

WOOD

AFRICA & THE BASS Part 3: The Polyrhythmic Basses Of Zimbabwe & Congo

BY MARLON BISHOP

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 (September '10), and this month, Zimbabwe and Congo—and finding out how Africans have been taking the instrument to new places.

N'Gouma Lokito's right hand dances spider-like between the four strings. He's finger-picking the bass, his thumb deftly moving between the lower three strings while his index finger answers with commentary from the G string. Lokito is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and he plays the bass in a way that nobody has ever thought of doing in America. By taking ideas from local instruments, African players like Lokito have come up with some surprising technical and conceptual approaches to the bass. In this last installment of the series, we'll check out a few styles inspired by traditional African musical ideas.

Few would argue that the greatest African musical idea of all is polyrhythm. At its most basic, polyrhythm is the combination of two or more rhythms happening at the same time, and it's a common element of music in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, if you have one musician playing in 2/4 and another playing in 3/4, you

get a two-against-three feel. This is common enough in the West, but in African music, the tension between the two-feel and three-feel is constant, driving the music. African musicians play with that ambiguity, slipping easily between grooves without committing to one or the other.

The polyrhythmic, 12/8 bass part in **Ex. 1** hovers between those duple and triple feels. In the first half of each bar, it has a quarter-note triplet against two dotted quarters. At the same time, the bass plays against eighth-note triplets in the hi-hat (represented on the bottom staff), generating two levels of the three-against-two polyrhythm. The line is from a song by Thomas Mapfumo, the father of Zimbabwe's guitar-driven pop music. Mapfumo's music comes directly from the traditional repertoire of the *mbira*, a metal-keyed thumb piano. With just two thumbs and one index finger, mbira players execute a melody, a counter-melody, and a bass line at once, all in glorious polyrhythm. In Zimbabwean pop music, those parts are translated onto electric guitars and, of course, the bass.

Charles Makokova, Mapfumo's principal bassist through the years, pioneered a style that imitates the mbira bass parts,

preserving the technical quirks of the instrument. Mbira players often strike their lowest note at the top of each measure, no matter the chord, leading to lots of inversions in the harmonies. And due to the challenge of playing melodies and bass parts at once with only three fingers, mbira bass tones often hit on the offbeats.

In Kinshasa, the booming capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, bassists have developed a unique playing technique. Congolese music—known variously as *rumba*, *soukous*, or *kwassa-kwassa*—is the most popular sound throughout Africa; it combines a laid-back, inherently danceable beat with dense layers of interlocking guitars, each playing melodic fragments that fit together like puzzle pieces. While Congolese music may not come directly from any specific traditional sound, there are old-school concepts at play. “In Congo, players play their guitars like drums, sometimes even thinking about particular drum patterns and sounds,” says Bob White, an expert on Congolese music who teaches anthropology at the University of Montreal. “Think of guitars like drums, and you get all kinds of wonderfully rich polyrhythmic patterns and counterpoint between the

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