

16 African Electrical Networks

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Introduction

My friend, Samba Mapangala, told me a story one night as we were driving home from a gig. We would often talk about the early Congolese groups, and tonight the subject was Nicolas Kasanda, known to all as Docteur Nico. Nico was the foremost player of his generation, known as a god among players, or “Le Dieu de la Guitare.” This stood in contrast to the reputation of Nico’s rival, Franco Luambo Makiadi of the group TPOK Jazz, another legendary guitarist known as “Le Sorcier [sorcerer] de la Guitare.” Both guitarists emerged in the 1950s on the eve of Congo’s independence from Belgium, and their bands provided a soundtrack not just to their nation’s liberation but to a newly postcolonial continent. “Yes,” Samba said, “we used to go hear him when I was young.” Samba had grown up in the 1960s in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), or Zaire as it had been known during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko. Samba recounted how he and other boys would hang around on the streets outside the clubs where Nico and his band were playing, “and when the band took a break, we could hear Nico’s guitar breathing!”

I was fascinated by this story. In every corner of the world, listeners and players of many genres anthropomorphize instruments, be they violins, guitars, or—per Eliot Bates—the Turkish *saz*.¹ Eventually, however, I realized the obvious fact that Samba and his friends were listening to the buzzing of the amplifier, which was in part the sound of the amplifier’s tubes and transformer cooking and rattling, and in part the sound of the city’s electrical grid pushing into the amp—or what American guitarists would call “60 cycle hum.” The sound of the city, thus, is amplified within the band’s music. I highlight three themes emerging from this moment. First, music—and sound in general—exceeds the spaces that are presumed to contain it, as evidenced by the boys in the Kinshasa night listening to the band’s music pour out onto the street. This is also true of regional style, which similarly carries across borders. Second, music is fundamentally material in that the sound itself is energized matter carrying through the night air, and also that the physicality of instruments and amplifiers is manifest, interacting with and expressing the physicality of the built city.

Third, the timbre of music is intimately entwined with this materiality. In the case of Nico, this has everything to do not just with the electric guitar but with the volume of the amplifier and the saturation of its reverb tank. His tone blooms into distortion as only an overdriven circuit can, and as revealed by the high volume of his resting amplifier—he played the amplifier as much as the guitar.² I also note that Nico was one of the first African guitarists to record using a plectrum (which Franco never did). The diminutive guitar pick may perhaps seem a triviality to the modern reader, but the material intervention of the plectrum—as introduced to Kinshasa musicians by the Belgian guitarist Bill Alexandre—had a massive impact on Central African players, dividing them into two camps as defined by Nico and Franco for following generations.³

Materiality is both the most overrepresented and most overlooked aspect of guitar in culture. It is essential to the establishment of a genre's aural signature, and it is central to the decision-making processes of musicians. Itself a crazy assemblage of wood, metal, and plastics from numerous sources, the guitar is an expression of many overlapping networks of supply and sociality. The breathing of Nico's resting guitar is just one entry point into African electrical networks, but we should address two additional critical points from the Docteur Nico anecdote: that this equipment was certainly made in Europe (likely Italy), and that it would not have been accessible to aspiring young musicians like Samba. Myself, I became more aware of scarcity and gained respect for my access to equipment while on tour with Samba. As we sat backstage, he gasped as I cut the old strings from the neck of my Telecaster. His guitarist, he told me, had toured East Africa for a year on a single set of strings—and it was clear that he did not approve of my wastefulness! Different expectations, and a different relationship to both resources and to their networks of distribution. In this chapter, I explore the materiality of guitars on the African continent with attention to their circulation, and how this has impacted the development of genre broadly as well as artistic choices personally. Similarly, I explore how genre and instrumental method adhere to networks of circulation that both mirror the material and adapt to new digital technologies.

Brief Overview of African Guitar Music

Before proceeding further, I review some recurring themes in the past study of African popular music and African music generally because guitar has tended to activate older discourses. I will also suggest some new ways to understand African guitar music's history. Musicology has frequently

taken an organological view of African music. While many Westerners associate African music with “the drum,” its instrumentation is incredibly diverse, as detailed by several African scholars.⁴ The diversity of string instruments in particular (lutes, zithers, harps) is enormous and varied. As a late arrival, the guitar did not square with established narratives of local organological development, but both the guitar’s capacity for expressing a mix of complex rhythmic and melodic counterpoint and its similarity to locally played instruments made for easy adoption and adaptation into regional aesthetic and practice. We can see similarities in construction and technique in such geographically diffuse instruments as the *oud*, *ngoni*, *kora*, and *sintir*. While its design and tuning present an inherent disposition to certain types of harmony and voicing, there are examples of the guitar’s adaptation—new tuning systems in the *guitare sèche* of the Copper Belt, and microtonal fret alteration in Mauritania, for example. The earliest history of guitar in Africa is syncretic—blending Western harmony with indigenous song forms and melodic and rhythmic vocabularies.

While the African story is more one of movement, contact, and exchange, generalizations have been made in the Western academic approach to African music and territoriality, which either elide an incredible diversity of cultures or lock cultural identity within modern state borders. Either of these impulses can enable essentialist readings: that of “African music” as a single unified practice, or alternatively one that fetishizes ethnicity and isolation. Similarly, there is the recurring separation of artistic practice into separate categories of the “traditional” vs the “modern”—a binary that enables a dialectic narrative of “development,” and which carries the heavy baggage of teleological colonial projects. An important variant on this is the division of African arts between the “traditional” (often coded as rural), the “elite” (i.e. adopted Western forms), and the “popular” (often coded as urban).⁵ Further, the traditional arts (also coded as pure, local, “authentic,” or essential) are often positioned as in conflict with the modern (the impure, the imported, the hybridized). Being a relatively new instrument to the continent, the guitar—electric and acoustic—has often triggered these musicological tropes. However, with early examples such as the adoption of the *seprewa* harp by the Akan from the Mande, and in countless other examples that preceded it, musical practice in Africa has always been one of contact, movement, and exchange—the foundation of what Achille Mbembe calls *Afropolitanism*.⁶ African guitar is positioned within diverse networks of style and repertoire, making many points of contact and exchange with regional and cosmopolitan musics. If we understand that music everywhere has always been built from a mix of custom, invention, and influence, we get a clearer picture of how the guitar has been working. As Nketia argued, traditional music has always embraced an aesthetic and

ethic of change and dynamism rather than of stasis.⁷ Further, if we consider how circulation—the movement of people and instruments in and out of the continent, and back again—influences musical culture, a different but related narrative can emerge.

The history of the guitar's arrival in Africa is undocumented. It arrived as a folk instrument, and until the birth of commercial recording in the late 1920s, its story was recorded primarily through anecdote, performative tradition, and oral folklore. The guitar is believed to have arrived in Africa with the Portuguese as they sought trading prospects along the coasts of West Africa. These encounters began in the fifteenth century, long predating the modern version of the instrument. European economic and social relations continued with coastal Africans for hundreds of years, as these zones acted as transaction points for a trade in raw materials.⁸ The earliest guitar music is associated with the Kru, a sea-faring people from regions in contemporary Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Kru are noted for their sailing partnership with European ships, traveling as far as the Caribbean and Europe as well as along the Atlantic coast of Africa. According to lore, it was the Kru who spread the instrument among West African ports. A collection of song forms and hybridized instrumental methods would coalesce in a set of styles, notably *osibisaaba* or *palmwine* music in the Fante port of Cape Coast in the colonial Gold Coast (contemporary Ghana).⁹ Many players utilized a thumb-index fingerstyle counterpoint of harmonies in sixths and triadic chords, frequently out of the C position, and accompanied by small local percussion. As bands expanded, they frequently included other Western instruments such as the concertina, the African American banjo, the *prempensua* (a version of the Caribbean rumba box), and the mandolin (often with a banjo head construction).

Ghanaians were principally responsible for spreading the guitar as far as Central Africa. Specifically, the Ghanaian “coastmen” were known in the Belgian Congo for introducing their idiomatic harmonic vocabulary.¹⁰ This earliest music was almost entirely coastal, and there was often more music exchange happening between port cities on this part of the continent than there was with communities in the interior. In fact, the guitar scarcely appeared far inland on much of the continent until after the Second World War, when many Africans returned from military service in Asia and Europe. In his study of Mande music, Eric Charry documents the first appearances of any guitars among the Malian *jeli* in the 1940s.¹¹ Notably, Mali's first internationally renowned guitarist, Ali Farka Toure, wrote the piece “Cinquante Six” as a recollection of first seeing a guitar on television in 1956, in the hands of Fodeba Keita, a composer from the coastal country of Guinée. This is striking when we consider how globally dominant Malian guitar would become in the twenty-first century.

While guitar music had initially thrived in ports, it solidified as these towns grew into large colonial capitals in the early twentieth century. These growing urban spaces offered nightclubs where bands could play and people could dance, increased access to imported instruments, and supplied electricity to power amplifiers. As always, the music changed. This era was ruled by *highlife* dance bands—large groups that used horns, electric guitars, and percussion to combine local vernaculars with rhythms from the Americas to play a repertoire of palmwine, Caribbean, and jazz. This new sound developed in part through the circulation of recordings but also happened as people moved from the diaspora back to Africa, and as Afrodescendants from the Caribbean and Africa met in the metropolises of London, Paris, and Liverpool. As of 1957, African countries were winning their independent statehood, and these bands provided a soundtrack to liberation, sometimes traveling on state visits, as Ghana's Starlighters and Tempos bands did with Kwame Nkrumah. Groups from across Africa would tour the continent, spreading the influence of their local styles and collecting new ideas. For example, the Congolese Docteur Nico had an incredible impact on players in West Africa. While the sound of Congolese rumba reverberates in repertoires from as far away as Senegal, Nico himself picked up the Ghana palmwine classic, "Yaa Amponsah," in the 1960s and recorded it as "Afrique de l'Ouest." The same song appears in Guinée in Bembeya Jazz's 1974 "Mami Wata."¹² Through highlife and rumba's embrace of music from the Americas and other parts of the continent, we see musicians' and listeners' desire to take part in larger conversations—conversations that would continue to push the music outward in new directions. In the 1970s, many bands in Africa had dropped the horns and further showcased the stylistic invention of the guitar players, a change that came from the limited availability of instruments in economically challenging times as much as from aesthetics. Many musicians had maintained close relationships with political leaders during the early postcolonial years only to find themselves in conflict with African regimes in the 1970s and 1980s (Fela Kuti in Nigeria, Franco Luambo in Zaire, Thomas Mapfumo in Zimbabwe, to name just a few).

Gerhard Kubik proposes three "stylistic super-regions of popular music" in Africa, but acknowledges that "from the late 1960s onwards, boundaries became increasingly blurred because the mass media began to cover the entire continent."¹³ It is true about the importance of media, particularly of state and regional radio broadcasts, but the movement of people and their instruments is documented in the songs—Dr Nico's "Nakeyi Abidjan (I have gone to Abidjan)" and OK Jazz's "Sentiment Poto-Poto" (Mpototo being the Lingala word for Europe), to name just two. Kubik's three super regions are highlife West Africa, Congolese rumba,

and South African guitar. Certainly, this is useful but fails to identify other important areas of African guitar work, notably the Mande zone, including both Malian griots and Guinéen orchestres, the Swahili coast, Lusophone Angola, and most recently, the ever-flowing world of the Sahel, which developed its guitar music less in cities than in temporary gatherings on the edges of the Sahara.

Further, we can look at the unique relationships (commercial and cultural) within communities of Francophone and Anglophone nations. We can organize our understanding of the music through these networks, with a first wave of guitar music beginning in transnational port communities, which would soon grow into cosmopolitan colonial centers. A later generation of guitar music developed in cities of the interior, and in rural communities to which many coastal musicians had traveled. I do not propose a unitary theory, but it is useful to think about how these trade circuits operated and how guitar fits into and, in some ways, helps to clarify these economies.

In this section, I have recounted elements of the established narrative of the history of the guitar in Africa, as well as some earlier problems in musicology, while trying to offer some new tools for thinking about music in a way that is connected and constantly changing but is neither totalizing nor teleological. I have opted not to discuss the adaptation of traditional techniques or repertoires to the guitar (the mbira patterns of chimurenga, the ngoni ornaments of griots, to name two). What I have omitted could fill books—and does, though there are countless more to be written. Here, as on other continents, the history of the guitar is written and preserved “in the street” rather than in the archive.¹⁴ In the following sections, I offer two brief ethnographies of African players whose musical lives span multiple eras and territories, and through whom we can think about the materiality of musical things, and the circulation of musicians and their tools through local and global systems.

Anthony Akablay

When I was a little boy, I seriously was a musician! I intended to invent my own guitar, with raffia stick speaker boxes. And then I used milk cans, put it on a stick as microphones stands. And then the guitar, I'd put a stick in a tin of the Saturday Night powder.¹⁵ (ANTHONY AKABLAY)

Anthony Akablay¹⁶ (Figure 16.1) is a Ghanaian guitarist with whom I have worked since 2008, and this section draws upon our many years of conversations. Ghana's popular music follows the trajectory discussed above. It begins with early palmwine guitar music, emerges during the colonial era as urban highlife dance band music, and solidifies a Pan-African sound in the early days of independent statehood and postcolonial

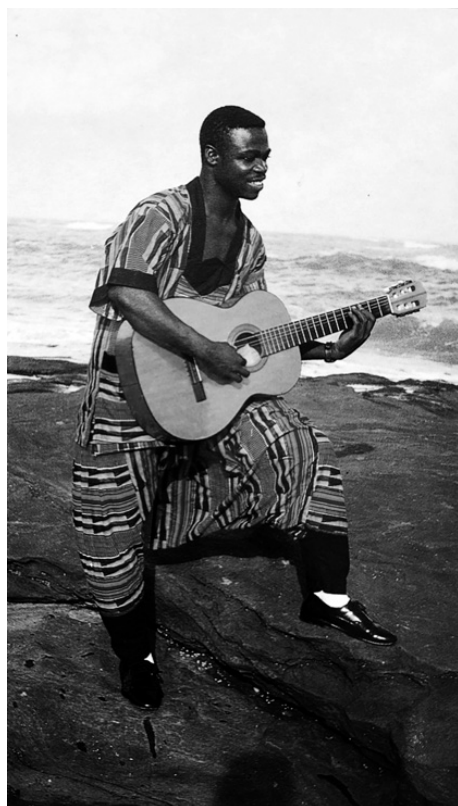


Figure 16.1 Anthony Akablay in a promotional photo for Western Diamonds, 1992

optimism. The contemporary soundscape is as full of these echoes as it is of contemporary gospel, electronic afrobeats, and a hybrid of highlife and hip hop known as *hiplife*. Akablay is a virtuoso guitarist whose musical vocabulary spans this inventory of traditional and modern Ghanaian repertoire, drawing heavily upon the fingerstyle rhythms of the coast's earliest players, the electric highlife that so influenced the development of afrobeat, the Lydian ruminations of the Akan style known as Kwaw, and a mix of smooth jazz and continental African styles. While the palmwine song forms and fingerstyle technique reference tradition for Ghanaians today,¹⁷ Aka's breadth and experience are cosmopolitan. He has played on countless recording sessions of every genre and performed across Africa and Europe as a leader and sideman.

Aka came of age in the 1980s and rose through Jewel Ackah's band to start the Western Diamonds, a group that would dominate the country's music scene in the 1990s. Aka's style is rooted in his knowledge of regional players. Ghana's acoustic guitar era was followed in the 1950s by the twin strands of large band highlife and smaller groups known as "guitar bands,"

and much of the repertoire and instrumental approach were retained even as guitars were electrified.¹⁸ The 1960s postcolonial era was characterized by the presence of cultural practices and institutional structures from both the colonial years and new systems of Pan-Africanism and the nation state. In the following decades, the national economy continued to change in response to the influence of global capitalist networks located in new technologies, such as the cassette, and new industries, such as the West African oil rush. During the 1970s, Ghana's electric bands thrived in boom towns such as Tema and Takoradi, which were Ghana's two deep-water ports. Concurrently, touring *concert parties*—ubiquitous traveling troupes presenting an evening program of familiar and innovative music, theater, and comedy—continued a performance practice from earlier in the century while actively circulating a mix of classic and contemporary music and musicians through networks of loosely connected villages in the rural zones. It is Akablay's generation who experienced all these transitions and laid the foundation for contemporary hybridities.

Aka comes from the Nzema ethnic group who inhabit a region straddling Ghana's coastal Western Region and the Comoé district of Côte d'Ivoire. He grew up on his grandparents' coconut farm in the village of Anokyi. As a child, Aka did not have an instrument, but in the opening quote of this section, he describes his early attraction to music and his drive to build his own equipment. The guitarists whom the nine-year-old Aka emulated were the performers passing through to play funerals and concert parties in Anokyi. Specifically, he recalls Dr. F. Kenya's highlife band as well as an itinerant guitarist named Safohene Djeni: "I said to myself I would want to do exactly what he was doing, and that motivated me to create the guitar." Aka's homemade guitar was what Kubik calls an "age-set instrument"¹⁹—not a toy, but an age-appropriate training device that instructs the process of construction and maintenance as much as creative invention and embodied knowledge. Though guitar music was extremely popular, there was no local production industry, and the instrument's scarcity drove such innovation for many young players. Access to instruments and training within the tradition of local guitar forms would define much of Akablay's future work.

As a teen, Aka's first professional gig was working as a drummer and then guitarist²⁰ in the HM Band—named for the band owner Hammond Mensah—at the Princess Cinema in the closest large city, Takoradi. Like most musicians of the time, Aka did not own his instrument. Instruments and amplifiers were the property of band owners—businessmen who acted as impresarios, investing in bands and venues. Musicians would gather at the performance space to practice on the instruments there. For other

musicians, this meant becoming involved in church music. Smart Nkansah, the leader of the 1970s group Sweet Talks, described to me sneaking into a local church in the small town of Begoro in the Eastern Region to learn the guitar parts he had heard on his father's records.²¹ After HM Band, the eighteen-year-old Akablay joined a touring concert party group run by F. Micah, where he had a crucial apprenticeship in the Ghana rhythms upon which he still draws today. Notably, Akablay's huge 2015 hit "Take Away" draws upon the 1980s performance of an elderly comedian in F. Micah's concert party. At that time, Aka was still playing band owners' instruments, but when he was twenty-one, he made a break, buying his first guitar (a Fender Stratocaster) and an amplifier (a Roland JC120),²² and starting the group that would launch him on the national scene, the Western Diamonds. As with Nkrumah and the early highlife bands, the Diamonds would accompany President Jerry Rawlings when he traveled outside Ghana. The promotional photo of Akablay in Figure 16.1 is from the band's heyday, and we see that he chooses to appear in a modern cut of traditional cloth and hold not his Stratocaster but rather the palmwine musician's nylon-string guitar, signifying his position on a continuum of tradition and contemporaneity.

The availability of instruments determined much of the social and economic structures of music making in postcolonial Ghanaian music. Instrument scarcity, while a limitation, made clubs and churches crucial points of congregation for musicians where the young could be trained in the vernacular repertoires and lore unique to the region. Several musicians in Ghana have noted that this changed significantly in 2010²³ when the government of Atta Mills removed an import excise tax on musical instruments. Now, guitars and basses are relatively plentiful, and many young players own an instrument, which is already impacting the way that musicians are able to organize themselves.

After the Western Diamonds ended, Aka became one of the most active gigging and recording musicians on the Accra scene. Preserving a Ghanaian pedagogy of guitar has been a concurrent project for him. In the late 1990s, he handwrote a method book of palmwine and other rhythms. His text follows the format of Western method books but recreates the orality and personal mentorship that were such a part of his own learning. Retaining this tone and historical contextualization provides a sense of cultural continuity for Ghana guitarists.²⁴ While the original manuscript was lost (I have a photocopy from 2008), learning and communication modalities have changed significantly since it was written. In 2018, Aka started a WhatsApp group for young Ghana musicians where he answers questions and posts lesson videos. He explained the group this way:

1. It has always been my wish to establish a school to teach the next generation what I've learnt from the older generation so decided to start from WhatsApp
2. Also the pressure from some students to come to my house and learn from me contributed to its establishment²⁵

The development of the guitarscape in Ghana has centered around the circulation of both musicians and instruments through rural and urban spaces, and now through mobile data networks. Aka's is but one story from West Africa which demonstrates the changing networks of both material instruments and cultural knowledge.

Jeannot Bel Musumbu

The traditional guitar is like an acoustic, but made by Congolese people. So, let's say they take the branch of trees, they cut it, they polish it, and then they can take another branch . . . they make it as a guitar. They take the brake of the bike, they take all this wire to make a string. (JEANNOT BEL)

Jeannot Bel Musumbu (Figure 16.2) is a Congolese guitarist who has lived in England since the early 2000s. He sat with me for a lengthy Zoom interview in 2023 and recounted his path in music.²⁶ We discussed the position of guitars within his home city of Kinshasa, how they circulate,



Figure 16.2 Jeannot Bel performing at a club in Kinshasa, 1986

and how the discourse and pedagogy of guitar move both orally and materially. Bel is a working musician, both appearing on stage with famous Congo artists and working busily in the background on projects that navigate the particularities of genre, mediated sound, and material economies. Bel pioneered a field of African guitar pedagogy within a globalized digital economy, where discrete instrumental styles assume broad marketability. Like many Congo guitarists, he broadly identifies the style as *rumba*, a name that originates with the bands of the 1950s but which also includes *soukous*, the style that emerged in the Paris-based diasporic Congo community in the 1980s. Multiple generations of rumba dominated the sound of African popular music for decades. In 2021, UNESCO granted Congolese rumba protection as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.”

Bel’s journey in Kinshasa and the diaspora is similar to many Congolese musicians. While Bel did not discuss with me any specific political structures, his move into music coincided with the final decade of the Mobutu dictatorship and the hardships of those years’ economic contraction, associated in equal parts with the collapse of the copper market and the kleptocratic mismanagement of state and private resources. His exit from the DRC coincided with the ousting of Mobutu by Laurent Kabila in the mid 1990s, a time of transition and difficulty for musicians.²⁷ Much of the history of music in sub-Saharan Africa is tied to the political and economic structures of the decolonial state. In Ghana, this relationship was between Nkrumah and highlife bands. In the DRC/Zaire, it had been between Mobutu and many groups, notably Franco Luambo Makiadi and TPOK Jazz.

Bel identifies three crucial moments of his youth in the Matete district of Kinshasa that set him on the path to becoming a musician and guitarist. The first came in the city’s churches—holdovers of European and American colonial projects. His mother was a Catholic, and as a youth, Bel sang the European hymn-based music of the choir. As a sixteen-year-old, Bel was invited by his friend, René, to a Protestant church, and he became enthralled by the guitar-based foundations of the repertoire. René was brought to the US for training as part of the church’s religious outreach. He was gifted a nylon-string guitar and taught a repertoire of I–IV–V songs in open position, which he brought back and taught to the congregation. Further, René’s father was a pilot for the national airline and would bring back additional guitars for use in his church. Youths like Jeannot had a chance to learn some basics, but the instruments remained on site, and the repertoire was circumscribed, consisting of religious songs and simple strumming.

Second, Bel encountered a local youth band practicing near his home, and he was able to pay the guitarist of the band to give him lessons in the modern style. Congolese soukous music also worked on I–IV–V harmonic structures, though guitarists employed a vocabulary of arpeggiations, thirds, sixths, tenths, and octaves in multiple positions up the neck to create densely interwoven rhythms. Jeannot made progress, but he was hindered by unpredictable time to practice with an instrument. The group with whom he was understudying would have to hire equipment for their gigs, and when Jeannot made his own debut with them on national television in 1986, it was on rented gear, just as we see in the picture of him in Figure 16.2, from the same year. The third significant moment in his progression came when another friend in Kinshasa decided to abandon music and make a career in the Zairian army, giving his collection of guitar theory books to Jeannot—“when he gave me the books, I saw the chords!” This confluence of personal relationships and both ad hoc and formal pedagogy is an important theme in Bel’s later impact as a global musician. The availability of theory books and instruments demonstrates the importance of networks of circulation in Kinshasa music making.

Bel partnered with a friend to acquire their first instrument, sharing it back and forth each day: “Then we bought our first guitar! A proper guitar. I was so happy! It was an artisanal—it’s not like the acoustic René used to have, a proper one. Acoustic guitar, but this one is HOME MADE.” This is the instrument described at the opening of this section, with brake wires for strings. While not claiming the refinement of a Spanish lutherie nor the consistency of mass-produced guitars, these instruments boast a forceful tone and striking visual impact now sought out by European and African players and seen in internationally touring groups such as Jupiter & Okwess and Staff Benda Bilili. These rough-hewn instruments equip players with the skill to play their music on a variety of instruments. The familiar guitars that many Westerners may consider to be entry-level (such as the Squier Strat in the photo) were unavailable to young players due to their scarcity—a problem of circulation networks. “A majority of people couldn’t afford electric guitar Fender—it’s made in America. One of them is like 1500 dollars! We couldn’t afford it! It’s too much money for a child or a teenager to buy this one.” It is important for readers in the Global North to consider how economic and currency inequivalences mean that certain expenses may be lower in local economies (rent, food, clothing) and gauged appropriately to local currencies. Imported goods, however, retain a price pegged to foreign economic systems and accrue the additional cost of importation, keeping them out of the reach of many.

Jeannot continued his work in bands and pursued tertiary education, but life in Kinshasa and the country more broadly was destabilized by the

collapse of the Mobutu government and its networks of patronage. The incoming president, Laurent Kabila, from the Swahili-speaking East, was reputed to be unsympathetic to the Lingala-speaking musicians from the capital and their relationship with the Mobutu regime.²⁸ Bel left the country to play music in neighboring countries as many Congo musicians had done, landing in Cameroon and eventually England, where he bought the first electric guitar he would own. “In London, I was walking in the street first time; I see this shop that’s selling a second-hand guitar. I went there, I give the deposit. I think it was like 30 dollars or something like that, I give a deposit, then I start paying slowly, slowly, then I bought this guitar!”

In London, Jeannot played in a Congolese church where he became known for his ability as a player, and it was here that he came to the attention of the Europe-based soukous star, Kanda Bongo Man. Beginning in 2007, Bel toured the world as a member of Kanda’s band, playing in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. During this time, Jeannot continued graduate studies at the University of West London—first in computer programming, then film production and sound engineering, and music industry management and copyright. With these skills, he built a recording studio, and as a final academic project, he unified these skills in the production of a video in which he taught the principles of Congo guitar. This video, *The Roots of Congolese Rumba Guitar* (2010), would become the first pedagogical DVD Bel published through his new business, ProSmart Studio. Bel began placing it in London markets and music stores, and it sold out rapidly and consistently. He further realized the potential of online marketing for ProSmart and used the rapidly expanding YouTube platform to promote his growing library of DVD lessons. ProSmart was soon shipping DVDs to fans of Congolese music all over the world—Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Soon, he was producing videos by star players from Zaiko Langa Langa, OK Jazz, and Wenge Musica:

This one was like—boom! Nobody made this before. People were hungry to learn African music, but in New York, in the USA, in Australia, in everywhere—there’s no school. Even in Congo, there’s no school for learning African music. There’s the Institute National des Artes, but this school is teaching classical music. But classical music is Italian music!

Bel combined his fluency in a regional musical vernacular with an ability in emerging technologies to center his work within a mediated digital network via YouTube videos and DVDs, as well as within a transnational guitarscape of global music genres. With the decline in DVD sales and of physical media generally, Bel has made all the ProSmart tutorials available as digital downloads, though he still considers Facebook

and YouTube to be his principal platforms of audience engagement. I note that these are two platforms with tremendous international reach, particularly as high-quality mobile data becomes increasingly available in all parts of the globe. Bel started his YouTube channel, *Soukous Congo*, in 2006 and has 46.6k subscribers as of March 2023. Since the launch of his first video, ProSmart has dominated this online world of African guitar pedagogy for an international audience. In recent years, another London-based company has entered the market of organized and downloadable international guitar pedagogies. *World Music Method* is run by the English bass guitarist Edd Bateman and features musicians from many global musics, including Jeannot as one of two Congo specialists. Unlike the DVD business and YouTube, data-heavy streaming and download formats are less popular in sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile apps such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and (to a lesser extent, as of this writing) TikTok, are the favored modes of networked connectivity. On these apps, you can see many young Congolese in Kinshasa and the diaspora posting videos, playing their favorite guitar leads and creating some of their own. So much is changing, however, that it is difficult to predict the reach of this new technology in diverse global markets.

On these platforms, we see the popularity of BC Rich and other brands typically associated with hard rock music. There is some cognitive dissonance for the Westerner when watching a video of a young African with an instrument associated with 1980s West Coast metal, and playing intricate major key arpeggiations with clear, bell-like tones.²⁹ Bel observes that “the way Congolese music was developing, they like guitar with long, long, long, long frets. Like twenty-four frets.” The adaptability of the BC Rich is clear, and its popularity further reflects the circulation of these guitars as they entered into economies of mass production and distribution. Watching these videos, it is clear that many amateur musicians now own their instruments, but I asked Bel for his perspective on the change.

I think that’s changed in Kinshasa. Now, many people become promoters. Many people come to Europe, they’ve got money, or are from the government. They will buy equipment and promote a band, and when election comes they will sing for him [the electoral candidate]. It is easy to find electrical guitar there, but for yourself to buy a guitar, it is still expensive. Maybe the cheaper ones—the Chinese—you can find for 100 dollars, 150, but like the Fender, the Gibson—you can’t find it there, you can’t find it. Because it’s too expensive.

Jeannot’s observations of guitar availability, and the affordances and constraints of both local and global production, reflect his formative experiences growing up in the late years of Mobutu’s Zaire as well as his contemporary reality of movement between life in the diaspora and the

bustling music scene of Kinshasa. Further, his groundbreaking work in the digital mediation of African music stakes out significant claims for regional style within the global guitar discourse.

Conclusion

We have looked at the experiences of one player from Congo and one from Ghana to see how their relationship to music—as well as their impact upon music—has been shaped by economies and networks of musicians, guitars, and their peripherals such as books and amplifiers. Equally important is the circulation of method and genre as manifested in models of guitar pedagogy. As outside observers of any music scene, it is important to remember that music is something that people are doing rather than a stable thing, solidified by a few recordings that are available to a global audience. In Aka's story, we get a single—though emblematic—narrative of the way in which musicians and instruments have circulated in Anglophone West Africa. In Bel's story, we see a different set of networks at play in Francophone Central Africa and in the diaspora. In each case, we see networks that move people, instruments, and pedagogical information—the material and the social. The electric guitar came to Africa and absorbed local musical practices, as seen in the mbira music of the Shona, the likembe of the Kasai, or the ngoni and balafon of the Mande. Simultaneously, the electric guitar has influenced the work of Africans on traditional instruments, be it the electrification and use of effects pedals on the jeli's ngoni (Bassekou Kouyate), the use of electromagnetic pickups on lamellophones to accompany traditional funeral music (Konono No. 1), or the sheer volume and distortion of amplified talking drums that accompany Dambe wrestling. Rather than an instrument of colonization or “modernization,” as once critiqued, we can see how the African electric guitar maps local, continental, and global networks of style and sociability.

Notes

1. Eliot Bates, “The Social Life of Musical Instruments,” *Ethnomusicology* 56/3 (2012): 363–395.
2. I recommend Nico's “Ngonga Ebeti” (Lingala for “the bell has struck” or, by extension, “the time has come”) from 1963 as one of many examples of his use of the amplifier.
3. Gary Stewart, *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of Two Congos* (Verso, 2000), pp. 43–44, 88–89.
4. Kofi Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People's Art* (Lawrence Hill and Company, 1969); J.H.K. Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (Victor Gollancz, 1975).
5. Karin Barber, “Popular Arts in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 30/3 (1987): 1–78.
6. Achille Mbembe, “Afropolitanism,” trans. Laurent Chauvet, *Journal of Contemporary African Art* 46 (2020): 56–61.

7. Nketia, *Music of Africa*, p. 241–245.
8. This trade began with material goods such as gold but would develop into an economy of asymmetrical extraction, and ultimately into the transatlantic slave trade. This entanglement of the guitar within economic and cultural systems is complicated, and has been more explored in its use in South America. See Rogério Budasz, “Black Guitar-Players and Early African-Iberian Music in Portugal and Brazil,” *Early Music* 25/1 (2007): 3–21.
9. While much of this music predates the era of audio recording, some early examples can be heard in the 1928 recordings of the Kumasi Trio, and as preserved in the performances of Kwaa Mensah and Koo Nimo. A good place to start is the CD *Vintage Palmwine* (Otoibrando 2003), recorded by John Collins. See also John Collins, “African Guitarism: One Hundred Years of West African Highlife,” *Legon Journal of the Humanities* 17 (2006): 173–196; Christopher Alan Waterman, *Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (University of Chicago, 1990).
10. Banning Eyre, “African Reinventions of the Guitar,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, edited by Victor Anand Coelho (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 57.
11. Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (University of Chicago, 2000), pp. 242–264.
12. Nathaniel Braddock, “You Can’t Run Away from It! The Melody Will Always Appear! Yaa Amponsah and the Rhythm at the Heart of West African Guitar,” unpublished master’s thesis, Tufts University (2020).
13. Gerhard Kubik, “Africa,” in *Grove Music Online* (2001), p. 33.
14. Victor Anand Coelho, “Picking Through Cultures: A Guitarist’s Music History,” in Coelho, *Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, p. 3.
15. A type of talc used by women to freshen up for the weekly social. “Everybody Loves Saturday Night” is an early highlife classic known throughout Anglophone West Africa.
16. Anthony Akablay, interview by Nathaniel Braddock at the Alegria Guest House, Lapaz, Accra, July 31, 2019.
17. While a folkloric form, palmwine is currently enjoying a significant resurgence, as heard in the work of performers such as Kyekyeku and Kwan Pa, and multiple youth collectives on the campus of the University of Ghana and elsewhere.
18. E.T. Mensah is perhaps the best known of the highlife bandleaders, and for guitar bands, see the music of E.K. Nyame, King Onyina, or the excellent (though out of print) collection *I’ve Found My Love (1960’s Guitar Band Highlife Of Ghana)*, issued by John Storm Roberts’ defunct (and difficult to Google) Original Music label.
19. Gerhard Kubik, *Theory of African Music*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago, 1994), p. 344.
20. This promotion through an ensemble’s instruments is also discussed in Waterman, *Jùjú*.
21. This continues to be true, as told to me by the young bassist Bright Osei. Like Nkansah, Osei gravitated to churches to have access to music but found that the local rhythms originating in palmwine were preserved inside the church songs. Smart Nkansah, interview by Nathaniel Braddock in Nkansah’s car, Abrantie Spot, Lapaz, Accra, August 4, 2019; Bright Osei, interview by Nathaniel Braddock at +233 Jazz Club, Accra, August 20, 2019.
22. The JCI20 became the ubiquitous amplifier of sub-Saharan African guitar music in the 1980s. The built-in chorus effect became an aural signifier of the moment, simultaneously signifying a professionalism and cosmopolitanism, as it indexed both financial means and access to circuits of international importation. Banning Eyre discusses the amp in *In Griot Time* (2000), and you see the edge of one in Figure 16.2. We can hear it on countless 1980s recordings from Ali Farka Touré, Franco, King Sunny Ade, as well as East and South African tracks. In addition to the amp’s considerable volume and chorus effect, its solid-state circuitry avoided problems experienced by tube or “valve” based amplifiers in the extreme weather of equatorial Africa.
23. Perhaps not coincidentally, Ghana opened its first oil production site in 2010, bringing new sources of wealth to the country, but also changing the landscape of import and export economics.
24. Anthony Akablay, “Untitled Ghana Guitar Methodology” (photocopy of original manuscript, 1990s).
25. Anthony Akablay, via WhatsApp, text communication, March 22, 2023.
26. Jeannot Bel Musumbu, interview of Jeannot Bel (London, UK) by Nathaniel Braddock (Cambridge, Massachusetts) via WhatsApp, March 29, 2023.

27. Joe Trapido, *Breaking Rocks: Music, Ideology, and Economic Collapse from Paris to Kinshasa* (Berghahn, 2017); Bob W. White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance in Mobutu's Zaire* (Duke University Press, 2008).
28. White, *Rumba Rules*, pp. 1–5.
29. In fact, distortion did become a sonic signifier within fourth generation Congolese music, featured on slightly simplified iterations of melodic guitar leads. In part this is an embrace of the new—a characteristic of much pop music—but it is also a soundmark of the introduction of inexpensive multi-effect units into circulation in the 2000s.

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