

Music As A Life Form

BY STEPHEN JAY



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There is a common belief in West African music cultures that the music-loving gods scorn performances that lack energy. Isah Hamani taught me that not only do these gods disdain half-hearted performances, they actually dislike them with such a passion that they will strike people down with physical ailments or mental disorders as punishment. In order to avoid this, many young African musicians practice from sunrise to sunset, practically from birth. They sit under trees and play all day long, the way birds chirp and bugs buzz—they just play. As a result, when music calls on them to be part of its existence, they will have become the perfect instrument—one who's willing and who charms the "player" with its plasticity and range: the kind of instrument you can't put down.

Interestingly, though, many West Africans regard music as an almost involuntary act requiring little energy, no matter how frenzied it may become. Rather, playing music seems to be more a *source* of energy that's powered, directed, and motivated by the musical being itself—the immeasurable force that has motivated humans to its calling since time immemorial. The depth of music's power over the soul and emotions is seen more as its benevolent play and teaching than an individual musician's expression or talent. Many African musicians become more or less possessed by music when they are lucky enough to be called on to support the being. Similarly, musicians around the world speak of transcending themselves, their playing, and their own directive will while seeming to *help* music come from an instrument. Great musicians and composers are always finding new ways to get "gone" and let

music really come to life.

Whether or not you share the West Africans' beliefs, being the slave of music often works much better than the other way around. I've noticed that it's usually more exciting to be possessed by music than to possess it. In the end we may be no closer to a full understanding of the big picture than bacteria would have if they "knew" that their host organism were actually alive. From this viewpoint an accurate perspective on music is hard to imagine, much less quantify—but we *feel* it, and according to traditional West African beliefs, it feels us. Our urge to play and sing is seen as music's wish to exist. From a spontaneous song in the shower to the most grandiose musical spectacle, it may all be coming from the same source—a gigantic, immortal ancestor full of beauty, wisdom, and life. **BP**

While living in rural West Africa, I was exposed to an ancient and amazing view of music. In many traditional West African cultures, music is seen as a kind of life form—a being that spans the universe and all time. It is an individual with a mind of its own, one that possesses a will and volition identical to man's, only much bigger. Music moves players as they move their instruments. Inward and outward, this relationship extends forever; you are to your instrument what music is to you. And according to African animist beliefs, all objects are alive—nothing is inanimate, including musical instruments. Musicians bring their instruments to life in the same way that some greater force brings the musicians to life. Music occupies a place far above human mortals and the musicians it chooses to "use."

During the time I spent near Niamey, Niger, studying *dundun* (talking drum) with master drummer Isah Hamani, I noticed that music arose in many forms to nourish nearly every aspect of life. Work, play, and rituals were almost constantly accompanied by incredible music. This extraordinarily wild and vibrant music culture is unencumbered by attempts to capitalize on it or prevent the average person from accessing the joys of playing.

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