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African Literature

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The Influential Power of Music

Some of my earliest memories, as well as my fondest memories, center on a deep connection to music. My earliest musical memory comes from Paul Simon’s “You Can Call Me Al,” as I was fascinated with Chevy Chase’s lip syncing and dance moves in the music video, as well as the chorus, since my name was in it. I would sit in front of the television for hours waiting for it to come on, proudly exclaiming, “Hey it’s my song!” whenever the music video came on. I had the same fascination with The B-52’s “Love Shack,” as I would torture my parents, making them play it over and over. The power of music is prevalent throughout the world, transcending every race and culture. Try to think of someone who doesn’t like music… It’s impossible. Drawing people together through not only lyrics, but also strong beats and the “pulse,” music allows for people everywhere to connect emotionally with one another through a common love and feeling. It will be the aim of this paper to relate the power of music, while focusing primarily on its’ place in African culture.

In the opening chapter of *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah explains his deep connection to the power of music. As a young child, Beah relates his first exposure to hip hop through The Sugarhill Gang’s song “Rapper’s Delight.” Arguably one of the most well known hip hop songs of all time, “Rapper’s Delight” is “generally considered to be the song that first popularized hip hop in the United States and around the world” (Delight). Beah explains how his fascination with hip hop began here, as he was transfixed by the way the rappers could speak English so fast, and to the beat: “I loved the dance, and particularly enjoyed learning the lyrics, because they were poetic and it improved my vocabulary” (Beah 6).

In *A Long Way Gone,* Ishmael Beah not only explains his deep, almost spiritual connection to music, but also relates that it saved his life on more than one occasion. Early on in the novel, while he is running for his life and searching for refuge from the war, Beah is caught and held by a group of armed men protecting their village. While shouts of “Drown the rebels” rang from the crowd, the chief of the village sought to distinguish whether the boys were soldiers or the students they claimed to be. Upon searching their pockets, the chief found and played a Naughty by Nature cassette tape that Beah had in his pocket. As Beah explained rap music to the chief, a member of the village recognized him as a performer, relaying to the chief that Beah was who he says he was: “None of us knew him, not even by his face, but we warmly smiled as if we recognized him as well. He saved our lives” (Beah 38).

Nearly the same situation happens only a few chapters later as Beah is captured by villagers who are questioning his motives. As Beah is forced to dance and mime the lyrics to another Naughty by Nature song, he finds himself “thinking about the words of the song, closely listening to the subtle instruments in the beat” (Beah 67). For at least a second, Beah is able, through the power of music, to take his mind off the impending doom he is facing and get lost in the words. While Beah’s safety is continually challenged by outside forces, time and time again he is able to find solace through the power of music.

After finishing “A Long Way Gone” and learning about the tremendous effect this American hip hop music had on a child on the other side of the world, I was curious to explore this phenomenon and learn about similar instances in which music is used throughout African culture. I figured the best place to start this journey would be to go on a journey of my own and visit the Africa section of the library. After twenty minutes of searching, following my classmate Martin’s directions, I decided it was best to go ask the wonderful people at the reference desk where this section was. Once I found it, I was dumbfounded, as the section consists of rows upon rows of thousands of books. Rather than wade through the stacks with the hope of stumbling on something useful, I decided that my best course of action would be to use the library’s website and focus my search on something more specific.

Once I entered the library’s search engine, I typed in “Influence of Music in Africa,” which returned 331,000 results. Obviously, this needed to be broken down and focused onto a more specific area. I then realized that I didn’t even know where to begin. Music as a general topic is so large and broad that finding a starting point might be impossible. I decided to Google the same search, which led me to a Wikipedia page, which led me to CK Ladzekpo’s website. Ladzekpo is the director of the African music program at the University of California at Berkley, and his website focuses on his course “Foundations in African Dance Drumming.” In his course description, Ladzekpo explains:

“In Africa, dance drumming is based on a common core of traditions belonging to the groups, traditions which help the groups have a sense of group identity. The knowledge of these cultural values are generally acquired as one grows gradually within the context of traditional life by watching, listening, and participating without necessarily being instructed.” (Ladzekpo)

Ladzekpo continues to explain that as a member of the *Anlo-Ewe* tribe in Ghana, a strong sense of community was instilled in him at an early age, as “the weak, the strong, the young and old all constitute an integral whole in the complex fabric of life in pursuit of a collective destiny. The most distinctive institutional result is trust, honor, compassion, sacrifice and a desire to share some part of themselves with others.” With these powerful words and description of life inside his community, Ladzekpo begins to relate how music, specifically dance-drumming, is a very integral part of their entire community belief system, and is really the complete “essence of their shared experience” (Ladzekpo). Ladzekpo relates that music is rooted deeply at the core of the *Anlo-Ewe* beliefs, most specifically their religious culture, as music is considered to be at the heart or gateway to the spiritual connection that binds all types of life together. The *Anlo-Ewe* believe that the universe consists of “dynamic forces which are constantly influencing each other” (Ladzekpo), and it is mankind’s job to gain knowledge of these forces in order to use these forces to influence his or her own life, and through the art of dance-drumming, mankind is able to connect and bond with these forces and harness their powerful energy.

After analyzing Ledzekpo’s powerful words and deep spiritual connection to music, it became evident that not only was a great deal of knowledge on the subject of music available when researching about a specific type of music, but also a great deal of useful information is available when focusing on a specific, knowledgeable person who is passionate about music. I was able to find just that when I came across Ross Simonini’s article “Music: Mining African Riches.” I was extremely fortunate to come across this article in the ProQuest search engine, as Simonini writes to relate the journey of Frank Conakry, also known as DJ Soulpusher. As Simonini explains, Conakry traveled through Africa for three years, searching for records and broadening his musical horizons, and blogging about it all along the way, which, as Simonini says, “has inspired others to embark on similar pursuits and could have a profound impact on the nature and field of ethnomusicology” (Simonini). I found Simonini’s article extremely interesting, as it intrigued me to learn about a man who would travel Africa in search of music just based on pure passion, and once I reached Conakry’s blog, VoodooFunk, I was hooked.

In the introduction section of his blog, Frank Conakry explains that from 2005-2008, he lived in Conakry, the capital city of Guinea in West Africa, and during those three years he traveled countries of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Benin, “always in the pursuit of records.” His blog details each of his trips to hunt for records, with each post focusing on a new experience. His passion for music is evident, but his attention for detail is also strong, as each post contains interesting facts about everyday life in Africa, such as renting out seats in a packed taxi as opposed to having the taxi to yourself. Each post contained interesting facts about music in Africa, such as how while searching for records, locals would tell Conakry to look for “old sailors,” as they were always the ones who would bring new records to town: “They were traveling up and down the West African coast, buying records in the harbors of Lagos, Cotonou and Abidjan, the cities with pressing plants and sold them to local recording studios and nightclubs once they would get back to Freetown” (Conakry). My favorite part of Conakry’s blog, and the reason I will continually be coming back to it, is that after each blog post he adds the music he was able to find, creating his own ‘mixes’ for everyone to listen to. Ranging from reggae to funk, this eclectic music focuses heavily on musicianship and love for the craft, as you would never catch any of these musicians using a drum machine or an automated sound generator. All of the music Conakry displays is made from the heart, and it is evident that all of these musicians, as well as Conakry himself, have a deep spiritual connection and passion for music.

While Frank Conakry uses his blog to spread his love of African music throughout the world, in “Culture, concept, aesthetics: The phenomenon of the African musical universe in Western musical culture,” Amon Saba Saakana attempts to explain the origins of African music. As Saakana explains in in her article, for Africans, at its conception, music was made purely to focus on the aesthetic qualities of the world around them, focusing primarily on sounds in nature, such as the roar of a lion, or the tweets of a bird. In Saakana’s article, Francis Bebey relates that African musicians "do not attempt to combine sounds pleasing to the ear. Their aim is simply to express life in all its aspects through the medium of sound" (Saakana). I found this article extremely interesting, because it also helped prove to me how deeply rooted music is in African culture. Throughout our readings this year, we have learned about many cultures of Africa and their deep spiritual ties to nature and the forest, with many having their religion centered on many aspects of life found in the forest. Finding this correlation between music and nature strengthened that idea for me, and it allowed me to fully understand how music is a central focal point for many people’s lives in Africa, both recreationally as well as spiritually.

After reading Saakana’s article, I sat and really contemplated on the idea that in Africa, music is *felt* just as much as it is *heard.* I felt as if I needed to find some more research focusing purely on the connection the artist or listener gains from the music, because as I listen to Frank Conakry’s mixes, it is obvious that improvisation plays a major role in all African music making, as the sounds come from *feeling* where the music is taking them, rather than a strict form or structure. In Richard Hodge’s “Drum Is the Ear of God: Africa's Inner World of Music,” he explains how the spirit of African music is used primarily to bring people to the “experience of communion, the sense of being part of the vast play of forces that encompass and connect all beings” (Hodges). Hodges goes on to explain the practice in which, through music, one is “possessed” and lost in a trance, becoming a direct gateway and communicator between the people and the Gods. As Hodges explains, “the Dogon say that Drum is the ear of God and one must beat it with the attitude that one is speaking to God on behalf of mankind” (Hodges).

This same type of spiritual connection that Hodges relates is shown in “Rhythms of the Gods: Music and Spirituality in Yoruba Culture,” as Bode Omojola explains that musicians in Yoruba culture are mediators between “temporal and spiritual domains of existence” (Omojola). Omojola explains that during ceremonies, musicians play instruments as well as dance, and through their performances, they cater to both the needs of the Gods as well as members of the tribe, as they connect the “living with the spiritual; life with death; body with soul; as well as the aesthetic with the divine” (Omojola). It is through relations like this that strengthen my belief in music being more than just entertainment, as people around the world are able to use music for a higher purpose.

When looking at music as a whole, it is easy to see the influence of music from Africa all over. However, many of the newer artists out today, especially those in the ‘popular music’ variety, could benefit heavily from an African style influence over their creative process. To say that the heart, soul, and feeling that Africans put into their music is moving is an understatement, as the strength behind the connection one can find in a simple reggae song is tremendous. In John Rockwell’s article, “The African Influence on Pop and Jazz Musicians,” he challenges Western musicians to seek their roots and search through Africa for an inspiration revival. Citing many examples of recent musicians who have used Africa’s musical template to create beautiful music, Rockwell contends that “It is a superb achievement and an intimation of the growing influence Africa is likely to have on Western musicians in years to come” (Rockwell). I, myself, hope that we get to see more of an African style base throughout popular music in the near future, as it is truly something special and moving.

When asked about his connection to music, Ray Charles said, “I was born with music inside me. Music was one of my parts. Like my ribs, my kidneys, my heart. Like my blood. It was a force already within me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me – like food or water” (Biography). It is evident through all of my research that throughout Africa, as well as the rest of the world, music has a profound impact on the lives of everyone, deeply effecting their mind, body, and spirits. Writing this paper has strengthened an already deep connection to music that was rooted in me at a young age, as learning about the drive and passion, as well as the spiritual connection, that music produces throughout the world will forever remain in my heart and constantly remind me of the power of music.

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