

# BORN OF DREAMS:

## the MUSIC of the PYGMIES



**By Richard Henderson**

**M**ost people describe Pygmy music in relation to water. The constant overlapping of voices reminds first- and third- and 20th-time listeners of waves on a beach, gentle and forceful, undulating without discernable form, all the while describing tangled hierarchies of melody as complex as any staircase imagined by M.C. Escher. Waves are fundamental to the architecture of sound. As such, they probably make the best possible analogy to evoke the songs, dances and performances of the physically small people who invented music in Africa's Ituri forest.

Scattered through the Congo and Zaïre and wherever primary forests still exist in the rest of equatorial Africa, the Pygmies roam as bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers. The major groups inhabiting the Congo Basin are the Twa and the Mbuti, with the Aka and the Baka living throughout Central African Republic, Cameroon and Gabon; within each of these are numerous tribal divisions. Colin Turnbull, the anthropologist best known for his writings on the Mbuti Pygmies, noted that they mastered the knack of survival, not in spite of, but possibly because of their archaic technology. This could apply as well to their music, constructed of little more than massed voices and rudimentary percussion, weaving naïveté and sophistication, childlike joy and horrific sorrow. It is music born of dreams and designed to inspire the dreams of others.

An American poet named Delmore Schwartz wrote that "In dreams begin responsibilities." OK, here's an example: Ten years ago, an American named Louis Sarno, far from home in Amsterdam, heard Pygmy music for the first time late at night on the radio and promptly found himself in its thrall. After collecting such examples of their music as he could buy, he determined to set out for the Congolese rainforest, "in search of a Pygmy music that was not on any record." His book, *Song from the Forest: My Life Among the Ba-Benjelli Pygmies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), is the account of a reverie that became real, as Sarno journeyed to Africa with a Sony tape recorder, a minimum of provisions and cash, and an all-consuming love of music. There, he met the Ba-Benjelli, a clan of the Aka Pygmy tribe. For the

sincerity and depth of his interest, he was rewarded with music that, until recently, few Westerners had heard. In exchange, by Sarno's account, "They demanded that I give them my life—which is what I have done. I think it's a fair exchange."

Recently, Louis Sarno returned to the U.S. to oversee the planning of the first cd exclusively devoted to his recordings of Pygmy music. The book-and-disc set, entitled *Bayaka*, is set for release in October on the Ellipsis Arts label. The music comprising *Bayaka* takes the listener through the course of a day, via songs and dances traditionally performed at specific points of the day. The listener is introduced to the morning ambience of a Pygmy encampment, with music limning each stage of the day's progress into night, and through to the following morning. All around the camp, the forest sizzles with unbroken insect menace. Immediately, I was reminded of the first Pygmy recordings that I'd heard, transcribed by Colin Turnbull. In both cases, the issue of verisimilitude pales and disappears; these recordings place you in the midst of people who live as lions do. Turnbull's recording of an Mbuti Pygmy hunting song captured many voices knotted together by conviction, with the fierce clapping of two pieces of metal as the sole accompaniment. To hear it is to be immediately convinced that people resembling children can bring down an elephant, no questions asked, and be home in time for dinner.

I was fortunate in having an opportunity to speak with Sarno during his brief return to native soil; his comments did much to inform my perceptions of the Pygmy recordings which I had amassed to date. In our conversation, we touched briefly on the issue of sampling. The Pygmies are nearly as popular as James Brown among practitioners of "musical appropriation," having turned up on recordings by Martha and the Muffins, Aka Moon, Jon Hassell (who introduced Louis Sarno to his benefactor, Brian Eno) and, most recently, the best-selling *Deep Forest*, whose Internet site offers two sentences about Pygmies and several paragraphs about recording technology.

Sarno described playing recordings of Martin Cradick's group, Baka Beyond, which integrates music of the Baka tribe with traditional English



melodies and instrumentation, for his friends among the Bayaka. "They really enjoyed the parts where they could hear their own melodies," said Sarno. They seemed safe from outside influence, though; to hear him tell it, "They were familiar with highlife, but reggae left them cold." He noted a similar detachment in their approach to a festival appearance in Paris: "They were very professional. They traveled there, understanding that they were expected to recreate their dances onstage, and that they'd be paid at the end. They collected their money and came back, not particularly impressed one way or the other."

The following list is not born out of a baseball-card collecting impulse, although it may read that way. All of these discs, with the possible exception of Carlon 7's *Nzomba*, are in print insofar as I'm aware. The material unique to each disc is described, but common to all are songs and ambiances which can trigger earthquakes of the soul, the aftershocks lasting for years. Unlike any other discography that I can recall, every entry here is essential listening. I have listed the year of publication where it is possible to do so.

#### ECHOES OF THE FOREST: MUSIC OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN PYGMIES (Ellipsis Arts 4020, 1995)

I am enormously grateful to Ellipsis Arts; their beautifully produced homage to Pygmy culture contains the first appearances on cd of recordings by Louis Sarno and Jean-Pierre Hallet, a Belgian raised among the Pygmies who has devoted much of his life to preserving their environment. Its wide distribution also enabled me to write this piece. A luxe package, the cloth-bound book contains photography, Hallet's photos and poetry, a pocket biography of Colin Turnbull and a cd tucked in the final page. Hallet's tapes document instrumental performances on bow-harp, one-string violin and thumb piano. Also included are recordings from the estate of the late Colin Turnbull, who, as the notes reveal, became a Buddhist monk in the last years of his life. Extraordinary sound and great performances, as is fortunately the case with most of the discs mentioned here.

#### MUSIC OF THE RAIN FOREST PYGMIES (Lyricord LYRCD 7157, 1967)

The first Pygmy recording that I owned, and in many ways still among the best, despite only half of the recordings being devoted to the Mbuti tribe. The elephant song, as well as those devoted to honey-gathering and leaf carrying (they leave grow BIG in the Ituri forest) chug forward with inexorable momentum, at once funky and threatening. Too bad that the tray card reveals the surprise that Turnbull got when he asked for "one of the great religious songs of the past." A

lo-fi recording, and all the more compelling for being so. The balance of the disc is devoted to the taller villagers who live near and mimic the music of the Mbuti.

#### MBUTI PYGMIES OF THE ITURI RAINFOREST (Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40401, 1992)

A compilation of two albums done for Folkways in the late '50s and '60s. Freed from the bargain basement pressings for Folkways vinyl, surprising details appear on this well-annotated disc. A measure of the high regard with which the Mbuti held Colin Turnbull may be detected in the number of *molimo* songs which he was allowed to record. During these late-night gatherings of the village's men, the forest spirit races through the campfire, as the music is echoed in the unseen distance by someone singing into a wooden horn. Out of mutually held respect, Turnbull did not record the distant voice. Also, initiation songs, bachelor duets and a lengthy extract of the poignant and innovative writing which, via Turnbull's classic book *The Forest People* (Simon & Schuster, 1961), has inspired generations of starry-eyed introductory anthropology students.

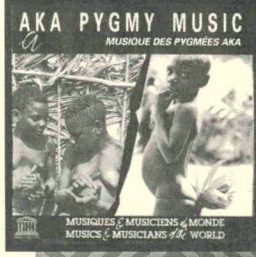
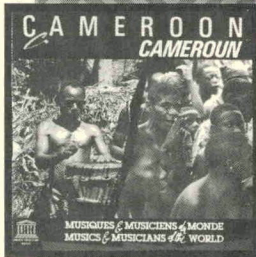
#### UNESCO COLLECTION: CAMEROON—BAKA PYGMY MUSIC (UNESCO/Auidis D 8029, 1977)

In the notes to this collection, Simha Arom, the man who literally wrote the book on ethnographic recording technique, makes the useful distinction between the women singing a song and the men "marching a song"—that is, dancing to it. As such, few Baka males are heard on this disc, which highlights the musical underscore to organized rituals. Also, sung fables and musical games among young girls which feature complex, hypnotic rhythms beaten with cupped hands on the surface of a river.

#### UNESCO COLLECTION: AKA PYGMY MUSIC (UNESCO/Auidis D 8054, 1973)

The initial European pressing (on Philips) of this music has been out of print for years, making the appearance of the compact disc all the more welcome. The songs of a diviner-healer, forming a call and response between the diviner and his audience, are propelled by the sound of two iron knife blades struck together. The music of the Aka is predominantly vocal; it is genuinely awe-inspiring to be confronted with the raw power of the human voice—Aka style—abetted by simple percussion. Blurring the divide between music and modulated noise is the hunting song of track one, designed to frighten game into the nets. Extraordinary, too, is the contrapuntal improvisation heard in children's songs found in this collection. Another Simha Arom recording; needless to add, the seeming proximity of this record's subjects is often startling.

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# MUSIC OF THE PYGMIES *Continued from page 47*

## CENTRAFRIQUE: ANTHOLOGIE DE LA MUSIQUE DES PYGMÉES AKA

(Ocora C 559012 13, 1978)

Originally a three-lp set from the Rolls Royce of ethnographic labels, Ocora, which is the recording arm of Radio France. Now a two-cd package, and uncompromised for being so, this contains many of Simha Arom's most three-dimensional recordings, and may be heard as his greatest achievement as a field recordist. One dance, whose participants wear leaves bound about their knees to create a rustling sound, creates a depth of focus between the stereo speakers which Western multitrack recordings often fail to achieve; the dancers move further then nearer, and the diffuse "leaf percussion" blends with the voices to convey a dizzying sense of circular motion. These recordings of the Aka were the inspiration for Louis Sarno's life-altering journey to the rainforest, though Sarno is now critical of Arom's "recording studio" quality technique, which involves taking notes during dances and ceremonies and staging reenactments later for taping sessions. Sarno directs those desirous of in-context performances to Ocora's *Cérémonie du Bobé* (see below).

## GABON: MUSIQUE DES PYGMÉES BIBAYAK—CHANTRES DE L'ÉPOQUE

(Ocora C 559 053, 1975)

The centerpiece of this disc is the series of "yodel" studies, which artfully dissects the layers of vocal hocketing which comprise the fabric of Pygmy choral singing. By first hearing a single voice "shaping broad, jagged melodic contours," then a duet, a trio, building to a larger ensemble of eight voices, the mesh of their voices is delineated, but not demystified. There is other material on this record which sounds interesting as described in the notes, but in the decade that I've owned the lp and then the cd, I've never gotten past the Yodel Studies to hear the balance. Rather involving, this.

## ZAÏRE: POLYPHONIES MONGO

(OCORA C 580050, 1971)

Louis Sarno provides a discography with *Song from the Forest*, in which he indicates that the Batwa people heard on this recording "seem to have lost their original style of music, and now excel at imitating their non-Pygmy neighbors." When pressed further on the subject, he said that their older recordings sound similar to the peoples of the Ituri forest, but that in many instances he detects almost no polyphony (the complex interleaving of vocals invented by Pygmy musicians). He described Batwa people in Rwanda serving as court musicians to Tutsi royalty from the region. This album is beautiful in its own right and a classic from the initial release series on Ocora. Recorded in Zaïre by Benoit Quersin.

## CONGO: CÉRÉMONIE DU BOBÉ

(Ocora C 560010, 1991)

Tracks simply entitled "Ambiances et Atmosphere" bookend this 1990 collection. In insect wallpaper is what you want, you can get it wholesale here. So dense as to resemble the more brutal forms of *musique concrète*, the cicadas, bees, mosquitoes, et al that drone throughout can actually make it difficult to connect with the music. The sketchy notes don't help in the least, alluding in tangential fashion to a ritual "devoted to the Spirit of the Forest," who "reigns over the world of shades and mediates between the living." The music, when it finally appears, takes the form of simultaneously mumbled chants, hiccupping yodels which echo hauntingly against the forest canopy, and whistling. Strange and mesmerizing, one of Louis Sarno's preferred recordings.

## HEART OF THE FOREST

(Hannibal/Fykodisc HNCD 1378, 1993)

For the past couple of years this has been the Pygmy recording most readily available to North Americans; thankfully it's a collection of supernatural power and beauty. Issued concurrently with a Baka Beyond album, these recordings were made with sensitivity to quicksilver moments by Baka's Martin Cradick. Here, the listener receives several instances of the melodic interplay between humans, birds and cicadas; one comes away with the feeling that all three groups each teach the other something new about music. Also, many examples of Pygmy instruments such as the earth bow, designed to be constructed, played (with virtuosity) and discarded on the same day. Wild and otherworldly.

## PYGMÉES DU HAUT-ZAÏRE:

KANGO, EFE, ASUA

(Fonti Musicali fmd 190, 1991)

Recordings of three groups within the Mbuti tribe, in the classic mold of a Turnbull album. Good notes and better microphones add up to an engrossing collection of songs based around daily events. An involving study of the intricacies of vocal polyphony, with some theoretical exposition in the booklet along with phonetic transcription of the vowel sounds which predominate Pygmy vocal music. Unique to this disc is an ensemble of eight whistles, mimicking the theme from an earlier feast song.

## CHANTS DE L'ORÉE DE LA FORÊT: POLYPHONIES DES PYGMÉES EFE

(Fonti Musicali fmd 185, 1990)

Another in the Fonti Musicali series, this time concentrating on the Efe, from the northeastern edge of the Ituri forest. Although the morbidity and mortality factors run high in the supposedly

Chants de l'Orée de la forêt  
Polyphonies des Pygmées Efe



Zaïre  
Polyphonies Mongo



GABON  
Musique des Pygmées Bibayak  
Chantres de l'époque





Edenic existence of these people, few of the recordings (Simha Arom's Aka set for Ocora is a noteworthy exception) make reference to any sort of laments or funerary music. Contained here is a rare example of the haunting *tore*, a complex ritual designed to introduce the recently deceased to their ancestors. Eight horns, drums and women's voices form the sonic composite which accompanies a dance. Also, examples of more casual, time-killing music performed, as throughout Africa, with a thumb piano.

## POLYPHONIES VOCALES DES PYGMÉES MBENZÉ

(INEDIT—Maison des Cultures du Monde/Audisid W 260 042, 1992)

"In their music, the Pygmies try to avoid a feeling of immobility." I love a good understatement as much as the next guy; Simha Arom goes the extra kilometer to deliver a wall of polyphony, with songs of children, songfables and "songs of entertainment" spiraling outward between choral efforts to divine the source of illness, or to appease the spirits of the dead. The closest an armchair traveler will come to the singing that Louis Sarno calls "the most wonderful music on earth."

## POLYPHONY OF DEEP RAIN-FOREST: THE MUSIC OF PYGMY INUTRI (Victor-Japan VDP 1100, 1986)

Many, many insects shroud performances, often interrupted for one reason or another. As is the case on many recordings done in the Ituri Forest, equatorial thunderclaps threaten to melt the microphone capsule, and cause much panic and discontinuity in the performances. The notes for my copy were in Japanese, but this has since been reissued in America, presumably with English liners.

## AKA PYGMIES: NZOMBA (Carbon 7, 1991)

I was dismayed when I saw the cover photo for this disc, showing headphone-wearing Aka Pygmies. Said dismay only darkened upon viewing the booklet, with members of a Belgian group, Aka Moon (similar in conceptual thrust to Baka Beyond, integrating Pygmy vocals with their own brand of Euro-pop), handing their instruments (trombone, sax) around to the Aka and everyone having a good laugh about it. Although self-conscious giggles cause delayed starts to some of these songs, the overall tenor of these recordings is respectful and accurate. There are some vocals, shrouded in rainforest reverb, so thrilling as to make the little hairs stand on end.

## VINYL ONLY

### CHASSEURS PYGMÉES

(Orstom-Selaf CETO 795, 1982)

The first side of this French album is devoted to mimicry of animal cries, deployed by hunters to lure various prey. These range from humorous exaggerations to remarkable imitations, segueing into hunting songs, and the melodic exchanges between hunters when in pursuit of game. The sound of falsetto "head" voices echoing about the woods is enchanting and then some. This, too, is a record of the Aka people, where song is the dominant expression. The last four cuts feature women singing to the accompaniment of a unique form of musical bow.

### MUSIQUE D'AFRIQUE TRADITIONNELLE, VOL. 2—PYGMÉES

(Playasound PS 33509)

Some record companies specialize in "duty-free shop" ethnomusicology; like Hawaii's Hula Records, most releases from the Playasound label seem designed for purchase in the airport on the way home from the latest vacation. With bargain-bin graphics, impressionistic liner notes and uneven sound, the Playasound catalog is a hit-and-miss affair at best. This recording of an expedition to the Lobaye region in Central African Republic is among the company's worthier titles. This record further explores the music of the Aka people.

An elephant-hunting song begins this set with especially furious polyrhythmic drumming and vocal hocketing, followed by solo harp performances, women's songs and dances involving the whole camp. There is a poignant cast to much of the record, with songs specifically addressing melancholy, sickness and loss. The recordists' notes describe the difficulty of capturing the song of a boy, aged 12, on tape. After playing him with gifts, having endured many false starts, they are finally able to record "the child singing" here in memory of his parents who are dead." His voice cracks often, and the forest seems to loom larger around him as he proceeds with the song.

### UNESCO COLLECTION: THE MUSIC OF THE BA-BENZÉLÉ PYGMIES

(Barenreiter-Musicafrica BM 30 L 2303, 1985)

The recordings issued by Barenreiter-Musicafrica preserved rare and endangered musics, but often at the expense of the individual musicians' identities. Even when performed by noted players, the music of a given B-M release is presented as a textbook example of a specific instrument or regional style. Fortunately, the soulfulness of the Ba-Benzélé broke through the "museum trophy case" treatment in this instance. Nearly as I can tell, this is the most important recording of Pygmy music as yet unissued on

compact disc. The introductory track, of a woman alternately singing and accompanying herself on a one-note whistle, is quite simply breathtaking. Lullabies follow, as do songs of rejoicing and sorrow, music for entertainment and inspiration. The second side contains a brace of stories, told (the notes explain) to the accompaniment of mimed gestures; a rare insight into the workings of Pygmy language and folklore.

Still missing in action (and undoubtedly worth the money):

**M'BENGA** (recorded by Pierre Huguet, Pithys 10112, 1992)

**CHANTS ET DANSES PYGMÉES** (recorded by C. Huchin, Chant du Monde LDY 4176, 1957)

**MBUTI PYGMY** (Recorded by Hugh Tracy, International Library of African Music TR-125)

### BUSHMAN AND PYGMY MUSIC: MUSIQUE BOCHIMAN ET MUSIQUE PYGMÉE (Musée de L'Homme LD-9)

To put a bow on this present, I'll leave you with the words of David Reck, from his wonderful book—Don't ask me why it's out of print—*Music of the Whole Earth*. Reck is an ethnomusicologist and a master of the South Indian *vina*, which gives him points over most of the academics whose writings I'm obliged to wade through. To his ear, Pygmy music sounds like this:

"A basic phrase design, a rough melodic plan, and a scale form the raw materials on which each singer may then elaborate in his own way. Extra notes are stuck in, notes are omitted, certain pitches may be lengthened (or shortened), inner motifs may be repeated, and so on. It is almost like 20 or 30 people being given the dimensions and shape of a house and the freedom to elaborate or emphasize the details of construction that please them or excite their respective creative imaginations. In Pygmy polyphony...there is, then, an intricate balance between individual creativity and the limits and controls of their sonic materials, all meshed in the extraordinary beauty of a recognizable larger design."

To best repay these extraordinary people for bestowing the gift of music upon us, please contact and support the following organizations:

The Pygmy Fund, Box 277, Mailbu, CA 90265; and Project Dzanga-Sangha, c/o The World Wildlife Fund, 1250 24th St. N.W. Washington, DC 20037.

Some sources for recordings itemized above: Harmonia Mundi (310) 478-1311  
Qualiton Imports (718) 937-8515  
Lynchord (212) 929-8234  
Ellipsis Arts 1-800-788-6670  
Rykodisc (508) 744-7678  
Smithsonian/Folkways 1-800-410-9815