

Why I Love African Music

When it's late winter in the Northern hemisphere—I live in Upstate New York and the snow is finally receding—it's hard to be cheerful. It's hard to move, it's hard to go outside. It's still too chilly and gray, and the wind bites. Most of us have tools in our emotional toolbox to cope with gloominess, and one of mine is African music. I know, I'm a world away...not only in a totally different climate and landscape, but I'm a middle-class white American. Part of me doesn't really feel entitled to embrace African music, in all its many-splendored variations, and yet... and yet, few things make me happier. Few things make me happier.



I know, I know, it was a white American named Frank Zappa who once intoned “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” But I am going to try here, to try to explain why African music is so delightful and affirming. Because it's about more than what sparkles in my ears and gets my body moving.

My introduction to the music from that continent first came, as it did to many Americans, white as well as nonwhite, via Paul Simon's “Graceland” album. As you may recall, Simon ‘discovered’ and imported a variety of musicians and singers from Soweto, South Africa, principally Ladysmith Black Mambazo. To do so, he essentially defied the cultural boycott imposed by the outside world against South Africa's apartheid regime.

Some African critics decried the project as “an exploitive appropriation of their culture.” But once released in this country, the album absolutely electrified almost everyone who heard it; “Graceland” was a huge seller, worldwide, and won a Grammy in 1987.

Many of us heard classic elements of that music for the first time: not just hand-clapping, soaring vocal harmonies, and irresistible beats, but also “oddities” like tongue-clicking and electric guitar played as if it were a percussion instrument.

Although Simon's album was a rather eccentric blend of styles and songwriting, the contributions of his collaborators thrilled. I vividly recall running Saturday errands around the small Massachusetts city where I lived at the time and hearing that album playing at top volume in almost every shop I visited—the bakery, the bookstore, the pet store, even the grocery store! The innovations, rhythms, and exuberance of the Africans broke over me (and many other people) like a wave. That day, I sailed and danced on a tide of joy, and saw similar effects on the people around me.

But it wasn't till years later that I began to learn more about the music. Once when visiting friends out in California, we went into San Francisco for a free outdoor concert in a park.

Performing from Zimbabwe was Oliver Mtukudzi and his band. They were different from Ladysmith Black Mambazo, with a softer, sadder sound. He played a poignant song about AIDS; the lyrics were a mix of English and a language I did not understand, but I remember this: “What shall we do??” It being San Francisco, the woe resonated with some in the crowd around us.

At one point Mtukudzi addressed the crowd in his melodious English. “In Zimbabwe, our lives are very hard. There is much tragedy and struggle.” He paused. We paused. “But,” he said, swinging his arms open as if to embrace us all, “Music! Music can be our joy. Music, it is our joy.” And they launched into another song that got his American audience on their feet, grinning and dancing.

Inexplicably drawn to this music—again, my privileged American life is a world away in every sense—I began to explore more. African music does make it to these shores. I was able to find some CDs in big urban record shops, particularly in Boston, New York and San Francisco, places where there are African immigrants. Of course, with the end of apartheid and the advent of YouTube and the ascendance of the internet in general, borders broke and it became possible to get all kinds of music. Among my favorites are Wasis Diop from Senegal (‘discovered’ by David Byrne), Ali Farka Touré from Mali, the Bhundu Boys from Zimbabwe, Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens from South Africa, and Angélique Kidjo from Benin.

All of these, and many more, have toured and even recorded outside of their native countries, including in the United States and Europe. It seems to me that not only did the barriers to hearing and getting copies of their music come down, but many of these musicians also were influenced by music from other places, including America, France, and the Caribbean. The general willingness—even eagerness—to incorporate blues, jazz, or pop, shows not only how open-minded these African performers are or were, but also demonstrates a deeper instinct.

Collaboration, which Paul Simon was sometimes vilified for, is the order of the day. Anything is fair game. Everything is welcome. I think it’s resourcefulness.

When I listen to music from Africa, my body responds. A songwriter like Wasis Diop just seems to have spot-on instincts for arrangements—every note, every turn of the song, every soaring or swooping or growling vocal seems exactly right in a deeply visceral and intimate way. I dance, I sway, I twirl, I stomp, I get up and hurl myself into movement. Search any of these performers on YouTube and you will always see dancing accompanying the music—the musicians and singers, but also the audience. It’s infectious. Pondering this, I have come to believe or understand that these people have tapped into some deep and primal language of the body. And the heart. I return again to what Mtukudzi taught me: “it is our joy.”

So I will stop apologizing to myself and to you, for being from another culture, for not being born into this music. We are all human, and we need movement and joy wherever we can find it or create it. It is free, necessary, and beautiful.