

Audio Review

Digging in the Crates with Analog Africa

Angola Soundtrack 2: Hypnosis, Distortions and Other Sonic Innovations. 2014. Produced and with liner notes by Samy Ben Redjeb. Analog Africa CD AALP075. Mastered by Michael Graves. CD, 21 tracks (60:00).

Bambara Mystic Soul: The Raw Sound of Burkina Faso 1974–1979. 2011. Produced by Samy Ben Redjeb. Analog Africa CD AA070. Mastered by Michael Graves. CD, 16 tracks (73:00).

Cameroon Garage Funk. 2021. Produced by Samy Ben Redjeb. Analog Africa CD AALP092. Mastered by Nick Robbins. CD, 16 tracks (72:00).

Manzanita y Su Conjunto // Trujillo: Perú 1971–1974. 2021. Produced by Samy Ben Redjeb. Analog Africa CD AALPDE013. Mastered by Michael Graves. CD, 14 tracks (36:00).

Senegal 70: Sonic Gems & Previously Unreleased Recordings from the 70s. 2015. Produced by Samy Ben Redjeb. Analog Africa CD AA079. Mastered by Stefan Konstantinidis. CD, 12 tracks (67:00).

“I tend to say that Analog Africa is music from the future that has been created in the past. Sometimes, it’s very futuristic and advanced music that it’s hard to believe it was recorded in the 1970s or even earlier. I wanted to create the label because many people had an idea of African music that was very far from the reality.”

Samy Ben Redjeb¹

Since 2000, Samy Ben Redjeb’s Frankfurt-based Analog Africa label has made it their mission to expose the planet to the richness and variety of African and African-based music. Equally active worldwide as a traveling DJ, Redjeb is a sonic proselytizer who seeks out rare, forgotten, or obscure sounds from the last few decades, giving them new life online with a comprehensive website featuring fifty-five releases from the Black world. The curation of this music allows it to flow seamlessly from track to track, provenance be damned. Listeners may well find themselves referring back to the extensive notes to confirm what their ears and feet are telling them to do. Those who hunger for the days of extensive LP liner notes, photos, and iconic images will be satiated; Redjeb and his team

1. <https://rhythmpassport.com/interview-samy-ben-redjeb-analog-africa-may-2017> (accessed 1 July 2023).

pay careful attention to minute details. The result is akin to an African time machine—a detailed snapshot of the artists and the era being presented.

In an interview posted on the label's website, Redjeb recounts his journey of discovery in the world of African music, beginning with his first job as a DJ at a hotel in Senegal. Though he began as an aficionado with no DJ skills, his fake-it-till-you-make-it methodology has served him and the rest of us very well. At first glance one might say that this project is as much about Redjeb as it is about the music. In fact, Redjeb shares little about his personal history. His is the decades-long love story of a close engagement with the music, the tales of an adventurer who is all about “getting up on the down stroke” inna African stylee. The focus is on the music and the musicians who play it. In this way Redjeb occupies the role of the modern hipster, consumer everyman in the West who is ever on the lookout for the next discovery, the next “fix.” He is the cosmopolitan and inveterate groove miner who, once bitten by the bug of African music, becomes fully obsessed by excavating rare sonic gems straight from the dirt. Indeed, Redjeb went down the rabbit hole and hasn't come up yet. We would be well advised to follow suit. His specific curation of dance music manifests as guitar-driven ensembles replete with complex percussion, blasting horn sections, and impassioned vocals. The main stylistic themes in the label's collection evoke the best of funk, traditional, and Afro-Cuban/Brazilian. The result is what happens when traditional rhythms and melodies collide with imported sounds and modern instruments. The Angola 2 disc, for example, is a glorious example of minor, mid-tempo guitar workouts that are as danceable as they are melancholic. Reminiscent of giants such as Franco et le T.P. Ok Jazz, The Super Rail Band, Orchestre Baobab, and Bembeya Jazz, the highly original artists presented by Analog Africa evoke a world of African styles and emotions without copying. Indeed, the influence of Franco is particularly felt, proof that a generation of English Rock fans were surely sniffing glue when they declared that “Clapton is God.” This is original music straight from what Donny Hathaway used to call “the Black pool of genius.” Amazingly, African music traveled around the world and found its way home in the form of luxuriant “guitar sounds that had blown across the ocean” from the Cape Verde Islands, the Congo, and beyond. The Afro-Cuban and Brazilian influence is palpable throughout this set, due to the centuries-long dialogue between the Motherland and her spiritual children in the West. This is wonderfully represented in the Bambara Mystic Soul release featuring the work of Amadou Ballake, the Burkinabe percussionist who originally formed Les Ambassadeurs (featuring a young Salif Keita on lead vocals) and Les 5 Consuls. Representing the cultures of several regional ethnicities, they anchored themselves in a Manding sound aesthetic that embraced outside traditions and brought them “back home.” In the liner notes, Ballake explains that the original nucleus of the band was a visiting group of Cubans with whom he played percussion when their conga player fell ill. When the group returned to Havana, he formed the first iteration of Les Ambassadeurs with his fellow Burkinabe musicians. Tracks like “Baden Djougou” shine in their steaming symbiosis of conga, clave, timbale, and djeli-meets son montuno, replete with meandering yet razor-precise guitar playing that seems to recall the entire history of the Black Atlantic in one glorious solo. Think of

this as one steaming hot slab of manding funk with hot pepper and plantains on the side. Once listeners have finished getting all the way down, they arise renewed, bewitched by the ancient melodies. Is it Cuban? Is it African? Is it funk? Does it matter? *Nah son!* All that really matters is that this music survived so that we can hear it.

Analog Africa's Senegal 70 release mines similar terrain to great effect, showering the listener with virtuosic guitar runs, exciting percussion and tight horns over a groove so deep, it can make you sweat without leaving your chair. Check "Kiko Medina" by Le Tropical Jazz for a blistering horn solo and tight arrangements that turn on a dime with characteristic quickness *a lo Cubano*. The fifty-five releases on the label document obscure as well as better known African and South American (mainly Brazil and Peru) releases during the late sixties and into the seventies. One might think that such a compilation would result in jarring differences, but the music of groups such as Manzanita y Su Conjunto works so perfectly alongside the other tracks that it will have listeners checking the notes to verify that this is a band from Peru and not the Congo. Similarly, the excellent samba rhythms of Jambú e Os Míticos Sons Da Amazônia infect the body and make you want to move every muscle; this too, is real African music. The label's main focus is the many different styles of traditional African music and their engagement with Cuban music, funk, rock, and R&B influences of the diaspora.

Samy Redjeb certainly has big ears; his curation shows he understands that Africa's borders extend far beyond her coasts. The label's motto is "the future of music happened decades ago," which makes for great copy. In truth, many of these tracks do sound rather dated, and due to the age of the masters and varying production quality, futuristic is not a word that immediately comes to mind. However, the exquisite, raw virtuosity of this timeless music is simply beyond category. The comprehensive liner notes and old photographs announce a boutique project with an eye for minute detail, adding to the pleasure of discovering this delicious music. Analog Africa is a labor of love.

Alongside the affinity for Afro-Cuban sounds, funk is also warmly welcomed as a member of the African family. Taking its colonial name from the abundant shrimp (Camarões) found by the Portuguese upon discovering the area, Cameroon has long boasted an eclectic and vibrant music scene. This is well documented by Cameroon Garage Funk, a vivid snapshot of the mid-1970s where thick grooves blended with native rhythms of the Beti, Ewondo, and Bamileke form a brand-new jam with 'nuff bass for ya face. Having experienced the Yaonde music scene in the early nineties, this writer witnessed personally the sweaty and funky Bikutsi throwdowns of bands like Les Tetes Brulees and the dance-till-you-drop, nonstop Makossa party of Sam Fan Thomas at the Abbia where the evening would end with the entire audience dancing on stage and getting sweaty with the band. With no division between fans and artists, one could bum-rush the stage and it's all just part of the act. Bodyguards were unheard of. This free-spirited party vibe oozes off the record, a compilation of well-known and obscure artists from the Yaoundé music scene of the sixties and seventies. Notable standouts include "Sie Tcheu" by guitarist Joseph Kanga, a hot and humid workout that encapsulates the ethos of the Meters and the J.B. Horns laid on top of a thick bed of Cameroon funk. "Quiero Wapatcha" by Charles

Lembe et Son Orchestra is another joyful guitar excursion deep into the realms of Cuban son montuno, proving without a doubt that Havana and Yaounde live in the same neighborhood. Franco and Sekou Bembeya would be proud. Listen to Tsanga Dieudonne's "Les Souffrances" for proof that the funk kinship between James Brown and the Motherland is no myth, with its full horn section, organ, and grunting, gutbucket vocals. Indeed, American Professor Robert Faris Thompson traced the word "funk" to Congolese origins in his book, *Flash in the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984). This, along with the fact that Congolese artists were the first to be marketed to Francophone African nations might explain the borderless allure of African music. Analog Africa gives us a sonic invitation to an international family affair, a continual dialog in rhythm and melody between a Mama and her scattered children.

There are a few missteps; "Mezik Me Mema" by Mballa Bony boasts a solid groove and smooth vocals but is spoiled by a rudimentary guitar solo, while occasionally the singing of Cameroonian funk legend Johnny Black on "Mayi Bo Ya?" strays a bit too far into campy impersonations of James Brown's funky exhortations. But these are only minor bumps in the road. Worth the entire price of admission alone is the sublime "Yondja" by saxophonist Ndenga Andre Destin, a masterpiece of guitar, percussion, xylophone with high-energy polyrhythms that are reminiscent of the classic Mulatu Astatke reissues from the Ethiopiques album series. Imagine David Murray stretching out on some Bamileke/Fela Kuti-like proto-funk mixed with ancient Chinese music and African chanting. When the brothers on the corner from the Five-Percent Nation preach about the "Asiatic BlackMan" was this the sound that they had in mind?

Even though he likes to say he eschews politics, Redjeb's tireless crate-digging and meticulous curation of this pan-diasporic music evinces a larger worldview that is not bounded merely by simplistic European ideas of "world music." Comprehensive liner notes remind us to put the music, the musicians, and their stories front and center. In an industry that markets easy stereotypes while exploiting artists, this, by itself, is a political statement. Analog Africa is a wide, international embrace of the rich musical traditions in the Motherland and in the Western hemisphere, a passionate sonic declaration of interrelatedness and community irrespective of national borders. Overall, this is a collection of instant classics that are essential additions to the library of African music lovers, teachers, or students of the various genres of the Continent.

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doi:10.1017/ytm.2023.9

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