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# Global (Re)vision: Musical Imagination in African America

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Ingrid Monson

African American music has always been global, for it would never have come into being without that international trade in human beings known as the Atlantic slave trade. As historians of the slave trade have noted, Americans of African descent came from a variety of ethnic groups primarily from Central and West Africa. Many stopped first in the Caribbean before being transported for sale in various American cities of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. In the United States, unlike in the Caribbean, large groups of enslaved Africans from the same cultural group often did not reside together, which resulted in a synthesizing of diverse African cultural practices and values. People taken from what was then known as Senegambia (present day Senegal and Guinea) predominated numerically in the 17th century, but by the end of the North American slave trade approximately 40% of Africans in America came from central Africa (present day Cameroon, Gabon, both Congos, Central African Republic, Angola), 30% from the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin (present day Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin), 15% from Senegambia, and 15% from elsewhere on the continent. As Robert Farris Thompson's book *Flash of the Spirit* noted long ago, many traces of Yoruba, Kongo, and Mande cultural expression, religion, and visual arts can be found in North America.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning, music was noticed as something exceptional about the Africans in America. Despite the best efforts of the slave owners to dehumanize the enslaved by proclaiming their inferiority, the effect of their music on the very people who enslaved them chal-

lenged that presumption. Although chattel slavery placed Africans on property lists—along with cows, pigs, and chickens—the sounds of their voices and their instrumental proficiencies served to remind their captors that they were unmistakably human. In 1756, Rev. Samuel Davies was overwhelmed by the sound of Africans singing psalms in his kitchen.

‘Sometimes, when I have awaked about two or three a-clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony poured into my chamber, and carried my mind away to Heaven. In this seraphic exercise, some of them spent almost the whole night.’ Davies came to believe that Africans—‘above all the human species that I ever knew, have an ear for Music, and a kind of ecstatic delight in Psalmody.’<sup>2</sup>

This exceptional place for music in African American culture—as one of the few activities in which African Americans are often considered superior to non-African Americans (by non-African Americans themselves)—is one of many reasons for the tremendous symbolic potency of music in African American culture. Nevertheless, there has also been a downside to the praise, since the musical gifts of African Americans were often considered to be instinctual, the product of talent and intuition, rather than the result of imagination, intellect, practice, and discipline. The music could be loved and savored, but still trivialized as something *less than*.<sup>3</sup>

The context of slavery makes plain three themes I would like to emphasize with respect to musical imagination in African American culture. First, musical imagination in African America has always been linked with freedom—the longing for and striving for personal, political, and spiritual freedom. Second, freedom and musical imagination have historically been connected to spirituality, like the knee-bone is connected to the thigh-bone. As the enslaved converted to Christianity in the mid- to late eighteenth century, they mobilized biblical passages and Christian principles to point out the unchristian behavior of the slaveholders. Lyrics to that great genre of songs known as spirituals, which were often on the surface about the relationship between a singer and God, also carried covert messages of freedom that the community of the enslaved understood. Hence the spiritual “There is a Balm in Gilead” proclaims the healing powers of Jesus and apparently nothing more.

*Refrain*

*There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole  
There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul*

Verse 1

Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
And think my work's in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit,  
Revives my soul again

*Refrain*

Verse 2

If you can't pray like Peter,  
If you can't pray like Paul,  
Go home and tell your neighbor,  
"He died to save us all"

Fisk Jubilee Singers (1909)

The healing balm of Gilead is mentioned in the Old Testament, but as something missing. "Is *there* no balm in Gilead; is *there* no physician there?; why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jeremiah 8:22). Later God threatens to destroy Gilead if its people fail to respect the covenant, and also condemns slavery: "Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work" (Jeremiah 22:13). This is just one example of the way the topics of salvation and freedom are linked in the African American song. The spiritual dimension of African American music, which is to some extent present in all of its genres, has provided solace, community, and personal identity. African American culture, as an abundance of literature in African American studies has repeatedly stressed, has profoundly emphasized African Americans' obligations to community and the need to take care of one another and foster a communal sense of self-love in a society that despises Blackness. The power of congregational singing and music-making in general to create a sense of wholeness, provide comfort, express powerful emotions,

and bolster courage are among the qualities that are invoked when music's spiritual elements are mentioned in African America, whether or not the genre is sacred or secular.<sup>4</sup>

The third theme to recognize is that African American music, both vocal and instrumental, has often been heard as a political critique of mainstream American society, especially its racism. This has been a particularly prominent theme in 20th-century African American music and continues to this day. Jazz, Blues, R&B, Gospel music, and Hip Hop all became symbols of protest, resistance, and Black Pride, when their artists and audiences interacted with the political and social struggles against racism throughout the century. The American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s looked towards the anti-colonial struggles in India and Africa for inspiration, but many African independence and post-colonial movements were also inspired by the audacity of Civil Rights activists like Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. Jazz musicians of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the upsurge in political activism by performing benefit concerts for Civil Rights and Black Power organizations, challenging Jim Crow practices in the music industry, forming cooperative organizations to protect the economic and artistic interests of musicians, and developing a radical critique of American society. Imagination in African American music consequently involved both a musical and social vision.

African American musicians found themselves subject to the elevated moral expectations of Civil Rights activists, who demanded that artists set a high standard of social commitment, and shamed them if they fell short. Nat Cole and Louis Armstrong, for example, were publicly shamed in the African American press during the 1950s for continuing to accept engagements in theaters that segregated their audiences, even though ten years earlier few questioned the economic necessity of performing in such venues. The escalating activism of the Civil Rights movement, especially after the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, led activist musicians to raise the bar for what was expected of the community-minded musician. As symbols of African American excellence and Black Pride, the black community expected a great deal from its musicians, and the musicians themselves were inspired to deliver not only activism, but a remarkable musical florescence that in turn inspired the political movement. The imaginations of African American musicians in this time period were consequently both musi-

cal and social: a creative, forward-looking musical vision that simultaneously called for a deep revision of American society.<sup>5</sup>

### **I. Globalization**

As we have seen, African American music has been global from the get-go because of the Atlantic slave trade. The cross-fertilization and synthesis of multiple traditions of African music-making, as well as their imaginative interaction with European musical traditions, began before the Industrial Revolution, but the synthesizing brilliance and distinctiveness of African American musical expression began to be noticed internationally only in the late 19th century, at a point when the technical innovations of the Industrial Revolution—the railroad, steamship, electric telegraph—created the possibility of easier long distance communication and transportation. As modernity expanded, the possibility of international touring and recognition grew with it. Although it is commonplace to think of the advent of recording technology as the pivotal moment enabling the transnational spread of African American music, it is important to realize that the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who had toured in Europe in the early 1870s raising money for Fisk University, established the spiritual as one of the first African American musical genres to be internationally recognized. This occurred several decades before the development of the recording industry. The Fisk Jubilee Singers sang spirituals in glorious close harmony. As proud freedmen, they refused to call themselves minstrels, instead making reference to the biblical year of the Jubilee, when “ye shall return every man unto his possession” (Leviticus 25:13).

English audiences, including Queen Victoria, heard in the sound of the spirituals the most original and distinctive American music they had ever encountered. So began a pattern that would recur throughout the next century—international audiences taking African American musical genres as the quintessential sound of American music; this despite the efforts of classical American composers to gain European recognition. Later, ragtime would be viewed from abroad as distinctively American, then jazz, rock and roll, soul, funk, and now Hip Hop.

Current dilemmas of globalization (and postmodernism), I maintain, are rooted in the history of modernity and do not make much sense without recognizing their interconnections with the past. The organizers of the Macalester Roundtable wisely stressed in their vision for this

discussion that globalization is both integrative and divisive. This has been especially true of African American music since the dawn of the recording and broadcasting age. On the one hand, the expansion of the audience for African American music made possible by its technological diffusion beyond ethnic and regional boundaries lowered the barriers between an African America shackled by Jim Crow segregation and “mainstream” American society. On the other hand, it created deep divisions, as the racially stratified entertainment system (fortified by copyright laws ill-suited to the creative processes of improvisational musical genres) produced recurring economic unfairness. African American artists who led the aesthetic transformations in musical genres earned proportionately far less than their white American counterparts, who had been influenced and inspired by them. The minority status of African Americans and the segregated economic playing field of the early and mid-twentieth century—which included segregated music unions and performance venues; drastically unequal access to radio, television, and film opportunities; and white ownership and control of the recording industry—ensured this state of affairs. The tense and divisive debates that regularly occur about race and music in the United States—over ownership, control, origins, and authenticity—have remained remarkably durable regardless of the 20th-century African American genre in question.

In my recently published book, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, I present a framework for thinking through some of these divisive issues in the U.S. context that I think is highly relevant to the ethical and analytical issues raised about music and globalization in the 21st century. In the remainder of the essay I would like to first present a summary of this framework, which I used to address one of the most divisive issues in jazz history—the debate over whether there is a black sound or white sound in jazz. Secondly, I would like to talk about my recent work on Mali and the impact of African American music there.

## II. Sound Stereotypes in Jazz

There is likely no topic more certain to elicit firestorms of invective and counterpoint in jazz history than the idea that jazz has both a white sound and a black sound. Jazz, after all, as one line of argument goes, is universal—a color-blind art music open to all who master its repertory, improvisational mode of musical creation, and demand for

individuality and originality. But, as others quickly point out, it is a music whose origins are in African America and whose most central aesthetic components are rooted in the blues and that elusive rhythmic flow called swing. For many observers, erasing that aesthetic history in the name of universalism allows non-African American people to appropriate black cultural forms with impunity.

The basic terms of this debate have been part of the discursive air in jazz since at least the swing era, when Benny Goodman became the “King of Swing” and Ellington and Basie were the “Duke” and the “Count,” respectively, despite their creative priority. Nevertheless, the problem is much older, dating to when enslaved Africans first arrived in the seventeenth century and fledgling white Americans first began to notice the musical gifts of the new arrivals. During the Great Awakening and the era of the camp meeting, missionary evangelizers commented mostly on their singing, declaring that the slaves had innate melody in their souls. To these early observers, the music unquestionably sounded distinctive. Nevertheless, when black congregations transformed the hymns of Isaac Watts and John Wesley in performance and later invented their own Christian texts and melodies (which became known as spirituals), there were those, such as George Pullen Jackson, who wished to claim that the repertory was of European origin.<sup>6</sup>

In the early to mid-twentieth century, African American jazz musicians self-consciously took up the mantle of the modern artist as a means of legitimating their music and as part of a broader-based transformation of African America from rural to urban. This effort brought with it the inexorable demand for full citizenship and inclusion in modernity’s promise of equality and justice for all. Bebop musicians and civil rights activists mobilized the language of merit, universal justice, and transcendence to demand entrée and recognition in mainstream American society, one in the language of art, the other in the language of politics.

Yet, as in all things pertaining to race in the United States, the idea of the modern artist was a double-edged sword. If it enabled African American musicians to partially break out of a race-based, second-class citizenship by appealing to merit and genius, it also provided a rhetoric through which white musicians could insist that the music be understood as colorblind, and dismiss those who emphasized its African American heritage as reverse racists. This basic discursive framework has shaped the way in which debates over race and jazz have been



argued since the mid-twentieth century. The music tends to be cast as either universal or ethnically particular, as color-blind or fundamentally black, with many jumping from one side to the other depending on the contextual situation. In a music as cosmopolitan as jazz, which draws on multiple aesthetic streams, how can history both account for the many musical elements that circulated and inspired across the racial boundaries and give just credit for the profound expansion and innovation of the jazz aesthetics in these years led by African American icons like Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, and Ornette Coleman?

I suggest that the musical landscape of modern jazz in the mid-twentieth century can be viewed as a palette consisting of five broad aesthetic streams: (1) the aesthetics of African American vernacular musics as expressed in jazz, blues, gospel, and R&B; (2) the aesthetics of American popular song as descended from Tin Pan Alley and musical theater; (3) the aesthetics of modern classical music; (4) the aesthetics of Africa and its diaspora; and (5) the aesthetics of other non-Western musics, most notably in this time period, India.

The crux of the argument is that individual jazz musicians drew from one or more of these aesthetic perspectives and often combined them in novel ways to produce an alternative aesthetics of modernism, at once more populist than its European art music counterpart, yet committed to articulating its elite position relative to the more commercial genres of R&B and rock and roll. The ultimate victory of hard bop styles in defining the aesthetic center of this canonic period in jazz, I maintain, represents a blackening of modernist aesthetics, which would ultimately serve as a standard against which any player of jazz would be evaluated.

The main musical styles in jazz of the 1950s—cool, hard bop, third stream, soul jazz—have long been color coded. Cool, West Coast, and third stream have typically been associated with white players; hard bop and soul jazz have been linked to black musicians. So-called West Coast and cool jazz, with their preference for thinner timbres, relaxed time feels, and lyrical melodies, have generally been taken as a “whiter” sound, while hard bop and soul jazz, with their prioritization of heavier timbres, blues inflection, and hard, driving rhythmic feels, have generally been cast as “blacker.” Historians have long noted the ill fit of these categories, with West Coast ignoring the hard-driving California sounds of Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, and Hampton Hawes (and the East Coast origins of Stan Getz), and “cool school” fail-

ing to account for the aesthetic range of musicians such as Miles Davis and Milt Jackson.

Since African American musicians have expressed themselves in styles ranging from the lusciously smooth tone of Johnny Hodges playing on *Day Dream* to the ear-splitting intensity of John Coltrane on *Ascension*, from the passionate blues of Charlie Parker on "Parker's Mood" to Duke Ellington's hauntingly relaxed feel on *Reminiscing in Tempo*, it is difficult to accept an aesthetic framework that requires evaluating the performances with a greater preponderance of blues elements as always blacker. Indeed, one of the limitations of rigid definitions of blackness in music is that they underplay the aesthetic range of the types of music that African Americans have played, as well as the importance to the history of black creativity of the synthesizing encounter between black and white musical repertoires. This forging of an Afro-modernist sensibility through the creative fusion of black aesthetics and modernism is one of the most influential achievements of jazz in the twentieth century.

In jazz of the 1950s and 1960s, African American musicians often deployed the aesthetic resources of Western modernism, as well as black vernacular music, to assert themselves as artists. This is not simply a matter of deferring to "white values," as the later rhetoric of Black Power might phrase it, but also of putting modernism to work in the aesthetic struggle to keep innovating, and the political struggle to gain higher status and power for black music and culture. This is what Paul Gilroy is talking about when he speaks of black Atlantic music as a "counterculture of modernity" and what Amiri Baraka spoke about when he suggested in 1961 that African American musicians had a necessary relationship to aesthetic modernism by virtue of living in the West: "We are, all of us, moderns, whether we like it or not."<sup>7</sup>

By the same token, white musicians of the 1950s and 1960s had a wide variety of relationships to African American musical aesthetics and modernism. Pianist Lennie Tristano's abstract improvisational approach on "Wow," which de-emphasizes the rhythm section and places a premium on the precision of the horns, is something quite different from Stan Getz's sound on "Dark Eyes." Despite Getz's whiteness, his bluesy performance is much closer to a sound ideal shared by many African American performers of the era and, in comparison to Tristano, shows greater sensitivity to the call-and-response dimensions of African American aesthetics. White musicians of the Fifties, it seems, also had a variety of relationships to the musical legacy of black music

and Western modernism but filtered, instead, through the social experience of being white.

Perhaps the greatest difference between black and white musicians in the 1950s ultimately lies in the fact that the latter had access to structural white privilege, no matter what their individual relationship to the blues and African American aesthetics more broadly, while black musicians experienced structural racial discrimination, no matter what their individual relationship to Western modernism and mainstream culture. American social structure and the economic structure of the music industry ensured this, with its *de jure* and *de facto* segregation of black and white.

This point, which has caused much confusion, emphasizes a disjunction between an individual's self-conscious identity and that person's treatment as a citizen within the larger sociology of race relations in the United States. If an African American's degree of black consciousness was evaluated and often harshly judged by other African Americans in the 1960s, the fact remained that even the person with "faulty consciousness" (the so-called Uncle Tom) experienced racism. Conversely, the "advanced consciousness" of the racially progressive white person did not alter the fact that public accommodations laws in the South and segregated practices in the North conferred certain benefits upon white musicians, whether they actively desired them or not. The ability of African Americans to play classical music or sing in the crooning style of Bing Crosby or the ability of white musicians to play the blues and swing in a convincingly black manner did not affect the more impersonal physical characteristics that were used to draw the legal racial line. Aesthetics, however, are more fluid, malleable, and pluralistic than social structures despite their roots in particular cultural communities and geographic locations. Regardless of one's cultural and social home base, in other words, it is possible to make choices to engage and participate in a variety of aesthetic traditions. I call this process of active musical self-fashioning *aesthetic agency*. Such musical cosmopolitanism has long been a hallmark of jazz musicians, who have often demonstrated their breadth of listening and musical appreciation. The music of this golden age in jazz history is replete with examples.

The crucial issue at the center of this historical analysis is the recognition that the aesthetic streams contributing to jazz have proved to be far more mobile and hybrid than the sociological and economic status of the various demographic groups that have drawn upon them

in the processes of aesthetic agency that produced this golden era. Put another way, the musical language of jazz has been far more pluralistic, democratic, and cosmopolitan than the racially stratified society that produced it. Although musicians and their audiences may have transcendent experiences in the act of making music, when they leave the bandstand or club, they walk back out into a racially and socially stratified world that enthusiastically places them back into the various social categories they longed to escape.

Throughout the twentieth century, African and non-African Americans alike have wanted to break free from the rigidities of sociological categories through musical expression. Although musics are typically thought to have a home ethnic or social base (black music, Latin music, classical music, country music), in today's globalized musical market few people listen exclusively to the types of music that their own ethnic and social groups have produced. Few musicians want to be told that they can only play those musics or instruments that are expected of people from their race, class, gender, or country.

Transposed to the global arena, many of the ethical issues that have been most divisive in U.S. debates over race and music are very relevant to the globalized 21st century. The genres have changed, the technological means of distribution have changed, the structure of the recording industry has become more multinational, and the computer has made self-recording much more feasible, but questions of power, money, and ethics remain. What does it mean when a music expands beyond its ethnic and social place of origin and is adopted by those with greater social power? What happens to the ethical and social power of musical traditions when they become commodities in the international marketplace? Is cultural diversity or authenticity simply a product that can be purchased in the marketplace? What ethical responsibilities do people from economically privileged nations, such as the United States, have towards the musicians in countries where everyday survival is much more precarious? Has the Internet exacerbated or ameliorated the gap between rich and poor with respect to music?

### **III. Globalization and Music in Mali**

In the twentieth century, African American musical genres developed large international audiences. Spirituals, ragtime, jazz, swing, blues, soul, Motown, funk, and hip hop were embraced and celebrated from London to South Africa to Paris, Japan, and beyond. American popular

music in general, broadcast by the Voice of America and distributed by the most powerful multinational corporations on earth, has been heard around the world, for better or worse. For some analysts, the globalization of economic power has created a new form of cultural and economic imperialism that threatens to wipe out local musical traditions, usurp the sovereignty of governments, and impose Western models of development. For others there are utopian possibilities in the new globalized era that will produce new cross-fertilizations, systems of distribution, and international progressive movements that have the potential to make a difference in the world.

Theoretical writing about music and globalization, including my own, has tended to be rather abstract. I have argued for a path somewhere between a totalizing and sinister view of globalization as a system that will overpower human beings, and the overly utopian notion that globalization and the Internet, in particular, will produce the Age of Aquarius that failed to emerge from the 1960s. Like Martin Stokes, I think that the most interesting insights into the effects of globalization on music will come from grounded studies in particular places that contextualize musical change in light of particular histories, social institutions, and individual agencies. Although global economic forces are powerful and influential, they are not monolithic. There have been a wide variety of social and musical responses to the changing nature of musical markets in the early 21st century, most of which could not have been predicted from a top-down theoretical model.

About five years ago, I began doing ethnographic work on the music of Neba Solo (Souleymane Traoré), a Senufo balafonist, who is widely known as the “genius of the balafon” (wooden xylophone) in Mali, but has a relatively small international profile. He is something like the Charlie Parker and Charles Mingus of the Senufo balafon rolled into one. Like Parker he is virtuosic, original, and the musician that all the younger musicians want to emulate; like Charles Mingus he is a composer who invents all the instrumental parts and orally transmits them to his band. He is also a song writer, whose lyrics comment on contemporary social and public health issues, such as vaccination, AIDS, female excision, protecting the environment, and political corruption. He views part of his mission as sensitizing people to important ethical and political issues of the day, as well as alerting them about what they can do to keep themselves healthy.<sup>8</sup>

When he was eighteen-years old, Neba Solo heard Alpha Blondy’s reggae recording of *Jersualem* as he walked through the streets

of Bamako. He was particularly enchanted by the bass line and had something of an epiphany. What if he built a balafon with an extended bass range and added driving bass lines to Senufo balafon playing? What if he were to change the tuning of the balafon slightly so that it could play with instruments in other ensembles, Malian and international? His father, Zano Traoré, and other Senufo elders were at first skeptical of the changes he wanted to make to the instrument. In order to proceed with his ideas, by Senufo tradition, Solo had to secure his father's permission. They came to an agreement: his father allowed him a period of time in which to develop his ideas and make a recording. If the results pleased his father, then he would give his blessing to his son's musical direction. Solo added three bass notes to the traditional seventeen keys and also experimented with various tunings. In the end, his new version of a traditional Senufo tune—with a prominent bass line, expanded texture, and new tuning—earned the approval of both his father and local audiences.

The nature of musical imagination and innovation is aptly illustrated by this example. Although a specific reggae song inspired his desire to experiment with bass lines for the balafon, none of his music directly imitates particular reggae bass lines or rhythms. Rather, reggae provided a conceptual insight that he adapted to the musical style and Senufo rhythms that he already knew. The cross-fertilization of musical styles, in other words, need not involve direct stylistic imitation, but can instead derive from a conceptual breakthrough that is applied in the context of the local genre.

In 2005, I spent four-and-a-half months in Sikasso with Neba Solo and had the opportunity to hear dozens of live performances of the band in venues ranging from tiny villages to major concert halls in Bamako, the capital. At times Neba Solo sang extended vocal improvisations into which he inserted rap-like passages of spoken words. The audiences loved these references to global musical style, but they remained embedded within his own compositions. At another event in Sikasso, two local rappers appeared on the same stage as Solo during an event to celebrate International Women's Day. Solo had been invited because of his song "*Mussow*," which celebrates the capabilities of Malian women. When the rappers took the stage, they rapped in Bamanankan (Mali's most widely used language) to a recording of Neba Solo's music. They drew upon the idea of rhythmic presentation of speech, but did not use hip-hop beats or musical styles as their backdrop, although there are plenty of Malian rap groups that do.

The impact of hip-hop music and style in Mali has been in counterpoint with my experiences since I first visited in 2002. A young man I had befriended asked me to send him some hip-hop CDs, which I have done several times. He asked for titles that many of my U.S. students consider very mainstream—Jay Z, P. Diddy, Alicia Keys. In 2005 in the remote agricultural village of Simona (which requires a 20-km drive from the already remote main road across terrain more like a tractor path than anything resembling a road), I saw a young man in a 50 Cent T-shirt. When I asked the band members about it, they insisted that it was unlikely the young man actually knew 50 Cent's music. In their view, people bought T-shirts such as these in the market as a fashion statement. Nevertheless, one of Neba Solo's dancers, Bocary Dembele, is a fan of Tupac Shakur. I had noticed him wearing a Tupac T-shirt and brought him several CDs on my next visit, which he greeted with delight.

African American and other African diasporic genres have long been part of the listening landscape of Mali. In the 1960s and 1970s, Motown, soul, and funk were quite popular in cosmopolitan Bamako, as were Latin musical genres from the Caribbean and reggae. It is not surprising that in more recent years, American hip hop has been added to the playlists of many Malians, especially those living in Bamako. Like Americans who listen to African music, a cosmopolitan caché surrounds those who are “down” with the latest musical styles from other countries.

Hip hop, of course, is the African American genre of music whose internationalism in the early 21st century is akin to that enjoyed by jazz in the mid-20th century. Hip hop has become a global movement of the young and poor, mediated by recordings, performances, websites, and summits, that many of my students view as potentially socially transformative. In the summer of 2007, I took a group of eight undergraduates to Mali to study with Neba Solo and become acquainted with the wide range of Malian music. While in Bamako many of my students sought out hip-hop scenes and befriended some college students who shared a deep commitment to hip hop. But they were somewhat surprised by the fact that hip hop, although popular in particular circles, has not taken over Malian musical culture by storm. As the course proceeded, some of the students began to realize that they had presumed that young people would prefer hip hop to traditional music, when, in fact, hip hop co-existed in the lives of Malian youth with the vibrant indigenous musical scene that is anything but fading away. Most of the

hundreds of recordings available on the street and in markets throughout the country (even in the remotest villages) are not those of the international superstars well known in the West: Salif Keita, Toumani Diabaté, Oumou Sangare, and Ali Farka Touré (although these are also available). Rather, there is a lively commerce (primarily in cassettes) in the music of dozens of Malian singers and instrumentalists performing in regionally diverse styles.

In the globalized African diasporic scene, African American musicians who have been recorded by multinational corporations arguably have greater power in the global music market than those who live and work in countries that have far less economic power and a lot more poverty. This puts African American music at a relative advantage in the international music market. Nevertheless, I worry less about African American musical genres displacing and homogenizing local music cultures than I do about the difficulties that Malian artists face in gaining access to the international musical market as a result of the vast economic disparity between the West and Africa.

Neba Solo provides a case in point. In 2001, he recorded an album on the Mali K7 label titled *Can 2002*, that was a top seller and award winner. The company signed him to a long-term contract and promised to record several more albums over the next few years. Solo produced a demo for the company, but they refused to issue the recording unless he agreed to radically change the configuration of this ensemble—which involved adding electric bass and guitar, eliminating one of the two balafons that form the core of his ensemble, and firing half of his band. He refused and asked to be released from his ten-year contract. Mali K7 refused, which left Neba Solo unable to record for anyone else and in the position of having to take legal action. It took two years to successfully terminate the contract. He has not released a recording since 2001 and has yet to find a new producer. Although Solo is considered one of Mali's top musicians and recognized by its Ministry of Culture, he has found it very difficult to break into the world market. The strongest pressure for musical homogenization, it seems to me, comes from the recording industry and individual producers, who seem to recommend instrumentation changes and production values that they think will appeal to people like us. Ironically, many of those suggestions seek to make various world musics more like American popular musical styles, themselves greatly shaped by the instrumentations and rhythmic styles of African American music.



It is difficult to tour internationally if you do not have a new recording to promote as part of the package. Indeed, many concert producers in the West team up with an artist's record company in the planning, funding, and implementation of an international tour. Even those artists who do have new recordings ready to promote often face difficulties in gaining visas for the full roster of their bands. Neba Solo has performed in the U.S. three times: at the Smithsonian Folk Festival in 2003, at Harvard University in 2005, and for Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute in 2007. The U.S. Embassy in Bamako denied visas to two regular members of the band before each trip, which affected the repertory that Solo could perform in his concerts. In all of these performances, American audiences have responded exuberantly to his dazzling compositions and extraordinary dancers.

It is a difficult time to be in the market for a recording contract. Although Neba Solo has placed some of his music on the fair trade website Calabash.com and bought a computer with the proceeds from some of his U.S. performances, he lives—like most Malians—without full-time electricity, running water, or home Internet service. He has e-mail access through a cyber café only, which is too expensive for him to consider a sustained D.I.Y. Internet entrepreneurship. Although the Internet has already transformed the music business in the West, and seems key to the future of global music marketing, in Mali an artist still needs to make cassettes and CDs to reach the national audience. There is a tension, in other words, between the marketing and information technology revolution in the West and the practical needs of African musicians in their national markets. Although slowly but surely digital technology is making its way to Mali (cell phones and cyber cafés most prominently), in a country in which 80% of the population lives without electricity, the Internet revolution cannot have the same impact it has had here.

Although there are strong ties between Mali and its former French colonizers, many Malians feel a much stronger cultural affinity to African American and American music than they do to French music. There is a Centre Culturel Français in Bamako that offers programs of both Malian artists and those from the Francophone world in an effort to promote cultural exchange, camaraderie, and collaboration. Ousmane Haidara, an entrepreneur long active in the Malian and global music scenes (he is married to Oumou Sangare), thinks that an American cultural center would be much more successful, because Malian audiences are far more interested in American than French music. The suc-

cess of many collaborations between American and Malian musicians in recent years (for example, Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré, Hank Jones and Cheick-Tidiane Seck, Roswell Rudd and Toumani Diabaté, and Dee Dee Bridgewater with Cheick-Tidiane Seck and Oumou Sangaré), has generated Malian interest in further collaborative projects. The capital supporting these recording projects has generally come from Western-based record labels.

#### IV. Musical Imagination and Globalization in the 21st Century

Musical imagination in African America, with its predominant themes of freedom, spirituality, and political/ethical engagement, has had a profound impact on American culture as a whole and around the globe. It has simultaneously been possessed of a deeply humane vision of joy and affirmation, and a deep critique of social injustice. For many, it has come to symbolize freedom, universality, love, and social action. In thinking about both the history of African American music and Malian music in the context of globalization, a careful analysis of power relationships and social categories is crucial to keeping one's head on straight. Aesthetics and products flow very freely across cultural boundaries and there is something about listening to and learning about musics from cultures distant from one's own that can be personally transforming in a way that sometimes leads to social action and commitment. Nevertheless, Americans—even those of relatively limited means by American standards—generally are much more able to purchase culturally diverse experiences than people in countries like Mali. The ability to travel, for example, is deeply constrained not only by the economic disparities between Mali and the West, but also by restrictive U.S. visa policies.

In the United States, African Americans have always been at the bottom of the national social hierarchy. When viewed from the perspective of Mali, however, *any* American seems vastly more privileged than most Malians. We have access to goods, services, and an infrastructure that we completely take for granted. American travelers to Mali are often stunned by the poverty that exists there, as well as the deeply generous hospitality that many Malians show them despite it. Many people are eager to befriend Westerners, partly because they are as curious about us as we are about them, but also because they understand that we have “means” that we may be willing to share in the course of our friendships.

Friendships and culturally diverse experiences, in other words, always occur against a socially and economically stratified backdrop. I would love to think that it is simply because of my especially humane qualities that in 2002 a performer of the stature of Neba Solo agreed to teach a balafon to a rank beginner such as myself. The truth is that it was in his economic interest to give me a chance, because the relatively small amount of money (by American standards) that I paid him for lessons represented a significant boost in income for the month I spent studying. In the subsequent years, I have earned genuine goodwill by maintaining a record of following through with any promise I have made. The prestige of my current academic position and my experience in grant writing has enabled me to mobilize resources (a grant for research travel, a summer school course, and a performance and residency at Harvard) that have helped accomplish what I said I would.

For this reason race has seemed to matter far less than class in my research on Malian music. This has surprised me because in African American music it has been the opposite. In Mali, I was allowed in without being properly “inspected.” My motivations were less questioned. As such, my awareness of the economic power of my country and the way it makes me more powerful abroad than I am at home has grown exponentially.

In African America, a far greater skepticism about people like me has reigned, for very good reason. In the U.S. it is much more obvious to African Americans when non-African Americans are interested in black music and culture for self-serving reasons—for example, to show how “cool” they are, to make money from their inside knowledge, or to rebel against the restraints of their ordinary cultural environment for an evening, while retaining their sense of social superiority. This is only to say that I think the key to an ethical participation in culturally diverse contexts is to remain honest about your particular constellation of social positions in the world and what it is you hope to achieve through cross-cultural contact. In today’s far more diverse American society, the cultural, religious, class, and social backgrounds that students of this generation bring to the college campus are far more variegated than the world I grew up in. Today’s students are vastly more aware than my generation that diversity is multivariate and that it is impossible to think about fairness and justice only within the borders of the United States.

In my own generation, the proximity of the Civil Rights, the Anti-Vietnam War, and the Black Power movements are what inspired many

of us to take a cold hard look at ourselves. African American musics and those they influenced provided the soundtrack of the day. Now the major social issues are international—global warming, the war in Iraq, religious fundamentalism, and global poverty—and will require another difficult self-evaluation. I suspect that the soundtrack will be more global, but still deeply inflected by Africa and its highly imaginative diaspora. ●

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## Notes

1. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 1983.
2. Sobel 1987.
3. For further reading on the Atlantic slave trade and African cultural connections, see Sobel 1987; Stuckey 1987; Thornton 1998; and Thompson 1983.
4. For further reading on 18th and 19th century African American music, see Johnson 1926; Southern 1997; Epstein 1977; and Radano 2003.
5. For further reading on African American music and politics, see Baraka (LeRoi Jones) 1963 and 1967; George 1988; Guralnick 1986; Ward 1998; and Werner 2004.
6. Epstein 1977.
7. Baraka, p. 70.
8. The information about Neba Solo presented here is the product of three research and teaching trips to Mali (three weeks in 2002, four-and-a-half months in 2005, and six weeks in 2007). Neba Solo's recordings include Solo 2001 and Solo 2002.

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