



## Africa & The Bass

BY MARLON BISHOP

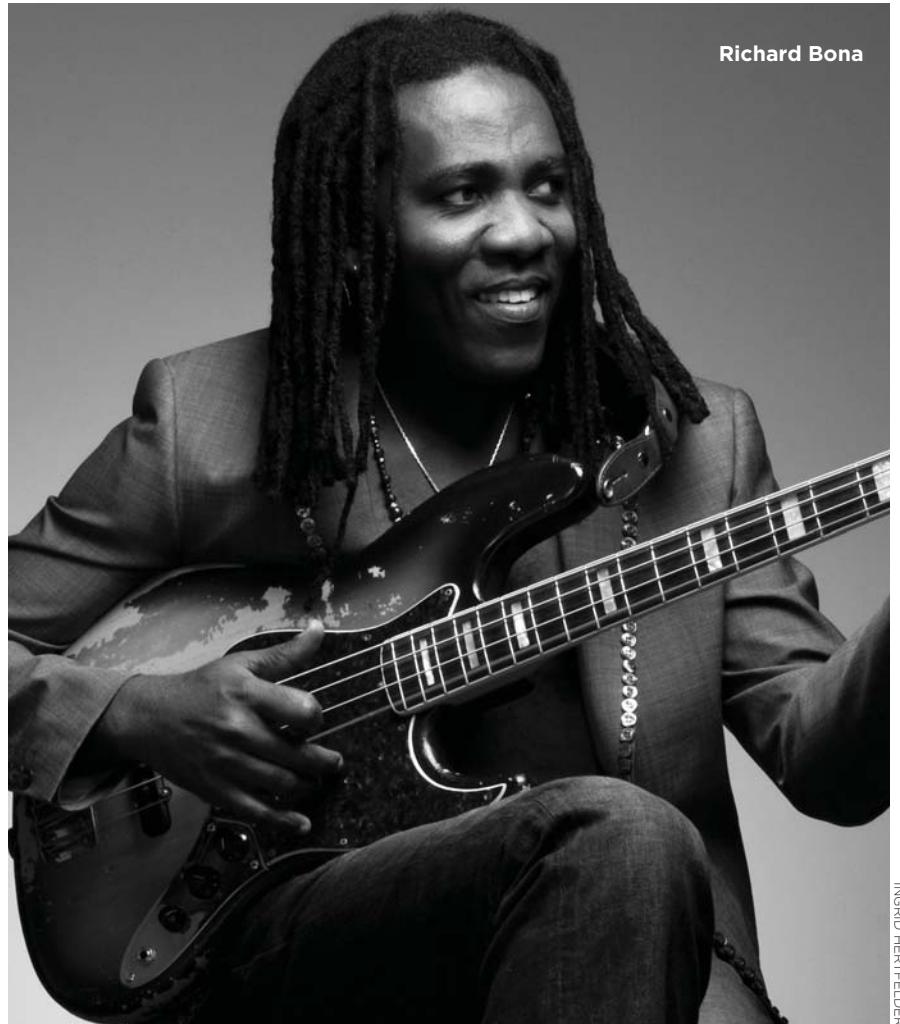
### PART 2: CAMEROON

*Some of the world's most inventive bass playing can be found in Africa's modern pop music. While some players have gotten a share of the international spotlight, most of the continent's great bassists have remained unsung heroes. In this series of articles, we're focusing on four of Africa's most bass-obsessed countries—South Africa (July '10), Cameroon, Congo, and Zimbabwe—and finding out how Africans have been taking the instrument to new places.*

**"IN CAMEROON, WE HAVE TWO** things," says Etienne Mbappé, speaking while backstage in Germany after a performance with guitarist John McLaughlin. "Soccer and bass."

He's not exaggerating. In addition to having one of Africa's best national soccer teams, Cameroon produces more slap-happy, fingerboard-shredding bass virtuosos per capita than any other place on Earth. Of them, Richard Bona is the best known, but he's just one of many Cameroonians in high demand on the jazz-fusion circuit. Etienne Mbappé, Guy N'Sangue, Armand Sabal-Lecco, and Noel Ekwabi are all first-call players on the international scene as well, and back home in Cameroon, every kid grows up wanting to play the bass.

How did this strange, bass-crazy parallel universe come to be in an otherwise inconspicuous West African country? "In Cameroon, we just have a tradition of



Richard Bona

INGRID HERTFELDER

Richard Bona grooving hard and singing. Wow!



Serious funk here from makossa pioneer Manu Dibango.



having a very good bassist,” says Francis Mbappe, another great player working out of New York. “In our music, the bass is in front, even louder than the voice. So when we’re young, we’re already familiar with the sound.”

The country has hundreds of tribal groups, each with its own rhythms, but the biggest popular music style by far is *makossa*, coming from the cosmopolitan port city of Douala. It’s fast-paced, hard-hitting dance music. At its core is a relentless, muscular bass sound that separates the music from other African guitar-pop styles. The genre’s biggest international star is Manu Dibango, whose 1972 song “Soul Makossa” was remixed by Michael Jackson in “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin’” (Think: “mama-se, mama-sa, ma-ma-ko-ssa”); it has also been sampled by such artists as Rihanna, Jay-Z, and Wyclef Jean.

“When you look at makossa,” says Richard Bona, “it’s very simple in terms of harmony and melody, but rhythmically it’s so complex.” Makossa bass lines are made up of an endless barrage of tight 16th-notes (see Ex. 1), with finger-busting fills and shifting accents that keep things interesting. The result is something like an African take on the percussive style of Tower Of Power’s Rocco Prestia. The other Cameroonian genre of note is *bikutsi*, a rhythm in 6/8 or 12/8 popular in Yaoundé,

Cameroon’s capital (see Ex. 2).

While some point to traditional drumming styles as the precursor to Cameroonian bass styles, players like James Jamerson and Bootsy Collins had a lot to do with it as well. Motown, soul, and funk were wildly popular throughout Africa in the 1960s and ’70s, but these sounds hit particularly hard in Cameroon. The hyperactive, contrapuntal bass sound that was happening in America had a big impact on the local scene.

In analyzing the root of his country’s low-end fixation, Etienne Mbappé points to a trio of makossa bass pioneers: Jean Dikoto-Mandengué, Vicky Edimo, and Aladji Touré were all talented Cameroonian bassists working out of Paris in the ’70s, cutting African and Afro-jazz records and playing sessions for French pop artists. They would dabble in the international jazz and funk scene, paving the way for future bassists like Etienne. “We listened to their LPs coming from Paris, and we just copied what they were doing,” he says. “Without knowing it, those guys opened up a bass school without walls.”

It was also a bass school without basses, apparently. Richard Bona estimated that when he was cutting his chops in Cameroon in the 1980s, there were only eight basses in all of Douala, the country’s biggest and richest city. The instruments were owned by club owners, and aspiring

bassists had to go to the venues during the day to practice. Much of the training was onstage, playing dance parties that went on until dawn. “When you don’t have anything, it’s amazing how creative you can be,” says Bona, who first learned on a homemade guitar. None of the bassists I interviewed for this article owned their own basses until they were older and making money playing in France.

Bona sees older causes of the Cameroon bass phenomenon. “Everywhere you go in that country, it’s amazing—the bass frequencies have such a presence in the traditional music,” he says. Bona recalls that when he was young and playing in a *balafon* (traditional African xylophone) group, the 15-piece ensemble refused to play without the bass balafon present. “I think bass must be in our genes,” he jokes.

Today, the bass tradition continues. In a fairly poor country that provides limited opportunities for young people, the handful of superstar fusion bassists (after the big-time soccer players) are some of the country’s greatest international success stories. The example motivates kids to sit down and practice, and gives bass hopefuls a mark to beat. Still, don’t expect a real bass school to open up in Cameroon anytime soon. “I never took a bass lesson in my life,” says Etienne Mbappé proudly. “And I don’t know a Cameroonian who has.” **BP**

### Ex. 1

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### Ex. 2

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