# The Significance of the Relationship Between AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC AND WEST AFRICAN MUSIC

By Olly Wilson

Any musically sensitive person who has experienced both West African and Afro-American music is aware of the similarities of these musics simply on the basis of the empirical musical evidence. In addition, common sense informs us that the shared history of these peoples would probably be reflected in some cultural similarities. It was only the ethnocentrism of some Euro-American writers that prompted the notion of a tenuous relationship between African and black-American music.[1]

This attitude toward the relationship of African to Afro-American culture was not limited to music. It was part of a larger view of the interrelationship of these peoples which held that there was little remaining of Africa in Afro-American cultures. Herskovits, in his monumental study *The Myth of the Negro Past,* describes this attitude as the "cultural *tabulala rasa*" theory; that is, the theory that Afro-American culture is essentially devoid of any important vestiges of African culture, that the ravages of slavery and contact with a powerful Euro-American culture have destroyed all remnants of Africa and created a cultural *clean state.* Herskovits launched a devastating attack on this position and demonstrated, through the marshalling of a wealth of data, that black cultural practices in America, particularly in religion and the arts, have shown an amazing ability to retain or adapt African practice to conform to the demands of the new environment.[2] With the recent growth of scholarship informed by a black perspective, on both sides of the Atlantic, Herskovits's studies have been amplified.[3] The purpose of this paper is to attempt to show some of the retentions and adaptations of West African musical practices in Afro-American music and to explore the nature of this relationship.

The question of the relationship of the Afro-American music to African music must be seen in the context of the meaning of the general term "African Music." The people of a continent as vast as Africa, with their cultural and historical differences, necessarily reveal this diversity in their music. It is because of these differences that some musicologists refer to "African musics" [4] and not African music. As a matter of fact, it appears that the more conversant one is with a specific musical style, the more he resists generalizations about African and Afro-American music. Nevertheless, as long as one recognizes the limitations of such generalizations they may be useful in tracing relationships which might otherwise be ignored. It is for this reason that, although the individuality of specific musical cultures must be recognized as the basic source of the richness of African music, the commonality of larger stylistic areas must not be overlooked. As Kwabena Nketia has stated:

> A plural concept of African music based on the "ethnic" group as a homogeneous musical unit can be misleading, for divergencies merely represent areas of musical bias. They are the result of specializations or differences in emphasis on the selection and use of common musical resources, common devices, and procedures, specializations which have over the years tended to group African peoples into different communities of taste.[5]

The recognition of the importance of an overview of the entire continent has led to comparative studies of African cultures as a whole, as well as specific aspects of these cultures. Among these, the pioneering work of Herskovits in comparative studies of African cultures and a study of Joseph Greenberg in African languages may be cited.[6] The implicit assumption behind both of these studies is the existence of an interrelationship of large areas of Africa in terms of culture or certain aspects of culture.

In music there have been several comparative studies. Perhaps the best known is that of Alan Merriam, published in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*.[7] Though his study was preceded by studies of Waterman [8] and others, Merriam's work had the advantage of drawing upon more recent research from specific areas. The basic criteria for the establishment of music cultural areas has been "a matter of specialization within a common practice." Hence, Merriam suggests that there are seven distinguishable musical areas in Africa, each having special areas of concentration:

> (1) Bushman; Hottentot; (2) East Africa; (3) East Horn; (4) Central Africa; (5) West Coast; (6) Sudan; Desert, divided into [a] Sudan and [b] Desert; and (7) North Coast. [These coincide in the main with the culture areas delimited by Herskovits.] [9]

To these must be added an eighth area which does not have geographic unity, the Pygmy area, found in rather widespread locations in central Africa. As Waterman had suggested, Merriam accepts (in a qualified way) the idea of a common sub-Saharan African musical practice. He differs from Waterman, however, in the delineation of common characteristics. Waterman has listed the following five characteristics as common throughout sub-Saharan Africa:

> (1) Metronomic sense (2) Dominance of percussion (3) Polymeter (4) Off-beat phrasing of melodic accents (5) Overlapping call-and-response.[10]

Merriam contests this list as not being applicable to the entire area. He holds that these characteristics are salient features of West Africa but not of East Africa. He is less explicit in specifying common characteristics for the entire sub-Saharan continent, though he points to "the importance of rhythm and percussive-rhythmic techniques" as indicators of a "reasonably cohesive

musical system in Africa." [11] It should be pointed out that Merriam is not suggesting a monistic approach to African music but is simply underlining elements of commonality that he finds running through independent musical practices. The most important contribution of Merriam's study is the clear statement of specific characteristics of each of the musical areas. Others have also made comparative studies of African music. Of particular note is A. M. Jones's use of the practice of singing in fixed intervals of thirds (or fourths), fifths, and octaves as a criterion for the establishment of musical areas.[12]

With a few notable exceptions, the scope of most of the comparative studies of African music culture has been limited to peoples living within the continent. This is surprising in view of the fact that the cultural influences of people outside of the continent on the music of the continent has received much notice, if not systematic analysis. Nevertheless, comparatively few studies have been published that give attention to the influence of African music on music outside of the continent.

Among the exceptions to this, however, have been the work of Waterman; [13] Merriam, Whinery and Fred; [14] Courlander; [15] and A. M. Jones.[16] The first two studies deal with the relationship of African music to the music of African descendants in the New World. The most detailed of these is that of Merriam, Whinery and Fred. In this study, there is a comparative analysis of Gege (Dahomean derived music of Brazil), Rada (Dahomean derived music of Trinidad), Ketu (Yoruban derived music of Bahia), and Cheyenne Indian music. Specific variables of the musical structures (incidence of melodic intervals, etc.,) are subjected to a statistical analysis. This study has shown that stylistic studies, though limited, may be a valuable tool in indicating continuity of musical styles.

Jones's work, *Indonesia and Africa,* is the most novel and problematical of the comparative studies because it is not based upon a known historical connection. It suggests that cultural similarity might be used to suggest a historical relationship. Jones's study compares the Chopi, Malinke, and Bakuba peoples of Africa with peoples of Cambodia and Java. He notes the similarity of the beginning absolute pitches of xylophones used by both groups in addition to similarities in scalar arrangements, techniques of singing in thirds, decorative patterns, game forms, and other characteristics. Jones concludes with the statement:

> The thesis we have propounded alters our perspective of Africa; it calls for a map with the Indian Ocean in the center; a basin whose rim is Indonesia on the east, Madagascar in the south, and Africa on the west, all to a greater or less extent, sharers in a common sphere of influence.[17]

Though his theory has been questioned,[18] it is of interest to us here because it suggests that a large cultural area might involve a sphere of influence outside of its geographical focal point.

It is the position of this paper to offer another hypothesis which has more credibility, at least, in terms of known historical connection.[19] I propose that a black-music cultural sphere exists which includes the music of the African and African-descendant peoples of the following geographical areas: the Atlantic Ocean in the center, bounded by West Africa on the east with the northern part of South America and the Carribean Islands on the south-west and the United States on the north-west. The resultant sphere of influence, which is divided geographically and culturally into three large sub-groups (West Africa, South America, North America), represents an extension of the West-African music area cited by Merriam. The common factors used to identify West-African music are all present in the same or adapted form in music of the two areas in the Americas. The earlier cited study of Merriam, Whinery and Fred, as well as others, has already established this relationship between West African music and that of selected areas of the Carribean and Northern Brazil. The fact that similarities exist in regard to the kind of slavery practiced, the probable origin of the slaves, the ratio of blacks to whites, and the geography between other areas in the Carribean and the northern part of South America implies that the same kind of close relationships also may exist between these areas and West Africa.

The inclusion of North America is admittedly more problematic since culturally the overall relationship of African descendants in the United States to West Africa is considerably less demonstrable than that of their brothers in the Carribean and South America.[20] A careful investigation, however, may add validity to my position. If one considers the five criteria given by Waterman as cluster characteristics for West African music, one finds that three have been well documented as being characteristic of Afro-American music. Call-and-response organizational procedures, dominance of a percussive approach to music, and off-beat phrasing of melodic accents have been cited as typical of Afro-American music in virtually every study of any kind of Afro-American music from work songs, field or street calls, shouts, and spirituals to blues and jazz. The degree to which systematic comparative analysis of these characteristics is dealt with in extant studies varies from being virtually nil in the descriptive works of early chroniclers of Afro-American music to tentative attempts by writers like Sargeant [21] and Schuller.[22]

Another of Waterman's characteristics, "metronomic sense," is really not a musical characteristic at all but a psychological one which proports to explain a cultural psycho-physical reaction to music. Such claims are conceivable, but given the embryonic state of psycho-cultural analysis they remain dubious and, under any circumstance, outside the range of competence of most musicologists, especially musicologists who are not native to the group whose collective psychology they attempt to explain.

Waterman's final characteristic, "polymeter" or "multi-meter" deserves special attention. Defined as the "simultaneous use of two or more meters," [23] its exact nature has remained a matter of controversy.[24] Most observers have

found it usually results from the metrical interaction of the various drums of the common multi-voice drum family to each other, and from the interaction of the drums with the gongs, rattles, and hand clapping which normally accompany them in West Africa. The exact manner in which these strata interact has been the subject of much musicological debate,[25] but the following statement of Jones is generally accepted as being representative of the fact:

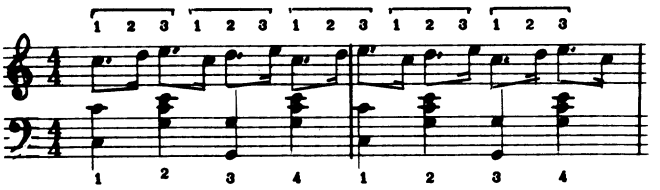
> Whatever be the devices used to produce them, in African music there is practically always a clash of rhythms; this is a cardinal principle.[26]

If one assumes that the essence of the multi-meter practice is the clashing of rhythmic accents or the creation of cross-rhythms (and not the manner in which this is produced), then the incidence of multi-meter in Afro-American music is large. Unlike in black musical cultures of South America and the Carribean, the typical multi-drum ensemble is virtually non-existent within North America. Nevertheless, the usage of cross rhythms is a persistent characteristic feature of Afro-American music. The frequency with which this occurs, in contrast to its more limited usage in musics of the Euroamerican tradition, also points to an African derivation. Early descriptions of Afro-American music consistently refer to the special rhythmic qualities of the music. Observers, such as Dr. James Eights in the eighteenth century and Francis Kemble in the early nineteenth century, all make reference to these unusual rhythmic qualities. Henry Krehbiel and the black composer-musicologist Nicholas J. G. Ballanta-Taylor, writing at the turn of this century, also comment upon this characteristic in the black spirituals they describe. None of the above, however, gives a detailed analysis of the rhythm.

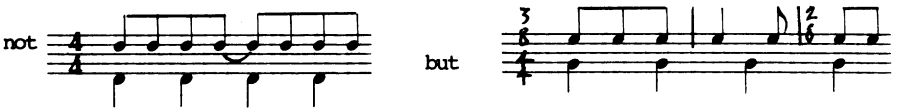
Don Knowlton, writing in 1926,[27] pointed out that a black guitar player told him that there was a distinction between "primary rag" and "secondary rag"—terms used to refer to typical rhythms commonly employed in the then popular instrumental form called ragtime. By "primary rag" he meant simple syncopation (or the momentary displacement of the regular accent implied by the metrical framework of the piece); by "secondary rag" he meant "the superimposition of one, two, three upon the basic one, two, three, four." (See Example 1.)

Aaron Copland, in his article "Jazz Structure and Influence on Modern Music," [28] points out that secondary rag is really an example of the polyrhythm, or the interplay of two or more contrasting meters. He feels that the notation commonly used to indicate rag rhythm is misleading, that another kind of notation would be more explicit. (See Example 2.)
The difference in these rhythmic notations reveals the distinction between one metrical system in which all rhythms are subsumed under a single all-encompassing metrical background and another one in which contrasting metrical backgrounds coincide.

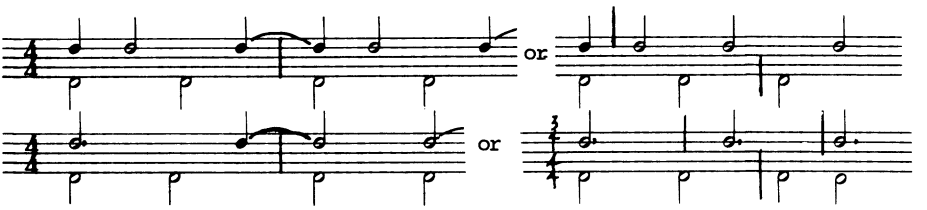
*Example 1*



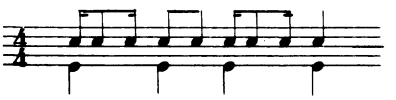

*Example 2*




*Example 3*




*Example 4*



*Example 5*

Winthrop Sargeant, in reviewing Knowlton's and Copland's work, suggests that the distinction between syncopation and polyrhythm has to do with the relative length of the patterns superimposed on one another since certain kinds of syncopations may also be polyrhythmic. He states his position as follows:

> In extended simple syncopation the accents of the superimposed rhythm are spaced similarly to those of the basic rhythm [i.e., a half note apart; see Example 3a]. In the secondary rag type of syncopation, on the other hand, the accents of the superimposed rhythm are spaced differently from the basic rhythm [i.e., three quarter notes apart; see Example 3b]. This would appear to be the fundamental difference between extended simple syncopation and polyrhythmic syncopation.[29]

The application of newer analytical procedures to this question suggests that the distinction between syncopation and polyrhythm is a function of the rhythmic hierarchic level upon which the displacement occurs. Hence, if the foreground rhythm (i.e., basic metrical pulse) is not displaced or is displaced only momentarily, the result will be syncopation (see Example 4), but if the foreground rhythm is displaced (see Example 3b or 5) or a lesser rhythmic level is displaced over a long time span, the effect of polyrhythm will occur.

It should be pointed out that Knowlton, Copland, and Sargeant, while recognzing polyrhythm as a non-European element of black rhythmic practices, tended to isolate it as the principle which governed black music. They therefore confused much music written in the twenties and thirties with black music because it superficially contained one of the characteristic elements of Afro-American music, although it lacked most of the others.

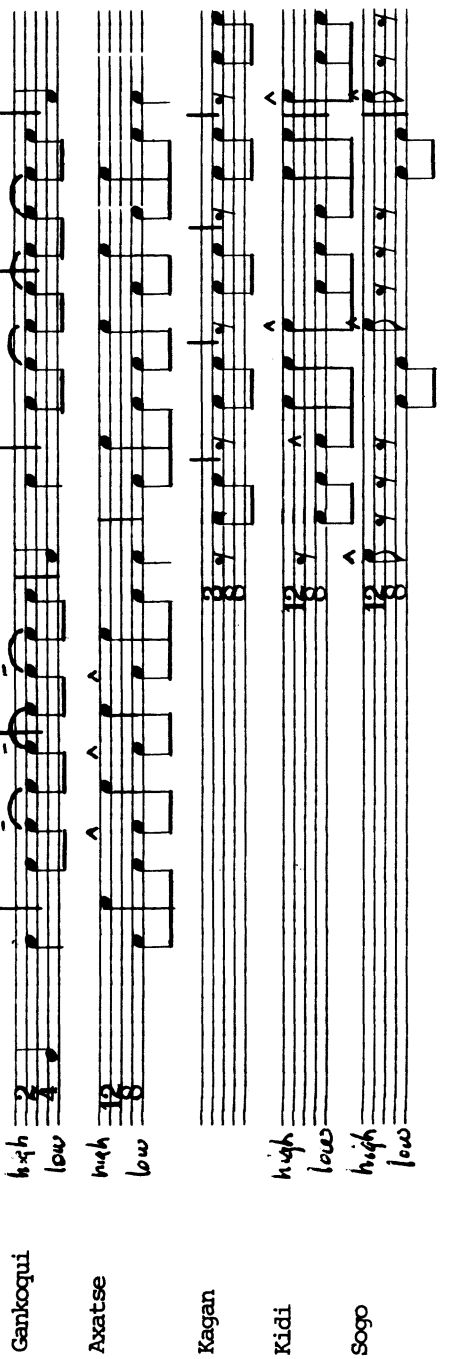
The polyrhythm described above is an Afro-American adaptation of the West African practice of multimeter. The adaptation became necessary because it was common practice in the slave states of North America to outlaw drums for fear of slave rebellions. Hence, although the multi-drum choir was impossible, the cultural propensity for cross rhythms was fulfilled by new practices.

Example 6 is a transcription of an excerpt from an Agbadza, an Ewe social dance. As is customary in West African music, the ensemble is divided into two rhythmically-functional sections: a fixed rhythmic section consisting of instruments whose basic rhythmic patterns are maintained essentially unchanged throughout the duration of the piece and a variable rhythmic section consisting of instruments whose rhythmic patterns change in the course of the piece. The Gankoqui (metal gong) and the Axatse (calabash rattle with external beads) form the fixed rhythmic group. The Kagan (small membrane keg drum), Kidi (medium-sized keg drum), and the Sogo (medium-large keg drum) comprise the variable rhythmic group.

*Example 6*

AGBADZA

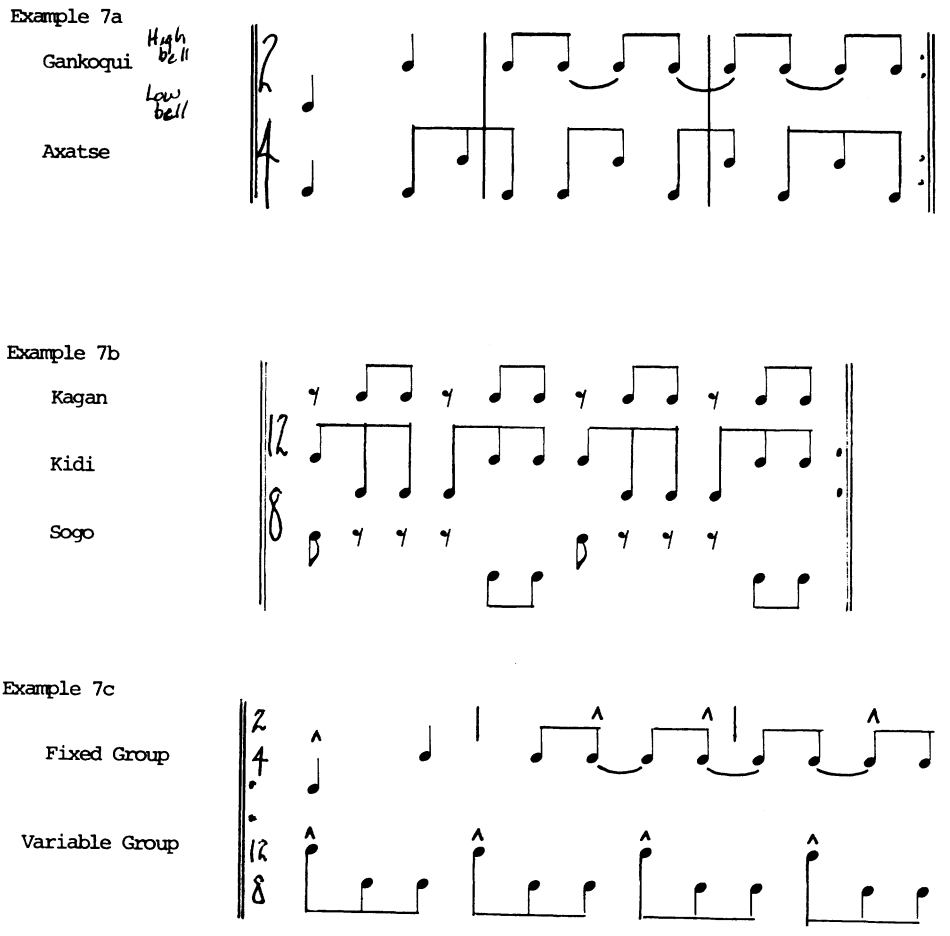
Transcribed by Olly Wilson



In the course of most pieces, the master drummer will play a series of rhythmic patterns which will be answered by a corresponding series of counter-rhythms performed on the smaller drums. The polymeter results from the dynamic interaction of the drum rhythms with one another, the interaction of the master-drum rhythms with the counter-rhythms of its paired associates (i.e., Kidi and Kagan), and the interaction of the entire variable rhythmic group with the fixed rhythmic group.

Specifically, in Example 6 the polymeter results from a clash of the implied 2/4 meter in the fixed group with the implied 12/8 meter being performed simultaneously in the variable group (see Example 7).

*Example 7*



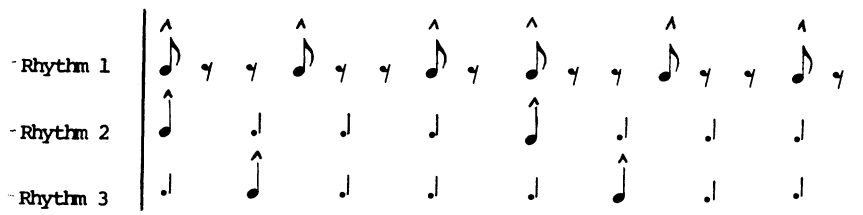
A composite polymetric rhythm is set up because the basic accents of the fixed rhythmic group and the variable rhythmic group are not coincident except at the terminal point of the bell pattern, which is precisely what makes the end of the pattern a perceptible focal point. The polymeter is thus the result of the simultaneous occurrence of several rhythmic strata, each with an independent meter.

In the James Brown transcription, (see Example 8), we find a refinement of the Afro-American adaptation of West African polymetric rhythmic practice described earlier in the ragtime examples. Although the wind instruments (along with the snare drum) may be written in 4/4 meter for ease of reading, the pattern that they play is really one of alternating meters (i.e., ). The second chord in the first measure is equal in stress to the first and therefore must be properly conceived as a downbeat, not an upbeat. The following notation— —implies the second eighth note is weaker than the first. In addition to this alternating metrical pattern, a contrasting meter is created by the strong accents that occur every four quarter notes, thus suggesting a regular 4/4 meter. This 4/4 meter is reinforced by the entry of the voice (in measure four) anticipating the downbeat, but still accenting the first beat of the next five measures. The first entry of guitar as well as the low E-flat, the melodic goal of the bass, also occurs on the first beat.

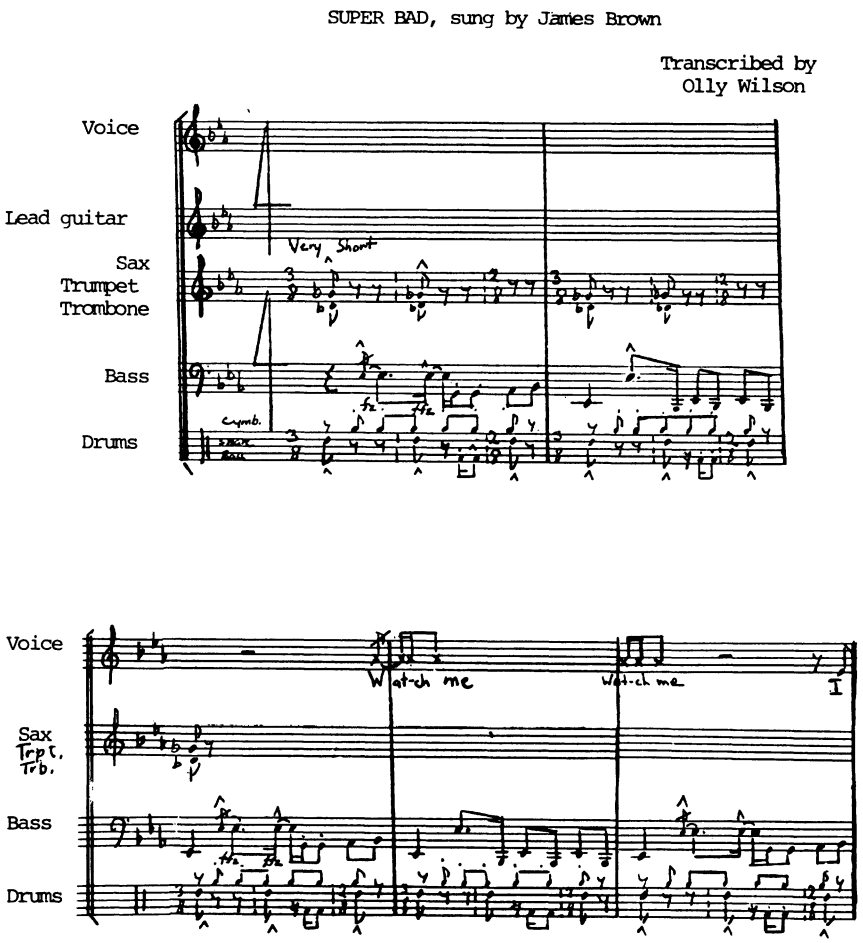
A third metrical pattern is produced by the bass instrument, which begins on the second beat of the first measure. This repetitive eight-beat pattern is subdivided into two groups of four beats each: (1) by the occurrence of heavy stress and agogic accents on the high E-flat every four beats and (2) by the repetition of the pitch pattern from high E-flat to low E-flat. The fact that this four-measure pattern begins on the second beat of the implied 4/4 meter creates a counter-rhythmic effect.

In Example 9 is a graphic representation of the resulting polymetrical composite rhythm.

*Example 9*

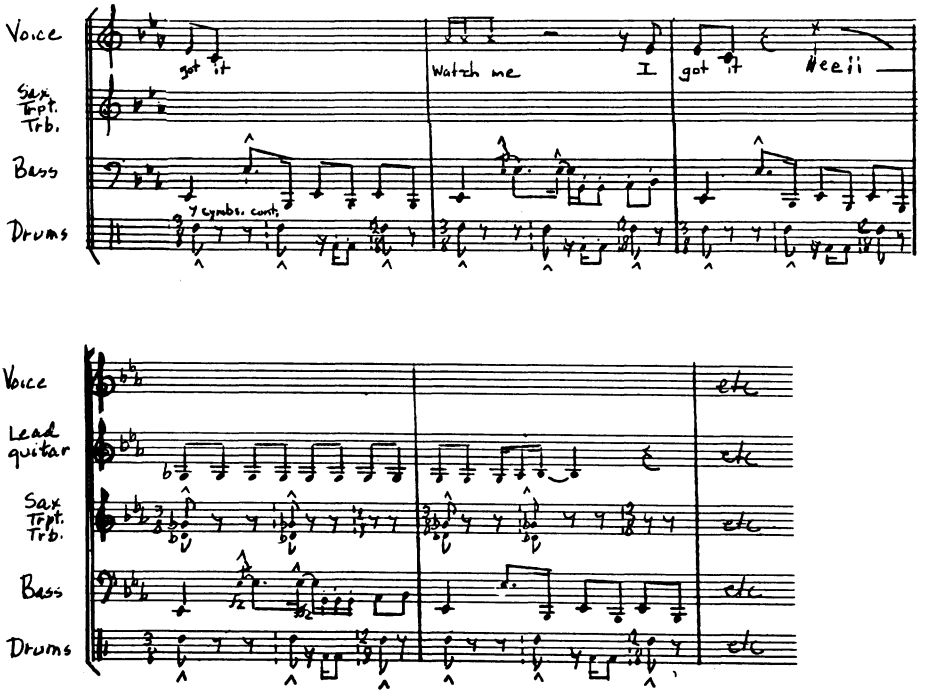


*Example 8*



*Example 8 (Continued)*

SUPER BAD



It is vital to understand the concept of adaptation of African practices if there is to be an understanding of Afro-American music. It provides a conceptual framework that can explain the diversity of practices within the sphere of West African music culture. Another area in which adaptation is operative is in the Afro-American approach to instruments. Eileen Southern cites many examples from colonial accounts of blacks in the United States which show that as early as the seventeenth century many slaves and former slaves had mastered European instruments.[30] In most accounts, blacks were sought out for their peculiar ways of performing, especially for performing music for the dance. What this suggests is that the slave dance-musicians performed differently than their white counterparts, that they approached the instruments with a certain stylistic bias. I would suggest that this stylistic bias was a percussive polyrhythmic manner of playing which was part of their West African tradition, that they adapted the European instruments and the English jigs that they probably played to an essentially African way of doing things. The adaptation of European instruments, from the violin to the electronic organ, has been a continuing process in the history of Afro-American music. It is well known that the performance technique a black jazz musician uses is not the same as that of his white symphonic counterpart and that this distinct manner of playing an instrument as if it were an extension of the voice has been a unique Afro-American feature throughout the history of black-American music.

In addition to the above characteristics cited as distinct features of both West African and Afro-American music, the following features common to both may be briefly noted. There tends to be an intensification of the stratification of the musical lines by means of emphasizing the independence of timbre (color) for each voice. Just as the different tonal colors of various size drums are clearly differentiated from each other and from the gongs, rattles, hand clapping, and voices in West African music so we find that the typical violin, banjo, bones, and tambourine of the eighteenth century or the clarinet, trumpet, trombone, guitar, bass, and drum set of early twentieth century Afro-American music maintain this independence of voices by means of timbral differentiation. The sound-ideal typical of the West African sphere of influence is a heterogeneous one.

Another common characteristic is the high density of musical events within a relatively short musical space. There tends to be a profusion of musical activities going on simultaneously, as if an attempt is being made to fill up every available area of musical space. This is partially a result of the stratification commonly found in the instrumental music of the entire area we are considering, but it is also present in solo songs—where the singer seems to furnish his own countervoice. This also partially explains the abundance of tonal and other vocal nuances as well as the overlappings and anticipations of phrase beginnings and endings that frequently occur.

Finally, another common characteristic is the inclusion of environmental factors as integral parts of the musical event. The thumping of the feet, for

example, or the patting of parts of the body and the sympathetic vibrations of anything on the dancers, the instruments, or in the physical surroundings are all considered an integral part of the musical experience. As someone has said, there are no observers in the traditional West African multi-media experience; everyone is a participant. The same thing could be said of most Afro-American musical experiences.

The above survey of the common musical characteristics shared by West African and Afro-American musical cultures is given in support of my contention that the West African musical sphere should include Afro-American music as an important sub-group. This does not mean that diversity between the musical practices of these groups is non-existent or unimportant. Nketia warns us:

> One need not over-simplify the musical situation by ignoring differences or variations in which, in fact, the richness of the African heritage lies. It is by taking into account what each African society has done, what each has been able to achieve musically that we can see the African musical heritage in its entirety. This aggregate must include also those forms integrated into African tradition and regarded as part of their musical culture by those who use them, but which, nevertheless, can be traced to some outside influence. Rigid immutable cultures, we are told, are barely to be found, and we must expect the same kind of situation in the African field.[31]

Among the obvious instances of divergencies of Afro-American music from West African music has been the adaptation of West African practices to incorporate functional harmony. The fact that most Afro-American music is functionally harmonic has led some observers to describe this music as representing a combination of European and African influences—African in its rhythmic principles and European in its melodic and harmonic principles. Indeed, African-American music, and particularly jazz, has been proclaimed as the only true American art form, with the emphasis on the American, the implication being that jazz consists of approximately equal elements of European and African cultures. Though this view appears plausible at first glance, careful examination reveals that it represents a gross over-simplification. Like the studies of Knowlton, this position ignores the fact that it is the combination of many interrelated parameters that defines the Africanness of a musical practice, not the presence or absence of a single one. The approach to metrical organization with cross rhythms as the norm, the percussive technique of playing any instrument resulting in an abundance of qualitative accents, the density of musical activity, the inclusion of the environmental factors as part of the musical event, the propensity for certain "buzzy-like" musical timbres—all these are African features which have been consistently maintained in Afro-American music.

The confusion has arisen because most musicologists, trained in Western music, unconsciously approach the musical event as one in which the most important elements are melody, harmony, and rhythm. All other aspects are seen as secondary. The traditional Western notation system reflects this bias. That is why transcribed African or Afro-American music seems a pale distillation of the musical reality—in which factors other than melody and harmony are of as equal, or more, importance.

Herskovits, in considering the dynamics of acculturation between two cultures, has stated that only those elements of a foreign culture which are compatible with the original culture will be adapted.[32] It has been pointed out by several reviewers that scalar types and methods of voice production found in West African and Euro-American music have a high degree of compatibility. In addition, although research has shown that most traditional West African music is modal and that structural organization is governed by rhythmic and melodic principles, some studies have suggested that a functional modality might be operative as a means of organizing melodic phrases. For example, in a study of melodic organization of music in Ghana (especially Asante music), Nketia found that the determination of the final tone of a melody was often indicated by the placement of the final tone of the penultimate phrase.[33] If this common practice in Asante music is typical of other West African modal usage, then one could postulate that the concept of functional relationships between tones exploited as a larger structural principle is present in African music. The same principle applied to harmonic aggregates can be regarded as compatible with West African practices.

This is not to say that the adoption of functional tonality in Afro-American music, with its regulatory principles, was not a significant departure from the West African tradition. What is suggested, however, is that functional tonality was not completely alien to West African practices. An investigation of the usage of functional harmony in Afro-American music remains to be undertaken, but a few of its common features suggest that its usage in this context is unique. First, the standardized harmonic patterns which evolved in Afro-American music (coincident with the development of the spiritual and later classic blues) tended to be strophic, short, and not dependent upon large-scale harmonic relationships for their continuation. Second, the usage of much melodic dissonance has been a characteristic feature of the music. This is because the harmonic rhythm tends to be slow, thus allowing for a large degree of melodic independence.

Another divergence of Afro-American music from the main West African tradition is represented by the lack of specificity of musical types for particular functions. This is a reflection of the difference in the social institutions of the two ethnically-related but geographically-separated peoples. Music in West African societies is usually associated with a specific social function. The specificity of musical type is shown by special music performed by specific groups on special occasions[34] (i.e., Fontomfrom, Kete, Adowa). This specificity of musical type is not present in Afro-American

music. The closest thing to the complicated West African system of musical types is the use of general designations for various kinds of music—such as "church music" or "dance hall music," or as the old folks used to say "God's music" or the "devil's music." This general distinction between sacred and profane music has always been more of a verbal one than a musical one, since musical styles, instruments, specific songs, and even the musicians themselves have been commonly shared by both the church and the dance hall. Performers from the early blues players to such contemporaries as Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin have played both sides of this street, frequently at the same time. Indeed, a study of Afro-American musicians would reveal that typically they serve an apprenticeship in the church prior to their professional performances on the stage. This is not surprising if one recalls that the black church in the United States was the strongest black-controlled social institution in the community for decades and hence the major reservoir of cultural practices. Although there are other divergencies of Afro-American music from West African music, the two cited above, along with the language differences, are the most important.

Two books written independently which explore the complicated psycho-sociological relationship of the black minority in the United States to the white majority appear to add support to my hypothesis about the relationship of Afro-American to African music. The two books are Leroi Jones's *Blues People* and Charles Keil's *Urban Blues*. The uniqueness of Jones's work derives partially from the fact that he approaches the problem of the black man's attitude toward himself and the white majority through a study of changes in black music and partially from the fact that Jones writes from a consciously black perspective—that of a man on the inside looking out. He states in the book's introduction:

> I am saying that if the music of the Negro in America in all its permutations is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of the country.[35]

and later:

> The one peculiar referent to the drastic change in the Negro from slavery to citizenship is his music.[36]

In his survey of change in Afro-American music, he concludes that important changes in the music were derived from reinterpretations of an older, basically African tradition, partially in reaction to dilutions of this music by whites who imitated it. Speaking of the development of the so-called Bebop movement of the 1940s he says:

> What seems to me most important about the music of the forties was its reassertion of many "non-western" concepts of music.[37]

Charles Keil accepts Jones's thesis, applies it to recent developments in contemporary American society, and codifies it into what he calls the "appropriation-revitalization process." He writes:

> Negro music, since the days of the first recordings but especially during the last two decades has become progressively more "reactionary"—that is more African in its essentials—primarily because the various blues and jazz styles are, at least in their initial phases, symbolic referents of in-group solidarity for the black masses and the more intellectual segments of the black bourgeoisie. It is for this reason that each successive appropriation and commercialization of a Negro style by white America through its record industry and mass media has stimulated the Negro community and its musical spokesmen to generate a "new" music that it can call its own. In every instance the new music has been an amalgamation of increased musical knowledge (technically speaking) [sic] and a re-emphasis on the most basic Afro-American resources.[38]

The appropriation—revitalization theory tends to support my basic premise that African-American music is a unique branch of West-African music in that it suggests that there is a basic store of African ways of creating music buried deep in the collective psyche of black Americans which historical and sociological forces make necessary for them to tap in order to retain some semblance of a unique identity. The tenaciousness of this fundamental base of West African characteristics, in spite of enormous sociological and environmental changes, suggests that Herskovits's assertions about the durability of subliminal aspects of culture might have credibility.[39] Thus, although the history of black music in the United States shows movement from hollers, chants, and worksongs to spirituals, ragtime, blues, jazz, gospel, soul, and avant-garde black music—all of which differ from one another—the characteristic West African core, clearly demonstrable in each practice, is the essential element which unites and defines these musical expressions.

Although Jones and Keil both seemingly recognized this, neither formulated the relationship in this manner, partially because the exact nature of the relationship of African-American to African music was peripheral to their major concerns. Keil, as a matter of fact, betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of this "West African Core," the source of revitalization, when he states:

> In the light of recent and current events in American music it looks as if this process (appropriation-revitalization syndrome) may now be entering its final cycles. Once gospel music has been brought to white night clubs and tambourines have been passed out to patrons at the door, it would seem that there isn't much left to be appropriated. Jazz musicians—sensing that

> Afro-American resources have now been thoroughly explored, re-integrated, and appropriated—are turning with increased frequency to Africa itself and to other ethnic traditions as well for revitalizing force.[40]

This statement implies, first, that there is a major difference between African and Afro-American elements, and second, that these elements are quantitative. Keil apparently did not grasp that the relationship between African and Afro-American music consists not only of shared characteristics but, more importantly, of shared conceptual approaches to music making, and hence is not basically quantitative but qualitative. Therefore, the particular forms of black music which evolved in America are specific realizations of this shared conceptual framework which reflect the peculiarities of the American black experience. As such, the essence of their Africanness is not a static body of something which can be depleted but rather a conceptual approach, the manifestations of which are infinite. The common core of this Africanness consists of the way of doing something, not simply something that is done.

The work of anthropologists studying continuity and change in African culture supports this view of conceptual framework. Herskovits and Bascom, for example, frequently refer to the tenacity of various aspects of African culture—sometimes reinterpreted, but always essentially African. In speaking of the religion they say:

> Despite the intensity of Christian missionary effort and the thousand years of Moslem proselytizing which have marked the history of various parts of Africa, African religions continue to manifest vitality everywhere. This is to be seen in the worship of African deities, the homage to the ancestors, and the recourse to divination, magic, and other rituals.[41]

They could have added to this list the rapid contemporary development of African spiritualist churches which exhibit an adaptation of Christianity to traditional African modes of worship.

If my view of the relationship of African and Afro-American music has validity, then fears of the imminent demise of black musical culture on both sides of the Atlantic seem unfounded. Contemporary developments in Afro-American music certainly seem to belie such claims, even in the face of the mass commercialization it is currently undergoing. The simultaneous development of this music in so many areas is astonishing. In addition, recent reinterpretations of this tradition have occurred on the mother continent, partially as a reflection of significant social changes and partially as a reaction to the impact that western music in general, and Afro-American music in particular, has had on the continent. Witness the development of highlife and more recently the so-called Afro beat of Fela Kunti. In each case the basic Africanness of the new development is undeniable.

The widespread popularity of James Brown throughout West Africa is a vivid testimony of the close relationship of Afro-American to African music. Brown's style is based upon an intensification of the most salient aspects of West African music, modified by the divergencies referred to earlier as characteristic of Afro-American music and the peculiarities of Brown's individual musical personality. The result is a style which is consonant with traditional West African approaches and yet different enough to benefit from the advantages of novelty. It is for the same reason that Louis Armstrong on his tours was immensely popular in Africa or that the young performer Fela Kunti, given proper exposure, would be popular in black America. To be sure, every Afro-American style could not find great popularity in Africa or, conversely, every African style in the United States. Some are too inextricably tied into a peculiar social experience to be understood by an audience unfamiliar with those circumstances. Billy Holiday speaks a musical dialect that people in Koforidua, Ghana, would have difficulty comprehending, and the essence of songs by the Ewe composer Akpalu would probably be lost in the streets of Harlem. Yet, in styles where the basic elements common to both cultures are emphasized the reaction is similar. For musical meaning, as studies have shown, is a complex phenomenon which exists on many levels, all of which have a cultural context. And in some instances the levels are so refined as to have relevance only to a select group. Yet, the communicability of certain aspects of music (especially those that are common to different groups although in distinct forms) appears to transcend these parochial distinctions.

In this paper I have limited myself to a general overview of the nature of the relationship of Afro-American to West African music. In order for my hypothesis to have meaning, it is necessary that there be more detailed study of music throughout the entire area. The basic point of this paper has been to develop a viable hypothesis which would give direction to the consideration of the relationship of African and Afro-American music. While the notion of a West African musical culture sphere united by a commonality of shared conceptual approaches to music making seems plausible, I recognize that because of the limited knowledge presently available in the field of comparative musicology such formulations must be primarily speculative. Nevertheless, it is hoped that such an overall view will bring together ideas from current independent studies to support or refute the hypothesis and hence serve to clarify a very complicated relationship.

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NOTES

[1] There are many such studies, most of them written before 1950. One of the best known is George Pullen Jackson, *White and Negro Spirituals* (New York, 1943).

[2] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941). Herskovits has been criticized for overstating the case by applying his concept of retention and

adaptation too freely to sociological patterns. Nevertheless, his position on religion and art has been incontrovertible.

[3] See particularly Joseph Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston, 1964) and Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators; African Retentions in the Blues* (New York, 1970).

[4] See, for example, Hugh Tracey, "A Short Survey of Southern African Folk Music" in African Music Society Newsletter 1, no. 6 (1953).

[5] J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Unity and Diversity in African Music: A Problem of Synthesis* (Accra, 1962), p. 11.

[6] Herskovits, "A Preliminary Consideration of Culture Areas of Africa" in *American Anthropologist* 26 (1924), pp. 50-63; Joseph Greenberg, *African Linguistic Classification* (New Haven, 1955).

[7] Alan P. Merriam, "African Music" in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, edited by William Bascom and Melville Herskovits (Chicago, 1958), pp. 49-86.

[8] Richard Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas" in *Acculturation in the Americas*, ed. by Sol Tax (Chicago, 1952), p. 212.

[9] Merriam, "African Music," p. 80.

[10] Waterman, "African Influence," p. 212.

[11] Merriam, "African Music," p. 80.

[12] A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music* (London, 1959).

[13] Waterman, "African Influences," pp. 139.40.

[14] Alan Merriam, Whinery and Fred, "Songs of a Rada Community in Trinidad" in *Anthropos* 51 (1956), pp. 157-74.

[15] Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music: U. S. A.* (New York, 1963).

[16] Jones, "Indonesia and Africa" in *African Music* 6 (1960), pp. 36-47.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[18] M. D. W. Jeffreys, "Negro Influence on Indonesia" in *African Music* 7 (1961), pp. 10-16.

[19] The historical derivation of the majority of African-descendent peoples from West Africa is so well known it need not be belabored here.

[20] Herskovits, *Myth*, pp. 146-47.

[21] Winthrop Sargeant, *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (New York, 1938).

[22] Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz* (New York, 1968).

[23] Merriam, "African Music," p. 61.

[24] Jones, *Studies*, p. 53.

[25] Merriam, "African Music," pp. 57-65.

[26] Jones, "African Rhythm" in *Africa* 24 (1954), pp. 26-27.

[27] Don Knowlton, "The Anatomy of Jazz" in *Harper's Magazine* 152 (1926), pp. 578-85.

[28] Aaron Copland, "Jazz Structure and Influence on Modern Music" in *Modern Music* 4 (1927), pp. 9-14.

[29] Sargeant, *Jazz*, pp. 63-63.

[30] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York, 1971).

[31] Nketia, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 11.

[32] Herskovits, *Myth*, p. 85.

[33] Nketia, *African Music in Ghana* (Evanston, 1963), p. 20.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[35] Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York, 1965), p. x.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 194.

[38] Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, 1966), p. 46.

[39] Herskovits, "Patterns of Negro Music" in *Transactions* 34 (1941), p. 19.

[40] Keil, *Urban Blues*, p. 46.

[41] Herskovits, *Continuity and Change*, p. 4.