

ORGANIZING MUSIC

We need ways to organize music so we can understand it and play it over and over. Some use notation, some use audible imitation and memorization. They are both excellent ways to learn music, especially when used together. My balafon teacher, Keba Mane, told me once he never took a lesson from his father... and yet he knows all his father's songs. He told me he heard it so many times he just went to the balafon and played it. West Africans learn music the way people learn their native language. Think about when you learned English. At 1 1/2 - 2 years old did you take out a pen and paper? Of course not. You paid attention to your mother and father... your brother and sister... and everyone who talked to you. You imitated and memorized. Music can be learned very deeply when received this way. Did you ever see a great blues guitarist make a guitar cry? And yet, he can't read a note of music. Never forget that music is an audible experience, and notation is but a means to

store and pass on the music to others.

Here's another little tidbit. We do our best when notating music. We use dynamic markings, tempo markings, stylistic markings. We use conductors. We use whole notes, half notes, dotted halves, quarters eighths, 16ths, 32nds, etc., and all the combinations of rhythms that we can write out ad infinitum. We can pretty much designate what rhythm we want on a piece of paper... or can we? Ahhhhh.... here is where notation can never completely replace experience. For example, early on I would hear my Djembe teacher, Amadou Joof, play a rhythm, and I would record it. I would write the rhythm down and also record the rhythm. But my recording of the rhythm would sound different than his. Why? Because he was playing in the 'cracks' and I was playing the rhythm as the notation read... he had all the nuances that made it feel West African. Some things in music, notation can never capture. That's why to really sink your teeth into

ethnic music you have to live it, eat it, and breathe it. You want to sound like a West African? Pack your bags if you really want to feel it. Of course we don't all have such an opportunity, so this book is the next best thing.

DJEMBE SOLOING

Some think a solo is when you can play whatever you want. There are very few styles of music where you can play anything you want, and West African music isn't one of them. So what does the Djembe soloist do? First and foremost, the Djembe soloist is lead by the dancer. The drummer marks the motions of the dancer. Yaya Diallo once said "If there is no dancer to drum to I have to close my eyes and imagine the dancer." What do you play? If you are West African you play the things that you have heard drummers play all their lives. You imitate all the drummers around you. There are certain 'licks' in Djembe music. The best way to learn these 'licks' or phrases is to study with a good teacher. Soloing is a more advanced part of the Djembe ensemble, and we will only touch upon it briefly.

FIRST STEP TO SOLOING

To solo on the Djembe is a process and we need to remember it's not about playing anything we want. For us it's good to listen to recordings of Djembe music, watch video, study with a good teacher, and ultimately study in West Africa. We will focus on the first step, which is imitation. Hearing a rhythm and playing back that rhythm is an excellent way to exercise our ears, and getting what we hear to come out through our hands. Here are a couple games to improve our imitation skills.

1. 'DJEMBE SAYS'

'Djembe Says' is simple... it's like Simon says only with a Djembe. Teacher... establish a tempo in 4/4 time. Play a one measure rhythm... have the class repeat the rhythm in tempo. Start simple. Eventually you can do 2 measure, 4 measure phrases, etc.

2. This next exercise is a little more difficult. Teacher... play a one measure rhythm in 4/4, the

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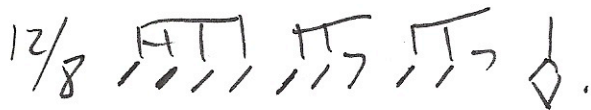
next person plays the rhythm, and adds another measure. This game works good with a smaller group. Another variation is... Teacher... play 2 beats in 4/4... the next person plays your rhythm and adds 2 more beats. All these exercises will help develop the ear/hand coordination as well as creativity.

CHAPTER 7

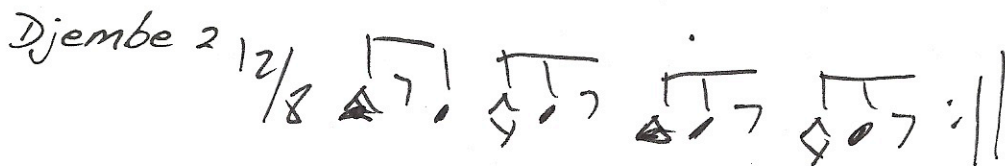
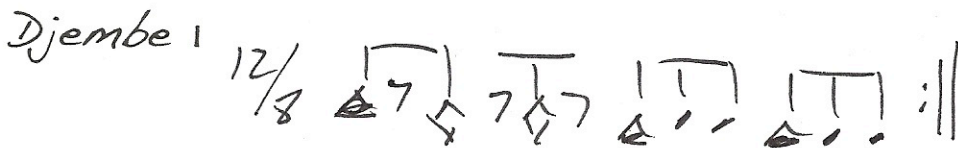
AKONKO

Akonko was taught to me by Amadou 'Boss' Joof.

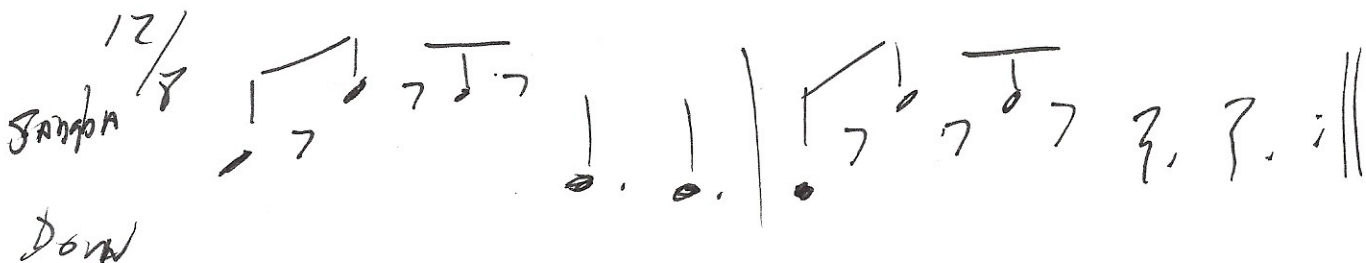
Here is the call.



Here are the Djembe parts



Here are the Down Down parts.

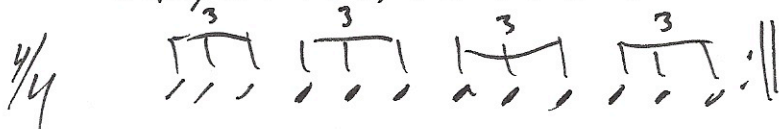


WEST AFRICAN TRIPLETS

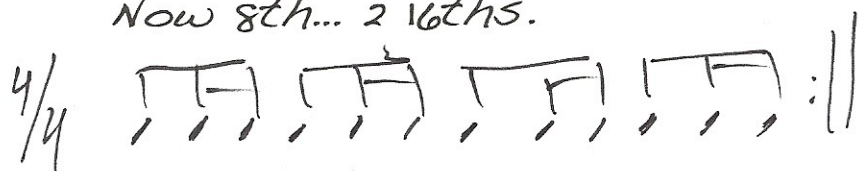
One thing I noticed very soon in West Africa is... West Africans play triplets differently than we do. I cannot stress enough how important this is in sounding authentic. There is a 'lope'... a splendid unevenness... to the feel. It makes me think back to the first time I heard Airto... the great Brazilian percussionist... play a samba. The sixteenth notes weren't even! And it sounded so groovy. Here I was trying to get it 'perfect'... and it's not supposed to be perfect even sixteenth notes. It has a 'lope' to it. Wow, what a lesson in music. Did your music teacher ever tell you, "okay that sounded good... now can you play me some uneven sixteenth notes?" Probably not. But to sound 'authentic' in music outside our culture, to sound like a West African drummer, the 'lope' is so important. Guess what? You can't notate it. You have to feel it. Once again... pack your bags to tackle this issue, and even then it's no guarantee! Okay... so what's the big secret? West Africans play triplets somewhere between strict 8th note triplets and 8th... 2 16ths. Let's try an exercise.

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Okay... first, strict 8th note triplets



Now 8th... 2 16ths.



Next... try to play somewhere in between.

This is not easy for us to do. We grow up listening to whatever music we like, and we get used to the feel, the style... subconsciously. In West Africa they have a certain style, feel, rhythm... and they get used to that. I can remember some of my drum teachers in West Africa wanting me to teach them drum set.... Rock and Roll, and Jazz. So I did, and I learned so much from that experience. The things that feel so normal and natural to me playing Jazz and Rock felt awkward, stiff, and unsettled when they would play. Hmmmmm, I wonder if the same is true for us learning their music? Of course! Feel, style, and sounding like a West African is certainly

more of an advanced goal, and we need to learn the basics first. But it's good to be aware of why when we play a rhythm, and 'they'... meaning West Africans, play the same rhythm, it sounds the same but 'different'.

TRIBES IN WEST AFRICA

There are hundreds of tribes in West Africa. Each one has its own music, drumming, and dance. In West Africa The Sere and Wolof tribes are known for Sabar drumming, The Jola tribe is known for Bougarabou drumming, The Balanta is known for Balafon, The Fula tribe is known for its flutes and acrobatics, The Mandinka tribe is known for the Kora, a harp like instrument with 21 strings, and the Susu tribe is known for Djembe. So you can see depending on the region and tribe the music will vary. Also every tribe has a language and the names of instruments change from language to language. It's important to remember the vastness of music in the very big continent. Do you realize how big Africa is? Here are a couple examples. You can easily fit 2 USA's inside Africa. Did you know that it is closer from New York to Senegal, West Africa than it is from Senegal to South Africa? Ok so you get the point. I think I counted more than 150 tribes in Africa just starting with the letter 'A'. Thousands

of tribes and languages, culture, traditions, and ideas all trying to get along. Once again when learning West African music it's always good to refer the music that you learn by naming your teacher, where he is from, and what his tribe is. Knowing what music certain tribes are known for can be very helpful. For example, "Modou told me he was from the Fula tribe. I immediately wanted to know more about the Fula flute and the acrobatics his tribe is famous for." All this information gives us a base to work from so that we can research the music further. Plus naming your teacher is an act of respect.

MORE THOUGHTS ABOUT DJEMBE, ETC.

Okay... let's summarize what we've learned about the Djembe.

*3 Djembe rhythms in 4/4 feel... Fanga, Kuku, and Kassa.

*3 Djembe rhythms in 12/8... Yankadi, Tomanka, and Soli.

*How to start a Djembe rhythm with the 'call'.

*How we can spice up a Djembe rhythm by adding an introduction, soloing, and breaks.

*The Djembe solo is all about marking and following the movements of the dancer.

*The Doun Doun parts, and we understand how they hold everything together with a solid bass line.

*Djembe is loud, aggressive, and until recently played only by men.

*Djembe music in West Africa is different depending on what region you are in... for example... 'Kassa' in Guinea is different than 'Kassa' in Gambia. These rhythms/songs/dance do vary region to region.

*Ethnic music... folk music... is most often passed

on by ear and not by music notation.

* Music has a purpose in West African society and is played at ceremonies, parties, weddings, birthdays, and holidays. Not much different than us !

* Djembe music is but one part of the whole scene which includes song, dance, food, fun, tradition, culture, etc.

* This music is supposed to make you move while you think.

* It is repetitive and simple in harmonic/melodic structure, but it's complexities lie in the rhythm.

* Among some tribes certain families are musicians, and even more specific a family name indicates what instrument they play.

* The songs tell stories of history, people, morality, life lessons, love, and just everyday common events.

* Some songs tell of great Kings and great musicians long past.

* Some songs are hundreds of years old, some are 10 years old.

* West African music continues to change and thrive. The past has come together with the 'now', and new combinations of instrumentation, styles and

languages along with heavy influence from European and American music is producing a modern sound from West Africa. Now it is normal to see West African instruments combined with guitar, bass, drum set, keyboards, etc.

*Some music has more than one pulse and can be felt different ways.

*The study of West African music can help us understand not only music from another culture, but also to better understand our own.

*West African music is all about cooperation, moving together, steady and supportive.

*Syncopated structure from a different point of view than possibly you have experienced before.

*West African music is organized. Can you believe not long ago many thought this music and drumming was primitive? In more recent years we have learned just the opposite. Have you ever known anyone who never listened to music, or enjoyed music in some way? I dare say that would be a very rare case indeed.

Learning music from another culture is very

difficult unless you live in that culture for a long time. We can only learn so much from books, audio/video, private lessons, drum circles. This makes me think of a proverb from the Mandinka tribe.

Yeree Kuntoo
Say May Baakoono
Nya Woo Nya Baary
Ar Tee Kay Laa Noo
Bambo Ti

"No matter how long
A piece of wood
Stays in the river
It will never
Become a crocodile"