

The Jua Kali Spirit

Thanks to the resourcefulness of Kenya's guitarists — and guitar makers — benga music still thrives

“OPIYO GITA TURA,” sings Kenyan guitarist Opiyo Bilongo: *This guitar is heavy around my neck.*

That proclamation, from his song “Third Party Destroy,” refers to the burden of composing and performing for the public, a cross that Kenyan musicians like Opiyo Bilongo choose to bear. In the tradition of the Luo, Bilongo’s ethnic group, it is common for players of any instrument to refer to their “tools” in this ambiguous nature. These instruments have the potential to bring the pleasure and recognition that musicians so desire, but earning a living with these tools remains a struggle in Kenya’s developing economy.

Like many hardworking people in this East African nation, guitarists excel at their craft, but the tools they need to do the job are scarce — if they exist at all — and usually in a compromised state. During the past 40 years, however, Kenyan musicians have overcome this hurdle to develop the genre of benga, a guitar-heavy dance style based on the familiar electric guitar/bass/drums combo that pervades popular music around the globe.

The first time I heard benga music was in 1995, in the small village of Sigomere in western Kenya. I was visiting Kenya on a study-abroad program to pursue my budding interest in African music and in the process had discovered the traditional music of the Luo. While attending a marriage celebration, which featured a dense mixture of several ohangla drum ensembles and a nyatiti (lyre) player (performing different songs simultaneously), I was struck by another sound that cut through the din. A stereo system blasted a cassette of an electric-guitar band singing songs in the Luo language.

Years later, as I continued my studies in ethnomusicology — and launched a side career as a rock guitarist — I was further drawn into Kenyan guitar music and the circumstances and traditions from which it emerges.

While those influences differ greatly from those of my own homeland, I was impressed by how pivotal a role the instrument has occupied in the creation of Kenyan contemporary music — much as it has in the U.S.

The guitar got its start as a primary instrument in Kenya in the early 20th century, when indigenous workers and students first encountered it (and other foreign instruments, like the accordion) in schools and churches and through employment within the British colonial infrastructure. It quickly caught on as a versatile instrument that was suitable for composing local interpretations of the popular dance music that Kenyans heard through recordings, such as rumba and foxtrot.

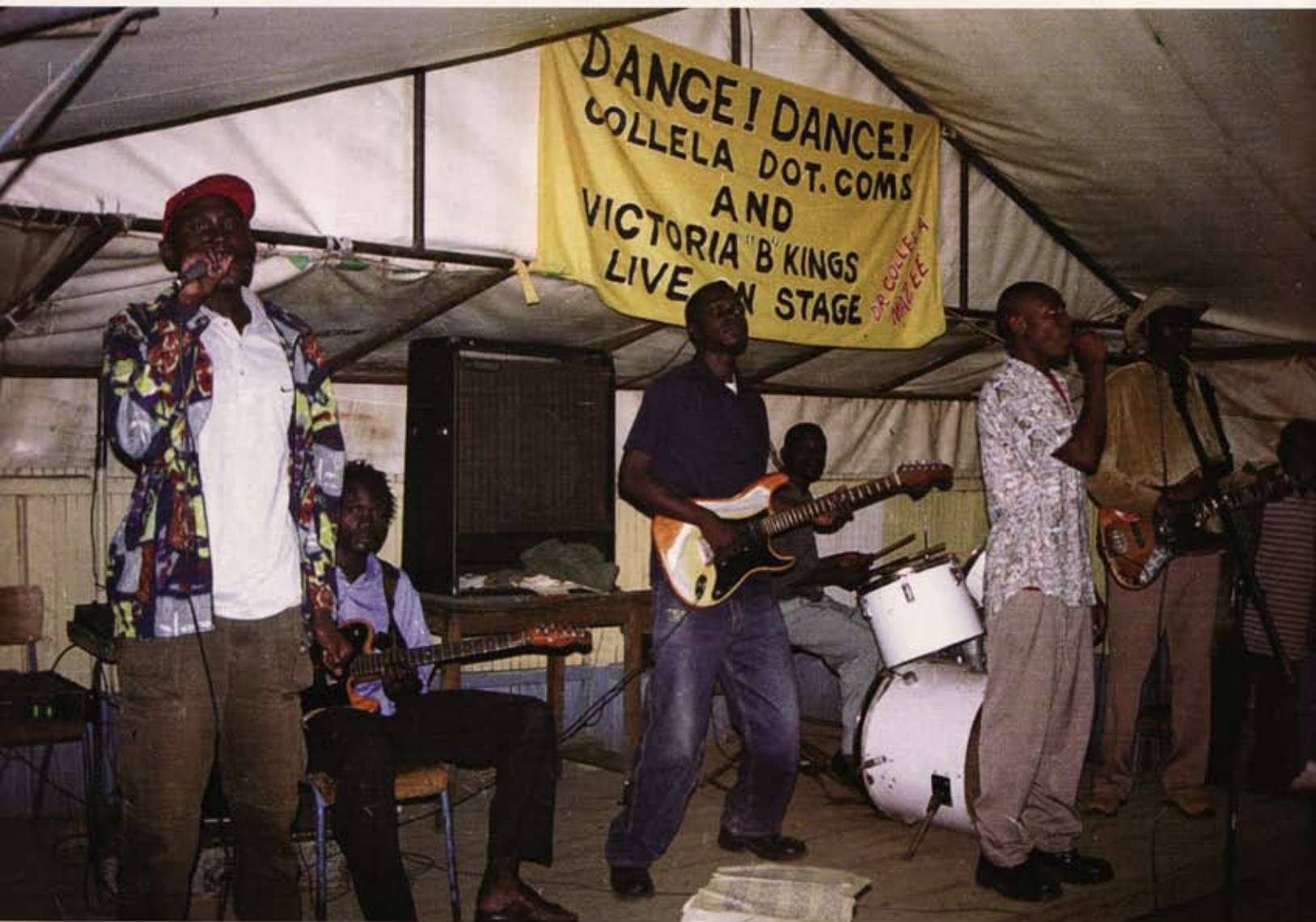
By the 1950s, acoustic, or “box” guitars, as they are known, were readily available throughout the small towns of Kenya in retail shops run by *wabindi* (Kenyans of Indian heritage descended from immigrants employed by the British Empire). Many

of benga’s first generation of guitarists recall buying these inexpensive, South African-made Gallotone guitars for less than 100 shillings, which at the time was equivalent to approximately 15 U.S. dollars — or three months’ pay, if you were an itinerant laborer, as many of Kenya’s first guitarists were.

In the hands of musicians like Daniel Owino Misiani (1941–2006) and George Ramogi (1942–1997), widely regarded as the fathers of benga music, the guitar became a vehicle for a new hybrid style that drew on elements of traditional songs and Congolese fingerpicking styles, as well as more decidedly foreign ingredients such as church hymns, Cuban dance music and even country and western ballads. When electric guitars were introduced to the studios and clubs of Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi, this nascent guitar genre quickly evolved into benga, a high-energy, dance-oriented style that would achieve lasting success up through the present day.

While the popularity of the guitar grew rapidly, many Kenyans lacked the economic means to purchase new models, even at inexpensive prices. Alternatively, they built their own instruments from scratch, using local materials and tools to fashion homemade box guitars. The wood needed to construct

Voicings



such instruments is readily available in Kenya, but the most basic components of a guitar — its strings — are difficult to come by, especially in rural areas. In such circumstances, necessity inspires ingenuity, and Kenyan guitarists fashion *waya* (a vernacular term for strings, or “wires”) from unwound automobile brake cables. While this improvised solution may be quaint, it is by no means ideal, and such instruments are used mainly by beginners who seek to attain the basic skills to join a benga band. Even when these budding guitarists make their way into the fold, they are still faced with a dearth of instruments.

When I interviewed benga musicians for my doctoral research, one of their most frequently voiced objectives was an achievement taken for granted by musicians in the United States: They aspired to own their instruments. It is reasonable to ask how this music

can exist when the majority of players don't even have the tools of their trade. Yet, benga players work with great frequency, obtaining valuable on-the-job experience during extended engagements at small nightclubs, many of which own a set of instruments. (The band must pay a fee to use them, which cuts into the musicians' earnings and hence stifles them in their quest to save the funds to buy their own instruments.) Groups typically perform four or five nights a week, starting in the early evening and continuing until the last dancers leave the floor — which, when times are good, could be the next morning.

In order to hone their sound, bands quietly practice at these bars during the day, composing new songs that they will eventually take to the studio to record. Rehearsals are unamplified; guitarists fingerpick rhythmic patterns and melodies to the accompaniment of

The Collela Dot Coms perform in Kenya with a set of 1982 Fender guitars they inherited from their father, the late benga maestro Collela Mazee.

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LEFT: The author's 24-fret electric guitar was made using the informal *jua kali* ("hot sun") approach of Kenya's street markets.

RIGHT: Aloo Tata, a veteran guitarist from the Gwasi region, relaxes at home in Ogongo village with his *jua kali* electric.

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a drummer tapping out hi-hat patterns on a piece of paper with small twigs, while the vocalists sing in a subdued tone. Interestingly, the lack of electricity does not impede the guitar playing: Benga guitar does not use sustained notes, but rather is founded upon repetitive, interlocking rhythmic patterns punctuated by high-register melodic bursts played by the soloist.

The guitars that land in the hands of these musicians are a motley bunch. During the 1970s and '80s, there was considerable investment in the local music industry by multinational companies such as Polygram and EMI, which brought with it quality imported guitars such as Fender Jaguars and Gibson SGs. However, as this initial connection eventually dissolved, the main source of instruments became East Asian companies like Tokai, Samick and Aria, which offered budget

Fender knockoffs. This is not to say that these instruments are frowned upon; on the contrary, any guitar that has working electronics and manageable action is highly sought-after, especially if it has 24 frets. (Much of benga's lead playing takes place above the 15th fret in the keys of C, G and F.)

Take, for instance, the guitars of the band Collela Dot Coms. This group is led by sons of the late Richard Owino (a.k.a. Collela Mazee, 1951-2000), one of the most accomplished guitar players and bandleaders ever to emerge in Kenya. They use a set of 1982 Fender guitars — a Telecaster Custom, Stratocaster and Jazz Bass — that their father obtained at the height of his career. When I first saw these instruments, I was astounded; in a country full of low-budget, East Asian-manufactured knockoffs and homemade improvisations, a set of

Fenders seemed like a jackpot. However, when you pick up the guitars and see the wear and tear that they have undergone through years of performing and recording — Collela Mazee recorded more than 300 songs in his career — you suddenly realize an interesting paradox: These musicians use this set of Fenders because they were lucky enough to inherit them, but they would still prefer brand-new budget Tokais that had decent frets and working electronics. Although these guitars may be budget-line, their retail price of more than \$200 is prohibitive to most musicians, who use the little money they make to feed their families.

Musicians and craftsmen must then improvise with the materials at hand. In Kenya, there is a cottage industry that thrives upon this circumstance, known as the “informal sector,” or *jua kali*, which means “hot sun.” This curious name refers to the conditions under which small-scale carpenters, mechanics and other

mate, the late Otieno Jagwasi, described to me how his first band, called Lambe Lando, existed despite the shortage of power. Based in the remote Gwasi hills of western Kenya, on the shores of Lake Victoria (a region that has produced many of benga’s greatest guitarists), this band used *jua kali*-style equipment to create an electric-guitar benga band despite the fact that the nearest electrical lines were 20 miles away. They built guitars and drums using local materials, and they created amplifiers from small modified radios, powered by 12-volt car batteries. Some of its members would later move on to larger towns (with electricity) and join more established bands, but they still remembered fondly their creative struggles to provide their neighbors with electric-guitar music despite the lack of means.

When I think of the difficult circumstances that benga has managed to surmount, I’m reminded of something my music teachers would always tell me when I was a young guitarist: In the end, it doesn’t matter how luxurious your instrument is, but only how well you play it. Regardless of the quality of one’s tools, it is talent, effort and creativity that truly make good music. This point is not lost on benga guitarists, and when they do get their hands on decent guitars, it shines through in the brilliance of their playing.

In the past four years, I have had the pleasure of performing and recording with guitarists Otieno Jagwasi and Opiyo Bilongo in the band Extra Golden, a benga/rock collaboration. When Bilongo visited the U.S. for a 2006 concert tour, his primary goal was to obtain new “tools” so that he could free himself from the control of club owners who continue to “rent” him instruments. Due to the trip’s high expenses, such a goal was ultimately unattainable. However, I did send Bilongo home with an Applause acoustic/electric and a Strat-style guitar that I’d won in a bar raffle. (Yes, it had Guinness beer slogans plastered all over it, but it was still a welcome start for Bilongo.)

Benga’s continuing vigor serves to remind us that instruments that may be deemed low-budget or even expendable in the U.S. have great value in places like Kenya. They allow the music to continue, and perhaps more importantly, they help musicians like Bilongo earn their daily bread.

— IAN EAGLESON

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craftsmen work. Many of these enterprises are based in temporary structures, and the work is done in open air at Kenya’s street markets. These craftsmen specialize in using local and recycled materials to manufacture any necessary goods — including musical instruments and electronics — that are either too expensive or too difficult to procure through more formal channels of commerce. My own *jua kali* guitar features a bridge constructed from a discarded aluminum cooling fin and a pickup containing pole pieces fashioned from fragments of household magnets. (Unfortunately, the pickup’s low output diminishes the charm.)

This *jua kali* spirit particularly helps musicians who are living in Kenya’s countryside, much of which lacks any electricity at all. My close friend and band-