

right in the middle of one of East Africa's largest refugee camps, where people found some respite. The music had everything to do with it. Combined with the harsh heat and light, like an impressionistic Ethiopian Haile Gerima film, the music and the lyrics shifted dimensions, slowed down time and cued the occasional cool breeze from distant mountains.

It was many years ago – and yet I can still hear those sounds. The creaks and pops of metal roofs expanding under the sun and contracting again in the cool desert night air, like the ebb and flow of tides, were part of the daily acoustics of life. But so too was the music and the animated talk in 50 tongues.

On any given evening, walking out into the various 'neighbourhoods', one could almost forget that this was a refugee camp. Years of war, uncertainty and diplomatic failures had kept tens of thousands of people from Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire living in limbo out in the Kenyan desert frontier. Unable to return home, the people had no choice but to build a life for themselves in their new barren surroundings. Thanks to a strong community-support structure, DIY resourcefulness and ingenuity, they built up their temporary shelters and converted

them into viable longer-term housing and collective spaces.

One of the first communal places to be built was the Florida 2000, 'the club' humorously

named after a famous Nairobi haunt. Much like its namesake, the local Florida 2000 was a vibrant place. People could have 'WFP beer' – a drink cheekily brewed from World Food Programme sorghum rations – and boogie down to the latest *Lingala* music from Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). A flexible barter system ensured that people with no money could still afford the occasional WFP beer in exchange for either some special labour or surplus rations.

Sometimes they didn't have to pay at all. It was like that. In a world straight out of a *Mad Max* set, the Florida 2000 was a life-raft in a sea of despair. And the soundtrack was there, energizing the place from a tinny box which filled the cavernous voids of despair with an enthusiasm for life.

Life wasn't paradise in the camp by any stretch of the imagination. Unbearable heat, scorpions and deadly hand-sized camel spiders, regular visits from bazooka-toting militias from the Sudan People's Liberation Army, disease, boredom and sometimes violent rivalries within the camp were common. Nonetheless a small communal hut and a beat-up old Russian cassette player, churning out the latest Ethiopian pop hits or reggae classics, transformed people's lives. I remember one friend – Walter from Kigale, a regular at the Florida 2000 – told me that the way he saw it, food and medicine enabled him to survive but it was music which made him feel truly alive. He'd swing to Milimani Park Orchestra and Kofi Olomide and you knew, for a brief moment, he wasn't weighed down by stones of despair.

Something about the setting, the circumstance, the people and the sounds all combined to make an impression on my life that endures to this day. That these people whose families were murdered, homes destroyed, and lives ruined could come together and have a moment of happiness through song tells us something both about the strength of the human spirit and the transformative power of music.

Darwinian rhapsodies

Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists broadly agree that all cultures in the world have some form of music. Styles of singing and use of instruments vary enormously, but we are all essentially musical beings, despite protestations from the *Wahabis* and the Puritans. Whether we can sing

four octaves or just butcher a Beatles tune, we all have some degree of sensitivity and receptivity to music. So why do we have music? Does it perform any particular evolutionary function? Do we have some biological need for it? Scientists aren't sure.

Professor Steven Pinker of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests that it could just be a happy evolutionary accident. He makes an analogy with food. In the past, it may have been useful for ancient hominids to develop tastes and cravings for nutritious fruits and certain foods containing high levels of fats. Nowadays, says Pinker, many in affluent societies can accommodate these tastes and pursue even more sophisticated ones. But, he says, it's difficult to argue that there are certain Darwinian advantages to enjoying strawberry cheesecake. Pinker suggests that our love of music may have developed out of a similar evolutionary need to distinguish different sounds. But ultimately, he argues, it's no longer essential to our survival to be particularly sensitive to sound. In his book, *How the Mind Works*, he concludes: 'I suspect that music is auditory cheesecake.'¹

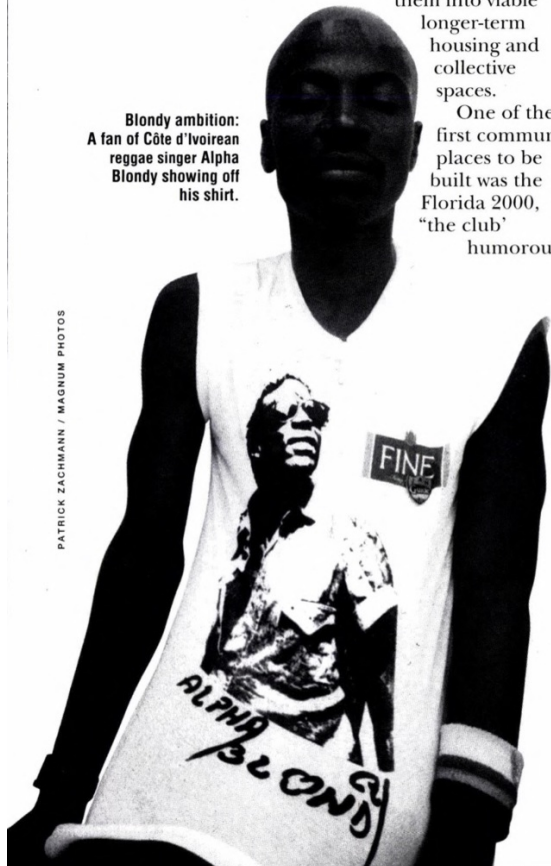
University of Cambridge lecturer in music, Ian Cross, disagrees. Cross argues that dismissing music as a useless fancy is incredibly ethnocentric. He suggests that Pinker's confectionary view of music may reflect what music has become over the last hundred years within Western society – where a booming industry for recording and selling sounds has 'turned music into a commodity to be consumed, dispensable on demand'. He goes on to argue that many people around the world use music for purposes other than entertainment. For example, they may use it for healing, education, cultural and religious ceremonies, communication and activism.²

The culture industry

Certainly the prevailing attitude in the West to music is probably more in keeping with Pinker's cheesecake theory. Walk into any record store today and the world's music is at your fingertips. Twenty dollars buys you *The Sounds of Mali*, the *Ritual Drummers of Nepal*, or the *Traditional Chants of the Sufi Mystics*. The fickle Western consumer can now sample the world's music cultures and explore new tastes for exotic musical desserts.

In contrast, many cultures around the world do not have a

Blondy ambition:
A fan of Côte d'Ivoirean
reggae singer Alpha
Blondy showing off
his shirt.



PATRICK ZACHMANN / MAGNUM PHOTOS



Rhythms of reconciliation: Israeli and Palestinian children learn to play the *darbuka* together in West Jerusalem.

Radical politics don't shift Nike sneakers as well as gold-jewellery-jangling bling-bling culture does

general word for music, reflecting a more complex and interwoven cultural association with sound. Instead of calling it all 'music', many cultures have a sophisticated vocabulary for describing what purpose or function singing and playing instruments may have. In East Africa for example, many groups have the concept of *ngoma* which can be simultaneously translated as 'drum', 'community gathering' and 'celebration'. The *ngoma* is where traditional music is

played, but it's no rock concert. Important dances and cultural rites are observed and the guardian spirits called through complex rhythmic patterns on sacred drums and other instruments. But the *ngoma* is equally used for popular uprisings and *harambees* – events where a wide group of people 'pull together' to benefit the community. Where social causes are taken up and political objectives agreed, the drums and songs elevate consciousness and celebrate unity.

The culture industry distorts this relationship. With the advent of recording technologies and Fordian manufacturing disciplines, for better or for worse, music has been rendered a mass product. Controlled by a mere handful of corporations, the global

'entertainment industry' has deployed an arsenal of satellite technologies, radio, television and print advertising – all in a sophisticated drive to sell more little round discs and tie-in products.

Media conglomerates make finely tuned decisions about which music to promote and which to sweep quietly under the carpet. The exercise of such kingly powers to make or break a band is ultimately a political act. Corporations will choose to promote vacuous materialist music as it is often in their interest to do so. While some black gangsta rappers are demonized for their sexist and violent lyrics, little is said about the largely white-owned major record labels promoting them. These companies actively cultivate misogynist, homophobic and violent music while shutting-out radical voices who might question the system.

These mega-corporations' cross-marketing strategies ensure that a promotional campaign will associate bands with the right brands. Radical politics don't shift Nike sneakers as well as gold-jewellery-jangling bling-bling culture does. Pass the cheesecake.

Meanwhile the culture industry lobbies for stricter intellectual property laws and tax write-offs, jails teenagers for downloading MP3s (MPEG Audio Layer 3 – the most popular compression format for online digital music distribution) of adored bands and keeps the majority of their signed

artists powerless and often penniless. Radio companies and government agencies effectively ban radical music while saturating airwaves with the sounds of consent on heavy rotation. And it's not just manufactured pop. Most music consumed is subject to similar market pressures. The increasingly popular 'World Music' genre, for example, is not immune.

Real world?

As is customary in the industry, the 'World Music' category was invented by a group of record-industry execs who wanted to carve out a unique market niche. Thus 'World Music' was born. Initially intended to be a short-term marketing campaign, the label stuck and the world's music has never been the same since. But in some respects 'World Music', didn't really mean world music. Its initial offerings of predominantly African and Latin music reinforced the notion in the white Western consuming world that 'World Music' was really just 'other people's music'.

Condemned to be forever a niche market in the West, talented musicians from the Majority World occasionally break through, such as Colombian superstar Shakira who recently took the Western pop charts by storm. But it rarely happens.

And while world music opens up possibilities for genuine cross-cultural exchange and internationalism, Western privileged power to consume the cultural products of the Majority World can often amount to a crude commodity fetish. The growing consumer demand for the 'authentic' musics of the South drives the industry to target certain arts to the exclusion of those which don't fit into romanticized notions of 'primitive', 'tribal', and 'ethnic' music. Zairean-born Tanzanian political musician Remy Ongala discovered this when the World of Music and Dance (WOMAD) festival and affiliated 'Real World' enterprise, decided that his music wasn't an authentic 'Zairean sound', forcing him to change his style to the more mainstream Zairean music if he wanted to stay on the WOMAD circuit.³ That a British company could tell an African singer that his music is not 'authentic' is not only absurd, it's dangerous. Imposing and reinforcing fixed notions of race, culture and identity are the hallmarks of the colonial project and have been at the root of many

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