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## Whose record is it anyway? Musical ‘crate digging’ across Africa



*Abigail Gardner*

Legendary UK Radio DJ, the late John Peel used to play Zimbabwe’s The Bhundu Boys on his shows. A lot. Throughout the mid-80s, their jit-jive would appear alongside Mancunians The Fall’s post-punk and Einstürzende Neubauten’s German industrial noise.

If Peel liked a band, he really championed them. And he really loved The Bhundu Boys. Peel was in tears the first time he saw them play live. The Bhundu Boys got their name from young guerrillas who supported the liberation army that fought for Zimbabwean independence. Between 1981 and 1984 they had four number ones on the local hit parade.

Touring the UK in 1986, they became stars of a new “World Music” scene. The term had been dreamt up by DJs like Charlie Gillett and the UK’s premier “indie” music magazine NME proclaimed October 1987 “World Music Month”, issuing a free cassette tape “The World at One”.

The Bhundus didn’t feature on this tape but they became stalwarts of a scene in the UK that included African stars like Nigerian Sunny Adé, Zimbabwean Thomas Mapfumo and Yussou N’Dour from Senegal. This “scene” lies on a continuum of Western consumption of African music from 1960s’ exotica to the contemporary trend for African reissue vinyl and its attendant compilation culture.

This continuum has been lying on the margins of Western music consumption since the early 1960s, when Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass Sounds brought (what was marketed as) the music of Mexico to urban American and the UK.

Arguably the first of many Western producers/musicians to export sounds and rework them for a domestic market, exotica was an early example of the culture of listening to music from "somewhere else".

As producers, musicians and labels have had more access to old vinyl and to new digital technology, the opportunities of reissues and compilations have proliferated. And so the sounds of Ethiopian jazz, of Nigeria in the 1970s and of Mali's Griot culture have become staples in a reinvigorated "World Music" culture reliant on reissue and compilation.



*Nigeria's King Sunny Ade & His African Beats performing 'Me Le Se'.*

Addiction, compulsion, obscurity and desire pepper this continuum, which has, at its centre, discomfiting tensions around neo-colonialism and control. A fascinating podcast by the radio programme Afropop Worldwide has suggested that the latest urge to buy up African vinyl and to compile generically and geographically determined compilations is yet one more (white) western scramble for Africa. Are reissue labels like Strut, Analog Africa and Luaka Bop guilty of such a scramble? Or does this story have a number of different plot lines, not all of them hitched to neo-colonial narratives?

## Space-disco musician

The trend in reissues manifested for me in the face of Nigerian space-disco musician, William Onyeabor, which appeared on my Twitter timeline a couple of years ago. Everyone I followed was raving about him. I clicked, listened and downloaded. Then I saw a documentary about him and wrote an academic piece that riffed off the idea of “raiders”. I linked the craze for Onyeabor to the phenomenon around the film “Searching for Sugarman”, which focused on the “missing” 70s folk rocker, Sixto Rodriguez.



*William Onyeabor's 'Atomic Bomb'.*

I ought to make a confession at this point. I was one of those that sought out African music in the 80s and 90s. I saw the continent's greats, Fela Kuti, N'Dour and Salif Keita. But I didn't really obsess, didn't really care about whether or not they were “authentic”. I just hated the hugely popular dance-pop duo Wham!...

But I knew guys (and it always seems to be guys) who would listen to nothing else, who moved to Africa, who demanded the “real”. They would spend their days in London's Sterns African record store, crate digging for treasure, and searching for rare vinyl to find something new. That was then, and now the crate diggers are searching for new sounds that are old – reissues, undiscovered stars from the 70s, of whom Onyeabor was one, a “collector's piece”.

Culture philosopher Walter Benjamin argued that collecting is about control. It is about creating (or even imposing) some kind of order on the world. And a collection is never finished. There's always one more record. Crate digging, is part and parcel of a compulsion to collect shaped by addiction and compulsion, believes media studies academic Roy Shuker. And it feeds into a DJ's sub-cultural capital, whereby unknown African tracks bestow respect within a dance culture that has always fetishised obscurity and the "white label" (rare records with white labels to conceal which records DJ were playing).

### **Archaeologist of African vinyl**

Frank Gossner, the "archaeologist of African vinyl" is one of the more well-known exponents of (West) African vinyl collectors, a German DJ literally digging through recent African cultural history. Like a determined archivist bent on rescuing vinyl before it decomposes in the West African humidity, he sources sounds that play well to western ears, raised on rare groove and funk..



*'Agboju Logun', a Nigerian disco classic by Shina Williams recently reissued by Strut Records.*

Gossner, and those who run Strut and Luaka Bop, have "no African ancestry or cultural connection to the continent" beyond enthusiasm. And they furnish European and American ears with sounds that are both obscure and familiar; unknown names playing tunes that sound like 70s' funk and 80s' Fela.

This search for old/new sounds is based around a nostalgia culture that is endemic to Anglo-American popular music and which music critic and author Simon Reynolds has called "retromania". It is not mirrored by contemporary African music culture, where an investment in musical presents is valued over the preservation of musical pasts and old vinyl is simply chucked away only to be "salvaged" by these western record hunters.

In these salvage operations there have been stories of financial rip offs, musicians not being paid their dues and even rumours about one reissue label, PMG, being affiliated to the extreme right wing. But of course, there is not just one thread to this narrative, it is complex and multi-layered. This is echoed by Christopher Kirkley who runs Sahel Sounds, a label dedicated to showcasing contemporary West African music – but Kirkley presents himself on Twitter as “Gentleman explorer, rogue ethnomusicologist”, harking back to colonial narratives.



*Cover of 'Witchdoctor's Son' by Okay Temiz and Johnny Dyani.  
Matsuli Music*

There are labels out there that are championing new sounds, and selling good percentages of their output to Africans (South Africa's Matsuli Music label for example). There are enterprises that showcase the dynamic West African Bluetooth file sharing and mix tape culture – Brian Shimkovitz's Awesome Tapes from Africa is a good example.

One of these “awesome” tapes is “Obaa Sima” by Ghanaian musician Ata Kak (real name Yaw Atta-Owusu), whom Shimkovitaz “tracked down”. His music is something that “no one in Ghana listens to any more”.



*Ata Kak's 'Obaa Sima'.*

Mediated like Onyeabor and “Sugarman”, an African/Black musician to be tracked down by (White) Europeans and Americans, Ata Kak becomes a curio. But when asked by Factmag if he was going to record any “new” music, his reply was,

It’s important for me to move forward.

John Peel liked the freshness of The Bhundu Boys, they were contemporary. He didn’t live long enough to experience this recent race to the past in music, this tracking down of the undocumented curiosity, this search for music that sounds old but is new, this new colonialism. If he were alive now, he’d be playing Ata Kak’s new songs and moving things forward.

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This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

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