TEXT JANE CORNWELL

AFRICAN MUSIC
SACRED RHYTHMS

A GNAOUA MUSICIAN BEATS HIS DRUM OUTSIDE THE CHELLAH

BUSHMAN RESETTLEMENT VILLAGE AT MABUTSANE, BOTSWANA

CELEBRATION OF THE SUNDAY CULT AT THE ARMY OF VICTORY

THERE ARE SOME AFRICAN LANGUAGES that have no word for music. Something so inherent, so elemental, doesn't actually need one. Here in this vast continent, rhythm, melody and harmony are an integral part of life – as natural as breathing and as vital to storytelling and communication as the spoken word. All of Africa's history is there in its music, as is its ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Oh, and its natural world: the whistling thorn bushes of Tanzania, the loping gait of a camel across the Sahara, the crack of thunder over a thirsty veld. Across Africa, natural sounds are taken and incorporated into music, so that soundtracks to life become musical soundtracks as well. The often-complex results might not always please the Western ear – but when it comes to traditional African music, Western standards don't apply.

The boundaries between life and art are blurred in Africa. Even speech has its musical uses: the link between language and music is so close in fact that instruments are sometimes tuned so that they are linguistically comprehensible. Not for nothing is the *tama*, the small, two-headed hourglass drum of the Wolof people of Senegal (known as the *kalengu* to the Hausa of Nigeria) called the talking drum! Music is often coupled with other art forms such as poetry or dance: the stomping feet of South Africa's Zulu warriors become the rhythm of the music, whose notes then turn into dance steps. Music can accompany work, religious, even political activities – 'Politics can be strengthened by music,' stated Nelson Mandela, 'but music has a potency that defies politics.' It can animate the life of the entire community.

In Africa everything moves to innumerable rhythms: the steady pounding of millet by Fulani women in the north of Senegal has its own metronymic beat. In the ancient Moroccan city of Fès, artisans pound metal, carve wood and stitch baboush slippers in familiar, long-practised cadences. Across the entire continent music marks everything from births, marriages and funerals to hunting, fishing and farming. African children quickly learn to imitate complex rhythms on minor and makeshift instruments, many of which they construct themselves from wood, hide or found objects. Their parents are known to improvise too: in Sierre Leone, empty Milo tins filled with stones were the core instrument for the genre called Milo-jazz. The South African musician Shiyani Ncobo grew up playing *maskanda* music on a guitar made from a tin can. In Cape Verde, women place a rolled-up cloth between their legs and beat it as part of their *batuco* music (the singer Lura does this live, with silver lamé).

African music lends itself to invention: Hausa children beat rhythms on the inflated bellies of live puffer fish. The Pygmies of Cameroon beat rhythms on river water. Everywhere, kids are shaking rattles, beating drums and playing minor instruments in adult ensembles. Children's musical games can smooth the transition to adulthood: among the Dogon of Mali, a child sounding a bull-roarer is said to be 'calling the panther' – as a hunter might (the bull-roarer, a long piece of wood or metal attached to some string and swung in a circle, has a sound akin to the growl of a panther or the roar of a bull). Instruments can also be functional: the

INSETS (LEFT TO RIGHT) // PHOTOGRAPHER MARTIN MOOS - LPI. PHOTOGRAPHER MARTIN MOOS - LPI. PHOTOGRAPHER MARTIN MOOS - LPI.

NUBA TRIBESMEN DECORATED WITH MUD DANCE AND SING DURING A PEACEMAKING FESTIVAL ACHIRUN IN THE LUMUN HILLS IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS OF SUDAN. HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE FROM TWO

Malian superstar Salif Keita titled his 2002 album *Moffou* after the shrill, one-hole reed flute he'd play to scare the birds away from his father's maize crops.

Traditional African music can be a source of magic and spirituality, healing and wisdom. 'I believe traditional music has a place in these modern times,' says Baaba Maal, an internationally famous Senegalese singer, whose band Daande Lenol is made up of traditional players. 'To take something of the past and put it in the present teaches us something about ourselves.' Recent years have seen Maal and a few of his equally stellar contemporaries – Mali's Salif Keita, Guinea's Mory Kante – unplugging their guitars and returning to their roots with acoustic albums. 'I wanted to sing about love,' says Salif Keita of 2005's critically acclaimed release, *Mbemba*. 'And use traditional instruments to make people dance.' Kante, a *griot* minstrel turned pop star – his 1988 house music–inspired song 'Yéké Yéké' remains Africa's biggest-selling single – is hailed for preserving and updating the musical traditions of his Malinke culture. His compatriots Ba Cissoko approach the kora (including the electric kora) with similar gusto.

Though the majority of Africans are musical, by no means all are actually musicians. In some societies musicians exist in semi-professional groups, members of which earn their living both from playing and from working in totally different jobs. In other societies, music is the province of one social caste – the praise-singing *griots* of West Africa, say, who trace genealogies, recount epics and span generations in a manner similar to the medieval European minstrel. *Griots* (known as *jelis* in Mali) are acknowledged as oral historians – virtually all children know the epic of Sundiata Keita, the warrior who founded the Empire of Mali – and often as soothsayers, and they top the bill at weddings and naming ceremonies. Nevertheless, they occupy a lowly rank in hierarchical West African societies, and many big West African stars faced parental objections to their choice of career. Others such as Keita – a direct descendent of Sundiata and as such, not a *jeli* – made their reputations in exile. Over in equatorial Africa, by contrast, the player of the *mvet* harp-zither from Cameroon also relays great epics but – unlike his more obsequious counterparts further north – tends to say what he thinks, however crude it may be, and garners more respect as a result.

The existence of these *griots* is vital to societies that have no written records but hand down information from generation to generation. Fortunately, though ethnomusicologists continue to fret over the preservation of musical traditions and beliefs in the face of an encroaching modern world, Africa's remain in a largely healthy state – cohabiting, sometimes awkwardly, with a bold and impatient youth market. As with much of the globalised world, African cities do thump to the sounds of American hip-hop and rap; Eminem and 50 Cent are as popular here as they are Stateside. Yet the indigenous industry is also booming – Dakar in Senegal is home to over 2000 rap groups alone. Not for nothing did homeboys Daara J title their 2003 debut album *Boomerang*. 'Born in Africa, brought up in America, hip-hop has come full circle,' they say.

MAIN IMAGE // PHOTOGRAPHER MARTIN MOOS - LPI.

The only shared form of African musical expression, in fact, is popular music. There is no identifiable pan-African music in the traditional sense – though there are certain regional similarities. The movement of people in, out and across the continent has enriched its musical make-up: North African music is heavily influenced by the Arabic-speaking world (its instruments are even held to be the original models for those of the West). Cairo's large *firqah* orchestras use centuries-old *maqam* scales (as heard in the classical poetry sung by the legendary Oum Kalthoum) and favour instruments such as the oud lute and goblet-shaped *derbouka* drum. Though danceable phenomena such as *raï*, *chaabi* and *al-jil* dominate North Africa, sub-Saharan traditions are not excluded: Morocco's *gnawa* brotherhoods, the descendants of sub-Saharan slaves, play pentatonic trance music using chants, hand drums, string instruments and giant metal *karakeb* castanets. Each year they invite Western jazz musicians to jam with them at the Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira.

Islam has also made its mark on East and West Africa. The lush orchestration of the *taarab* ensembles of Zanzibar and Kenya have a distinctly Arabic tinge, as does the Swahili sound that proliferates between Uganda and Tanzania – though the rhythmic structure is not as complex as that of the Maghreb. West African music might be flecked with the muezzin's wail (listen to the glorious, swooping vocals of long-established stars such as Senegal's Youssou N'Dour or Malian songbird Kandia Kouyaté) but it's also highly rhythmic and drum-oriented, featuring call-and-response singing and vocal repetition. There's an emphasis on polyphony in Central Africa, where a number of Pygmy tribes sing their hearts out in relative isolation. South Africa probably has the greatest range of musical styles on the continent – not the least its own flourishing jazz genre – but the rousing harmonies of the Zulu, Sotho, Pedi and Shangaan regions are the most identifiable.

Similar musical instruments are found throughout Africa: think drums, percussion, string, wind and self-sounding instruments. Precisely what form they take is dependent on geography: drums are obviously more prevalent in forest areas than in savanna regions (oh, and if any instrument is representative of Africa, it's the drum). The *ingoma* drum choirs of Rwanda whack their gigantic instruments – made from rawhide and aeons-old umuvumu trees – with sticks the size of baseball bats. The dispersal of African slaves to the Caribbean and the Americas brought the likes of the berimbau, xylophone and cuica back to Africa; up in the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde they sing *morna*, the local equivalent of the Portuguese *fado* (ciggie-puffing grandma Césaria Évora is *morna*'s undisputed queen). Angola boasts its own merengue, samba and accordion-fuelled music, called *rebita*. Gospel is hugely popular right across the continent, belted out everywhere from Lagos to Lilongwe.

The instruments of European colonialism – saxophones, trumpets, keyboards, guitars – have long been fused with traditional patterns. Popular music is best described as a product of African and external influences: jazz, soul and even classical music helped create the Afrobeat sound of the 'Black President', Nigeria's late Fela Kuti. The Malian bluesman Ali Farka Touré reaffirmed the role of the African *griot* by mixing wisdom with entertainment – and taking the blues back to its birthplace. (Touré was the continent's first artist to win two US Grammies, but his remarkable career was cut short by his death in February 2006.) Guitars helped invent Nigerian *juju*, Kenyan *benga* and Congolese rumba (which grew out of the Cuban rumba that made its way back across the Atlantic in the early 20th century). Horns – brass ones – jump-started Cameroonian *makossa* (check out master saxophonist Manu Dibango). Electric instruments gave rise to Senegalese *mbalax* and Ghanaian highlife. Ghanaian hiplife – hip-hop plus highlife – is now successfully exporting itself to its neighbours.

South Africa's giant recording industry rivals that of Europe and America (there are similarly large industries in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire) and embraces everything from *mbanqanga* (township jive) and Zulu *iscathimiya* call-and-response singing to the urban music phenomenon that is *kwaito*. And so the cross-fertilisation goes on: a new generation of township rap sits somewhere between *kwaito*, new-school and house music. Elsewhere, American hip-hop hybrids are sparking fascinating music revivals in Tanzania, Kenya, Angola and Guinea. Angola's favelas have given birth to *kuduro*, a breathless fusion of *semba*, rap and techno that has become popular in other Portuguese-speaking nations as well. Former Sudanese child soldier Emmanuel Jal has traded a Kalashnikov for a microphone; the Somalian rap sensation K'Naan (the first Somalian artist to feature on MTV) delivers fierce, percussion-fuelled protest songs. Both artists mark African music's growing social and political consciousness.

As a political tool, music's lyrics and associations can wield immense power. Musicians are regularly expelled (or choose to exile themselves) from the likes of Algeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe for their political stance and beliefs. Paris in particular is full of exiled big-name African artists: Angolan star Bonga. Ivorian reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly. Algerian rock chanteuse Souad Massi. Conversely, African leaders often try and cash in on the popularity of their country's stars: Salif Keita, Baaba Maal, Oumou Sangare et al repeatedly decline requests to align themselves with the political parties of their countries. This doesn't mean that they balk at raising consciousness: everything from treating women with respect to the virtues of picking up litter and wearing a seat belt – oh, and a condom – has been broached by African songwriters. So has the problem of cassette piracy: a glance around any major African city reveals pirate operations on a massive scale.

The major record labels in Mali closed down their operations in 2005 in protest at the fact that 95 per cent of the cassettes on the market are counterfeit. It allegedly takes just 24 hours from an album's official release for pirates to get their copies out on the streets, and despite government promises to crack down the problem continues. (In Ethiopia in 2004 a well-organised strike by top musicians forced authorities into action, so that many musicians are now able to earn a living from their craft.)

Some genres, of course, are bent on helping listeners forget their environments altogether: Côte d'Ivoire's percussive, melodious and hugely popular Coupé Décalé sound was born during the politico-military crisis there. The likes of Sagacité, Papa Ministre and Mollah Omar sing of endless partying, easy money and unbridled happiness – and fill some of French Africa's biggest stadiums as a result.

It's simply impossible to overstate the influence of African music on other musical genres. Without African music there would be no Puerto Rican salsa, Brazilian samba or Trinidadian *soca*. No Cuban *son*, Jamaican reggae, American blues. No soul or gospel. No rock. The spread of African music has been compared to the giant baobab tree found in many West African regions. Its roots are African: traditional, historical, inherent. Its trunk is jazz and blues. Its branches are R & B, gospel, soul. Its leaves are Afro-cuban and calypsonian. Its fruits are rap, hip-hop, reggae, salsa, merengue and a host of genres too numerous to mention here.

To ensure that the musical traditions of Africa survive and grow, it is vital – if we might continue the analogy for a moment – that it be fed, watered and fertilised. Music in Africa is, after all, as natural as breathing.

The Motherland depends on it.

TWO OLD FRIENDS BASK IN THE SUNSET GLOW OF PIAZZA.

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