

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN MUSIC

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Overview African music trails behind it a history as long and complex as does African painting. That painting -- already found between 4000-6000 B..C .E., on Tassili cave-rock walls-- depicts dancers and *musicians*. The subsequent development of African music tracks a story of inventive native instruments, evolving settings for the music they play, and, to leap to our own time, world presence both through its own genius and through the African diaspora, which (partly through slavery) has exported the African tone throughout the Western world, through the rhythms of Brazil, the Caribbean, and the southern United States.

Ancient Music

Ancient cave paintings depict musicians playing for dancers, energy exploding from the rock walls. Nor are these walls, scattered by the thousands across many parts of Africa, the only source of information about ancient African music. If we include a generous interpretation of 'ancient,' we will speak about the Ile Ife terra cottas of musicians (13th century C.E.) , or the actual archeology-discovered *iqbin*-drums from the 10th-14th centuries. We will cite those 14th century Arab travelers, Ibn Batuta or Ibn Khaldun, who expostulate on the vitality of Sub-Saharan rhythms; we will even return to the travel document of the Carthaginian admiral Hanno, in the fifth century B.C.E., who found, on sailing down he West Coast of Africa, pockets of black dancers making music and fire along the coast, awakening in him the passions that were later (in fiction) to terrorize Marlowe, in Jpseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.'

Early modern

We can only approximately date the accession of increasingly diversified instruments, to the African repertoire. We can, though, say that in the 10th to the 14th centuries Iqbin drums came into active use, that in the 15th century we see increased use of talking-drums--which are amply depicted on the walls of the Palace at Benin, and that by the same time there is widespread use of pellet and tubular bells. Rhythm enforcing instruments are making their way into performance, forerunners of those lamellophones, xylophones, koras, wind instruments which by the 17th century will be wrapped into a vast network of musical styles and expressions variegated throughout the continent. It cannot be overstated that the growth and direction of instrument technology, in Africa, is closely related to the kinds of rhythmic music indigenous to the continent. Whatever the occasion, for which the music is created--religious ritual, marriage ceremony, funeral songs, praise songs for chieftains, courtship songs for young girls--the polyrhythmic character of the art is omnipresent. Many instruments, in fact, are fitted with two or more rows of keys, permitting the instrumentalist to cross play on two or more sets of rhythms.

18th and 19th centuries

The development of instrument technology, fitting to various regions and available materials, marches hand in hand with the growing refinement, and local difference, of the kinds of music (and occasions for that music) manifesting themselves from the Berber north to the Bushman click songs of the deep south. By this time the instrumental repertoire now comprises ample representation in each of the four basic types of African music: membranophones (drums); chordophones (harps, fiddles); aerophones (winds); idiophones (rattles, shakers). The individual musician begins to achieve full recognition, the instruments themselves are honored as high quality art, decorated (sometimes) with the finest craftsmanship of sculptors and painters. (In Buganda, reportedly, the royal drums had higher status than the King himself.) Rumor circulates in Lesotho that the cows graze more contentedly, and productively, when entertained by the *lesiba* mouth bow.

20 century musicscape in Africa

As in the other arts, Africans excelled in music, and by the present time have left their mark not only on their own continent, which (a visitor is likely to assent vigorously) is permeated by the noise, charm, vigor--you name it--

which emerges pretty much night and day from bar, church, ‘occasion’--the wedding or funeral or praise gathering at which the musical accompaniment is central--or for that matter from the fast foods restaurant down the road from me, which all day resonates loudly with piped in Gospel music. Music, more portable and invasive than the other arts--painting, sculpture, and architecture don’t quite float on the air--comes out of the woodwork in an Africa which digital technology now enables to hear itself with a ferocious clarity. Perhaps the most provocative instance of this state of affairs *within* Africa can be illustrated by the musical power of Fela Kuti (1938-1997). Son of a prosperous Lagos family, Fela was sent in his twenties first to London then to Los Angeles, where a double contact, with the Black Panthers and with American black music, ricocheted him back to Nigeria, and a life of huge musical production--with his Afrobeat band--and political activism of a scathingly anti-leaders drive, which impacted profoundly on the social consciousness of newly independent black activists. Still today the Shrine, in downtown Lagos, serves as a reminder of Fela’s fiery performances, where he used to emit two hour long song-torrents directed at the corruption of his government.

The power of African music outside Africa

Slavery poured Africans--many of them from Sub-Saharan SW Africa, the richest home of musical traditions-- into the American South, as well as into Brazil and the Caribbean. For American music history this contribution was to unfold meaningfully. Gospel music, a splendid harvest of Southern American Baptist sacred music, was to emerge from work and praise songs of the African laborers on American cotton plantations. African musical rhythms, generated in Harlem Clubs and St. Louis speakeasies in the 1920’s, were to collaborate their way into the groundbreaking new American musical arts of jazz, as well as--through the rhythms of a poet like Langston Hughes--into the Harlem Renaissance. Miriam Makeba (1932-2008) brought her fierce South African independence, and influential opposition to apartheid, into the America of the sixties. Her hugely popular singing--African traditional beats and melodies, Afropop, and humanitarian openness--made her for a decade the darling of American intellectuals; until her marriage to Stokely Carmichael, who really wanted to dismantle the U.S. government, at which time the Feds shipped her and her husband off to Guinea.

Reading

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Titon, Jeff Todd, *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World’s Peoples*, New York, 1984.

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Veal, Michael, *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon*, Philadelphia, 2000.

Discussion questions

Can we get behind the African inclination to polyrhythms, as distinct from the harmonies on which western music depends? What could explain such inclination?

Percussion effects are prominent in African music, as distinct, say, from the more fluid effects of strings. Do you think that difference arises from the closeness of out African music to dance and performance?

In the nineteenth century various ethnomusicologists attempted to create a notational system for African music. What is there about African music that made this effort fail?

Is the proliferation of instruments for expressing African music related to the instinctually rich sculptural tradition in African culture? That is, were musical instruments generated in part by the African gift for shaping materials?

Nollywood has become a thriving part of the Nigerian entertainment industry. What about the economics of the 'music scene' in contemporary Africa? Is it a scene of hot releases and trending hits?

Gospel music is potent in the African Pentecostal churches. Does this music derive in part from traditional African rhythms and melodies? If so, how does that source blend with the Christian hymns brought with them by western missionaries, and introduced into church services already in the nineteenth century?