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AFRICA'S WORLD CUP

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World Cup Music and Football Noise

The Lion King, Waka Waka, and the Vuvuzela

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With ESPN’s broadcast of the World Cup’s opening match, my fellow tweeters began to crack jokes about the Lion King. We imagined Rafiki and Mufasa calling the matches and half expected the referees to lift up the Jabulani to announce the arrival of the New Ball. Some folks simply observed that there was a good reason for this resemblance. The score used by ESPN to frame its coverage was written by Lisle Moore. The Utah composer gave us muscular music for a sporting event, upbeat music for a media event organized around putting us all in the mood to buy a shirt, a ball, or a Coke. Layered over the orchestral swells are the oddly familiar sounds of African voices—or, I should say, African-sounding voices. Africa is scored here as a noble landscape, peopled by a unified chorus, singing together in a harmonic convergence of tribal cultures.

“With the exception of the African choir,” reported the Salt Lake Tribune on June 10, 2010, “all of the music is performed by Utah musicians.” The “African choir” lending this score a sense of location is actually made up of members of the Lion King’s Broadway cast. The choir from New York City was hired to sonically channel an idea of African authenticity keyed to the ears of ESPN’s U.S. audience. The same of course holds true for all scores produced by the World Cup broadcasting networks, as they reach for music that their imagined audience will understand. Without a doubt, we are hearing not African music but, to
invoke the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe, a musical “idea of Africa.”

Much can be gained by listening to the sound draped over the 2010 World Cup. This is nowhere more obvious than the “Official 2010 FIFA World Cup™ Song,” “Waka Waka (This Time for Africa),” sung by Colombian pop star Shakira and Freshlyground, a South African Afro-fusion band. As numerous bloggers have pointed out, the global pop hit has a clear relationship to a Cameroonian military song, “Zangaléwa,” popularized by the group Golden Sounds in 1986. “Waka Waka” does not just borrow from “Zangaléwa”—listening to the two reveals that the chorus to “Waka Waka” is a direct use of “Zangaléwa.”

Dibussi Tande, a Cameroonian digital activist, places this appropriation within a longer history of intellectual theft in Africa. In a May 23, 2010, post on his blog Scribbles from the Den, Tande begins with Michael Jackson’s use of a hit song by Cameroonian makossa master Manu Dibango. The words and melody of “Soul Makossa” provide the distinctive sound of “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin’,” the opening track on Jackson’s Thriller album. Dibango sued Jackson and won. Dibango’s song was actually the B side of “Movement Ewondo,” a song composed for the 1972 African Nations Cup hosted by Cameroon and won by Congo-Brazzaville. It’s a frenetic football score in which strings seems to scurry underneath Dibango’s expressive and light-footed sax.

Jackson’s theft of recognizable lyrics and melodies pales in comparison with what Shakira and Sony music pulled off with “Waka Waka.” Given their use of a song known to a generation of fans of African pop, it’s surprising that they thought they could get away with such plagiarism. But, of course, that is how entitlement works—you do not notice the theft of that which you feel is already yours.

Tande points out that the origins of the song were only acknowledged by FIFA, Shakira, and others in response to online activism by those who were horrified to see the song stolen. Under pressure from the Cameroonian musicians and their advocates, FIFA stated that “Waka Waka” is a “remix” of the Golden Sounds hit. This appropriation of African music into a musical idea of Africa is a never-ending story. “For decades, African artists have had their works plagiarized by the West with little or no compensation or acknowledgement,” writes Tande. “The most memorable example of the theft of the intellectual rights of an African artist is that of Solomon Popoli Linda who in 1939 wrote the song ‘Mbube’ and received 10 shillings (less than $US 2) for his efforts. The song which later became the pop hit ‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight’ was reinterpreted by dozens of American artists without Linda or his family receiving a dime. In fact, he died penniless.” In 1995, according to Tande, “the ‘Lion Sleeps Tonight’ earned an estimated $1.5 million dollars just for its use in the movie Lion King—a movie which has since grossed about 800 million USD worldwide. Linda’s descendants sued Walt Disney for $1.5 million dollars with the full backing of the South African government. Disney settled for an undisclosed sum just as the trial was about to begin.” Disney is not eager for its consumers to know that behind that feel-good African sound is the noise of the gears of neocolonial exploitation, turning, turning.

Perhaps more interesting, in terms of the spin an artist can put on the same song, is K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag,” the ubiquitous official song for Coca-Cola’s 2010 World Cup advertising campaign as well as the soundtrack for the Electronic Arts video game 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa. The song began as rousing melody tracking fantasies of precolonial glory and postcolonial resistance:

So many wars, settling scores,  
Bringing us promises leaving us poor,  
I heard them say, love is the way,  
Love is the answer, that’s what they say,  
But look how they treat us,  
Make us believers,  
We fight their battles, then they deceive us,  
Try to control us, they couldn’t hold us  
Cause we just move forward like Buffalo Soldiers

But we struggle, fighting to eat  
And we wondering, when we’ll be free  
So we patiently wait for that faithful day  
It’s not far away…

The song’s chorus then repeats a wistful thought: “When I get older I will be stronger / They’ll call me freedom just like a wavin’ flag / And then it goes back, and then it goes back, and then it goes back.” While supported by anthem-like muscle, the song is hardly the sort of tune one imagines selling Coca-Cola and video games. All of these lines were thus removed from the World Cup version. The refrain “And then
it goes back, and then it goes back” remains, however, like a phantom limb. It’s a strange chant for a football anthem, in which forward motion is the more usually celebrated run of play.

The words literally describe the movement of a flag, but without the context of the song’s original words, the phrase has lost its sense. Within the original lyrics, the refrain describes the movement of nationalist impulses toward and away from freedom’s horizon. Those words promise both “if we go forward, we also go back” and power “goes back” to the people from whom it was stolen.

In addition, we have K’naan’s very dense reference to Buffalo Soldiers—all-black regiments of the U.S. Army established after the Civil War. These soldiers supported the federal government in the Indian Wars, and their story gestures to a very complicated knot in American history, in which the complexities of racial oppression are condensed into an emblem of the trauma of slavery, erasing the full interaction of race and empire in American nationalism. (The 1870 legislation naturalizing people of African descent as U.S. citizens, for example, also reinforced eighteenth-century legislation barring people of Asian and Hispanic descent from that citizenship.) This reference, perhaps accidentally, underscores the colonial twist embedded in that phrase “moving forward.” Of course, I am probably overreading by seeing in K’naan’s lyrics a story about settler colonialism, but it does not seem like a stretch to say that in the story of his participation in its revision for (more) commercial use, we see something of the problem of the World Cup interface.

In “When I Get Older,” a title that nods to “Wavin’ Flag,” Mumbai-based journalist and blogger Supriya Nair warns liberal American pundits to check their impulses to read in African national teams an allegory for Africa itself. “Where you see models of correlation between dictators and football victories,” Nair argues, “others would see the run of play as the rest of the world knows it: of a history of possession dominated by those who wrote the rules, of enforced migrations and unwilling recruitments; of contests that we must always resist seeing as wars, because they are only fought—and won—on the field.”

We do well to listen to other music, not co-opted by FIFA and its corporate tentacles. Nomadic Wax produced “World Cup,” a pulsating twelve-minute track in which sixteen emcees from Africa, Europe, and the Americas contribute sixteen bars of lyrics speaking to and about the event. The grimmest lines come from emcee Emile YX from the Grassy Park section of Cape Town, who sums up the neo-imperial relationship between FIFA and South Africa, as the latter subsidized the former’s World Cup profits:

The attention world gathers for the wrong reason
It’s the long cold-hearted capitalist season
Where basic human freedoms violated for money
In the land of gold, we chase a gold cup, that’s funny
Suddenly money changes “never & never again”
Never say never, the same money’s running everything
Where Khoi & San bodies hung, impaled and battered
Is where they built the stadium & 4 billion got Blattered
But we’ll foot the bill, just to foot their ball
On the graces of our ancestors, how can we stand tall?
Here Hegemony erases the memory of the San
And lands send players to get played by the man
This scams like “Yes we can tans [Obama]” distracting nations
Subduing revolution with media mind occupation
When FIFA’s moneymaking machine moves on
Has Africa finally the World’s respect won?

Emile YX boils down a critique launched by activists and academics across South Africa. As emcees toggle between bragging about their skills on the pitch and on the mike, between love for their national team and critical reads like this one, “World Cup” distills both the desire and the danger of looking for redemption in FIFA’s tournament. Like much critical hip-hop, “World Cup” is a portrait in ambivalence.

No team bore the burden of redemptive hope more than Ghana. Cheery anthems abound in its stands. Ghana is home of “hi-life,” a hybrid movement that combines the sounds of up-tempo Ghanaian highlife, hip-hop, and pop. Ghanaian artists working in this genre regularly make use of Jama song (football chants). In his 2006 survey of hi-life and World Cup music, African music blogger Chale describes Jama as a form of “public music”—songs known, sung, and in essence owned by the Ghanaian public. Jamaica woven throughout much hi-life and feeds back into Jama as fans break into songs that have been recast by their favorite emcees and pop artists.

Ghanaian musicians regularly produce new anthems for their na-
tional squad, called the Black Stars. For the 2006 World Cup, the group G-Force produced a whole album celebrating the team (Faith in the Black Star). That year, an all-star lineup of hiplife musicians produced “Oseiye” as the Black Stars’ official theme song in the lead-up to the 2008 African Nations Cup. In “Blackstar 2010,” Trosky Blackman sings for the Ghanaian squad over a bouncy synthesizer backdrop, the song coalescing in the familiar soccer chant, “Olé, Olé, Olé, Olé, Olé, Olé.” The genre migrates: English DJ and producer Richy Pitch crafted “Football Jama” after attending the 2008 African Nations Cup. The song remixes crowd noise, drumming, and the whistles of fans with Jama chants and rapid-fire football-centered lyrics from U.K. artists Sway and Mj NSA who speak hypothetically as team captain and chief supporter. The song is not exactly Jama but a use of Jama—a musical essay on football noise. This kind of portrait of the sonic landscape of the sport is itself a subgenre of football music—the record “Péler” by Bosco De Oliveira’s samba band, Arakatuba, uses whistles, drums, and crowd noise from broadcasts to create a conversation with match experience. An excerpt from Pitch’s track opens Rodney Quarcoo’s “Obama We Are Sorry,” a fantastic video showing ecstatic fans swarming, dancing, and singing in the streets celebrating the Black Stars’ World Cup win over the United States. (People can be heard singing “Obama We Are Sorry,” and one fan carries this apology on a sign.) That video closes with Waniow the Kubolor’s “Goal Again” (featuring Kwabena Jones). Waniow the Kubolor’s track is from a concept album, Yellow Card—Stomach Direction. The entire album is a musical conversation with football fandom. That it is the follow-up album to Green Card gives a sense of the album’s bite. “Stomach direction” refers to a kick made in whatever direction the stomach faces: The term can mean not only shots sent wide but also a certain kind of thoughtless greed. “Goal Again” drifts from direct rapping (often in pidgin) about the Black Stars and football in Ghana to match calling, in which “Gooool” becomes the song’s refrain. (The album itself is full of hilarious and grounded dialogic interludes in which a fan rants, theorizes, and laments about the national side.) Most of these tracks are made available by artists as free downloads.

Kwabena Jones and the United States–based MC Manifest produced “Vuvuzela Blackstars,” yet another celebration of the cruelly eliminated squad, via an appreciation of the controversial plastic horn (see the essay by Solomon Waniaula in this collection). Much of this track sounds pushed through the program Autotune, giving the entire song’s background a reedy texture evocative of the vuvuzela. Making the viral rounds in 2010 was a comic duet produced by a Turkish football fan site (go.turk.com), “African Vuvuzela vs. Turkish Zurna.” Two stereotyped characters, one African and one Turkish, blow their respective horns. The zurna appears hopelessly quaint until a crowd of chanting Turkish football fans swarms around “Ali” with drums. The zurna wins.

Point taken, for by the end of the 2010 World Cup, the vuvuzela had been removed from the world of “public music,” and fans who now plant their lips on it seem to have opted for the world’s plastic noise. And so unfolds the debate over the authenticity of the vuvuzela, as an African sound (as asserted by FIFA’s Sepp Blatter). Like many football artifacts, these vuvuzelas were manufactured in China; the people in the stands of the South African World Cup did not represent South African football culture. And it is unfair to reduce the whole of any fan culture to what Elina Shatkin has aptly described as a “glorified kazoo.”

Although they were marketed as African artifacts by the media, vuvuzelas have been used in North American stands for years. Their strange, sad bleating had always struck me as depressing, perhaps because at the Los Angeles Galaxy and Chivas USA games I attend, they are blown by people sitting in their assigned seats, watching the dutiful play of American soccer. Whatever spirit they channel, in the smaller stadiums of Major League Soccer matches (for which twenty thousand is a good turnout), their noise is manageable. That human scale is true to South African league football, too.

But South Africa’s stadiums were scaled up for the World Cup. A gathering of seventeen thousand people—some with drums, some with vuvuzelas, some with trumpets—makes one kind of aural experience, a cacophony, in which song and noise can wrestle playfully. Sounded by audiences of seventy thousand or more, however, the vuvuzela is a nightmare, a sonic hornet’s nest, especially for networks broadcasting the tournament.

This quantity of vuvuzelas amplifies stadium affect itself—broadcasting anxiety, suspense, frustration, and happiness as simply volume. A team attacks at a tense moment in the match, and the volume goes up. The horns throb when it feels like something important might happen, when something needs to happen. Attention drifts and the noise fades. It communicates degrees of intensity—a sonically disorienting sense of hope and alarm.
Radio and television productions of World Cup matches rode these waves of sonic attack. Sound editors balanced the imperative that they communicate the audience's volume (the aural effect of a packed stadium) with the need to create a watchable, listenable broadcast. If your network did not edit out enough of the vuvuzela noise, you could download sound editing programs with vuvuzela-killing features. Online Media Technologies promised, "The Vuvuzela Remover feature contains 6 filters adjusted to reject frequencies typical of this African horn."

The vuvuzela is the sound not exactly of resistance but of interference—the noise of a multitude that stands in the way of the desire to hear a pretty African song. The challenge of mixing the sound of the vuvuzela into live broadcasts of World Cup matches translated into noise the problem that the World Cup is a commercial event in which an enormously diverse and fluid cultural activity (football, as a sport one plays and watches) is converted into hard cash. Each match looks like a dollar bill, played on a bright green rectangle, even though in most parts of the world the game is played on uneven brown surfaces. It is played by a single sex—by men who appear to be straight, by men who work together within a team and subordinate politics to the desire to win. It is a global illusion, in which a whole world wants the same thing, sees the same thing, and listens to the same song, over and over again. "Sport goes on and on and on, you see," writes Lynne Truss in an essay confessing her lack of interest in who wins or loses and the ease with which she cut the sport out of her life after years of writing about it. Stepping back, she noticed that everything is the same—winners, losers. It is the same story, over and over again.8

For me, the vuvuzela provided the noise of the World Cup in the truest sense: the sound of all that the spectacle collects, organizes, and disciplines into a consumable form. It announced in a single, unrelenting note what FIFA does on a disciplinary level by organizing football into a single global event.

For the illusion of a "World Cup" to work, we need to believe that teams have equal resources, that they practice and play on the same surfaces, and that they grow up with the same kind of care and development. We need to believe that the best players are chosen by the best managers, that the best teams qualify for the tournament. We need the illusion of a level playing field—on which Ghana can beat the United States, for example—and fans can laugh and say, "Obama, we are sorry." We need a zone of suppressed contradiction in which we can rage at the unfairness of it all while celebrating the glory of La Furia Roja, in which we can laugh at the paradox of our passion for a process that is in reality foul, full of prejudice and corruption.

Corporations sell us their products with fantasies of poor boys who need only a ball to forget their troubles. Layered over those images are tracks from K'Naan, Shakira, Coca-Cola, and Disney, music that itself feeds on that which is outside of the entertainment complex but is always in the process of being absorbed into it. The favelas, ghettos, and townships in which those commercials are set are leveled to make room for the stadium green. The noise of such spaces is captured and repackaged as a catchy jingle. The vuvuzela, blown by tens of thousands of people at network microphones makes an entirely different kind of sound—something close to what Jacques Attali described as a sonic "liquidation of meaning." The plastic trumpet heralds the conclusion of a process that has turned the joys of improvisation into so much programming.

NOTES

3. Ibid.