

West African Music as a Means of Communication, Connection, and Cultural Preservation

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Abstract

This paper examines how West African music in general, as well as specific examples and encounters, impacts and has impacted those in positions of musicianship or cultural students. It examines how undervalued and underappreciated West African music is, ways in which it can be honored more in the future, and how the reach of this broad genre will continue to grow and be appreciated as time goes by.

Introduction

Spring 2023

- April 3 by midnight Initial paper due to studentresearch@unca.edu with document file name and email subject line LASTNAME_2023Journal.
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- Review returned by April 14
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Section

In this section we discuss formatting guidelines that have been updated in 2023 to follow standard accessibility guidelines

Subsection: Formatting

- Use this template!
 - Use the standard (first) Design in Word and use the Heading, Heading 2, etc from the Style menu in Word (not just bolded). This makes the document more accessible for those with reading disabilities/blindness using screen reading tools.
 - Use Arial 12-point font for the body of the paper (this font is considered one of the most accessible and this is minimum font size for accessibility), 20 point font for section titles, 16 point font for subsection titles
 - [This page from the OAA](#) gives additional accessibility guidelines.
- No minimum page length, maximum 25 pages
- Single spaced body of the paper, one-inch margins
- First page top right header only goes on the first page (not every page)
- Use citation guidelines consistent with your discipline.
- Papers may be written in LaTeX as well
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Introduction

In this piece, I will be discussing how West African music and cultures align with one another; how the values from the many varieties of beautiful and enriching music from the countless cultures intertwine and weave themselves into society. Through anecdotal encounters with musicians and friends, as well as through performances that have been part of my musical career that I will be recounting, I have come to understand that my path in life is to bring myself closer to these cultures and their values through the art they have created and continue to create.

Studying aesthetic practices derived from diverse African traditions allowed me to link my own expression to concepts of “Africa” in physical, embodied ways, that has affected me in more or less a transcendent way. This is not an unfamiliar feeling for me, but it has historically been in a strictly musical context.

Music has many ways of meaning, which are both extremely subjective, and extremely socially determined. I will discuss the subjectivity of the communication process in both language and music, showing how these two communicative processes are in some ways similar, and some ways distinct. They both communicate in different yet complementary ways, with language being more functional and music being more emotional.

West African Aesthetics

Music in West Africa has been described as a way of living, as cultural expression, in even ethical terms. In addition to its well-known rhythmic sophistication, it is also an integral, connective, social, even holy expressive process.

Upon meeting various well-known musicians, this musical perspective was borne out by my interactions, and music manifested social bonding between us. This occurred both in casual performance, in the purchasing of a traditional instrument, and in formal and professional performance. My growing familiarity and confidence with new musical aesthetics led me to reach out to create new friendships from across the globe, which inspired confidence in me. My musical recordings reflect that confidence. They are inspired by my appreciation for African aesthetics, and the reception of my public performances of this body of work is reassuring.

West-African Concepts and Aesthetics

There are a lot of different concepts and ideas in West African music that are linked between countries and ethnic groups. Music in many parts of the world, including in west Africa, served many roles, usually not just for entertainment, but for community-building, for spiritual reasons, or for sending messages back and forth from town to town, home to home, or even person to person, such as from a king's servant to the king.

The book *Music in West Africa*, by Ruth Stone, explores the musical traditions of the Kpelle people, highlights how music across the region is similar—"It is, in fact, difficult to find a word in any of the West African languages that is equivalent to the Western idea of "music." Instead there are terms for more specific actions like singing, drumming, or dancing as well as broader terms such as performance, which encompass song as well as dance, oration as well as instrumental playing (Stone 2005, 22).

As we can see, Stone makes it clear that many west African cultures see music as almost a way of life, rather than simply a form of entertainment, so much so that they don't have general words for music itself. It simply is and exists. She also makes note of how most song in west Africa is polyrhythmic—"West Africa, as a region of Africa, is well-known, particularly within its indigenous music, for polyrhythmic, multilayered sounds" (Stone 2005, 24).

We can gather from these two quotes that this kind of music is like, as Stone puts it, "speaking one's native language". In fact, it is such a part of life, that many master musicians give their instruments names and human features—"A drum that I encountered was called Goma by the musicians, a name given to a woman and meaning 'share with me.' They pointed out the ears, body, waist, and feet, all human features attached to the carved form. And when I finished field work with the ensemble that played Goma, the musicians sent her home with me as a gift" (Stone 2005, 25).

This idea and practice is incredibly touching and beautiful.

Overall, we can gather that music is something of a holy, integral experience for many west African peoples, whether the Kpele, the Ashanti, the Yoruba, etc. It incorporates a very nature-based, reverent kind of idea into what it means to play music, one that connects the musician, the instruments, and the listeners in a way that's very profound.

Music, Language, and Their Relations to Each Other

In this section, I will be discussing the links between music and language, and how the two cannot exist without one another. Language is a very special and interesting tool, as it can not only convey things like what day it is or how to find a place to eat, but it can also reflect so much about how the society that speaks it perceives the world around them.

Let's take the word "iya" in the Yoruba language. The term "iya" can be written in several ways, since Yoruba is a tonal language. The tones depend on the accent marks put on the vowels of the word. In this case, the word "iya" can be written with several different accent marks on the A. The term "iya" can mean either "mother" or "to suffer".

This is important, not just because one change in pitch, and the word becomes totally different, but because these words, "mother" and "suffer" while being so distinct from each other, could also share a great many similarities in their cultural context.

Mothers must bear great responsibility, great pain in giving birth, and a huge weight in caring for not only their own children, but the children of the community. Thus, they suffer in order to provide. To be clear, "suffering" here isn't necessarily a bad thing, as to suffer could mean you've earned a reward when your suffering is done. And to suffer could not even mean to be physically in pain either.

Now, we can look at this and say, "But nobody should have to suffer to live a good life." Sure, that's a fair point. But we also need to remember that some cultures consider struggle to be a means to an end, a means to honor, wealth, experience, and most of all, wisdom. The Yoruba are a society that respect their elders quite a lot, and of course, being old means you've had to endure many trials and tribulations to get to where you are, I.E., to suffer/struggle. And this could not be truer enough than for mothers and grandmothers.

And let's remember that a "mother" here can also be just as metaphorical. To bear any great responsibility is to mother it, is it not?

Therefore, language like this carries not only basic, surface-level meaning, but great, powerful, much deeper meaning that reflects the values of the society it belongs to.

Music has been around since perhaps the beginning of human language, perhaps even before it. According to a BBC documentary that I saw, on music and its effects on people with dementia. In this documentary, they were showing how and why music affects us so emotionally. It's said that scientifically, the tones that we hear in music reach the very primal parts of our brain that respond to strong emotion—a happy song actually can make us happy, due to the tone of the song, how fast it is, the way the singer or instrumentalist plays it, etc.

An explanation for why tones affect us so much like this is due to how before spoken language, humans communicated in tones and noises to express how they were feeling. This way of communicating with vocal expression still plays a role today in how infants speak, and thus, even though music can be composed of words and sounds from singers it reaches that basic center of our brains that still responds to sound, even from instruments that can't speak.

The emotions that music allows us to experience should not just be taken as a biological/neurological idea. In the moment, music allows us to transcend these mundane values, and to be taken to places in our minds that we can only go to when we're listening to the words or instruments of a song.

Music can help people through stressful times or inspire them to do good. For instance, when I was going through a stressful period in my own life, the songs of a Nigerian group called The Cavemen helped me a lot with allowing me to relax and stay calm. Their gentle, ethereal sounds of their music helped me enter a state of mind filled with peace and quiet, that was hard to get from other forms of wellness. Within a few days, my mood had improved, in part thanks to their melodies and instruments.

Musicians can also inspire people due to challenges they overcome to still be able to play music as well as they can, for instance, artists with disabilities, stage fright, or looks that aren't accepted as normal by society, such as being larger than average, or having facial deformities. With the lyrics and messages they can send to their fans, and even first time listeners, they can help people to understand that no matter your looks or identity, your art is still as touching as that from those more accepted by the public.

Music can also help in social change. The Nigerian artist Fela Kuti, for instance, was someone who was known for being boldly outspoken with his lyrics, calling for an end to the dictatorial government in his country. For this, he received many jail sentences, and was often ridiculed by those in power, but that didn't stop him from being a voice for the youth and those who wanted the torment to leave.

Music can also communicate words that are too hard for people to say while talking, it acts as a way for people to connect to a higher power in spirituality, it helps people discover things about themselves through writing and performing it, and a lot more that can be hard to list.

Everyone experiences music differently, interprets the same lyrics in their own way, and sees music through their own lens. But this is what makes music so wonderful, it's in itself a language that everyone can understand, but that every assigns their own meaning to, and all meanings are just as equal. To restrict this diversity of experience into one category, as if music needs to be this or that, is wrong and limits just how powerful it can be.

In Simon Frith's 1996 book *Performing Rites*, he discusses how African and European music differ in their audiences. He makes it clear that while a general European sentiment is that music is to be listened to analytically, many other cultures, including

those on the African continent, see music as a participation activity, involving both the musician performing and the audience coming together as one—" they could be danced as well as sung, and it was in their function as dance music that all these songs transcended the level of functionalism and were raised to the level of artistic integrity" (Frith 1996, 142).

I personally feel as though I experience this in my own life. I almost always view music from a relatable and experiential lens, rather than from a more simplistic viewpoint. I tend to like or dislike a song or songs based off of how they make me feel, rather than with how the lyrics present themselves, although that can be a component of how I view music in some cases. But usually, if the song or songs make me feel content and joyful, I'll continue listening to them, if not, I won't and I'll stop.

Frith makes clear how much of west African music blends emotion and function together—"On the one hand, many African languages use what Europeans would regard as "sung" elements (variations of pitch, vibrato, and timing)--these elements are as essential to what an utterance means as the use of vowels and consonants; on the other hand, African musicians expect to "talk" instrumentally: African drummers, for example, vary the pitch, vibrato, and timing of their sounds just as skillfully as African singers" (Frith 1996, 142). This brings to mind how these musicians understand both a need to inform and provoke people as they play and sing. A beautiful, haunting piece can make a great impression on someone, but the contents of the piece can be just as relevant, especially if it tells of important history, danger, or moral lessons.

Afro- Aesthetics and Sculpture

In this portion of my paper, I will recount my time sculpting a Bamana-inspired figure, as African art such as sculpture also relates to the ideals presented in cultures.

I've always been into sculpture and sculpting ever since I was little, and I began to start sculpting with a type of modeling clay known as Model Magic, a clay for young children who are making things for the first time, and who might not have the skills to handle clay or other complex materials.

I started sculpting simple things like flowers, shoes, birds, and hearts—well, perhaps these objects aren't *that* simple, but they were very easy for me to do at my age. I really enjoyed sculpting them not only because they were fun, but because they brought my ideas that were in my head to life in a 3D way that I could perceive.

When I found out that my African art class was presenting us with the opportunity to make our own art projects based off of pieces that we've studied previously, I was thrilled, and realized that I would be able to sculpt something for my project.

Before I made my sculpture, I hadn't sculpted anything in ten years, and this made me rather nervous, but, after some time, I came to the conclusion that I may as well do the best that I can, because it didn't matter how I sculpted my art, it would be the thought and love I'd put into it that would count. I ended up making a figure based off of a traditional Bamana sculpture representing a woman ready for marriage, called a

“Nyeleni”, meaning “pretty little one” in the Bamana language. These women often have very accentuated breasts, waists, and buttocks, to represent their status as mature women. I created this sculpture out of polymer clay this time, a much more sturdy and usable material than Model Magic. Instead of the clay drying out using the air, I had to bake it to get it to set.

It took about four-five days to sculpt the Nyeleni. I ended up remaking her body, hands, hair, and even her buttocks several times out of the fear that I wasn’t going to end up making her the way I envisioned her. But, as mentioned earlier, I recognized that I needed to put that fear aside and continue making this woman who I was picturing, and once I had her in my hands, it would all be worth it.

And it was very worth it! Once I finally baked her, she turned out very beautifully, and I was incredibly proud of myself. My African art teacher seemed to be proud too. What I truly loved, as I mentioned before, was just being able to hold my piece in my hands, to touch all of her body and to really get to feel how a thought in my mind could become a tangible figure, and to me, that’s a very lovely, almost spiritual experience.

Music as Social Revelation

In this section, I will be telling three anecdotal stories of different people who I have met in my life that have contributed to my musical journey in a personal way as an artist, and also as a study and as a creative outlet. I will be speaking of meeting the legendary Beninese singer Angelique Kidjo, working with a Ugandan musician and singer named Kinobe (Chee-no-bay), and getting to meet a close friend of Yoruba heritage, a culture that I have studied the most in my research, named Wuraola (Wura for short).

Meeting Angelique Kidjo

Angelique Kidjo is someone who I had always heard about in certain top 10 African musicians lists, or who’s songs got recommended to me on Spotify and Pandora playlists. But, as much as I had heard of just how talented of a musician she was, as well as her immense contribution to UNICEF and other charities, I had never bothered to look her up until my good friend, Hyacinth, played her album Fifa for me at her house one evening. And, when I heard that voice—that beautiful, powerful, rich, startlingly enchanting, ecstatically moving voice come from her speakers for the first time, I suddenly knew why those lists were calling her one of the greatest African vocalists, because she was.

From that point on, I have ingested and digested her music like consuming a fine honey with a bit of pepper. Her voice is rapturously calming and soothing, yet so unashamedly loud, vibrating, and commanding. She is a force of nature, truly, and I was all here for it.

One day, my dad pulled me aside to talk to me about a surprise he said he had for me. I stood beside him, patiently waiting for him to tell me what it was.

When he told me he had gotten tickets to see Angelique performing live at the 44th LEAF festival, I..... was not as overwhelmed with absolute joy as I thought I could have been.

That was quite surprising indeed, as he even announced that he also had passes to see her at her meet and greet!

I'm not entirely sure why, but it could have had to do with the state I was in at the time, which was a little sad and distressed, due to my grandfather being critically ill and nearly on the brink of death. I know, the news was supposed to make me feel better and happier, but it didn't seem to. And I forgot about all of it for a while, in fact, until a week or so before the actual show. And even then, I wasn't super excited. But, despite this, the day came, and me and my dad were off to see this great and powerful woman. My dad sadly couldn't be there, as she was in Argentina, taking care of her own family matters.

We drove to LEAF in the cold and rain, listening to Angelique through my dad's car speakers. I'll admit, I did start to get a little more amped up to see her, although perhaps not as starstruck as my dad was, and wanted me to be. You see, with celebrities, even ones who I really admire, I don't tend to get overwhelmed when I would meet them. I would not see them as a famous person in that moment, but rather a friend or an equal of mine, even if their music has inspired me a great deal. And so, while I certainly became more and more excited to see her, I was not as purely fame-driven as my dad. As the day went on, it got colder and rainier. Thankfully, I'd worn rainboots to help protect me.

Later that night, we sat on the porch of the same house that I had stayed at to perform my own LEAF shows, waiting for Jenifer to come out and to announce Angelique was here. As me and my dad sat, he kept asking me if I could sense her presence in the building. I kept telling him no, because why would he even ask me that kind of a question? I know he was probably just teasing me, but it still bothered me for some reason.

Finally, we were let inside of the house by a woman who happened to be named Joran. Ha! As we went inside, I was unsure whether to just see Angelique as someone normal and friendly, or goddess-like and demanding to be worshipped. It turns out, I was right about the former.

Angelique entered the room, chatting to someone about the weather. The person introduced her, and she spoke just as if she were sitting to talk with an old friend, except we were about 15 people in a room together. When she noticed me, she commented on how there were two Jordans in the room, then asked me to sit down beside her, as she said she liked my energy. I smiled at the complement.

In truth, her presentation shocked me a little. I thought she would, indeed, be someone who knew she was famous, talented, and inspiring, who was just as powerful and striking off stage as she was on stage. But, instead, I was met with someone who be fun to have a drink with and talk about life with at a party.

She spoke to us about how she was born in Benin and really wanted to have a music career, but because of the dictatorship, music wasn't allowed to be played on the radio.

And so, she did the only thing she could: she fled the country illegally, with everyone on her side. She ended up moving to Paris France, where she released her first few albums, and she went on to grow her career from there.

Honestly, I wasn't paying too much attention to her story, as I was distracted about if she would ever speak to me again. I wasn't unsure of what to say or anything, I just didn't know why she said she liked my energy, and if this meant that now I had to act a certain way around her, like she was saying I was her new student and she needed me to perform well in her class. It was hard to explain. I was not starstruck, but perhaps I was confused.

Angelique finally turned her attention to me and smiled.

"So, Jordan, tell me what you like to do."

Oh, thank god, she wasn't about to fail me if I said something wrong. Phew! I told her about myself and my interests, especially that of my love for African cultures and peoples. She was rather impressed, and told me she didn't know a person like me could know so much about her identity. I was glad she at least respected my love for culture.

After speaking about things I can no longer remember, I told Angelique that I could sing. Immediately, she asked me to sing something for her. I went ahead and sang "360 Degrees" by Asa, and she told me that she was shocked that I knew the song and the artist. She told me about how she works with Asa, and about how she is much shier than her, but that she is very kind, and that her songwriting is wonderful. I nodded in agreement, now starting to, admittedly, get a tiny bit jittery as I realized she knew an idol of mine.

She then offered to sing with me, and so I agreed. I began singing "Fire On The Mountain", another Asa song, and she joined in with me. I realized as I was singing that my strange mixture of fear/excitement was starting to turn into a feeling of friendship, of a close bond between two people who just loved being within the music. When we were finished, everyone around me was crying. I didn't really understand why, and I still don't. We were just singing together. Why shed tears? Aren't those times supposed to be happy?

At the end of it all, however, I got to meet an incredibly kind, funny, sweet, and surprisingly chill woman, who I have called my auntie ever since. I indeed was very, very lucky to get to meet her, and after her show which blew me away, I thanked my dad a million times over, plus the people he knows at LEAF who got him the tickets and passes, for such a memorable night with such a talented artist.

Meeting Kinobe and Rediscovering my Talking Drum

Ever since my first foray into African cultures, starting with Asa, I knew that I loved the talking drum. Going by many different names within west Africa, it is believed that it originated in Yorubaland, although most ethnic groups who use it as an involved instrument in their musical heritage all claim to have been the originators of the instrument. But no matter who originated it, it was still a drum which I knew I loved from

the moment I heard it—no, even before I heard the sound of it. I just knew it existed, I knew it was African in origin, specifically Yoruba, and I knew that it was a drum that went deeper than just being for plain music alone.

I knew the drum could speak; I knew it could carry important messages. I knew it could pass on vital information from person to person, community to community, even town to town. I knew it was a drum that provided the people who heard it a great sense of joy, connection, and euphoria.

I got my first talking drum from a web site that claimed to sell authentic African products, but it turns out this is a lie. They sold me a manufactured, Indonesian-made gangan (talking drum in Yoruba) drum, that at first, I thought was what it was supposed to sound like, but it turns out that it couldn't have sounded further from a true gangan. This was because all the videos I've heard of a real gangan were much different. It sounded fuller, richer, more well-tuned, just all around better and... wiser, than whatever I was playing.

And so, I set out on a mission to find myself an authentic Yoruba gangan for sale. Sadly, I didn't have too much luck at first, until I found a man named Richard Olatunde Baker. According to his web site, he is a proficient gangan player, and repairs and sells gangan straight from Yorubaland, as well as many other African instruments from different ethnic groups and countries. I knew that I would buy a drum from him.

I messaged him over a short period of time, and we finally agreed that my adamo gangan, a smaller gangan that is made to lead and speak, would be custom made for me. I had it custom made as I am rather small, and I wanted the drum to be able to fit me OK. When I knew the carver in Nigeria was working on making it, I was overjoyed. It was difficult to not hold back my excitement and anticipation, but, after a few months of waiting, it finally arrived! When I held my new, authentic gangan for the first time, I truly felt like it was like holding a child. I was so, so comforted by the mere weight of it in my arms. And then, I hit it for the first time. There it was, that fullness, that richness, that throatiness, that beautiful wisdom I had heard in all the talking drums online. And now, I had it in my hands to play.

Kinobe

Fast forward four years later, to 2021. That May, we went to the LEAF festival again, a year and a half after seeing Angelique, and we were there to see a new person who we've never met before. He was a musician from Ugandan, named Kinobe, who was apparently an amazing multi-instrumentalist. His specialty was the akogo, which is more generically known as the kalimba, although the akogo is what it's known as in Uganda. I didn't think that me and my family were going to be in for something too special, but boy, was I wrong!

His playing was magnificent! It was fun, energetic, fast, fiery, and super infectious! He had me dancing and clapping my hands throughout his entire show. There was just something about his playing I couldn't place—it was carried a sense of pure laughter; by that, I mean that I felt like I was laughing as I was hearing it.

Later on in the day, my dad got a phone call from his friend Jim, someone who works at the LEAF festival who he knows well, saying that Kinobe had heard about his restaurants and wanted to come and eat at one. My dad was more than happy to put him at a table at his seafood restaurant, Jettie Rae's, and he came in along with his wife, Stella.

I ended up going in to meet him and her, and me and him spent a while speaking about African music and cultures, which he was also very impressed I knew a lot about. At the end of the meeting, he told me that he was very interested in me, and that he wanted to talk to me more. My dad and him had a conversation on the phone a while later, where he remarked I sounded a lot like Asa! Ha! How awesome is that?

We ended up talking on the phone ourselves, and at first, I wasn't too sure if I was going to like him or not, as we had some opinions that clashed, and he seemed a bit abrupt when I was speaking to him. But my dad told me to not be so dismissive of him, and he turned out to be right.

Three consequent in-person stays in Asheville over a period of time, and him, his wife Stella, and his children, Faith and Mercy, had decided to permanently move down to Asheville, just so he could work with me. During the second time we met in person, however, when he was staying in Asheville for a few days, we were hanging out at my house, playing music together and having fun. That's when I realized that I could show him my gangan, to see how he'd play it. I didn't think he knew much about the gangan and the Yoruba way of playing it, but I was wrong, at least on one part. When I brought my gangan to show him, I was eagerly waiting to see how he could have it speak. And boy, did he!

When he began to play my drum, it truly felt as if it was talking for the first time in ages. I could have never made it speak the way he could. It truly felt as if, in that moment, it had a voice, and it was saying words I could have never predicted it knew how to say. But they were enchanting, resonating words, that made me get butterflies. Even though Kinobe did not know how to play my gangan in the Yoruba style, he did at least play it in a style, that of Senegalese talking drummers with their tama. Although just the fact he even could make it talk was enough for me to know that I was sitting next to someone who would become my musical partner for many, many years to come.

Meeting Wura And Making a New Connection

Making friends has always been very hard for me. At least, making close friends, especially close friends who I would be able to get along with very well. It's hard to make these kinds of friends in real life, let alone online, where I'll admit I spend a good portion of my time. And so, when I met Wura for the first time in October, it was certainly very shocking when we quickly became very good friends in a matter of days.

I met Wura on TikTok in October. It all started when I saw a video of her playing her gangan (talking drum), very well and very enthusiastically. I could tell instantly that she was passionate about her Yoruba culture and heritage, and this made me excited to know I could have a connection with her.

I decided to create a video applauding her commitment to her culture, and she ended up seeing it and responding to me via direct message. She told me that she got incredibly emotional when she saw how I complimented and adored her advocacy, and this made me very happy, I'll be a bit caught off guard, since I've never heard anyone describe getting emotional over something that I've told them. It was a bit much at first, although I quickly seemed to adjust to her way of speaking and expressing herself through very strong emotional experiences, and we quickly began direct messaging.

We moved our conversation to Instagram, where I found out that she actually knows a friend of my musician friend Kinobe's, named Papylulu (Lulu for short). I found out that she lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where he is based. Apparently, comma she knows him as she used to play her talking drum with him in her church, that she no longer attends.

We continued speaking about culture and my relationship to the Yoruba that I have cultivated for almost six years. She kept emphasizing that she was very impressed with my knowledge and honoring, and frequently got emotional over me just sending a sentence.

As I said before, I was quite flabbergasted at how quickly this friendship was seeming to bloom in less than a few hours. This was made even more evident because of the fact we continued to speak every day since then, and continue to do so. I remember two days after we met, it was Wura's birthday, and she suddenly called me late at night. It surprised me and, admittedly, made me recoil a little at just how open she was towards me, confessing her woes and tribulations of the day. Goodness, it was only two days since we met, what was going on! And yet, just as with every other time when we both became a bit too personal with one another, it almost seemed to become natural. From rocky to smooth and almost familiar, which is yet another thing that has never happened with a friend before.

And that, as you can see, is also a common theme, things that have never occurred in most friendships that I've had before. This has made me think that, perhaps, this friendship is.... almost unusual, destined, deeper than just a regular friendship? Not anything romantic, but more than just a friendship that develops slowly and patiently. Our relationship grew quickly, intensely, and yet the intensity felt as ordinary as one that grows patiently.

We continued talking, finding out we both liked the same things, had the same values, shared the same kind of attitudes, that our families were both musical, and so much more. A while into us speaking for a few months, I brought up the exciting idea of her coming to visit me, and she agreed that it would be a great experience. And so, we ended up planning a trip for her to come to see me in Asheville. I was overjoyed about this, again more so than most visitations from friends.

As days and weeks went by, I counted down until the day when she'd arrive. Finally, January came, and soon, she had landed in Charlotte, and we were hugging so tight outside the airport, my dad who had come with me to get her looking on.

We instantly clicked, even deeper than we had online. We began talking about culture, tradition, conversations we've had previously, her family, my family, her home, my home, and even the revelation that Asheville is connected to the sister city of Osogbo, the capital of Osun state in Nigeria.

The following few days are ones filled with even more sharing and loving. Wura met my parents, who welcomed her with open arms, and she and I connected also on a very musical level, as she brought instruments from Yorubaland for me to play. We also got to record some of this music, both for Wura's own personal memories, as well as her vocals for my own projects, in my home studio (recording attached). Wura's singing was yet another experience of deep understanding—the passion and authority in her voice shocked and awed me, a state which allowed me to see and hear a part of herself that was full of a raw power unlike anything I've heard. It was something to behold in the physical space of the moment.

When Wura left to head back to Maryland, I began to feel depressed that she was going. It was a feeling that lasted well after she left through the doors of the airport, and I even cried over the fact that I missed her so terribly. And, just as with all the other times, it was a feeling I would have never expected. The last time I met a good online friend, I never became nearly as sad as I did when Wura left. Perhaps it was because she only stayed for about a day and ½, which is quite a short time for a close friend to stay, as it's important to connect and bond with someone like that, which takes a lot longer to do. But I also think it's because I have not had a friendship like hers before in a very long time, and to know that I could only have it physically every once in a while hurt me a lot.

As I said before, friendships are hard for me to make. I have been rejected so often in the past, seemingly for no apparent reason. And if it was for some type of offence I've committed, nobody has told me. And so, finding a friend like Wura allowed me to realize that there are friends out there that won't abandon you just because of a few misunderstandings, which is the message I'm still trying to get into myself. But it is definitely hard knowing that I can't get to see her all the time offline. And yet, the time I did spend with her was one that I will absolutely never forget, and that I will try to recognize was a sign of our friendship growing ever stronger.

Music as Expression

In this section, I will be recounting some songs that I have covered as part of my debut album, emphasizing that my research isn't just based in academics, but as a part of integral creative pursuits that have ultimately led to my career choice of being a singer and musician.

On the Song "Jailer":

The first moment that I heard the Nigerian singer Bukola Elemide, otherwise known as Asa, sing, something came over me, a feeling that I hadn't gotten from music or an artist in a very long time. It was a joyful, pure, ecstatic emotion, that made my heart flutter and

my body freeze, taking in the almost mystical feeling that surrounded me in that moment.

The first song I heard of Asa's was called "Jailer", which tells of the struggles of an unnamed person, and how a "jailer" figure is impeding their successes and freedom in their life. Freedom from what exactly seems to be up to the listener's interpretations, as there are no specific things mentioned directly—"I'm in chains, you're in chains too; you suppress all my strategies."

This song not only kindled my feelings and adoration for Asa and her work, but also allowed me to reflect on my blindness, as the song was relatable to my own struggles with my disability, and those who wanted to discriminate against me because of it. It gave me a sense of empowerment, and the ability to explore a subject that I haven't before.

As I performed the song throughout my budding musical career, it earned me the winning member of the national Blind Idol contest in 2017, as well as winning first and second place at the Amateur Night at the Apollo competition, at the Apollo Theater in New York City, an experience which I'll always treasure.

In finding my love for Asa, and with the success this song brought, I knew that I had to put it on my album that I began creating in 2018. It was one of my favorite songs to do, and I felt just as energized and inspired doing it as I did the first time I performed it at the Blind Idol semifinals.

Besides the song "Jailer", I have also covered an Asa song entitled "360 Degrees". A song telling about how we need to stop being so hard on each other and try to find the love we all have, it is simple, soothing, and comforting. I decided to cover it since it has a message I can often relate to, in a world that doesn't seem to be very happy most of the time, especially in today's current climate. The chords are soft and gentle, the lyrics are easy to understand, but also have a lot of meaning behind them, and the style of singing is mellow and free of pain, hopeful, but an almost maternal kind of way that leaves the listener feeling safe and whole. That's what I really love about Asa herself, her way of carrying that motherly energy that has the power to be strong but also soft at the same time, a powerful position to be in for certain.

[A transformative performance](#)

Finally, a song that I have not covered on my album, but that I still adore singing and performing, is called "Pata Pata". A song in the Kosa language, it is sung by Miriam Makeba, an incredibly influential and legendary South African musician, women's rights activist, and an advocate for social peace and change amongst her people. In fact, she was Angelique Kidjo's greatest role model and musical guide, who she got to meet as well.

Angelique's version of the song, which she performed on Austin City Limits in 2016, was what inspired me to perform my version. It's much faster and more energetic, I believe, than Miriam's, even though I do still love Miriam's style. But, Angelique's

vibrancy inspired me to want to perform it for a while, but at the time of hearing it, I did not have a big enough band to make it happen as it's a big song. But when I finally decided to actually perform it, my band was already established and I had already performed several shows by this point.

My producer, Daniel, thought that my suggestion of the song was silly and too simple for me to do, and that discouraged me at first, but I insisted to him that it would work, however that would be.

Eventually, I was rehearsing for the LEAF festival 50th anniversary, and I was helping my backing vocalists, Catherine and Abby, with how to do their respective parts with "Pata Pata". I was so excited, and Daniel seemed to have changed his mind about everything. As we rehearsed the song, I just knew it would be a hit, and it seemed like the band agreed.

And it was! According to Kinobe's wife Stella, everyone was clapping and cheering as I sang the song, and as Angelique Kidjo was there a night before me and had performed the song as well, many had witnessed her performance, and those who were there the previous night had said that I did much better and brought a life to it that she hadn't, which, I'll admit, made me pretty happy!

Conclusion

To conclude this work, I will say that music is a much deeper kind of art than just being for entertainment. The values expressed within the drumbeats, harmonies, string plucking, flute playing, and clapping is much more than simply how these peoples live their lives, it is an intimate look into why they live their lives the way they do, and how we can take tips from these cultures, not seeing them as ancient, stone-age, and dark, but unique, enlightened, and valuable.

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