being generically Latin—such as the mambo, rumba, chachachá, merengue, and samba—are danced to African rhythms and, indeed, their names serve interchangeably as designations for music and dance.¹

South America cultures derive from a mixture of indigenous, African, and European sources. African peoples are most numerous along a coastal band that goes from Uruguay up through

¹ John Storm Roberts's *Black Music of Two Worlds* (1998) is the most comprehensive single account of the musical interaction between Africa and the Americas. Much of the material in this and subsequent sections is based on Roberts, but I do not cite him on every relevant point.

Brazil and Venezuela and on to Colombia and Ecuador. Of these, Brazil has been the most important source of blended styles; the rhythmic foundation is largely African, melody is variously African and Portuguese, and harmonic practice is similarly mixed. Of these many styles, the samba is perhaps the best-known and most widely influential family, some of which are African in all important respects, while others are genteel enough for formal ballrooms. Samba appears to have originated in the Candomblé rites of the heavily black Bahia, a coastal state centered on Salvador. It displays the rich polyrhythms typical of West African styles along with call-and-response vocals, also typically African. During the first half of the twentieth century samba schools formed in the slums of Rio de Janeiro (which is south of Bahia) for the purpose of staging Carnival parades. During the 1950s and 1960s samba met cool jazz to yield bossa nova, which became both a popular form and a staple of the jazz elite.

Caribbean cultures also reflect various mixtures of indigenous, African, and European populations, with each island having its own microcosm of style and influence. Cuba, however, is the Caribbean's single most important site of African-derived music. It wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century that Cuba became heavily colonized and developed a plantation system with a large population of enslaved Africans and their descendants. By 1800, however, Havana was the third largest city in the New World (after Mexico City and Lima) and had a rich musical life, as did the rest of the island. The city gave its name to a dance form, the *contradanza habanera*, a largely European form derived from the French *contredanse* by way of Haiti (Roberts 1998, 105). Cuba was also home to the Abakwá, a secret religious cult originating among the Ibo of Nigeria. The Abakwá, and similar groups in Cuba and elsewhere, helped to preserve African religious practice, and hence African dance and music.

The English-speaking Caribbean is perhaps best known for calypso and reggae. Calypso is an inter-island style most strongly identified with Trinidad. Its origins are obscure, but it has been known since the second half of the nineteenth century. Calypsos often have satirical topical lyrics, and calypsonians will sometimes comment upon one another in their lyrics, especially in institutionalized competitions. The music varies in style, having an Afro-Spanish rhythmic base, with jazz, Cuban, East Indian, rhythm and blues, British and other elements in the mix. Reggae emerged in mid-twentieth century Jamaica in part as a youthful rejection of calypso. Drawing on North America rhythm and blues by way of ska (another Jamaican style), reggae was well established by the early sixties. One strain of reggae hooked up with Rastafarianism—a syncretic religion based on the nationalist ideas of Marcus Garvey (a Jamaican who emigrated to the United States) and focused on the divinity of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie (Simpson 1978, 124-128) and developed into an international musical language of social protest (Feld 1994a, 273; Lipsitz 1994). A different strain, called "dub" went minimal and gave rise to toasting, in which deejays improvised lyrics over recorded dub tracks. This practice reached New York in the 1970s where it met similar deejay practice and became rap and hip-hop (George 1988, Lipsitz 1994).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many of these styles traveled north to the United States, northeast to Europe (indeed, some of them reached Europe before the United States), and east back to Africa. Some of this travel reflects migration—such as Cuba to the United States, the West Indies to Great Britain—while much of it is simply a result of the availability of sound recordings.

Black and White in the USA

African forms were not as strongly conserved in the United States as they were in the Caribbean and in Latin America. In the first place, there were no large concentrations of slaves during the seventeenth century. Rather, each master had only two or a handful; these enslaved Africans thus tended to assimilate to the European customs of their masters, often becoming Christian (Berlin 1998). Such arrangements persisted in many places even after the spread of the

plantation system in the eighteenth century brought about large concentrations of Africans. Beyond this, direct contact with Africa was broken off early in the nineteenth century and drums were forbidden throughout North America, making polyrhythmic interplay more difficult. Finally, we should consider the fact that the primary European influence came from Britain, whose music was less rhythmic than that of Spain or Portugal, and thus more resistant to blending with African polyrhythms.

In any event, the colonists recognized the musical proclivities of their slaves. One noted that the “Negroes above all the Human Species that I ever knew have an Ear for Musick, and a kind of extatic Delight in *Psalmody*” (Southern 1983, 41). And psalmody was important to these European colonists, many of whom were religious dissidents who saw in America an opportunity to create a perfect Christian community, a New Jerusalem free of European institutions. Here many white colonists and early Americans found a common cause with their black brethren. For the religious practices those Africans carried with them were even more expressive and emotional than the sermons and conversions of revival Christianity. Anecdotal accounts of mixed-race camp meetings in the early nineteenth century suggest that the whites were much influenced by the vigorous psalmody of the blacks (Levine 1977, Southern 1983, Roberts 1998). Thus it was that the ecstatic techniques of African animism mingled with and helped to stabilize the ritual practice of large numbers of charismatic Christians. These practices then became standard among large numbers of black and white Christians and fueled the revivals that have been at the core of American public culture for two centuries (Fogel 2000).

At the same time blacks were called on to play dance music for their masters, in European styles and on European instruments, while northern whites began developing minstrelsy on black models, based on their conception of what plantation life was like. By the middle of the nineteenth century minstrelsy was well on the way to becoming America’s first medium of mass entertainment (Southern 1983, Lott 1993, Watkins 1994). After the Civil War black minstrel troops began traveling the country even as the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured America and Europe in triumph. Late in the century minstrelsy gave way to vaudeville and to Broadway.

In the early twentieth century blacks and whites met in urban ballrooms where white dance and music adopted forms of black sexual expressiveness. America was awash in dance crazes—cakewalk, tango, Charleston, Lindy, rumba, all reflecting some degree of African influence and all accompanied by rhythmic music. Some originated in the United States (cakewalk, Charleston, Lindy) while others arrived from Latin America—the tango from Argentina, the rumba and mambo from Cuba. There was ragtime, the blues, and jazz, the term that stuck to the most influential and diverse family of musical (and dance) styles.

Early jazz consisted of polyphonic collective improvisation within a group generally having a half-dozen to nine players. During the late 1920s and early 1930s this style gave way to one featuring elaborate written arrangements played by an ensemble having a dozen or more players, a few of which played improvised solos. At its peak in the nineteen-thirties this style, called swing, became the dominant style of popular music and dance in America. In the wake of World War II big-band swing began to die, being replaced in the general arena by rather bland vocal music. But swing music persisted in small group formats which melded with country music in the fifties to become rock and roll. During the same period bop, or bebop, emerged; it was a small-group style that emphasized solo improvisation more than any previous jazz style had done. Subsequent jazz styles—cool, hard bop, modal, and free—maintained this emphasis. None of these styles, however, attained the broad popularity of swing. Jazz had become a high cultural art music. While the major jazz innovators were black, whites were welcome too and the audience was mostly white, reflecting the predominance of whites in the general population (cf. DeVaux 1995).

Though jazz didn't retain African polyrhythms, its rhythmic emphasis is certainly African, as is the practice of floating melodic phrases over the underlying beat. Similarly, jazz makes extensive use of call-and-response forms and rough timbres, both African traits. In the 50s and 60s jazz musicians began investigating African music (Weinstein 1992). This coincided with the emergence of the civil rights movement and wide-spread attempts to forge a new black identity.

Rock is the next major family of styles. Classic rock—from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s—had both black and white performers and audience. But that changed in the early 1960s and rock became mostly white while American blacks moved to soul and funk. Soul took the ecstatic melismatic vocal style of gospel music and secularized it, while funk emphasized complex rhythmic grooves. During the late 1970s and early 1980s rap/hip-hop emerged from a Brooklyn subculture heavily influenced by Jamaican dub and toasts. The conventional musical elements of melody and harmony were minimized, if not eliminated entirely, leaving a highly rhythmic background over which boasting lyrics were rhymed. Where both jazz and rock had attracted large numbers of important white performers, hip hop has not, so far, done so, though it does have a large white audience.

All of these styles migrated to Europe, Latin America, and back to Africa. Performers toured and their recordings were distributed around the world. Jazz musicians and later rock musicians became interested in African music. Some traveled there, recorded there, and even lived in Africa for awhile.

Afro-Pop

During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries Europeans established trading enclaves along Africa's west coast, eventually giving rise to an Atlantic creole culture in the ports of four continents (Berlin 1998, 17 ff.). European music made its first African beachhead in these settlements, where European, West Indian, and African musicians played marches and polkas and various fusions (Collins 1992). It seems likely that the European guitar arrived in Africa during this period, though its use didn't flourish until the mid-twentieth century (Roberts 1998, 261). Toward the end of the nineteenth century the Belgians, Germans, British, French, and Portuguese moved to establish colonial control over African nations and the European presence necessarily increased. The brass band movement that had careened through Europe and the Americas in the middle of the nineteenth century hit Africa just before the beginning of the twentieth century, quickly followed by ragtime, minstrelsy (complete with blackface make-up), swing, and rumbas. The colonists brought Christian missionaries, who brought Christian hymns, and the hymns introduced European-style harmony and part singing into African choruses. And thus the creolizing process that had been happening in the Americas took root and flourished in Africa herself.

During the 1920s horn-based bands began emerging so that by the late 1940s Ghana and Nigeria had become home to highlife, a diffuse Westernized popular music played for ballroom dancing. At the same time guitar-based palm-wine music, which originated in port cities, had migrated to the interior. A Nigerian palm-wine music known as jujú emerged in the 1930s and eclipsed highlife by the 1960s.

African musicians used guitars—acoustic, then electric starting in the 1950s—in two ways: 1) to play traditional riffs derived from traditional instruments, e.g. Senegalese koras and or Zambian mbiras, and 2) to assimilate foreign melodic styles and then develop new styles. During the 1950s Cuban recordings exerted a major influence on West African and Congolese musicians producing a profusion of styles that dominated popular music, urban and rural. African-American soul and funk arrived in the late 1960s and exerted a similar influence.

Meanwhile, the situation in South Africa was a bit different. Traditional West African and Congolese musical styles depended on polyrhythmic interplay among multiple percussionists, making them very compatible with Cuban styles. South African styles, by contrast, generated their excitement through the interplay of vocal parts over a regular beat. Thus they were able more readily to assimilate Western vocal harmonies, leading to *iscathamiya*, the choral music that burst on the West in the 1980s. These styles were also a bit more attuned to the rhythms of swing jazz, leading to township jive styles in 1940s and 1950s and eventually giving South Africa its own indigenous jazz styles.

Future Tense

African-derived rhythmic grooves are now used on all contents North and South, East and West. This does not, of course, mean that all music is somehow African. For there are many styles that have not been touched by Africa and most of the rest have had non-African hands on them as well. Still, African grooves are as close as the world has come to an international expressive medium—no doubt, one reason that Salmon Rushdie choose to center *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* on fictional rock stars born in Bombay India. Africa's musical styles have been so attractive that they can make their way in the world independent of Africa herself. Thus we face the cruel irony that peoples the world over celebrate their solidarity using African grooves while that fate of African peoples remains problematic; the music is welcomed while the people are unacknowledged.

Let us consider the cases of three contemporary musicians, two born in Africa, and one born in the United States, as a way of raising some issues about the current status and future prospects of African styles.

Yacub Tetty Addy is the senior musician of the Addy clan of the Ga people of Ghana. He has lived in the United States for several decades while others in the clan have remained in Ghana or have immigrated elsewhere. Addy directs *Odadaa!*, a troupe of dancers and musicians who tour the world performing traditional Ga music and dance. The very fact that *Odadaa!* performs on stage means, of course, that their musicking is thereby cut off from its traditional roots in the lives of the Ga people. Yet Yacub Addy is one of a diminishing number of people for whom a traditional African musical praxis is their native praxis. When this generation dies their music will be known, and perhaps performed, only by those who know it because it was preserved and transmitted to them in some fashion. It will have become museum music.

Hugh Masekela is a trumpeter and singer who was born in South Africa in 1939 and raised on township jive and jazz. In 1961 he and his wife Miriam Makeba left South Africa for political reasons and emigrated to the United States. His 1968 recording of "Grazin' in the Grass" sold four million copies and become the top song on the U.S. pop charts, the first recording by an African musician to do so. Masekela returned to the African continent in 1970. Moving from one country to another—Guinea, Liberia, Ghana, Zaire—Masekela settled in Botswana in 1981 and then moved to England in the mid 1980's where he helped create "Sarafina," a musical which toured the world and was performed on Broadway. He finally returned to his homeland in 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Then and now Masekela has toured internationally performing a wide repertoire of variously African music; though his music tends to be marketed as jazz in the United States, jazz is only an influence, not the anchor. He also toured with Paul Simon in support of Simon's 1986 hit album, *Graceland*.

In creating *Graceland*, pop star Simon collaborated with a variety of South African musicians to much popular success and critical acclaim. The album brought wide recognition to South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo and other groups, thus increasing world awareness of South African pop styles. While this album and tour represent only one phase of Simon's career, that entire career is based on pop styles that wouldn't exist if Africans hadn't been enslaved and

brought to the New World. Thus it is not surprising that *Graceland* led some intellectuals to raise disturbing questions about neocolonialism (Lipsitz 1994, 57 ff.; Feld 1994b, 239 ff.).

I don't know how to resolve such questions but we should briefly think about how they arise. The work of these three musicians—Addy, Masekela, and Simon—is so different that I cannot imagine any way of comparatively judging their abilities and accomplishments, though all are world-class performers. But Simon is surely the best known and best paid of the three, followed by Masekela, and then Addy. These differences in wealth and reputation bear little relation to the merit of the work done by these musicians. Rather, they reflect the large-scale structure of economic and political arrangements that existed before these men were born and that are so powerful as to be effectively beyond their wishes and deliberate actions.

These forces converge on an international star system that is dominated by large record and entertainment companies. The star system has room for only a few brand names. Simon is near the center of the system; Masekela has a place in its hinterlands; while Addy is, at best, marginal to it. What about the thousands of bands and tens of thousands of musicians who created the riffs and grooves on which this music is based?

And what happens as culture after culture dies, either through disease and warfare or simply through blending and assimilation? Will all the world's styles become homogenized into a bland indifference, as Alan Lomax (1968, 4-6) feared; or will we continue to see styles meeting and mixing in an ever various transmutation of old styles into new ones? We do not know. We can only listen to the bell, step into the future, and see who we meet dancing toward us from the other side of the world.

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