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Made Locally, Sold Globally: How Viable are West African Music Scenes?

The geography of music production in the Global North is oriented around a few major urban cultural centers. In the United States, these centers are New York and Los Angeles, and in the United Kingdom, London. Each national or regional cultural zone has its own central site of popular music creation and accreditation. Holly Kruse writes about peripheral music scenes in the United States like Seattle, Washington and Athens, Georgia, as places whose musicians define themselves as outside of the mainstream. Yet groups like Nirvana and REM used these scenes as launching pads for major commercial careers. As such, peripheral music scenes are contested spaces of subjectivity—their independence from the mainstream music industry is largely subjective.¹ Still, musicians in Seattle, Athens, and other peripheral music scenes have the potential for a certain amount of success—in creative and economic terms—independent of the major urban cultural centers.

But what of the countries and regions which are situated in the economic and political peripheries of the globe? The nations of Senegal and Mali combined have less than 30 million people, many of whom live below the poverty line in rural villages or substandard housing in urban centers.² Their capitals, however —Dakar

¹ Kruse, Holly. *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. P. Lang, 2003. 1-15

² Central Intelligence Agency. "Senegal." CIA World Factbook.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sg.html>.

Central Intelligence Agency. "Mali" "CIA World Factbook

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>

and Bamako, respectively—are home to thriving live music scenes, which have produced a number of genres and musicians that have garnered fame and respect in popular music markets worldwide. In this paper, I will attempt to assess the viability of the contemporary Dakarois and Bamakois music scenes as sites of not just creative, but economic success for the musicians they produce.

Before attempting such an analysis, it is first necessary that I provide some global context as to the market conditions of the popular music industry worldwide. Once I have defined the global conditions, I will then analyze the conditions specific to West Africa, and Dakar and Bamako specifically. Finally, I will provide a few case studies representing specific strategies for economic success for West African musicians.

Global Market Conditions in the Digital Age

The most widespread medium for listening to and storing music is currently the mp3. Sterne argues that this ubiquity is due to the mp3's design as the audio component of the larger Motion Picture Experts Group (MPEG) video format, which is completely standardized so as to be easily sharable. The mp3 compresses music to the smallest size possible by excluding sounds that are difficult or impossible to perceive by the human ear. The widespread compatibility of the format and its small size has given rise to a world-wide file sharing community who exchange music freely and, in the eyes of government and industry, illegally. As Sterne compellingly describes it, the mp3 was “designed for promiscuity.”³

³ Sterne, Jonathan. “The Mp3 as Cultural Artifact.” *New Media & Society* 8, no. 5 (October 1, 2006): 829-836.

File-sharing technologies have frequently drawn the ire of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the media conglomerates which it represents, resulting in lawsuits and the frequent lament that file-sharing is destroying the music industry's profits. Using economic data and billboard charts, Gopal, Bhattacharjee and Sanders have shown that this stance ignores the fact file-sharing is not always destructive to the industry, and in fact actually has the potential to increase profits by providing a means for consumers to sample new music.⁴ Further, Gopal, Bhattacharjee, Lertwachara, and Marsden have shown that smaller labels have used file-sharing and other internet technologies to brand their music more effectively, allowing them to compete with bigger labels. This indicates that smaller artists can benefit from file-sharing technology in marketing their music to the Global North. At the same time, artists with "superstar" status whose albums chart well upon initially release have experienced no negative effects on the sales and chart survival of their albums.⁵

From these studies, we see that file-sharing (or "piracy," to use the terminology of the RIAA) has by no means had a universally negative effect on the potential for musicians and the music industry to profit from the promotion and sale of music to consumers. File sharing is a new technology which, like radio and recorded sound before it, necessitates changes in strategy for musicians and industry representatives if they are to be successful. However, these new strategies

⁴ Gopal, Ram D., Sudip Bhattacharjee, and G. Lawrence Sanders. "Do Artists Benefit from Online Music Sharing?" *The Journal of Business* 79, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 1529-1531

⁵ Bhattacharjee, Sudip, Ram D. Gopal, Kaveepan Lertwachara, James R. Marsden, and Rahul Telang. "The Effect of Digital Sharing Technologies on Music Markets: A Survival Analysis of Albums on Ranking Charts." *Management Science* 53, no. 9 (September 1, 2007)

open up new avenues for potential financial success. The academic and cultural critic Lawrence Lessig openly advocates for less restrictive copyright laws, stating that freer usage of file-sharing technologies could “encourage an enormous growth in economic opportunity for both the professional and the amateur, and for all those who benefit from both forms of creativity.”⁶

West African Realities

But what of music in the Global South, and specifically in our two West African music scenes, Dakar and Bamako? Monographs on African music scenes in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana have established the presence of complex informal economies which flood local markets with unauthorized reproductions of locally produced music recordings. In such economies, selling unauthorized copies gives merchants struggling to breach the poverty line a significantly higher profit margin.⁷ There have been moderately successful efforts in countries like Ghana to use labeling systems and other interventions to boost sales of authorized recordings. Yet while these interventions have improved sales for some artists, they have not created enough success for local music industries to thrive.⁸ Tristan Mattelart notes that even Lessig does not support the copy and sale of unauthorized copies in the global south, adding his voice to the global narrative of unauthorized copiers as destructive pariahs despite their diverse and sometimes

⁶ Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. Penguin Press HC. 2008.

⁷ White, Bob W. *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire*. Duke University Press Books, 2008. 65-97., Shipley, Jesse Weaver. *Living the Hiplife: Celebrity and Entrepreneurship in Ghanaian Popular Music*. Duke University Press Books, 2013.

⁸ Shinner, Jo. “New scheme boosts African piracy war. (efforts by Ghana’s music industry to stop recoring pirates).” *Billboard*. Vol. 105, No. 16. April 17, 1993. 40.

locally necessitated motives for participation in the informal economy.⁹ Mattelart elaborates that unauthorized copies of media products from the Global North can dominate markets in the global south, further damaging local music, television, and film industries. As such, unauthorized copies cannot be used as a means of resisting mainstream media conglomerates in the way they have been in the Global North.

...the networks of the globalization from below through which pirated goods circulate cannot be seen as spaces of resistance that would be opposed to the networks of the globalization from above: They are, like the latter, and not independently from them, inserted in a complex interplay of hegemonic relations at local, as well as national and global levels.¹⁰

Ryan Skinner has written more specifically about the music economy in Bamako, in which merchants selling unauthorized copies of local music have been targeted by government enforcement. This enforcement was spurred by the closing of several local record labels and protest by musicians about the lack of opportunities for them to make money from their music. Skinner reports that as much as 90% of the recordings bought and sold in Mali are unauthorized copies. Government crackdowns have been largely symbolic and ineffectual, however, leading to instances of high tension and even violence between musicians and merchants selling these unauthorized copies.¹¹

⁹ Mattelart, Tristan. "Audio-visual Piracy: Towards a Study of the Underground Networks of Cultural Globalization." *Global Media and Communication* 5, no. 3 (December 1, 2009): 308–310.

¹⁰ Mattelart. 2009. 323-324.

¹¹ Skinner, Ryan Thomas. "Artists, Music Piracy, and the Crisis of Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Mali." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2012): 723–754. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1353/anq.2012.0053>.

In Dakar, economic conditions for musicians are little better than Bamako. Van Gelder and Schultz point out that Dakarois musicians make less than the average laborer in the city.¹² The World Bank's Africa Music Project study found that musicians average around \$600 a year in the city. Once again, piracy is named as one of the primary reasons for this problem, with a ratio of pirated copies to authorized ones similar to that of Bamako.¹³

As a result of these problems and the establishment of cities like Paris, London, and New York as centers of world music, many musicians from West Africa are trying to establish themselves abroad.¹⁴ This trend started during the establishment of the world music industry in the 1980's, but has been further strengthened by the deterioration of local music industries due to the unauthorized reproduction economies outlined above. As such, many of the most established artists spend as much time in the United States and Europe as they do in Bamako or Dakar. Fofu-Mensah, Duran, and Stapleton argue that the potential for success abroad has caused something of an exodus of the more popular musicians in West African music scenes.¹⁵ It should be taken as a given, however, that this exodus involves only those musicians with enough financial support and connections to

¹² Van Gelder, Alec and Mark Schultz. "Unchain Africa's Melodies." *The Turkish Daily News*. December 4, 2008. (Accessed online April 30, 2013).

¹³ Penna, Frank J., Monique Thormann and J. Michael Finger. "The Africa Music Project." in *Poor People's Knowledge: Promoting Intellectual Property in Developing Countries*. ed. J Michael Finger and Philip Schuler. World Bank Publications, 2004. 95-101.

¹⁴ Winders, James A. "Mobility and Cultural Identity: African Music and Musicians in Late-Twentieth-Century Paris." *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 3 (June 20, 2006): 483-508. doi:10.1215/00161071-2006-008.

¹⁵ Fosu-Mensah, Kwabena, Lucy Duran, and Chris Stapleton. "On Music in Contemporary West Africa." *African Affairs* 86, no. 343 (April 1, 1987): 226-231.

attempt a career in the Global North—a small minority in the Bamakois and Dakarois music scenes.¹⁶ For musicians who are successful in establishing themselves abroad, financial success can come with new difficulties in transcultural marketing and cultural imperialism—concepts upon which I will elaborate below.

So what are the avenues to financial success for musicians in these cities, and how viable are they? As mentioned above, local recording industries are weak due to unauthorized reproduction and foreign competition. Local record labels, however, do exist and can provide a means for musicians to sell their music to local markets. Arnqvist and Thorsen provide the example of Seydoni Production,¹⁷ a music production company based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which also has offices, recording facilities, and a factory in Bamako.¹⁸ In the interview he gave to them, Seydoni founder Richard S. Traore lays out numerous difficulties in mounting tours and promoting recordings for local musicians, including poor infrastructure, lack of access to modern equipment, and piracy—he claims that it takes “a maximum of two weeks after the launch of an album to have the market flooded” with unauthorized copies.¹⁹ The volatilities of the Malian market were further borne out when Seydoni closed its operations in Mali in 2005, laying off a number of employees and ceasing production. It was not until 2007 that the company

¹⁶ Van Gelder and Schultz. 2008.

¹⁷ Arnqvist, Maria and Stig-Magnus Thorsen. “Music Industry in Burkina Faso and Mali—The case of Seydoni Production: Interview with Richard S. Traore.” in *Sounds of Change: Social and Political Features of Music in Africa*. Ed. Maria Arnqvist and Stig-Magnus Thorsen. Sidastudies no. 12. Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2004. 107-109.

¹⁸ “Accueil.” Seydoni Burkina, S.A. <http://www.seydoni.com/index.html> (accessed May 12, 2013).

¹⁹ Traore, Richard S., quoted in Arnqvist and Thorsen, 2004. 109-115.

reopened its doors, citing increased government enforcement of piracy in the country as the reason for the change. Skinner maintains that Seydoni's closing was motivated more by politics than economic necessity, yet, for the musicians whose livelihood depended on the production company, motivations hardly mattered.

Strategies and Interventions

As the potential for success with local record labels is limited and volatile at best, many musicians in Bamako and Dakar attempt to sign with international labels instead. One of the labels that signs artists in the region is the American company Nonesuch, an affiliate of Warner Records. Nonesuch's Explorer Series has signed many of the most well-known acts on the world music market from Dakar, including Youssou N'Dour, Cheikh Lo and Orchestra Baobab, as well as big acts from Bamako including Toumani Diabate, Rokia Traore, and Oumou Sangare.²⁰

Amadou and Mariam are perhaps the best example of a Malian act to have benefited from signing with Nonesuch. Since they joined the label in 2005, they have achieved a great deal of success in Western markets, selling hundreds of thousands of albums worldwide²¹, touring the US, Canada, and Europe, and opening for acts like U2 and Coldplay.²² This success has been due, in part, to a sometimes dramatic change in production values since Amadou and Mariam joined Nonesuch. Their recordings from the early 90's, rereleased on Because records as *L'integrale*

²⁰ Nonesuch Records. "Artists." <http://www.nonesuch.com/artists>. (Accessed May 10, 2013)

²¹ Nonesuch Records. "Amadou and Mariam." <http://www.nonesuch.com/artists/amadou-mariam>. (Accessed May 13, 2013).

²² Smith, Caspar Llewellyn. "Amadou and Mariam: When you live in this world you have to make yourself useful." The Guardian Online. February 12, 2012. (Accessed May 12, 2013).

des Annees Maliennes, (The Complete Mali Years) employ stripped-down, minimalist production, with Mariam's unaltered voice and Amadou's clean electric guitar sound taking center stage.²³ Their 2009 Nonesuch release, *Welcome to Mali*, however, uses extensive studio effects, especially on the track "Sabali," which features extensive vocal processing, sampling, and synthesized sounds.²⁴ These changes are likely indicative of the kind of "cultural imperialism" that Martin Stokes has argued is endemic to the world music industry.²⁵ It is not necessarily a negative thing when artists from a specific locality change their sound in an attempt to be more attractive to a world audience. In the case of Amadou and Mariam, however, they have largely ignored Malian audiences in favor of international ones since joining Nonesuch. The touring schedule on their website lists no dates in Bamako or other Malian cities, despite an intensive list of dates in Europe and the United States over the next year.²⁶ During my time in West Africa in the Peace Corps, I visited Mali, and spoke to a number of volunteers and Peace Corps staff members in Mali who expressed the desire to see Amadou and Mariam in concert in the country, but none of them had ever heard of the pair playing a show in the country in recent years. In addition, their recent albums have only been released on Nonesuch and the British label

²³ Amadou and Mariam. "Mon Amour" *L'Integrale Des Annees Maliennes*. Because Records. 2008.

²⁴ Amadou and Mariam. "Sabali" *Welcome to Mali*. Nonesuch Records. 2009.

²⁵ Stokes, Martin. "Music and the Global Order." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2004): 47–72. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143916. (Accessed May 1, 2013).

²⁶ Amadou and Mariam. "Shows." <http://www.amadou-mariam.com/shows/>. (Accessed May 12, 2013).

Because, meaning that copies of these albums available in Mali are even more likely to be pirated than their locally released counterparts.

While Amadou and Mariam's success is remarkable, the number of musicians who are signed to Nonesuch and other foreign labels is very small in comparison to the number of independent musicians in Bamako and Dakar. The Africa Music Project noted that, as of 2004, only about a dozen of the more than 30,000 musicians in Dakar had been signed to international labels.²⁷ In addition, some of the artists who signed were hardly down on their luck beforehand. Youssou N'dour was one of the biggest selling artists in Africa well before signing with Nonesuch in 2002²⁸, achieving fame in the West through collaborations with artists like Neneh Cherry and Peter Gabriel.²⁹ Artists without the status, money, or connections to attract the support of foreign labels, however, have to find alternative means of making a living in Bamako and Dakar.

An outside intervention that at least claims to help African artists make a living is the wealth of African music blogs operated by bloggers in the Global North. Some of the most prominent of these are Likembe, Rhythm Connection, Awesome Tapes from Africa, and Sahel Sounds. Each of these sites include recordings of artists from Francophone West Africa, especially Dakar and Bamako. Upon reading the profiles of each blogger, it becomes evident that they are overwhelmingly white males from the U.S. and Europe. The mission of each blog is some variation on

²⁷ Penna et al. 2004. 95-101.

²⁸ Duran, Lucy. "Key to N'Dour: Roots of the Senegalese Star." *Popular Music* 8, no. 3 (October 1, 1989): 275-284. doi:10.2307/931277. (Accessed May 1, 2013).

²⁹ Nonesuch Records. "Youssou N'dour." <http://www.nonesuch.com/artists/youssou-n-dour>. (Accessed May 12, 2013).

providing access to music that is no longer available and/or making new types of music available to people who might not otherwise hear them.³⁰ Much of the music on these blogs is available to download for free, based on the claim that the music is no longer available, and contact information for the blogger is provided for artists who do not wish for their music to be available on a blog. Some blogs, though—Sahel Sounds and Awesome Tapes from Africa in particular—have expanded their operations to actually print albums and distribute them to customers via online orderings systems. Bloggers like Chris Kirkley of *Sahelsounds* and Brian Shimkovitz of *Awesome Tapes from Africa*—both of whom focus mostly, if not exclusively on West Africa—claim that their efforts help African musicians connect with fans abroad, and eventually make additional income from online sales.

While I do not doubt the potential benefits to artists that these blogs could bring, I see two primary problems with this approach. The first is the limited amount of exposure that they provide in comparison to labels like Nonesuch, who provide extensive marketing and touring support. The second is that the sole middlemen in this situation between African artists and theoretical western audiences are the bloggers themselves, who become de facto cultural accreditors, choosing which music they think is worthy of exposure online and leaving out what they find less compelling. While these bloggers are removed from the mainstream

³⁰Rhythm Connection. "Rhythm Connection." rhythmconnection.blogspot.com (Accessed May 12, 2013).

Shimkovitz, Brian. "Awesome Tapes from Africa." awesometapesfromafrica.com (Accessed May 12, 2013).

Kirkler, Chris. "Sahel Sounds." sahelsounds.com. (Accessed May 12, 2013).

system of artistic cultural accreditation portrayed by Bourdieu³¹ and Gendron,³² they still seek to speak for African musicians the same way in which art traders or rock critics seek to mediate the discourse about artists and music in the Global North. At times, the tone of bloggers can even become overtly paternalistic, seeking to save musicians from obscurity through their benevolent digital intervention. For instance, Shimkovitz declares that digitization is “liberating” to African musicians, only briefly addressing his own subjectivity in what music he decides to upload.³³

While African music blogs represent an internet intervention by foreign bloggers, African musicians have some means of online marketing available to them on the continent. The Dakar-based band Takeifa, headed by frontman Jac Keita and comprised mainly of his siblings and cousins³⁴ uses a variety of web-based promotion methods to market their music and shows in the city and abroad. Rather than selling their music as CDs in local markets, they opt instead to use the online digital music site Bandcamp, presumably to cut down on piracy. In addition, they use extensive promotion activities on social networking sites like Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter to attract new fans.³⁵ As such, they have built connection

³¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Production of Belief.” in *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. Columbia University Press: New York. 1993.

³² Gendron, Bernard. *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*. 1st ed. University Of Chicago Press, 2002. 189-222.

³³ Shimkovitz, Brian. “Collateral Damage: Awesome Tapes from Africa’s Brian Shimkovits.” *The Wire*. <http://thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/p=10630> (accessed May 13, 2013).

³⁴ Takeifa. “Bio.” www.takeifa.com. (Accessed May 13, 2013).

³⁵ Takeifa. “Jac Et le Takeifa.” <https://www.facebook.com/takeifa>. (Accessed May 13, 2013).

Takeifa. “Jac et le Takeifa.” <http://www.myspace.com/takeifa1>. (Accessed May 13, 2013).

across West Africa and Europe to help them sell their music and tour. Using these methods, the members of Takeifa have been able, at least to a degree, to form their own image and avoid the need for foreign intervention to help them market and sell their music.

The problem with this model is that Jac Keita and his bandmates have considerably more resources than most Dakarois musicians. Coming from middle class families who provided them with education and support, the members of Takeifa are much better situated to utilize online resources and foreign connections to help them achieve financial success. The average musician depicted in the World Bank's Africa Music Project, who is likely unemployed or underemployed and makes around \$600 a year,³⁶ can probably count on only sporadic access to the internet, let alone to foreign connections who can help them tour or sell music abroad.

Outside of these individualized approaches to the digital promotion and marketing of African music, broader, potentially more inclusive models are currently being implemented. The Kleek, a Pan-African digital music service, is run by Samsung and Universal Music Group, and provides access to music by internationally known African artists as well as local musicians. The service is currently free, but is only available on Samsung phones using Google's Android operating system.³⁷ This, of course, greatly limits the number of customers who can use the service, as most sub-saharan Africans cannot afford smartphones. The

Takeifa. "Takeifa on Twitter." twitter.com/takeifa. (Accessed May 13, 2013).

³⁶ Penna, Frank J., Monique Thormann and J. Michael Finger. 2004. 101-102.

³⁷ Pfanner, "Universal Music Group and Samsung Offer Digital Music Service." The New York Times. www.nytimes.com March 24, 2013. (Accessed May 12, 2013)

Nigerian service iRoking, on the other hand, is based in Nigeria and the UK, providing a model for digital music marketing at least partially based in West Africa. As opposed to The Kleek's method of making agreements with both local and international record labels, IRoking actually signs artists, acting like a label itself.³⁸

Whether these services will provide long-term solutions for digital music marketing in Africa remains to be seen however, as IRoking has only been operating for a year and The Kleek only since March. One problem is that they both may have a difficult time making sufficient revenue due to how few Africans can afford the technology necessary to use their services. There is speculation that this will change with the release of lower-cost smartphones, yet there is, of course, no telling how long this will take. Methods for monetizing digital services in the Global North have generally centered around subscriptions and advertising revenues, but these are problematic in West Africa, where few people have enough regular income to afford subscriptions and advertising budgets are not generally robust enough to provide sustainable income to support these services.

Conclusions

Taking these problems and some attempts at interventions on the behalf of musicians and music industries in West Africa, what can we say about the viability of these music scenes as places of potential financial success? I have established that unauthorized reproduction of audio recordings is a constant challenge to the ability of musicians and local record labels to profit from their activities. Despite the potential for file sharing and unauthorized reproduction in the Global North to

³⁸ Pfanner, 2013.

boost recognition and sales for artists, the informal economies of West Africa do not provide the same opportunities.

Foreign labels and blogs do provide limited avenues of success for Bamakois and Dakarois musicians, but for the vast majority of musicians these are unattainable. Even for those who do, success could mean repackaging their music for foreign audiences, and even leaving their countries of origin, seeking better opportunities in Europe and the United States. Digital services like Bandcamp and social media sites can give African artists opportunities to sell their music for more profit and reach more potential fans, but once again, these practices are limited to reasonably well-off, well-connected musicians, and involve marketing to foreign audiences more than local ones. The picture that emerges from a reading of these problems and potential interventions is that of a difficult economic landscape for Bamakois and Dakarois musicians. While foreign interventions are problematic both in terms of scale and cultural implications, the viability of new local strategies based on digital-age technologies remains to be seen.

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