

CD REVIEWS

The King of History: Classic 1970s Beats from Kenya. 2010. D.O. Misioni and Shirati Jazz. Stern's Music STCD3051. One compact disc. Booklet (16 pp.) with photographs and notes by Douglas Paterson, in English.

World Defeats the Grandfathers: Swinging Swahili Rumba 1982-1986. 2010. Issa Juma and Super Wanyika Stars. Stern's Music STCD3050. One compact disc. Booklet (16 pp.) with photographs and notes by Douglas Paterson, in English and Kiswahili.

During the twentieth century Nairobi became a primary center for the recording and production of music in east Africa, drawing in musicians from Kenya's rural hinterlands as well as from Tanzania, Uganda, and Congo. Ever since the first local offices of transnational label HMV were set up in 1912, through the global recording boom of the 1960s to the 1980s and into the present era of local production, this centrally located city has held the distinction as being a place of musical opportunity.

These reissue compilations provide the listener with a taste of two of the electric guitar-band genres that drove Nairobi's thriving recording business during the 1970s and 80s: Luo *benga* in the music of D.O. Misioni and Shirati Jazz, and the Swahili *rumba* of Tanzanian singer Issa Juma and Super Wanyika Stars. Released by Stern's Music from the catalogue of Nairobi label AIT,¹ and compiled by east African music scholar/producer Douglas Paterson, these albums are welcome additions to the growing catalogue of classic African popular music being made available in recent years.

The recordings in these compilations epitomize a debate over the relative merits of different strains of contemporary music that has long concerned musicians, producers, fans, and critics in Kenya. On one side is the ethnically oriented, almost parochial *benga*, which is sung in several Kenyan indigenous languages (with Luo being the most prominent) and often incorporates musical conventions particular to the ethnicity of the band performing it. In contrast to *benga* are Kenya's "big-name" *rumba* groups singing in Kiswahili and Lingala, usually posited as being more cosmopolitan and having a broader appeal (Paterson, 1999: 515). In addition to their use of languages that transcended Kenya's ethnic divides, bands like Super Wanyika featured Tanzanian and Congolese musicians, and their sound more closely approximated the Congolese *rumba* of the time, hugely popular across the region.² These characteristics enabled these groups to overcome the inherent marketing limitations faced by *benga* with its

¹ Andrews International & Teal.

² Other notable bands performing music in this vein at the time include Simba Wanyika and its various offshoots (of which Super Wanyika was one), Maroon Commandos, Les Mangelepa, Super Mazembe, Orchestre Virunga, and Baba Gaston. The personnel of the latter four were largely Congolese in their origins, but performed much of their work in Kiswahili in addition to their native Lingala.

ethnic orientation.

While Swahili *rumba* bands commanded the most attention from multinational labels such as Polygram and CBS and were hired almost exclusively by Nairobi's upscale nightclubs, *benga* musicians had devoted followers among their respective communities. Their prolific recording output and busy performing schedules in Nairobi's lower-income estates and rural towns (especially among Luo groups) are a testament to this vitality.

Perhaps more than any other musician, Daniel Owino Misiani (1940-2006) pioneered the *benga* genre, shepherded it and many of its up-and-coming musicians through developmental stages, and continued to compose fresh material in his distinctive style even as his popularity was eclipsed at various times by musicians who catered to the cosmopolitan preferences of many fans. Hailing from the Tanzanian village of Shirati near the Kenyan border on the shores of Lake Victoria, Misiani began his career in the 1950s as an itinerant guitarist performing at funerals, homestead social gatherings, and bars in the Luo homeland of Kenya's Nyanza Province. Inspired by the success of Nairobi musicians like Daudi Kabaka, Misiani made his first electric guitar recordings in 1965, and soon after had formed his own recording band, Shirati Luo Voice (later to become Orchestra D.O.7 Shirati Jazz in 1975).

The songs featured on this CD, recorded between 1973 and 1979, capture the emergence of Luo *benga* from its earlier, more loosely woven texture to its maturation as a tightly composed, conventionalized form that would hold sway among Luo bands until the turn of the century. The *benga* beat emerged in a manner similar to other regional "dance crazes" of the late 1960s that coalesced in Zaire and Tanzania³: seeking to create a distinctive sound that moved beyond the standard rhythmic scheme of the Latin-American-inspired *rumba*, young musicians crafted new "beats" that used faster tempos, short repetitive cycles, more open-ended stanza structures, and often incorporated elements of indigenous music that had not flourished as much in the conventional *rumba*. Misiani was one among several other musicians⁴ who, with the help of impresario Oluoch Kanindo, developed the distinctly Luo *benga* beat through a proliferation of recordings for Mike Andrew's AIT label during the 1970s. The songs recorded in 1973-74 ("L.K. the Pretty," "Simaya Chunye Oketo," and "Harusi ya M.K.") represent *benga* in its early phase. The ensemble features two guitars: one as a lead, or "solo" voice in the high register, and a rhythm guitar that provides a constant cyclical accompaniment, also in the high register. A hallmark of the *benga* style is a hyperactive bass guitar part that mixes melodic fragments with a constant thumping of the pulse sounded on the root and fifth tones, which can be heard in all of these

³ Examples include the *soukous* of Orch. Bantous de la Capitale and *kiri-kiri* of Dr. Nico and African Fiesta (Stewart, 2000: 136) in Congo and Zaire, and the various *mitindo* (styles) of Tanzanian bands, such as Jamhuri Jazz's *apollo* and the *msondo* of NUTA Jazz.

⁴ Including George Ramogi, Ochieng Nelly, Collela Mazee, Ajwang Ogara, George Ojijo, and Juma Odundo.

songs. The percussion in early *benga* was based around a constant articulation of the pulse using a rim-shot, filled out with shakers, congas, and a limited use of the high-hat. In the “climax” section⁵ of these early songs, a four-beat cymbal pattern is played that is archetypal of Luo music in general, being employed as a central rhythmic motif in other genres such as *nyatiti*, *orutu*, and *dodo*. From 1976, this percussion section was replaced by a single drummer using the bass drum to sound a constant pulse, contrasted with the accents of a high-hat. The vocal melodies of most Luo *benga* songs are sung in a two-part texture that emphasizes thirds, and are based in various chord progressions of the tonic, subdominant, and dominant. Earlier *benga* songs, such as these tracks from 1973, are characterized by a short vocal stanza (between four and eight measures) that is melodically reiterated by the lead guitar in between statements.

This predictable formal characteristic, along with the ways the guitar parts interact with the melody, were elements that would develop and mature as *benga* was refined by Misiani and his counterparts over the next ten years, a process illustrated in the tracks recorded from 1976 to 1979. Whereas early *benga* was characterized by a homophonic texture where a melody is supported by chordal guitar accompaniment, as the style progressed the guitar took on a more complex textural role. A third rhythm guitar was added, with each guitar’s setting adjusted to create a contrast in timbre. While the rhythm guitars utilized lower-frequency “neck pickup” settings, the lead guitar stood out with a sharp, high-frequency “bridge pickup” sound, laden with reverb. The rhythm guitars often take the spotlight from the lead in these later songs, and their inventive patterns are showcased during the climax section. The addition of the third guitar was used by Shirati Jazz to create dense, tightly woven guitar parts as melodic responses to the vocal stanzas. In “Wang’ni To Iringo,” “Kiseru,” and “Safari ya Garissa,” one can hear what would become a hallmark of Misiani’s style: highly syncopated vocal melodies are allowed to stand out accompanied only by the thumping pedal point of the bass guitar and are subsequently answered by a dynamic outburst of the guitars in a three-part, heterophonic rendition of the same melody (sometimes reinforced by the bass, as in “Kiseru”). This dialog between the guitars is allowed to spread out in the climax, where each guitarist explores different variations on their themes as the arrangement moves through a dynamic juxtaposition and removal of separate parts. These three songs in particular also show an inventiveness in formal arrangement. Along with his main competitor Collela Mazee, Misiani frequently used stanza forms that defy predictable permutations of tonic, subdominant, and dominant cycles played out over the course of four measures, rather letting the melody and song texts freely dictate chord progressions and periodic lengths. The best example of this is “Safari ya Garissa,” which features a string of phrases of varying length separated by pauses, and performed over a V-I bass vamp. Like the rhythmic motifs used in earlier *benga*,

⁵ “Climax” is the term used by Kenyan musicians to designate the second, more animated section of the song that, like the Congolese *sebene*, is driven by a short cyclic chord progression (usually lasting eight beats) and extended guitar soloing that showcases virtuosity.

this characteristic form is suggestive of other genres of Luo music, which have fluid, open-ended forms to accommodate exposition of the text. The closest Misiani comes to directly invoking Luo traditional music on this compilation is in “Kiseru,” which features a three-measure solo/chorus call-and-response reminiscent of *dodo*, a Luo vocal tradition. Over the years Misiani would use the distinctive rhythmic character and metric and formal schemes of these genres in composing new material, of which this song is a good example. Of additional interest is the song “Jaa,” which begins in the mixolydian mode, based on a vamp between the IV and V chords, before finally settling into the more typical I-IV-V-IV cycle. This subtle expansion of the harmonic palette of *benga* is another mark of its emerging sound in the late 1970s. Finally, two of these songs (“Mary Pt. 1” and “Ngeruok Joshirati Pt. 1”) feature *rumbas* as their main verses before proceeding to the more fast-moving *benga* beat, a reminder that this form maintained its popularity alongside *benga* and has continued to do so.

The lyrical themes of these songs offer a good representation of the various subjects Misiani chose to write about in his career. Included in the booklet are short synopses of the song texts. There are love songs expressing admiration of women, as well as lamenting love troubles, praise songs of various types, a travel narrative, and two songs that ponder the state of political affairs in the region. Misiani was notorious for his sometimes biting criticism of Kenyan politicians and was occasionally detained or deported to Tanzania when his lyrics were deemed by the government to have gone too far. The notes to the CD comment on this facet of his career, and in general provide a decent summary of Misiani’s biographical details and musical style.

In *World Defeats the Grandfathers: Swinging Swahili Rumba 1982-1986*, the contrast between Luo *benga* and its Kiswahili counterpart can clearly be discerned. The sonic quality of the recordings themselves is quite different: while Misiani and most other *benga* bands recorded exclusively in mono at Hi-Fidelity Studio at this time, Super Wanyika and bands of their ilk recorded primarily in multi-track stereo at Andrew Crawford Productions or the short-lived studio operation of CBS. This discrepancy is perhaps due to the higher level of investment that labels made in Swahili and Lingala bands, banking on their potential for crossover appeal.

Like Misiani, Issa Juma was a Tanzanian by birth who settled in Kenya to pursue a musical career. During the 1970s Juma worked as an assistant to producer A.P. Chandarana in Kericho, before relocating to Nairobi in 1978 to join Simba Wanyika, an established group that traced its lineage back to one of Tanzania’s most successful electric bands of the late 1960s, Jamhuri Jazz. As is common with Kenyan bands, internal disagreements led to the splitting of Simba Wanyika into several offshoots, one of which, Les Wanyika, featured Juma as its lead singer. It was with this group that Juma recorded his biggest hit, “Sina Makosa,” in 1979. He would later split from Les Wanyika to gain more “creative and entrepreneurial control” over his music (CD notes, p. 6), resulting in the recordings compiled on this album.

Issa Juma’s music exists in the same sphere as *benga* and other electric guitar

music of central and east Africa that had evolved from the *rumba*: it is dominated by short, cyclic chord progressions using the I, IV, and V; it features intricate, cyclical guitar-playing in lead and accompaniment roles; and its songs are arranged around contrasting sections of vocal stanzas and instrumental expositions. In comparison to Misiani's *benga*, Issa Juma's take on this basic format illustrates how the difference in approaches to concepts like melody, form, and texture, while subtle, constitute the musical identity of distinct genres.

One of the most striking qualities of these recordings is the relaxed execution and simplicity of the arrangements, which help to highlight Issa Juma's raspy baritone voice and smooth phrasing. A great deal of repetition in the stanzas also lets the melodies and messages of the song sink in for the listener. This style is epitomized in "Ma Eliza" and "Mpita Njia," in which Juma sings several solo verses before he is joined by the other vocalists. The high-pitched backing voice of Betanga Mazinere is a distinct complement to Juma's baritone lead, and the call-and-response dialogue between lead and chorus provides many of these songs with their dynamic thrust. In terms of guitar style, these songs differ notably from *benga*. Where *benga* features tightly arranged, multi-part reiterations of the vocal melodies and carefully orchestrated entrances and exits of parts, in these songs the rhythm guitar generally sticks to a supporting role, playing one pattern throughout the song (exceptions are "Maria," "Mwanaidi," and "Si Mimi," all of which feature a rhythm guitar solo break in the *benga* vein). Likewise, the lead guitar, while featured between verses, is not bound to reproduce the melodic profile of the vocal line. Rather, the soloists on these recordings (who include Adam Solomon and Anzino Osundwa), tend to use an approach in which chordal tones are played in an intricate rhythmic juxtaposition over the course of an eight-beat cycle, hinting at melodic ideas rather than explicitly stating them (this technique is exemplified by "Barua" and "Si Mimi," both featuring finely interwoven two-part, multi-tracked guitar solos). The rhythmic scheme driving this collection of songs (using a variety of tempos) has the same throbbing pulse in the bass drum found in *benga*, with accents played on the high-hat and snare that are consistent with a fast *rumba*, similar to the Trinidadian *soca*. An exception is "Wacha Waseme," based on the 12/8 *chakacha* beat, a coastal Swahili form that was embraced by many Nairobi bands during the 1980s.

The lyrical content of these songs deals primarily with human relationships, both romantic and otherwise. The title of the CD, "World Defeats the Grandfathers," is derived from a passage in "Maria," where a man questions his wife's fickle behaviour, warning her that the world is unpredictable and it "defeated our grandfathers" ("yalishinda mababu"). The CD booklet provides excellent transcriptions of the Kiswahili lyrics with English translations. This feature makes the album a useful resource for those interested in learning how to perform the music. As in the case of the Misiani CD, Paterson has written a useful biographical sketch of Issa Juma, including context on the recordings and a brief assessment of their essential musical characteristics. Paterson's firsthand experience of this era in Kenyan music and interaction with many of the

musicians (gained over several years while conducting fieldwork for an anthropology degree and teaching) provides insight that is rare among productions of reissues.

Taken together these two albums provide a good reference for what was a highly productive, yet contentious period in Kenyan popular music history. The accomplishments made by musicians like Misiani were often overshadowed by the fact that the lyrics of their songs were not intelligible to the majority of the population. For fans, broadcasters, and journalists looking for a more accessible alternative to *benga*, the Kiswahili songs of groups like Les Wanyika and Les Mangelepa were appealing. Yet, this created a national identity crisis for some, as these bands were largely made up of Tanzanian and Zairean expatriates. This led many critics to ask the question, "Where are Kenya's stars?" (Kariuki, 1986). Despite the complaints, *benga* musicians would persevere and in the end, their music, however parochial, has remained popular, outliving the heyday of Kiswahili *rumba*. This is a reminder of how the search for a national cultural identity in Kenya has always had to contend with the vitality of ethnicity. Kenyan musicians have dealt with this contradiction in their work, but have tended to operate in the indigenous languages and musical modes that they and their fans know best.

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