

A TOUR OF AFRICAN MUSIC

By Jack Kolkmeier

Money hard to get but easy to spend

Put Better Records

These type of men and women dancing, are the type of people who spend money too much. They can get £5 a day and spend all on useless things. Give me 12 bottles of beer give me one roasted fowl. Tune to Congo. Tune to Nigeria. Tune to Ghana: "put better records," is what their body wanted.



Now that Nigerian juju king Sunny Ade is holding court in America to packed concert halls and rave reviews, the public's attention has once again focused on the rich and ancient musical mosaic of Africa. Music has probably been played on the African continent longer than anywhere else in the world. So, it is not really unusual or extraordinary that the contemporary popular music of Africa should suddenly be recognized in this country as significant.

Some of the most important styles of music in the Americas — gospel, blues, rhythm & blues, rock & roll and reggae, to name a few — are derived from African music. And, once these new musical styles appeared in the West, they were beamed back to the Mother Continent via radio where they were readapted once again into the African genre. This has happened repeatedly since the 30's and 40's.

Africans borrowed heavily from the music of Latin America in the 60's, creating perhaps the most influential popular African music of this century, all in the form of merengues, rumbas, pachangas, tangos and cha chas. This particular music and many of its heroes of 20 years ago — Docteur Nico, Rochereau and Manu Dibango among them — filled the airwaves from Dakar to Libreville.

There have been many attempts to popularize African music in America. Jazz has used African idioms and African players since its inception. Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba and Manu Dibango have all achieved success. African oriented groups such as Osibisa and Luumumba, both made up primarily of Ghanaians, have attempted to blend highlife and juju musical ideas with more commercial styles of Western pop music.

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There are two major problems that limit African music's success in America. One is record distribution. It is difficult to find popular African records in American record stores. Another problem is that popular African music makes the most sense within its own cultural context. It is, after all, African music and not American music.

Then, why all of a sudden has Nigerian Sunny Ade become so fashionable in the West? Ade's music is relaxing, even mesmerizing, while at the same time its basic structure is percussive — a key element in all African music. His music is not the stereotypical barrage of drums that Westerners expect and fear. Rather, it is relaxing and subtle percussion, particularly because of the "dondon" or hour glass shaped "talking drums" which provide the fundamental and profoundly moving groove to his form of juju music. Ade's music is a truly remarkable blend of "high tech" electronics and ancient traditional instruments. The bottom line, however, is that Ade's music, like all popular African music, is danceable.

Since the 1950's, there have been many styles of popular African music identified mostly with a particular geographic region or specific language. In West Africa, the "griot" (traveling oral historian and musician) traditions of Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Gambia and Niger have greatly influenced the songs, instruments and styles of popular music groups, Gambian kora player and griot Jali Foday Musa Suso, a young but respected oral historian in his country, moved to Chicago in 1978 to form the Mandingo Griot Society, a group that quite successfully adapts West African styles to Western formats.

The country of Ghana and its diverse ethnic groups created highlife music, a style originally developed by Fanti fishermen who had extensive contact with sailors and music styles from all over the world. Numerous highlife singers, soloists and their respective big bands, featuring saxophones and flutes, have now attained mythical status — E.T. Mensah and the Tempos, and Jerry Hansen and the Ramblers Dance Band among them.

The juju music of Nigeria is a bit more obscure in origin but has culminated with the music of Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey and his Inter-Reformers Band in the 60's and 70's and Sunny Ade and his African Beats in the 80's. Whereas highlife is tropically lilting, juju is twisting and percussive, emphasizing the rhythms of talking drums, the subtle interplay among electric guitars and long, uninterrupted pieces. It was, in fact, Ebenezer Obey who pioneered African lps with long continuous takes on each side. Nigeria is also responsible for Afrobeat, a more funky, horn-laden combination of highlife and juju popularized by national hero and musical maverick, Fela Kuti.

Central Africa, particularly Zaire and The People's Republic of the Congo, has spawned what has perhaps been the most popular music on the continent (which is quite extraordinary given the popularity of highlife and juju). Known colloquially as "congo music" or "sukisa" or "soukous," this style was made popular by Lingala singers and musicians from Zaire. It is the "musica franca" of the French-speaking west and central African countries. Congo music is characterized by an almost march-style drumming, the ubiquitous three-guitar interplay and lyrics frequently about love, life and the pursuit of musical happiness sung usually in Lingala, French-Lingala or some other popular vernacular. There are many very humorous Congolese tunes — "Savon Omo" is a paean to the ever-popular Omo soap and "Succes Ya Toyota" is a song of praise to the sturdiness and dependability of the Toyota taxi. This is bright uplifting music in stark contrast to the often brooding intensity of juju.

There are of course, legendary Congolese personalities, in particular Seigneur Rochereau, Dr. Nico, Jean Bokelo, Verkys, Franco, Dewayon and the many notable "orchestres" such as Orchestre Vox Negro, Orchestre OK Jazz and Orchestre

African Success. Little is written about Congo music in the English language press, perhaps because of the French influence. Nevertheless, there are many extremely popular Congo musicians today including Pierre Moutouri, Nyboma and Pablo Porthos who have already reached revered status.

The popular music of East Africa, sometimes referred to as "The Nairobi Sound," was quite popular in the late 60's, but faded from the limelight because of the popularity of West African music. However, it seems to be coming on strong again in the 80's.

Because we only hear bits and pieces of popular African music here in America, it is difficult to appreciate the enormous popularity of the music and the cult status of many of its musicians on the continent of Africa itself. In Nigeria alone, nearly 12 million juju records were sold in 1982. One can spend a long time on the continent traveling around and frequenting the places where popular music can be heard and still only scratch the surface.

West Africa in the early 1970's was politically volatile. The myth of Kwame Nkrumah, Africa's most charismatic leader, was being tarnished; the Biafran war was still claiming lives; Nigerians were being expelled from Ghana, and most Africans were readjusting themselves to "independence" after many years of colonial exploitation. Urbanization began at an alarming rate, a phenomenon that does not sit well with traditional ways of life.

Urbanization, however, accelerated a change in African music. The radio, record player and electric guitar invited Africans to adapt their traditional instruments and musical styles to the alternating currents of electricity. A typical juke box in Monrovia or Accra would include records by country and western singer Jim Reeves, original soul singer James Brown, rising reggae star Bob Marley, many highlife, juju and Congolese tunes and, of course, the incendiary Afro-beat of Fela Kuti and his band, Africa 70.

In 1977, a horde of soldiers stormed Fela's residence (a community actually, called the Kalakuta Republic) and burned it to the ground. After a brutal attack in which his mother was killed, he was exiled to Ghana. When he returned to Nigeria in 1978 he changed his name from Fela Ransome Kuti (a slave name) to Fela Anikulapo Kuti (a proud Yoruba name) and his political-musical war was on.

Much of Fela's music is about his personal political travail — "Zombie," "Expensive Shit," and "Black President" are political diatribes in a musical format. Fela's style is pure James Brown. The slashing, non-stop funky guitars, the strident but relaxed horn section and the cool, ultra cool, vocals and saxophone playing of Fela are trademarks.

Fela has similarities to the late Bob Marley as well. He has a huge following and an impenetrable political base in his music and he is much feared by the government. He advocates the liberation of people and their marijuana. His music grows as much out of rhythm and blues as it does from traditional music. Fela plays a distinctively modern African music just as Marley played a distinctively modern variety of Caribbean music.

Yoruba musicians have been revered highlife players (basically a Ghanaian contemporary music style) and Tunde Nightingale, a predecessor and influence on Sunny Ade, claims that juju is a Yoruba party music.

It is hard to pinpoint the actual birth of juju. Like highlife it has been played for a long time, perhaps even in a rudimentary form since the 1920's. It is difficult to follow into the past because of the many names it has had over the years. Many Nigerians, though, would place its beginning in the early 1980's with the popularity of I.K. Dairo. Dairo linked his deep Yoruba traditions and skills in the Yoruba language with different beats and tempos to attract a wide variety of ethnic groups. This, and his discovery of the perfect relationship between electric guitars and talking drums made Dairo enormously successful and one of the most popular musicians at that time.

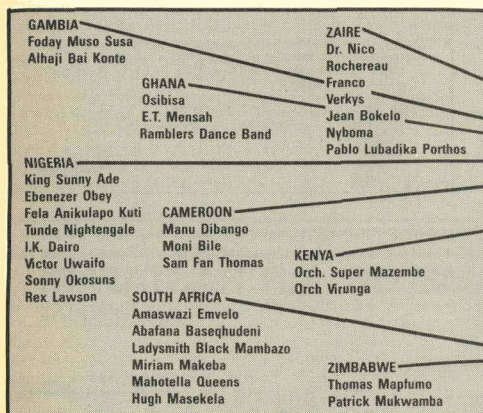
Juju may have found its way onto the popular scene through another type of music called "kokoma," a style popular in the Lagos area in the early 1950's. The talking drum is rumored to have been first used in "kokoma" in the mid-50's. Some would even say that "kokoma" gave birth to highlife as well.

Sunny Ade, the current juju prince, credits Tunde Nightingale and Ebenezer Obey as important influence on his own music. Tunde Nightingale has been playing and singing a form of juju music as far back as the mid-40's. His high pitched voice and out of tune (to Western ears) guitar playing are unique and immediately recognizable.

Ebenezer Obey is still the present "grand master" of juju in Nigeria, peaking in his third musical decade. Obey is also particularly important because he merged juju with the Congolese style guitar playing. He has kept all of the juju basics, especially the talking drums, and added the bright and bouncy spirit of three Congolese style guitar lines.

The three-guitar interplay, using single note lines rather than chordal sequences, is interesting because it establishes rhythm notes and melody notes, a percussive attitude towards stringed instruments. Electric guitars also allow far greater range than the traditional instruments.

The Congolese style owes much of its development to the



rumba of Cuba. Imported into Zaire, Senegal, Ivory Coast and the Congo during and immediately after World War II, the rumba style as adapted by French-speaking Africans was refined in the late 60's and virtually displaced highlife and juju by the early 70's.

The rumba structure allowed a great deal of improvisation by the lead guitarist and its generalized African beat made it immensely popular throughout the continent. Cuban favorites, such as "Siboney," "El Manisero (The Peanut Vendor)," "Say Si Si" and "Tabu" were reworked into West African classics with different words.

Manu Dibango is probably the most well known Congolese (even though he is from Cameroon) musician to Americans because of the recorded music he has produced since he came to America in the early 70's. In 1973, Dibango recorded the classic "Soul Makossa," produced under the direction of Paul Winley, a multi-talented rhythm and blues producer who almost singlehandedly forged the "New York sound" of the late 1950's and early 60's.

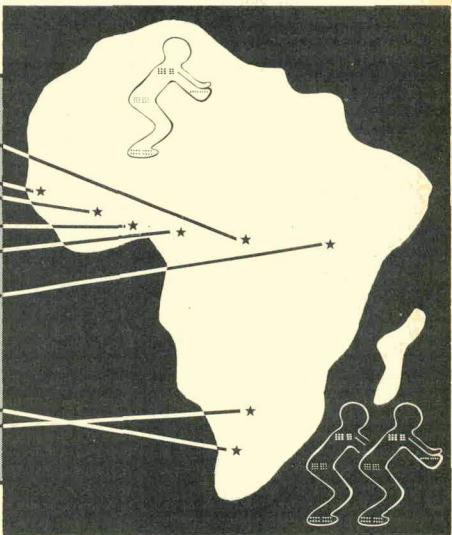
From 1965 to 1971, Dibango was at the center of popular West African music. One of the other prominent figures was Tabu Ley, better known as Seigneur Rochereau. Dibango and Rochereau together were the heart and soul of Orchestre African Jazz.

From Bandundu, Zaire, Rochereau literally became the voice of African rumba or, as a newspaper in Kinshasa called him, "The Muhammad Ali of Song." He did more to enhance and further the three-guitar/vocal style than anyone. His albums recorded as part of the "L'Afrique Danse" series are collectors items and his live recordings in Abidjan, Ivory Coast are current best sellers. Rochereau left the music scene in the mid-70's but after a four-year respite he returned with a new musical vigor.

In Kinshasa he opened up a night club and cultural center called "Le Type K" and resumed his position at the forefront of contemporary Congolese music.

Docteur Nico, a teacher at a technical college, sings in a style similar to Rochereau and also plays guitar, a skill that allows him to diversify a bit more. Dr. Nico likes cha chas and tangos as much as he does rumba. He is also an important figure because of his close association with Orchestre OK Jazz, a very popular ensemble of the 70's.

Congolese style has also shaped the development of popular music in East Africa because of the many Zaireans



Graphics by Donna Tarzian

who have emigrated or sought refuge in that part of Africa. Orchestre Makassy, one of Tanzania's most popular groups, for example, is composed primarily of Zaireans who emigrated to Uganda but were forced to leave that country and settle in Tanzania because of the repressive regime of Idi Amin.

But the luminary of the hour remains Yoruba juju sensation Sunny Ade now enjoying his second decade of musical prominence. A recent American release, *Synchro System*, effuses pure African magic, not only for the person who is hearing the music for the first time but also for seasoned jujuan highlifters. The album is crammed with references to other West African musicians — Tunde Nightingale, Expensive Olubi, Dele Ojo, Ebenezer Obey, Flash Domencici. They are all there, in musical spirit, being graciously introduced to us by Sunny Ade. A warm gesture that he should so kindly and so musically lead us into the heart of contemporary African music. ★

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