

Lighten up and Be Cool

*An underground classic
keeps on drumming*

Brian Francis Slattery

African Rhythm and African Sensibility

By John Miller Chernoff

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In a performance in an Accra lorry park, with beggars and businessmen standing in the dust or on top of trucks to watch me play, or in the fetish cult ceremonies with dancing initiates singing in a secret language, I would sometimes smile and ask myself, "What am I doing here?"

—John Miller Chernoff

Somewhere the Western conception of the artist broods on a mountaintop: the recluse, the mad scientist, a person apart from society. The Europeans gave it to us, with their Fausts and their Prousts, making diabolical deals and languishing in cork-lined bedrooms, but when even we Americans think of the artistic ideal, we don't think of Norman Mailer or Andy Warhol, the one who ran for mayor or the one who turned partying into art. We think of J.D. Salinger, in self-imposed exile in New Hampshire. We have our artists' retreats, where people create in serenity, away from trucks, telephones, and mailmen. This notion of purity still gets us: a quest for perfection, a whiff of the divine, the artist finding his voice and ascending to the firmament, leaving behind works that make the planet swoon.

Meanwhile, in a bar in some American city, a band is cranking out a final dance number before last call, and there's something about the way it's all coming together. The band decided to all drink the same thing tonight. There's a woman at the bar that the guitarist has been trying to flirt with from the stage. There's a group of friends in tuxedos and dresses who weren't done partying when the wedding reception ended, now dancing between the tables with their hands in the air. Cops in kilts, a bagpipe brigade from a policeman's funeral that afternoon, have decided to let it rip. The band plays a song we've heard a million times—"Son of a Preacher Man," or "One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer"—but the people there will remember it as one of the best songs they've ever heard, and when they hear it again, later, piped through the speaker of an airport, they'll

be transported back to that night; the night lifts itself out of the past and lives on, a work of art in itself, until the last person who was there is gone.

Alhaji Adam is one of those old people who are always happy. He had not been involved in my work, but we had a beautiful friendship. We liked each other very much, and whenever we met on the street, we were so happy that we would become confused: we would just be standing and greeting each other over and over again, laughing.

—John Miller Chernoff

Though trained as an academic, John Miller Chernoff went to Africa just to learn to play the drums. In learning to play with discipline and mirth, he immersed himself in Ghana's culture to an extent that many anthropologists must envy, and his ability to ingratiate himself—more than ingratiate himself, really—is matched by the lucidity with which he can describe what he learned. Musicians can be very bad at explaining what they do, because to them, music can be too much like breathing; or, they have thought about music so much that they do not know where to begin. It is obvious that Chernoff is an excellent musician, but learning to think with his hands has not robbed him of his tongue.

To get at the crucial difference between African music and Western music—and thus between African sensibilities and Western sensibilities—Chernoff describes two concerts by masters of their arts: Mstislav Rostopovich, the late Russian cellist, and Koyaté Djimo, a Senegalese kora player. At the height of Rostopovich's performance of a concerto, Chernoff writes, the cellist's concentration "became so intense and his playing so perfect that the audience was riveted to attention.... [T]he intimacy of his involvement with the instrument fascinated me, and ... we in the audience joined together in wild applause for his genius." Meanwhile, at his concert, Djimo started with a simple melody, a simple rhythmic structure, and over time began to elaborate; the melody got curlier, the rhythms denser.

"Finally," Chernoff writes,

at the moment when his improvisations were reaching their most difficult and wonderful point, he raised his head and looked out over the audience, smiling slightly as he turned his head and his eyes to survey the scene. His demonstration of coolness and poise gave those in the audience...their most accurate understanding of the depth and meaning of the tradition he was representing, and as he looked at them and smiled, they acknowledged this insight with a spontaneous gesture of applause which transformed the concert hall from a Western to an African musical context. When he finished his piece, the people in the audience actually looked around to smile at each other while they applauded again.

The cellist's aesthetic was internal, implicit, "an inspiration to be appreciated and internalized." The thrill for the audience was in watching a lone artist rise to perfection. Djimo's aesthetic was external, explicit, "a display to evoke participation and respect." The joy for the audience was in being included, made part of it. The cellist, in an ecstatic moment, rose above society; the kora player, through his coolness, created a society around him.

A drummer plays only some of the things he hears. [He] restrains himself from emphasizing his rhythm in order that he may be heard better ... concern[ing] himself as much with the notes he does not play as with the accents he delivers.

—John Miller Chernoff

Learning to play any kind of music involves discipline, extreme repetition of musical figures to learn to play them well. As it is with Western classical music, so it is with traditional African music. Chernoff inveighs several times against those who might think that African music is mostly improvised, when it is in fact mostly composed, passed on from player to player. But never would a classical

instructor encourage a student by telling him that “every mistake is a new style.” In striving toward the perfect, the Western artist is encouraged to find his voice, the thing that sets him apart even from other artists; the farther his voice carries, the more important he is. In African music, the idea of the perfect is irrelevant, uninteresting; and someone playing too loud ruins the music. What is more important is to leave space—for the other musicians, for the huge beat in the middle that is not played, for the things that are felt without needing to be made explicit. This space lets in the people listening and dancing to the music, lets them be a part of it; and the quality of the music is judged not by the ability of the players, but by the success of the occasion as a social event. How good a time people had. How it made them feel.

In the museums of the major cities of the Western world, paintings and sculptures hang on the walls, and symphonies, operas, and string quartets are played in still concert halls. We are told to regard them in a near-silence akin to worship. Is this fair to them? Why don't we play string quartets in basements and abandoned warehouses, while people clap, mock, and cheer? It is said that Mozart ended his piano concertos with improvisations. Why don't contemporary pianists improvise their endings? In operas in Italy, if the audience liked an aria, they used to thunder their applause to grind the opera to a halt until the singer sang it again. Why don't we do that any more? Why are we only allowed to sing along to the Messiah at Christmas when everyone also knows the melody to the Ode to Joy? Why can't the Mona Lisa hang in a restaurant?

Meanwhile, the African sensibility that Chernoff describes is all around us, all the time. It is there in the beautiful graffiti on the brick wall of the old factory, in the chalk drawings on the sidewalk. And it is a lightning bolt through American music: jazz, gospel, country, soul, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, the music we want to hear when we dance and pray, mourn and party, step up or chill out. We do not need to be told that what we are seeing, what we are hearing, is good. We know how we all feel.