Musical Restitution: Reconstructing the Roots of Jazz and the Blues

Frederick Gooddall, "Song of the Nubian Slave" (1863)

The slave pictured plays the West African gabu – precursor to the kora.

By Julie Moore

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All classical musicians know of Guido – the 10th century monk who invented the staff and solfege (do-re-mi…); they know the sound of a Gregorian chant. But how many jazz musicians know of Sumanguru Kante, the Sosso king who brought the balafon to his court as a sacred instrument in the early part of the 13th century? That balafon - later taken as a war prize by Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire - launched a musical revolution, the effects of which are still felt today. All classical musicians understand the early history of Western music, but how many jazz artists know the pulse (or could even find the pulse) in ancient Mande music?

Evidence suggests not only a strong West African root, but indeed Manding - and even more specifically Malinké/ Bambara - roots to the music in Black communities throughout the South just after slavery ended. Jazz studies programs in universities today generally acknowledge a West African root to jazz music, but the exploration seems to stop there. Jazz musicians are not yet making good use of this information. West Africa remains stuck in the ethnomusicology department, where students study it from afar. Malinké music history, which spans back to the tenth century, is not included in jazz history textbooks; Mande music theory is not taught.

This paper is not intended to fully explore Mande music history and theory, though it touches on both subjects. (For more information regarding the theory of West African music, please see my paper *Space in West African* Music.) Rather, it was written to highlight the *significance* of Mande music both in Africa and in America, and to assert that it possesses a music theory made of a different language than Western music theory. This paper also argues for the necessity of including Mande music theory in jazz history. We modern Western musicians must offer restitution to West African musicians, by

acknowledging that our modern music is based on their music theory. To grow as musicians, and to truly understand our American roots as musicians, we must endeavor to understand West African music theory.

Manding music is the mother of West African music. This same rich music came across the oceans to be played on slave ships and on plantations. Its melody and rhythm works in a way that's unattainable when following the standards of Western music theory. Mande music is the very root of what blended with Western influence to form jazz in the Southern states just over 100 years ago. When this music crashed onto our shores 300 years ago, we had no idea how lasting of an impact it would have. However, today we are obliged to include it in our jazz history. We would grow as musicians by letting our jazz students experience it physically and aurally as they work toward their degrees.

In America today, there are a wealth of Mande musicians living among us, and many more still in Africa who would love to come here. But it is up to the academic elite among American university jazz programs to lift Mande music up to the university level, with a commitment to learning about what I like to call the original Cradle of Jazz.

During the slave trade, in all Southern states but Louisiana there was a concerted effort to deconstruct the music brought by slaves. But stripping instruments from the slaves did not stop their music. A rich culture of vocal field and spiritual songs arose, while in Louisiana drums, rattles, and gourd "banjos" continued to be played much as when in Africa. As drums and flutes were discouraged by slave owners, the softer banjo was seen throughout all of the States as an instrument of the early Black American.

What was the underlying framework for this banjo-based music, and the songs in the field?

In more recent decades, there has been a wealth of new information available from Creole and slave historians, as well as ethnomusicologists. History reflects an unbroken lineage of banjo-like instruments from 10th century Manding culture in West Africa straight to the beginnings of American blues and jazz. Not only the instrumentation, but also the musical style of Mande lute/harp cultures is clearly reflected in jazz.

Slaves undoubtedly came from a host of different African groups, and influences from each of these ethnicities still linger in America. *But there is a tremendous body of evidence giving the Mande people great cultural, musical, and linguistic weight in the Southern states during the slave trade.*

The Mande are a very large and influential ethnicity found through West Africa. The history can get a little confusing, so here is a quick summary. Anyone who is Manding is simply a person whose language is in the large Mande language group, including among many others the Mandinka people, the Malinké, and the Bambara. The Mande founded the Ghana Empire which dominated West Africa until the 11th century and then later the Mali Empire in 1235. The Mali Empire - rich from trading cotton - in its prime spanned modern-day Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and northern Ghana.[i] One of the most outstanding characteristics of the Malinké is their musical culture. Malinké music deeply impacted the Manding culture, and its influence spread to neighboring racial groups, like the Wolof.

In fact, music is at the heart of the story that begins the reign of the Malinké Empire. One day, the Sosso king Sumanguru Kante, found a balafon in the woods, left by the spirits of the forest. When he played it, it worked like a news machine – Kante would receive information about the world around him through the music that came out of the balafon. He loved this balafon and, taking it back to his palace, decreed that anyone who dared to play it would be killed. Kante was a power-hungry king, intent on ruling all of West Africa, and had been ravaging the land with war.

Meanwhile, the rightful heir to the Mande thrown – Sundiata Keita – was living in exile away from the Mande kingdom, while his younger half-brother and step-mother ruled the land. Keita's personal jeli[1], Balla Fasseke, had been torn from his master by Keita's step-mother and sent to serve Sumanguru Kante. Balla Fasseke one day discovered Kante's balafon and began to play it. Kante was enraged, but was unable to kill him because the music was so beautiful. Through this experience, Balla Fasseke became Sumanguru Kante's jeli, though in his heart he always remained loyal to Sundiata Keita.

When Keita, from exile, heard that Kante was descending upon the Malinké people as his next target for conquest, he summoned warriors from all over West Africa, and mounted an epic battle with Kante. Balla Fasseke found Sundiata Keita on the battlefield and told him the magical secrets needed to defeat Sumanguru Kante. At just 18 years of age, Keita defeated Kante, came out of exile, and began his reign as king of the Mali Empire.

[1] A Jeli is a Manding story teller, music maker, and history keeper – a walking library of sorts. The French call these people griots.

As a trophy of war, Kante's balafon was taken to Keita's palace, where Balla Fasseke remained as Sundiata Keita's jeli. It is claimed that the original balafon still exists, now 800 years old. Today it is called the Sosso-Balafon, and it was added to the world heritage list by UNESCO in 2004. It is kept in its own house in northern Guinea on the border with Mali. A very elderly man holds the keys to the house, and on special occasions the Sosso-Balafon is taken out and played.[ii]

Ever since Sundiata Keita's victory, the balafon has been the special instrument of jelis throughout West Africa. In the 15th century, the 21-stringed harp-like kora was developing in modern-day Guinea Bissau. It traveled through Senegal and the Gambia before reaching Mali, where it too immediately became a favorite instrument of the jelis.

The Mali Empire began to decline in the early 16oo's, just when the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was gearing up. Mande influence soon turned up all over the southern United States.

The Gullah language still spoken on the South Carolina coast is derived almost entirely from Mande languages. In fact, on the plantations, "Massa" was not a mispronunciation of the English word "Master," but rather the correct pronunciation of the Mande word "Mansa" – widely used in the Malinké Empire – meaning "King" or "boss."[iii]

The Mande were ethnically preferred among slave traders for their skills in rice cultivation, and valued on slave ships for their musical skills. Indeed, it was the Mande racial group, the Mende, who famously took over their slave ship *Amistad.*[iv]

Malinké and the similar Bambara music, specifically, brought a huge influence musically to the Southern states. The Jola scholar Daniel Jatta from Gambia "asserts

that the name banjo comes from the Malinka word bangoe, for the local papyrus used in making the long neck of the akonting banjo and that resembles Asian bamboo in its qualities of hardness."[v]

In South Carolina in 1721, the population was estimated at 18,000 people. 12,000 of them were African or of African heritage, plus there were an additional 1,000 new slaves a year coming in from Africa.[vi] South Carolina slave traders "preferred above all to import Senegambians which meant principally Bambara [a Mande people] and Mandinka… As a second choice, they took groups from the Gold Coast [also Mande or Mande influenced]… Because the South Carolina slave market supplied many of the Africans for neighboring colonies, a bias toward Senegambia and Sierra Leone can be seen in Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida."[vii]

In Louisiana in 1746, whites numbered 3,200, and blacks 4,730. Louisiana, from the time the first 200 slaves were brought there in 1719, had an edict issued for Senegambian slaves who had a reputation as skilled rice farmers. By the end of the 18th century when Louisiana put an early end to importing slaves, the state was laden with a concentration of Wolof (an ethnic group that has lived side by side with the Malinké for centuries, sharing mutual influence) and Bambara (a large Mande racial group).[viii] Amazingly, there was even a Bambara interpreter working in the New Orleans court.

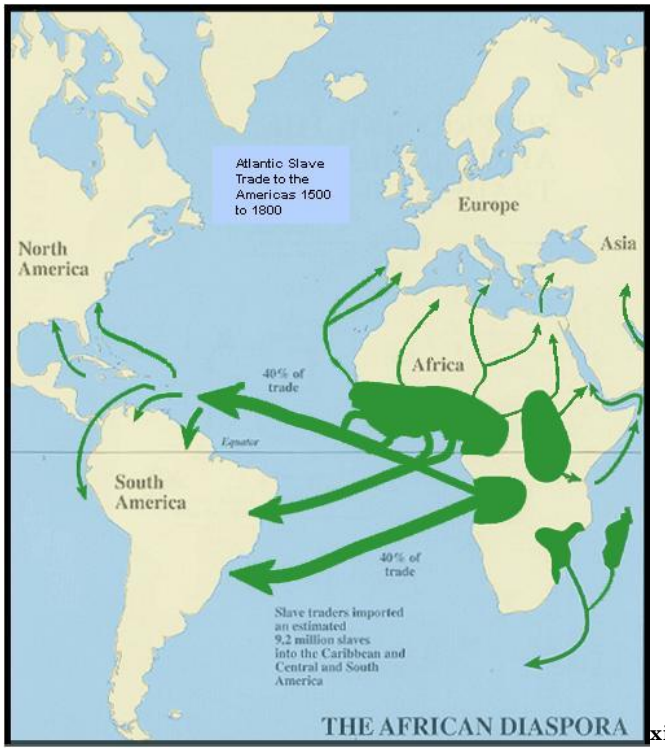
Mark Gridley, author of Jazz Styles, defines *jazz* as music made of swing and improv, played over preset arrangements. [ix] A more concise definition of *West African* music could not be given. West Africa has enjoyed its own highly rich and complex musical language starting at least 400 years before Palestrina, over in Europe, convinced the Church that polyphony was an acceptable form of music. Is it possible that the ears

of early Americans lacked the sophistication required to interpret (and truly hear, even) the complex musical language being expressed among the slaves?

How much more freedom would jazz gain if we encouraged today's students to delve into West African cyclical melo-rhythm? *We are shortchanging today's jazz students when we ask them to consider swing and polyrhythm only by the standards of Western music theory*. An entire chapter in our music history texts is missing! Mande influence plausibly dominated the African music culture in America where the blues and jazz developed. And many West African rhythms are hundreds of years old. Modern students of the music learn many of the rhythms that would have been familiar during, and well before, the slave trade.

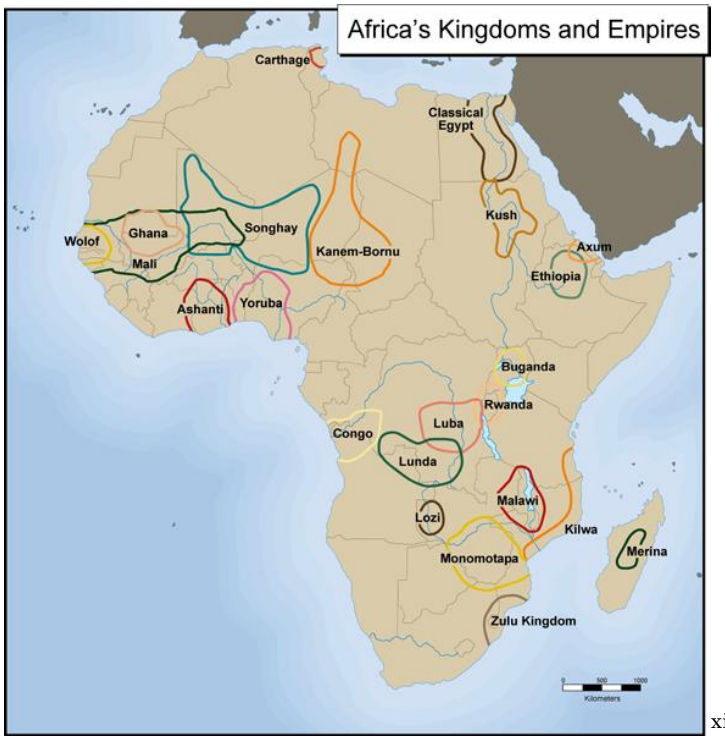
I was able to interview Guinean djembe-legend Mamady Keita for this project. We were looking at the painting The Old Plantation (shown on pg 16 of this paper), and I asked him if he thought West Africans would recognized the music being made in that picture. His response was, "If a Malinké person saw the slaves playing music, they wouldn't know the name of the song – because it would be generations later – but they would say, 'Yes, that's *our* music.' Maybe the time would be the same."[x]

West African music is based on the push and pull of complex, layered musical cycles with soloists taking turns over the top – also the unmistakable marks of jazz and the blues. Mande people had a huge influence throughout West Africa, through cultural and geographical dominance, and that dominance transpired to the Southern slave-holding states.



[xi]

The preceding map shows projected exports of the accounted slave trade. The following map shows the size of the Mali Empire. Notice how it shares so much of the region marked by slave trade, and how it is by far the largest-reaching Empire in West Africa. The reach of Mande people is much larger than that even of the Mali Empire.



[xii]

Mali's empire encompassed the head of the Senegal River, and much of the Niger – an influential point from which musical concepts could literally float downstream, penetrating other regions of West Africa.

Leading Blues authority Paul Oliver, after decades of study, concluded that early African American music had its roots in West Africa, in the vicinity of the Mali Empire. He says: "Recalling that [West Africans of the Savannah region were]… identified in Congo Square, I feel jazz authorities, too should be looking to the Savannah… The Congo has been a romantic 'source' of African slaves and their presumed legacy of music in jazz history… In the critical centuries when the patterns of… working the slaves were established, the Congo had little part to play in the British and American slave trade… Statistics as to the total shipment of slaves… reveal a large proportion from the Congo – but relatively few went to North America."[xiii]

The Congo… It would indeed be shortsighted to give such a thorough explanation of the prehistory of jazz and the blues without mentioning the ancient Bantu of Central Africa. They are one of the largest racial groups in Africa, with wide-spread impact from Uganda to the Congo. Their primary instruments included bells, trumpets, drum, thumb piano, flute, and marimba. The marimba traces its origins to the Malinké balafon.[xiv]

There are records spanning the 15th-17th centuries of Congo natives playing skillfully on imported Portuguese drums.[xv] The Portuguese and Congolese had a history of cultural exchange and mutual influence even before the Portuguese began exporting Angolans in the slave trade. The Afro-Brazilian culture developed when the Portuguese colonized Brazil with primarily Bantu/ Congo slaves. Today Brazil still has the highest

concentration of blacks in the world outside of Africa. A large number of Angolan slaves also traveled to North America, primarily in the mid 16th century and the mid-18th to early 19th centuries.[xvi]

And the Yoruba people, primarily of today's Nigeria, played a huge role in the formation of Afro-Cuban music, though their presence was noticeably absent from the population of the slaves in North America.

It would be foolish to deny Congolese *elements* in early African American music, or the lesser influences of other African cultures in American history. But it does seem clear that the West African Mande – being in large proportion and high demand, especially early on in the slave trade – were positioned to have a huge impact in Black America, and that the large portion of Malinké within that population would particularly influence early Black America musically. In regards to this theory, Mamady Keita says, "I totally agree, because look at the Manding Kingdom in West Africa. The music was really big and really strong. Even though slaves may have come from all over Africa, I think they may have been influenced by the Manding."[xvii] This assertion is further supported by the steady trail left by the banjo.

Indeed, while Central and South America were clearly influenced by African balafon music (the slaves introduced the marimba to South America), Oliver's research shows that **blues melodic sources are best traced to West Africa's stringed instruments**, pointing out that the stringed instruments with the "melodic-rhythmic independence" of both hands creating "contrasting bass and treble lines," and the most

virtuostic musicians of these instruments derive "without questions in Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali."[xviii]

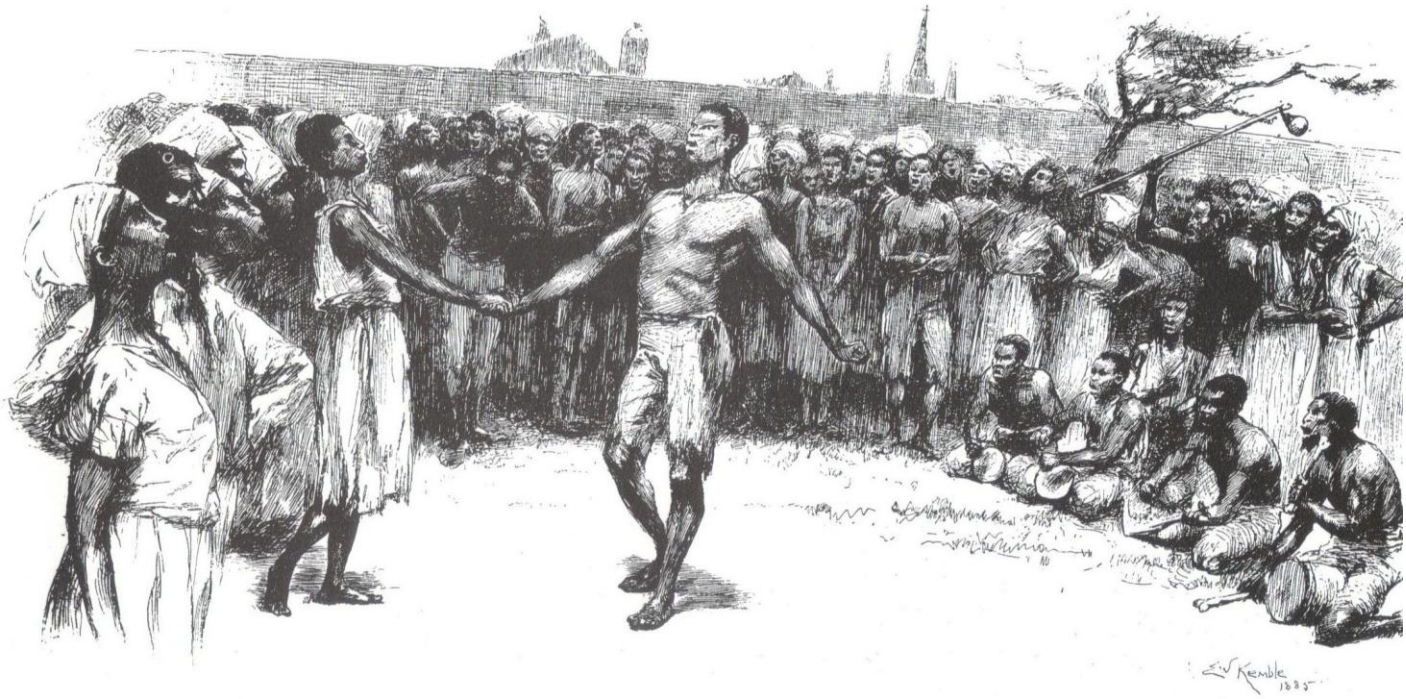
Oliver then goes on to describe the unity of West African musicians despite geographical barriers. He said of the musicians at London's 1972 Manding Conference that "after a short while, all griots [from Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and elsewhere] can play together, even though they may come from regions hundreds of miles apart. That this would give them a considerable edge over musicians who were outside their culture is obvious… Furthermore they play themes of narratives that are centuries old, so that the continuity of their tradition in West Africa is not in question."[xix]

But earlier Oliver mentioned Congo Square. We must examine this place for more evidence regarding the roots of jazz and the blues…

Congo Square was designated as "an official site for slave dances" by the New Orleans' City Council in 1817.[xx] Think of the tremendous amount of music coming from the slaves at that time for the City Council to bother with a permissive ordinance! It has been estimated that over 500 slaves (a very significant percentage of Louisiana's blacks) arrived each Sunday, with the women setting up a market atmosphere.

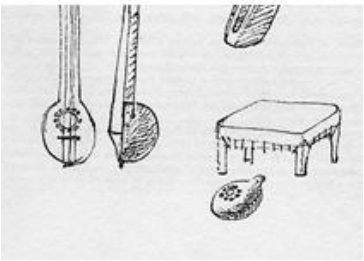
New Orleans' George Washington Cable (1844-1925) is known as the first modern southern writer, and the most important southern artist of his time.[xxi] He documented Congo Square, taking extra pains in his writings to specifically describe the Mandingo, Sosso, and Guinean participants, and how the new American-born blacks were also in attendance, proudly intermingling[xxii]. The Mandingos were so important to Cable that his 1886 article reminiscing on the Congo Square of the early 1800's begins with a portrait of an unidentified man, simply titled "A Mandingo."

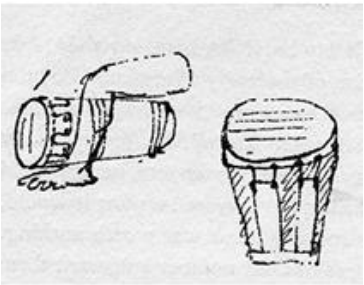
Regarding the actual performances in Congo Square, Cable could just as easily be describing a traditional Malinké dun-dun ba – non-participants standing in a wide circle around the musicians – including drums and banjo – while solo dancers took turns in the middle of the circle. Here is an artist's rendition of these gatherings from 1885.[xxiii]



An anonymous writer delivered this sound bite in 1884, regarding Sundays in Congo Square in 1816-17: *"The Minah would not dance near the Congo, nor the Mandringos near the Gangas… Each set has its own orchestra. The instruments were a peculiar kind of banjo, made of Louisana gourd, several drums made of a gum-stump dug out, with a sheep-skin head, and beaten with the fingers…"*[xxiv]

French architect Benjamin Latrobe wrote about Congo Square in 1819, and even left us sketches of what he saw:





> The music consisted of two drums and a stringed instrument. An old man sat astride of a cylindrical drum about a foot in diameter, and beat it with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand and fingers… The most curious instrument, however, was a stringed instrument which no doubt was imported from Africa. On the top of the finger board was the rude figure of a man in a sitting posture, and two pegs behind him to which the strings were fastened. The body was a calabash. It was played upon by a very little old man, apparently 80 or 90 years old….[Another instrument] which from the color of the wood seemed new, consisted of a block cut into something of the form of a cricket bat with a long & deep mortise down the center. This thing made a considerable noise, being beaten lustily on the side by a short stick. In the same orchestra was a square drum, looking like a stool…"[xxv]

In Malinké culture, it makes sense for the "banjo" player to be the eldest. The jelis, who are the primary players of the balafon and stringed instruments, are West Africa's story keepers and story tellers. They would naturally be leading an ensemble, on the most melodic instrument. Latrobe's description of the "cricket bat" sounds remarkably like a Guinean krin, and the square drum is the description of the sikko drum popular in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Further pinpointing the early American banjo to Malinké influence is its gourd body. Mande music expert Eric Charry explains that there are two main kinds of West African harps: "those with calabash [gourd] resonators, which are primarily found in the savannah region, and those with wooden box resonators, primarily found further south in the forest regions."[xxvi] The Mali Empire encompassed the savannah region.

It has long since been known that slave ship captains valued string players on board to keep up the spirits of the captives and provide music to accompany exercise. One instrument particularly valued was the khalam[xxvii] – a stringed instrument originating in Mali, and known by many names, including ngoni.

Malinké jelis date the ngoni back to the 11th century, one century after the bolon (a bass stringed instrument made of gourd) arose, marking the beginning of their music history.[xxviii] Despite America and Europe's preconceived notions about the percussive nature of West African music, it has its roots in a tonal instrument.

Malinké music began with cyclical melodies on stringed gourds. In the traditional music itself, it is string gourd melodies that form the reflective rhythms of the djembe and dun dun drums. These stringed gourds boarded the slave ships crossing the ocean, and were then played in Congo Square. It is stringed gourds that hold the key to jazz and the blues. Even Thomas Jefferson, wrote in 1787 of the African Americans, "the instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa."[xxix]

The Old Plantation, ca. 1790-1800. Anonymous.[xxx] …An early portait of slave life depicts a banjo and gourd drum accompanying a field dance, similar to the Malinke region's Kassa.

Rather than continuing to marginalize the sophisticated roots of jazz and the blues, it makes much more sense to assume that this slave music was a highly organized product of Malinké music theory, but nonetheless a product that the European/American ear couldn't, at that time, comprehend. With this understanding, Western music theory can only be a partial lens through which to approach jazz and the blues.

With modern eyes, it is now easy to see evidence of continuity from Malinké music to early African American music, from the time slaves first arrived in 1619. Finally, by the early 18th century, some blacks began to gain their freedom, while other slave families began to be broken apart by inter-state slave trading. By the mid-19th century, the various African subdivisions began assimilating, and American influences on the African American culture began to be felt.[xxxi]

Even then, though, Malinké echoes were still strong. Robert Goffin was the first serious jazz writer – noting the music's importance from England a decade before anyone

in America took notice. In 1946 he wrote, "By 1880 jazz was in gestation… What had become of the music which had set the Negroes dancing in Congo Square? …[During this early period of jazz, the drums took an early precedence, and] the banjo appeared as the indispensable instrument it was to be for the early jazz orchestra."[xxxii]

In 1946, Goffin defined jazz as *"a new form of music based on rhythm,"* versus the melodic lines of classical music.[xxxiii]

For support, Goffin then quotes a Creole authority: *"*"The essential thing in pure Negro music, as is known, is to be sought in rhythm. The melodic phrases… consist of endless repetitions of short series of notes… [N]o European shall escape the impression which these rhythms make. They literally bore themselves into the consciousness of the listener."[xxxiv]

With all we know now, we must correct Goffin and say that *jazz is a new take on a very old form of music based on cyclical melo-rhythms.*

We can now see the dominance Malinké music had throughout West Africa, and its strong influence in America's early Black culture. But what is it, exactly, that West African music has to offer the modern jazz student that is beyond the scope of Western music theory?

West African music is blessed with rich melodic and rhythmic roots. Some worry that the populariry of the djembe in the West helps the stereotype persist that West African *music* and West African *rhythm* are one and the same. But other musicians, like Mamady Keita, see that Western interest in the djembe is only leading to a broader understanding of West African music as a whole.[xxxv]

Though West African music is by no means solely percussive, in regards to the rhythmic aspects of music theory, West African music is in a league of its own.

Famadou Konate, the world-renowned master of the Malinké drumming tradition, speaks of an "elementary pulsation" in music, which defines a "micro time," which then is felt in larger "cycle lengths," which can differ a good deal from each individual instrument's part length.[xxxvi] Indeed, it is learning to use rhythm properly with an understanding of the elementary pulse that is most challenging to Westerners.

This type of vocabulary doesn't come up in Western music theory until one enters the realm of computer-automated transcription of percussive music. In this science, Famadou's elementary pulse is called a "tatum," which is "the lowest metrical level…the pulse series that most highly coincidences with all note onsets."[xxxvii] The elementary pulse/ tatum indicates that there is a smallest note value running silently through all music, and, in the case of West African music, only as long as one stays within the boundaries of the tatum is one playing in time. This understanding is crucial both for solo and ensemble West African musicians.

Demonstrated by the elongation and stretchiness of Western performance, in the West, music and dance are events that happen in periods of leisure, when the work is done. In West Africa, music is within people at all times – the underlying tatum of life. Think for a moment of the position your body would be in while harvesting a crop, or washing clothes – these positions of straight backs, dropped hips, bent knees, and outstretched arms define the dance of the Malinké. Forgive the boldness and crudeness, but wouldn't this cultural "sense of tatum" also give rise to the old stereotype in America that all black people have rhythm?

It is precisely by being able to feel time in its most minute fractioning that so much freedom is gained in improvisation. The tatum is also what makes the short, melo-rhythmic cycles of Malinké music much more complex than the Western ear assumes. When Westerners try to play West African music, all too often they miss the precision of the tatum, instead just trying to fit a part into the larger cadence. *Just as Western musicians cannot tolerate "pretty much in tune," West African musicians cannot tolerate "pretty much in time."* Without an ensemble that plays in the pocket at all times, a soloist cannot trust that his interpretation of the piece can be heard correctly.

Whereas in the West it is an orchestra's job to ebb and flow with the soloist, in West Africa it is the ensemble's job to *never* divert from awareness of the smallest pulse. Otherwise, the ensemble is compromised and the soloist is crippled.

Gunther Schuller, in Early Jazz, acknowledges this aspect of West Africa music theory when he writes of missionary and musicologist Arthur Morris Jones' experiences trying to play in time with his African friends. Jones, time and time again, was able to prove how his African music partners could hear the smallest rhythmic deviations – as small as *one twenty-fifth* of a second. Gunther quotes Jones as saying, "'When we Europeans imagine we are beating strict time, the African will merely smile at the 'roughness' of our beating.'"[xxxviii]

If the possibilities of a musician's solo are limited to how tightly his band mates are playing together, and West African musicians demonstrate a unique ability to play against an infinitesimally small tatum, it seems only logical that jazz musicians – whose worth is based on the tightness of their music and the freeness of their improv – would hunger for this knowledge. We should be giving them this knowledge when they come to study jazz in the universities!

Once the tatum is understood, one may delve deeper into West African music theory. With an understanding of the tatum, one can begin to conceptualize that West African music is a music of *space*, not time. Western music theorists, from the time of Boethius in the 6th century, have relied on the mathematical, man-made measurements of time to create both rhythm and melody in music. West African music reaches beyond the confines of man, by paying no attention to time, and instead focusing on the special relationships of the different parts in an ensemble. Through this relationship to space over time, both the thick polyvocality and the rich improvisation of West African music is attained. (Again, these ideas are expanded upon in my *Space in West African Music.*)

West African rhythms are classified as "mesoperiodic:" "a pattern of typically one or two measures length deliver[ing] the guideline for the other musicians, comparable to a metronome in Western music."[xxxix] The mesoperiod defines the framework of a piece of music, but in a larger context to the music than a metronome can. So, as each musician is sure to place each of their notes on a tatum, they rely on the mesoperiod (often larger than their own cycle) to connote the broader feel of each piece.

Adding to the complexity of this music is the concept of "cross-rhythm," which Jones introduced in 1934. Cross-rhythm, which is often found in West African music, refers to cyclical melo-rhythms that, though played together, "their starting place, main accents and, or beat reference points "cross", that is, that they do not coincide."[xl]

Next comes the shape of the piece of music being performed, and how an ensemble punctuates its own repetition with various "breaks" and bridges.

In the West, one only sees the complex jargon of "tatums" and "mesoperiods" when explaining attempts to "improve the recognition of the three rhythmic features"[xli] of

tempo, micro time, and time signature by automated transcription. In the end, West African music's temporal precision even eludes computers. The scientists admit "for West African music, an assignment of the rhythmic features is often ambiguous." *In other words, Western computers – let alone the naked Western ear – can scarcely break down the pulse of music as finely as West African musicians naturally hear it.* What's more, when a computer system tries to notate West African music, the *swing* of the piece is far beyond the scope of the transcription program. Herein we see that written music is an insufficient way to convey this music. *Thus its oral tradition is not the result of cultural deficiencies, but in truth is the only accurate way to impart West African music.*

West African music is, indeed, profound in a way not often expressed in Western music theory. And jazz – what an amazing, truly American art form – the best combination of the tonal precision of the Western world and the rhythmic precision of the West African world.

Grout's A History of Western Music – the standard textbook for music history students – speaks of George Gershwin's "attempt to combine the language of jazz and Lisztian Romanticism,"[xlii] and Aaron Copeland's use of jazz. But Grout never explains what jazz is. The standard The New Harvard Dictionary of Music fares a little better. It devotes quite a bit of print to describing jazz, but only begins when it was already formed – when white jazz bands began recording around 1916. The Harvard Dictionary waves off the roots of this "black church" music as "hazy."[xliii]

It is time for jazz students to have proper knowledge of their heritage, beginning with this definition: **Jazz is a modern manifestation of an ancient music based on**

interlocking, cyclical, melo-rhythmic parts, topped by improvisational solos. Were today's jazz students set free by being taught to properly feel West African music the way their predecessors did, the resulting creative output would be strongly felt.

Today, there are a wealth of West African musicians who have established themselves in America, but the majority of their work often comes from elementary school performances and workshops, along with teaching West African music as a hobby to adults. Their plight is reminiscent of the 18th century patron-dependent composers in Europe who struggled to find recognition for their now-lauded work. Concert halls call on West African performance groups when they want to inject a multi-cultural element into their schedule, but as of yet West African music has struggled to be treated by the European and American ear as the complex, layered, hugely influential language that it is. Most of us just don't know how to hear it.

Wouldn't you cringe if Yo Yo Ma were invited to some new grand land, but instead of performing in a single concert hall, he spent all of his time teaching "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to 4th graders? Currently, many Malinké musicians in the West are in exactly this plight. Why? Perhaps because most American music scholars have not acknowledged the relevancy and reach of Malinké music in the United States.

Just a small, but well-presented inclusion in music history texts of the West; a "Malinké authority" in every serious jazz department – these steps would go a long way towards filling in the gaping hole at the end of America's musical timeline, and towards paying musical restitution to this rich heritage which is the very foundation of modern American music.

Afterward

In 1800 the population of the United States included 893,602 slaves…The 3,953,760 slaves at the census of 1860 were in the southern states.

President Sekou Toure led Guinea to independence from France in 1958. One of his major visions for his country was for music to be Guinea's ambassador. He formed a National Ballet, stocked with the finest musicians throughout Guinea, who study and rehearse conservatory-style and still perform internationally. Similarly, a decade earlier, Robert Goffin was noting how the advent of jazz was of tremendous benefit to black/ white relations.

In contrast, in Guinea, more than 15% of all children die before the age of 5. More than 1 in every 200 women die in childbirth. The life expectancy is in the early 50's; Guineans lead the world in deaths from Malaria; the overall literacy rate is less than 30%. [xliv]

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it could, indeed, be the rich musical history of West Africa that helps lead its people to more optomistic statistics?

Author's Information

Julie Moore received her B.A. from Roanoke College in 1997 where she studied Philosophy and Music. Today she teaches cello and music theory as a registered Suzuki teacher to students aged 4 – 78 near Greenville, SC. She has also studied West African music and dance for the last 12 years, and plays the 21-stringed kora, dundun drums and balafon. Julie's dream is to open a school in West Africa in which children would continue to study their traditional music, while gaining fluency in Western music and theory, as well as literacy. Enabled as such, these children could enter America's best universities – helping not only their own families, but also providing technical insight to the music historians' quest to properly understand West African music. If just 10 universities across the U.S. were to contribute minimally to the funding of such a school, it could function well with maximum benefits for all involved. University students from the sponsoring colleges could visit for a semester to both teach and learn, and when the West African students reached college age, they could attend the sponsoring universities on scholarship. Then, automatically, the college would have its own built-in Malinké performace group and teachers of the instruments and theory.

Andrew Moore has played and studied the primarily Malinke rhythms of Guinea, West Africa for the last 15 years. He has spent time in Guinea studying, and teaches and performs throughout the South. While on the clock, Andrew is a licensed contractor. Inspired by Greg Mortenson's Three Cups of Tea, he dreams of marrying his construction skills with his love of West Africa by helping to build sustainable, economical, locally sourced homes and schools in Guinea.

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