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Africa & The Bass

Part 1: South Africa

BY MARLON BISHOP



Bakithi Kumalo on the Graceland Tour

HARRISON FUNK

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. Over several issues, we'll focus on four of Africa's most bass-obsessed countries—South Africa, Cameroon, Congo, and Zimbabwe—and find out how Africans have been taking the instrument to new places.

“There’s no good music without bass,” says Bakithi Kumalo, the South African bass guru, matter-of-factly. “Especially if you’re

gonna play African music. The drums might be the heart of African music, but the bass is its body. The bass surrounds

the music.”

Home to over one billion people, over 50 countries, and over 1,000 local languages, the immense diversity found within Africa makes it difficult to generalize about the continent and its music. But there is little doubt that Kumalo is right: There is a special place for the low end in Africa. African bassists are rarely content to sit

back, lock in with the kick drum, and outline the harmonies. The bass plays a more active melodic and rhythmic role in African music, often dancing around the beat in counterpoint to the rest of the band and leaping around the neck to execute slippery 16th-note licks. And African bass is usually pushed way up to the front of the mix for all to appreciate.

For the most part, bass instruments were not a part of traditional African ensembles before colonization. There wasn't any need for them; the bottom-end support of harmonic movement was a fundamentally European musical concept. One exception is the ground-bow, known as the *kalinga* in Southern Africa. It was made by tying a long gut string to a tree sapling on one end and anchoring the other in the ground, using the earth itself as a resonator. The player adjusted the pitch by pulling on the sapling and changing the string tension, a design that reappeared in the Mississippi Delta in the form of the washtub bass.

Musical ideas may have flowed from Africa to the Americas during the slave trade, but they went back the other way in the 20th century as Black American sounds came to Africa on LPs and over airwaves to influence music in the motherland. In the 1950s, a variant on the washtub bass sprung up in the sprawling townships of apartheid South Africa: the tea-chest bass, a one-string instrument made from the big

plywood boxes used throughout the former British Empire to ship tea. The tea-chest was used to accompany *kwela*, a sort of stripped-down jazz played on penny-whistles and guitar. A few elite dance orchestras boasted upright basses, but the instruments were far too expensive for most South Africans.

The country's greatest bass innovator was also literally the first black man in South Africa to own an electric bass. In 1962, more than a decade after Leo Fender rolled out the first P-Basses, Joseph Makwela bought a second-hand instrument from a white South African session player. He soon became the bassist for the Makhona Tsohle Band, which backed artists on the Mavuthela record label, the "South African Motown" that crafted the soul-inflected, electrified pop sound known as *mbaqanga* (see Ex. 1). Makwela's style would profoundly affect future generations of bassists. "When we started to hear Joseph Makwela, it blew us away," says Bakithi Kumalo. "We had no idea what he was doing. It was incredible."

Under mid-tempo, four-on-the-floor drum grooves and sunny I-IV-V progressions, Makwela would pick heavy, rhythmic lines full of melodic fragments played high on the neck, characterized by a trebly, attack-heavy tone. However, what stands out most in Makwela's lines are the slides: up and down the neck, inflecting nearly every note and giving the instrument

an almost human voice. According to Kumalo, voices may have been his inspiration. "I think Makwela's lines came from a capella vocals," he says, referring to the all-male choral groups ubiquitous in South Africa. "He would listen to the guy singing on the low end, and just grab the part"

After Makwela, Bakithi Kumalo would become the country's most renowned bass man. Growing up in Johannesburg on a *mbaqanga* diet, he would later translate South African ideas to international rock on Paul Simon's *Graceland* [Warner Bros., 1988], a classic bass album that prominently features Kumalo's meaty fretless Washburn 820. He bought the bass simply because it was the cheapest one he could find at the time, but with those big slides engrained in his musical DNA, it was a perfect fit.

Kumalo seasons his playing with tasty, finger-busting licks, showing an evolution of Makwela's high-register melody concept; listen to the fills on Paul Simon's "Diamonds On the Soles of Her Shoes," for example (see October '07 for a transcription). For Kumalo, it's all about playing the right thing at the right time. "When I play fills, I don't think about a lot of notes. I think about singing the song. It's like you are answering and telling them, 'Hey, I hear what you say, here's some of my stuff'"

You could call it call-and-response—and that's one of the oldest African musical ideas around. **BP**

Ex. 1

♩ = 100

Measures 1-5: G, C, D, G, C, D

Measures 6-10: D, G, C, D, G

Fingering: T (Treble), B (Bass)