

EAST AFRICAN POPULAR MUSIC

From Alex Seago, Richmond College, London, 1985.

When compared to West and Central African popular music, East African music has received relatively little attention from music critics. The main reason for this seems to be that pop in East Africa has tended to be an imported, or at least, an imitated music. During the '60's and '70's the Zaïrean rhythms of Franco, Rochereau & Co. took Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania by storm to become firmly established as the dominant urban sound. Zaïrean musicians moved east to take up residences in the clubs and attracted huge crowds of Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ugandan fans.

The 1970's and early '80's were the halcyon days of East Africa-based Zaïrean pop. Superb bands like Samba Mapengala's Orchestre Virunga, Orchestre Super Mazembe and Orchestre Makassy played all night in the clubs of Nairobi, Kampala and Dar es Salaam. Lps were recorded at the CBS studios in Nairobi and pressed on the local CBS, AIT and Polygram labels. Since last year (*i.e.* 1984), though, all this has begun to change. Live Zaïrean music is on the wane and the vacuum is being filled by the all too familiar sounds of Michael Jackson & Wham!

Why the change? The blame can be placed squarely on a near fatal combination of official policy, record piracy, foreign exchange restrictions and taxes on luxury imports.

Take the example of Kenya. In the early '80's the Kenyan government initiated a Presidential Music Commission to review the state of music in the country. The commission concluded that Kenyans were enjoying foreign music played by foreign musicians more than the homegrown Kenyan variety. Some months ago it was announced that the Swahili service of Voice of Kenya radio could only play Swahili music and not the music of other African countries, Europe or the United States. Now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has taken up the issue. They have refused to renew the work permits for two of the top Zaïrean bands, Virunga & Magalepa, both central to Nairobi's club scene. This has hit the few clubs which still feature live music rather than disco very hard indeed, because there are few, if any, indigenous Kenyan bands who can compare with the Zaïreans. Club owners like Robbie Armstrong of Nairobi's Starlight Club where the excellent Virunga used to be the resident band, are now being forced to reconsider their music policies, perhaps featuring disco during the week with occasional live acts at weekends.

Armstrong is also faced with the problem of finding equipment for his resident bands, for very few Zaïrean bands playing in East Africa actually own their equipment. Very high import duties on all electronic equipment means that the guitars, drums, amps and speakers available on every British high street are virtually impossible to find and cost a fortune in Kenya. Excellent musicians are usually forced to play through diabolical and ancient PAs, dreading the technical breakdown which could force them out of work. In the past, club owners have attempted to solve these problems by selling second-hand PA's to the bands who in turn pay off their debt with a percentage of the performance fee (one of the reasons why long residencies have been the rule in Kenyan clubs). But now that the work permits have been revoked it makes much more economic sense for a club owner to invest in one new disco system and occasionally hire those few bands fortunate enough to possess their own PAs.

Apart from these legal and technical problems, another problem which bands have to face is record piracy. Home taping in Kenya has reached epidemic proportions and has reduced what little income bands were receiving from record sales to a trickle. The causes of piracy in a relatively poor country like Kenya are not difficult to fathom. An LP or pre-recorded cassette on sale in Nairobi costs over 100 Kenyan shillings (about £5), roughly the cost of the same record or cassette in London. Most Kenyans who listen to Zaïrean pop or *benga* beat are working class people on very low incomes. A home produced cassette costs a fraction of a pre-recorded tape and the sound quality on a cheap recorder is virtually identical. Ron Andrews, Head of CBS Kenya, and Felix Jakomo, Head of AIT Records, reckon that although audience tastes aren't changing and the market for African music in East Africa is actually growing, home taping has reduced Kenyan singles sales from over 100,000 per month in 1976 to less than 10,000 per month

today. Piracy, they conclude, is destroying the industry and only a ferocious blank tape levy and a legal crackdown on the pirates can save indigenous African pop. This problem hardly affects the MoR/Disco market whose fans tend to be more affluent and whose performers enjoy international reputations.

The depressing fact, confirmed by almost everyone I spoke to in Kenya, is that unless something is done to reverse current trends, African pop will quickly suffocate under an avalanche of disco.

The situation in neighbouring Tanzania is rather different, but here too Zaïrean bands face deep problems. Despite the fact that Dar es Salaam is visibly poorer than Nairobi, the live music scene is more vibrant here. After Kinshasa, Dar remains the best place to hear hot live *soukous*. A plethora of local Zaïrean bands, including Fred Kasheba's Orchestre Safari Sound, Orchestre Makassy, Orchestre Maquis and the Dar International Orchestra play virtually every night of the week in open air clubs like the Safari Resort, the Silent Inn, the Stereo Bar or Milimani Park.

In striking contrast to Voice of Kenya, Radio Tanzania pursues a policy of featuring local bands whether or not they are of Tanzanian origin. The Tanzanian government also actively promotes traditional music and does not legally harass Zaïrean musicians. Unfortunately, though, the Tanzanian government does not actively help Zaïrean bands either. Understandably it reserves its very limited arts budget to assist traditional *ngoma* and tends to regard Zaïrean pop music as an alien, though not unacceptable music.

Those Zaïrean musicians living in Dar es Salaam face acute problems, a direct result of Tanzania's chronic lack of foreign exchange. To begin with, it is virtually impossible for them to record their music, so all their income must come from live shows. Tanzania possesses no working recording studio (the Tanzanian Film Company studio in Dar broke down years ago and there is not enough money available to fix it). A trip to CBS in Nairobi is an expensive business if your medium of exchange is non-convertible Tanzanian shillings and those bands who have made the trip, like Orchestre Makassy, remain bitter at the rip-offs they experienced in the past. The only way to record your music is to send out tapes recorded from the radio to Zambia where they are pressed in mono, returned and sold privately at gigs for very high prices. Fred Kasheba's Safari Sound album, recorded in mono and pressed in Zambia, costs a Tanzanian fan 400 Tanzanian shillings (an incredible £20 at official rates of exchange).

Another very serious problem is lack of equipment and electronic spares. It is simply impossible to find basics like plectrums and strings, let alone major items like guitars, drums or amps. If anything the situation is worse than in Kenya, where it is sometimes possible to buy equipment in resorts like Mombasa. In Dar es Salaam brilliant musicians are playing with equipment which garage punk bands in London would put out for the dustman.

Although most of the Zaïreans I spoke to in Dar were full of praise for the tolerance and peacefulness of Tanzania (remembering that Samba Mapengala's Les Kinois were machine gunned down after a gig in Kampala's Topaz Club in 1980), many of the more gifted and ambitious musicians feel frustrated at the lack of international exposure they so rightly deserve. Bands like Fred Kasheba's Safari Sounds and Orchestre Makassy need promoters to help them record and play in Europe and the United States if they are not to remain musically isolated in Tanzania.

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