

African Music in the Heart of Europe

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I have never been to Africa, and according to some people I should not say a word about it, let alone write a book called *In the Mouth of an African Crocodile* or have other notes of a similar kind. In any case, African music has been on the European scene for more than forty years; and its protagonists, some are African musicians themselves, contribute to a situation in which there are two devoted but disagreeing groups of listeners. In consequence, I, as a European listener, have been hearing developments in African music for years from nearby and comment on them. But here is the question: am I following authentic and genuine African music or just its hybridized form, which has for a long time had nothing in common with its source and is said to be outside the perception of ordinary African listeners?

There have been passionate discussions about this topic. It was revealed that it very much depends on where the discussion participants come from; it is, though, becoming more and more evident that we must admit the fact that African music as performed in Europe differs extensively from that played in the “Black” continent. We must take this situation into consideration, as a fact, as something normal and natural, and at the same time get rid of the old prejudices. We must accept the existence of two differing markets for African music, each of those with specific requirements as far as tastes and rhythms are concerned. The London radio personality and critic Charlie Gillet says (in a slightly exaggerated way), that on one hand we have educated European listeners undertaking scholarly debates about the problems of *balafon* and *kora*, while on the other hand, a crowd of Africans is madly dancing to some African disco in a night club in Senegal (to that same sugar-like keyboard disco Europe abandoned at the beginning of the 1980s). Both camps,

however, are having great fun! So what is the problem then? And which is the right answer? Both answers are actually correct.

Because I could not say it better, I will again let Charlie Gillet speak: "If someone in African music makes use of a sound which seems to have been forgotten in the eighties, it is not a problem for us. I would never claim this is bad, I also have to object against us being accused of snobism for hearing things that way. In my opinion, if there is to be a definition of World Music, then it is a genre which was originally consumed by the listener of a certain country or continent and which gradually went beyond the intended group of people and flooded the whole world. And, of course, it is quite natural when an African musician tries to win recognition for his music throughout Europe and uses highly modern means to achieve his goals."

Even the best-known African singers and musicians do not wish to be totally unknown names in Europe and cherished music legends in Africa. They see themselves as the African counterparts of Phil Collins, Sting, Peter Gabriel, or Madonna. They are not interested in expressing their ideas only by means they inherited and grew up with, but in modern ways too; they should not be accused of intending to "wash off" the colour of their skin. It is not even possible to do so. If an African musician played only European pop music and nothing else, he would never get rid of his "African accent," no matter how hard he tried. While some Europeans and patriotic Africans view this as something unnatural and non-standard, African artists do not share their fears and often feel offended by such ideas. They, after all, have the equal right to express their musical feelings with the help of all sorts of instruments, including the synthesizer. We in Europe have similar experiences with orthodox traditionalists; in the case of Africans, we hear words such as neo-colonialism, even if they come from their fellow countrymen.

The Nigerian promoter Biyi Adeprgha claims that some African musicians in the centre of European attention gained their fame through their contacts and connections with European labels, managers, and

agents, who then force them to pursue success in order to earn fortunes. Music created in this way is presented as African even though it is virtually unknown to Africans themselves. For Adeprgha, singers like Youssou N'Dour and Salif Keita are considered to be nightclub singers of local importance and do not mean a thing for the rest of Africa, and Adeprgha despises our admiration for them. This might be an extreme opinion, but it is supported by the reception of Youssou N'Dour's latest album *Egypt* in his home country of Senegal: despite his status as a public or musical icon, the album was a total failure. In the album, the beloved singer confessed his veneration for the saints and wise men of a Senegalese form of mystic islam called mouridism; however, he did not choose the common *mbalax* style that constitutes a crucial musical element for Senegalese listeners, but a tranquil ecclesiastical form instead. And when the Senegalese could not dance to it as usual, they condemned the album, completely ignoring its spiritual depth, which had gripped worldwide audiences in quite an opposite way.

The debate about the two faces of African music started in the 1980s, when the gaiety of African musicians caused by their warm welcome in Europe gradually changed, in fact, into mutual disillusionment. Dramatic political changes in Africa and the fashionable interest in everything exotic that flourished in Europe soon turned all disregard into a seemingly open embrace. (Among others, any music beyond the European horizon became popular, from primitive ethno to bush-like banging that would hardly have been able to exist without help, or be heard as quality music.) African music traveled to the old continent in several ways: first, with immigrants who were creating their own communities in European, previously ethnically homogenous, cities, and who were trying to keep their cultural customs in an unequal surrounding and, thus, dance their own styles; second, thanks to the commercial music market, which was supervised by white producers who felt they "knew it all" and thought that by adding some fresh melodies and previously unheard rhythms they would revive their own

pop music, suggest new approaches, and find surprising solutions. The interest in Afro-pop, as it was called at the time, shook the charts. Speaking about any topic connected with African music was “in”: multicultural European cities were eager for it, enchanted by the regained joy and possibility of dancing with abandon. Youssou N’Dour, Papa Wemba, Salif Keita, Manu Dibango, Fela Kuti, Mory Kante, and dozens of other African musicians, launched an attack on Paris and London. The poor men did not have a clue about what was going on, happy to be given a chance abroad. They signed with big labels and accepted the advice about how to sell their “raw” music to the Europeans, to earn as much as possible at the lowest cost, with a naive trust. But it ended as fast as it began. “This over-sweet funky noise is supposed to be African music?” asked all the surprised listeners. The sad Africans had to back off and realized too late that they could not break into Europe by denying themselves. Many of them returned home, others—determined to make it at any cost—struggled along or collaborated with rock or jazz musicians and contributed to a new interest in their music, revived by the young generation of listeners who were freed from the Afro-pop madness. Even the overall attitude towards African music slowly changed in the heart of Europe. This helped the 1990s boom of the world music spread; it enticed both young and experienced African musicians to sign with the growing number of small labels whose owners let them make decisions about their own music persuaded them that their power was especially in the faithfulness to their roots, which should not be reshaped even when exposed to rock or pop. Those who could not bear the loss of fame and refused to leave the big labels found more sophisticated ways to get what they wanted: they searched for more communicative rock producers and recorded their albums in two versions—African and European ones. The same was true for concerts. While they gave their best at home, they performed in front of white audiences only halfheartedly, knowing that the whites would not dance wildly anyway.

The situation later seemed to calm down. European audiences were breathless at really excellent African recordings, and so were the experts. Year after year, African albums appeared at the top of the charts in the prestigious English magazine *fRoots*. However, sharply contrasting opinions were arriving from Africa; these argued that the marketing of African musicians by European journalists who lacked complete information was wrongly influencing the public's view. "Are you trying to suggest that the results of the African music sales in the Stern's shop in London and a couple of charts that bring ideas of a few chosen individuals and have nothing in common with the music listened to by the Africans themselves, should be taken as a standard by us?" was the reaction in a Senegalese press. Many African stars have been living in Europe for such a long time that one cannot consider their music as purely African: they represent the continent only partly. The most fitting comment comes from the promoter Biyi: "A discussion arose in the African spheres after Youssou N'Dour was declared the African musician of the twentieth century by the British magazine *fRoots*. This caused disagreement all over Africa: 'What about King Sunny Adé, Fela Kuti, Franco or the dignified and brave Miriam Makeba?' everybody asked. We respect Youssou N'Dour, but none of the Europeans has any right to tell us who is and who is not the best. And he himself definitely is not. That is nonsense."

We live in a globalized era, in which even the most intimately cherished and worshipped cultural phenomena are beginning to belong to everyone on earth, and globalization, whether or not we see as a negative thing that helps the deliberate increase of "commercial waste," has, according to Wole Soyinka (Nigerian writer and laureate of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature), an ancient character of the artistic and spiritual blend. Thus, the assimilation of Africans amidst European culture cannot mean anything new. Similarly, some African music returned home from places where it was long ago dragged by slavery. I refer here to music from Cuba, the Caribbean, Latin America, or New

York's Bronx. If something is markedly moving on the African scene today, it is hip-hop, which combines a hidden energy with enormous inner strength, as well as an unprecedented potential for witty confessions of the young African generation. And still, voices were immediately raised to say that this belongs only to black guys from New York. DJ Doudou Sarr sent a message to those people: "We are living in one big globalized village and music is like a Coke, it simply is for everyone. And if somebody has a different opinion, he has himself to blame as he misses many great musical experiences with the excellent African musicians."

Also, we should not forget that Africa still stands for an unexplored musical "excavation site" and that jumping to quick conclusions about its new wing being created in the heart of Europe would lack any sense. And so, early disputes between the two camps have not yet been resolved. Time will probably solve this little problem for us. These days, however, it is clear that even we Europeans can talk about African music without having to undergo compulsory schooling in an African village.

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