

Reflective Article

## **Questioning Tradition through Experiments Between African and Western Music: A Personal Account**

*Lukas Ligeti*

Can rebellion be a tradition? Is protest against tradition a tradition in itself? In the following article, I would like to give a personal account of my experience as a European/American musician who had come of age in a tradition of rebellious experimentation and suddenly found himself in Africa, making music with traditional musicians. Our collaboration had no ambition to instigate social change, but the more we challenged ourselves artistically, the more we found ourselves in an aesthetically counter-cultural position.

Everyone is familiar with the teenager shredding on his guitar and annoying his parents, and when this teenager then aspires to become a professional musician, the family is concerned, or even alarmed. But my choice of music as a profession was not an act of rebellion at all. My father, after all, was a fantastic composer, and remains a challenging act to follow. Yet I did not study music intensively, if at all, while I was growing up: my silence, perhaps, was my annoying teenager's rebellion. Only after graduating from high school, realizing that I heard a constant soundtrack in my head and that I would not be able to free myself from it unless I used it, did I start playing an instrument seriously – the drums; I began composing soon thereafter. A recurring issue in my professional life has been that many people expect my music to sound similar to my father's, but it doesn't. Is that somehow an act of defiance? I don't know, and don't think so. In spite of genetics and the undeniable influence my father has had on me – possibly even more as a thinker than as a musician – I am, with all due respect, a different person. I have a different imagination, different strengths and weaknesses, and (again, in spite of significant overlaps) different interests.

This personal situation aside, however, a young musician engaging in the study and creation of new music in Europe or North America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was almost by necessity a rebel of sorts. Furthermore, I refused from the beginning to buy into the separation and segregation of 'classical', 'jazz', 'rock', etc., and pursued all of the above in my search for a voice of my own. In that sense, I was a nonconformist among nonconformists. Why among nonconformists? Because each of these separate worlds of Western music were, to a certain degree, founded upon ideas of rebellion, or, at the very least, a spirit of questioning, of challenging, of going-against.

Jazz and rock both originate, not exclusively but to a good degree, from the blues, which again originates, to a good degree, from the work songs of slaves who had been forcibly imported from Africa to America. The slaves were forbidden to preserve African traditions; hence, their newly-evolving culture was a counter-culture, consisting of concealed references to their African heritage

and of articulations of rebellion against their white owners, among other things. One of the outgrowths of this culture, jazz, a uniquely American hybrid made possible through the combination of African and European elements in a tension-laden environment, always bore within it an additional element of cynical humor. As jazz took a turn away from dance-music big bands towards a more deliberately experimental form of music, the style known as bebop was born, and it has been said that the extreme difficulty and speed of bebop came out of a desire to make participation in this music impossible for the uninitiated. Two decades later, another style was born: free jazz, in which the music became progressively unfettered from its previous harmonic, rhythmic, and formal constraints. The musicians of this era were overtly political, using their music, abrasive to many people's ears, to convey messages about the black Americans' struggle for civil rights.

Rock, too, was much more than merely a music for entertainment. It became the voice of a social majority in America and Western Europe, and a voice of the underground in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe. Yet, for all its commercial exploitation, no form of art embodied resistance against the 'establishment' during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like rock did, not only purely musically through its rhythmic drive and loud volume, but also as a vehicle for young people's self-expression through its connections to fashion, drug consumption, and unorthodox politics. From the Beatles' haircuts to the psychedelic music of the early 1970s to punk, rock was a form of peaceful rebellion.

And as for classical Western concert music, most forward-looking composers agreed that, after the destruction caused by World War II, something new had to be done. Composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez created serial music, initially perhaps a synthetic construct but soon imbued with musicality. This new, 'modern' music did not aspire to be popular: in Europe, particularly in the former Axis countries, being on the fringes of society implied being noble and standing on the moral high ground: Hitler, after all, had been legally elected by the majority of German voters. Moreover, Hitler's preference for folklore and generally anti-intellectual stance made any reference to folkloric music seem deeply suspect to the postwar generation of artists. Their music, therefore, was a kind of protest against popularity, against what they perceived to be a depraved majority. As revolutionary as the postwar avant-garde seemed, however, its attitude was not without precedent.

As modernism emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and forward-looking art progressively detached itself from popular taste, a spirit of provocation took hold, voiced by French poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud or Verlaine as 'épater la bourgeoisie'; later, futurist movements in countries such as Russia or Italy, already politically charged, promoted this attitude in defiance of totalitarian governments, especially in Russia and Germany, which classified all aesthetically challenging work as 'degenerate'. But the tradition of Western musical rebellion actually goes back much longer. In the middle ages, the church issued rules on how music was to be composed, but as time went on, and especially at the dawn of the renaissance, some musicians and composers refused

to adhere to the rules, preferring to search for new sonic possibilities. Evidence of controversies and discussions about new versus old music goes back at least as far as the polytextual motets of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Pope John XXII was known to make derogatory remarks about provocative new music and tried to forbid polyphony entirely.

By the time I began making music in Austria in the mid-1980s, the atmosphere of post-World-War-II urgency, while undoubtedly waning, was still fundamentally present. As a young creative musician, it was conformist to be nonconformist: a paradoxical situation. In the meantime, this has changed quite a bit, and the youngest generation of musicians in America and Europe is maturing in a very different environment, one which values the emotional in music, and where craft is regaining the importance it last had, perhaps, in the 1930s. I am not judging this to be more or less valuable, but it was not the environment in which I came of age as a musician.

The environment I found myself in, I perceived as uncomfortable. A fairly established misfit, I had little use for the commercial and popular, but equally little use for the so-called avant-garde, which seemed to me pseudo-intellectual and divorced from the cognitive possibilities of both musicians and listeners, an aesthetic dead-end. I wanted to create something new. If non-conformism was conformity, I had to find a way out: I needed to do something different, rendering these issues irrelevant.

An emergency exit presented itself in the form of lectures at the University of Vienna by the Afro-ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik. Reading his articles on various forms of African music (of particular importance to me were his analyses of the court music of Buganda, in present-day Uganda), it became clear to me that here was a world with a completely different outlook on music, totally different concepts of rhythm, meter, and interplay between musicians. In my search for a voice of my own, I began investigating African music, adopting and adapting some of the ideas I thus encountered, and developing them in my own way to create a personal African/Western musical hybrid. I have continued with this investigation and hybridization until today, 25 years later.

In the early 1990s, someone at the Goethe Institute, the network of German cultural institutes, heard my African-influenced music and decided that it might be interesting to send me to Côte d'Ivoire to collaborate with traditional musicians. While excited about the prospect of visiting Africa, I was also confused about what my role in such a collaboration could be. I was not trained in playing African music, and the culture of Côte d'Ivoire, specifically, was unknown to me, even in theory, and I couldn't expect the traditional musicians to play my music, either. Once again, the desire to do something new provided a solution. I arrived in Abidjan in February of 1994 with the dangerously optimistic plan to try to create a music I couldn't have conceived of without the African musicians, nor vice versa. Something neither African nor Western; something altogether other. To add another level of complexity to the scenario, I brought with me my electronic percussion; I had just begun using electronics in

my music. And, to help me tame these electronics, I invited an established member of Germany's experimental pop music community to come to Africa with me: 'Pyrolator' Kurt Dahlke, a founding member of the bands D.A.F. and Der Plan and a longtime thorn in the side of all things commercial in his country's pop scene.

The experience of collaborating with the West African musicians was life-changing for me and embarked me on a sequence of intercultural projects across the African continent. With Kurt and 14 African colleagues from six countries, I founded the ensemble Beta Foly (the name means 'The Music of Us All' in the Malinké language) in Abidjan, which became, for the next few years, one of my main projects and an extremely educational forum for experimentation in the combination of African and Western concepts, ideas, and approaches. Our compositional process was varied, but the stated objective was to try something new in every piece and to keep challenging ourselves and each other. Sometimes one group member brought in an idea that was then developed, mutated, and molded into a piece during the rehearsal process. Sometimes nuclei for pieces emerged during rehearsals, and sometimes a relatively complete piece was brought in. Some pieces started as conceptual ideas while others originated from a sound, a combination of sounds, or a melody.

It is hard to explain the exact motivation for this work. For me, it was, on the surface, a survival strategy. I was given an assignment by the Goethe Institute: conduct a two-week-long workshop and present the results in a concert. And, as explained above, I figured that trying to do something new and original would bear the best chances of success – perhaps in part because such a strategy would lead to the circumvention of commonly-accepted quality criteria. I have always been interested to know what motivated my African colleagues, but I have a strong suspicion. I think the musicians were invited by the Goethe Institute, and they were game. It was an opportunity to work with an allegedly reputed young European artist. They were paid for their work, albeit modestly. Who knows what could come of it – better-paid concerts perhaps?

When thinking about our motivations in this way, they do not seem very elegant. But I think that as we became more deeply involved in our collaboration, something started happening: we became sincerely interested in each other and progressively drawn into this work. Ultimately, we became something of an artistic family, and while Beta Foly ceased to exist as a group at the end of 1999, we never officially disbanded, and I have remained in touch with every group member.

During our first work sessions, I was still somewhat confused. The musicians I was working with, coming from various parts of West Africa and from backgrounds ranging from the strictly-traditional to the more jazz-oriented, had not all met before. As they struggled to find musical common ground, I watched and asked questions, taking on a guise akin to an ethnomusicologist. Increasingly, I began using the answers I received to suggest things to the musicians, probably coming across as something of an agent-provocateur. For

example, there were two balafon (West African marimba) players at the workshop, and I noticed that they never played at the same time, so I asked them why, and they told me that their instruments were tuned differently, incompatibly. I asked them whether they could try to play together anyway. With a conventional mindset, this would not have been doable, but my hope was that we would collectively open our ears to new aesthetic possibilities – for example new combinations of tuning systems, new harmonies. I did not arrive in Africa consciously wishing to stir up anything, but neither did I want to shed my identity, and perhaps because of my nonconformist nature, but definitely because of the tradition of nonconformity in the experimental arts in the West, I had brought my stance of questioning and challenging the status quo with me. I did not come to Africa to learn from a master; I came to jump into the cold water and create art, collaboratively, hopefully learning by doing. Not wanting to adapt nor wanting to convince anyone to adapt to me, I investigated my surroundings and tried to develop an understanding from my personal viewpoint. And I soon realized that my brand of counter-cultural attitude – not one of sociopolitical provocation but one of artistic experimentation for its own sake, of ‘l’art pour l’art’ – was perceived as rather exotic by the people I met and collaborated with.



**Figure 2: Lukas Ligeti with electric marimba**  
Photograph courtesy of Chris Woltmann

Which African musicians or styles could qualify as counter-cultural in a way obvious to local African as well as to Western observers? I do not claim to be able to give a complete overview, but Fela Kuti immediately comes to mind. Fela's familial background was already quite unusual in that his mother was a women's rights activist; he then studied music in England and undertook travels in search of new musical ideas. Later, he was constantly at odds with the Nigerian government, even declaring his compound in Lagos independent from Nigeria. Not many other musicians between the Sahara and South Africa have been as overtly rebellious, founding new styles of music and taking in foreign influences while promoting social and political disobedience. The Tuareg rock bands of Mali and Niger must be mentioned, but in their case the rebellion is mainly political; while clearly counter-cultural, the music leans strongly on traditional sources.

The situation in South Africa is complex; Johnny Clegg's bands Juluka and Savuka were important acts of defiance against apartheid, but not overtly experimental in musical style. Paul Simon's *Graceland* was conspicuous in its defiance of the rest of the world's cultural boycott of South Africa and deliberately mixed South African music with the input of an American singer-songwriter, but clearly remains a pop album. Warrick Sony's Kalahari Surfers project was born from political protest and used many aesthetic attributes of the European pop and electronic music underground, standing as a counter-cultural phenomenon on multiple levels. Chris McGregor, Mongezi Feza, Dudu Pukwana, Johnny Dyani, Louis Moholo and several other South Africans became important avant-garde jazz musicians, but their most challenging work was done during their period of exile in the U.K. African reggae and hip-hop are often seen as counter-cultural movements, but both genres are somewhat divorced in Africa from their original social context; African hip-hop, while a strong assertion of youth culture, does not play the same socially provocative role as it did (and arguably continues to do) in the ghettos of Brooklyn or the Bronx. The list could certainly go on, including genres such as Zouglou, grown out of the student movement in Côte d'Ivoire...but on the whole, the expectation that an artist be rebellious in order to be cutting edge seems to me largely absent. The individual artist is greatly respected in Africa (the West often perceives of Africa as a place where all culture is created communally, but that is a false impression), but art usually has a purpose other than itself, be it ritual, political, for communication, for entertainment, or for myriad other uses, and is not regarded more highly if it challenges the establishment.

Beta Foly's musical experimentalism was counter-cultural in that it progressed in opposition to musical establishments in both Africa and Europe. I returned to Abidjan numerous times in the late 1990s to work with my Beta Foly colleagues, and we recorded a CD, *Lukas Ligeti & Beta Foly*, released in 1997 by the German label Intuition Music. A tour through the pieces of this CD may serve as a description of our experimentation.

A few years before my arrival in Côte d'Ivoire, I had begun developing a polymetric drum-set playing technique based on the Baganda court music that so fascinated me. This technique allowed me to play extremely long rhythmic cycles, many hundreds of beats long before repetition. While I was only playing a succession of hand-to-hand (left-right-left-right etc.) beats in a completely straightforward rhythm, the way I distributed these simple beats around the drums created the illusion of multiple tempos being played simultaneously. In this playing style, there was no set downbeat; a listener could focus on various component parts of my drum set and adopt any arbitrarily chosen component as the beginning of a cycle and/or the downbeat; in other words, there was no absolute beat, just many relative ones – a phenomenon already present in the music of Buganda. In Beta Foly's piece *L'Escalier du temps*, we developed this drumming technique into a method of conducting an ensemble of improvising musicians. I played a succession of polymetric cycles in the technique I'd developed, and my colleagues each picked one component of my drum set to play along with. For example, a flutist might pick a ride cymbal, and would play a note every time I hit said cymbal. Obviously, this connection enabled me to react to his playing; by interrupting my rhythmic cycles and playing, say, exclusively on my cymbal, I could get the flutist to play a solo. For the ensemble, playing like this meant that while we were all playing together, there was no collective beat to follow. We had taken an African musical model and used it as a departure point for something else, a new model for improvisational interplay at once polymetric and devoid of meter. Rubato ensemble playing is rarely found in Africa, but it is found in Western avant-garde music, as is conducted group improvisation.

In another piece, we used a similar approach but in a more regimented way. In an attempt to get Western-trained musicians to play complex interlocking structures for which they, as opposed to African musicians, had not been trained, I devised a setup consisting of a computer and multiple headphones; every musician played to a different metronomic track audible to him/her only, via the headphones. All the independent strands were coordinated and kept in sync by the computer, which acted as a conductor of sorts. This way, it was possible for me to have a chamber ensemble play such that each musician was in a completely different tempo but coordination was never lost, or such that they all played at the same tempo, but staggered – I did this with up to 11 musicians in my piece *Groove Magic*, written shortly before my first trip to Côte d'Ivoire and resulting in probably the fastest 'klangfarbenmelodie' (timbral melody) ever composed. In Beta Foly, we came up with a piece entitled *Langage en dessin*, wherein we played polymetric patterns similar to the ones in *L'Escalier du temps*. But this time, rather than being very free in our interplay, everyone had headphones and their own metronome track, which they attempted to reconcile with what I was playing on the drums.

In a piece entitled *Village dans 8 pays*, Aly Keïta, a balafonist, and I opened the proceedings with the juxtaposition of a balafon phrase inspired by the traditions of southern Mali or southwestern Burkina Faso and another one of my polymetric cycles. Here, there were clear downbeats, but due to the lengths of

both the phrase of the balafon and that of the drums, they occurred rarely. We then invited a seasoned avant-garde jazz improviser from the U.S., Henry Kaiser, to contribute a guitar solo on top of a soundscape that shifted from Aly's and my duet to one of increasingly dense percussion. After that, the piece progressed through a variety of rhythms and styles, with vocals in various languages such as Moré (from Burkina Faso), Wolof (Senegal), and Peul (from the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea-Conakry) – elements from the traditions of eight countries in all, hence the title.

In some pieces, we attempted to mix elements of one style with elements of another. During our rehearsal sessions and even more so during tours, we spent much time listening to music. My colleagues introduced me to many styles of West African music, both traditional and pop, while I played them recordings of various Western genres. The piece *Le chant de tout le monde* has a section in which a griot chant is sung as fast as possible, underpinned with loud and fast drums and aggressive guitars – a mixture of griotism and punk rock. (It is interesting to note that very few overtly rebellious forms of pop music from Europe or America other than hip-hop have taken hold in Africa; for example, does African punk rock actually exist? And it would be interesting to explore whether African music created under the influence of mind-altering substances shares much ground with psychedelic music of the West in the 1960s...)

In another piece, *Sound of No Restraint*, we went a step further. I played my colleagues recordings of traditional Korean p'ansori music as an example of a music as far removed from Africa as I could muster up. We then attempted to imitate some of the rhythmic and timbral characteristics of this music in an improvisation. The result was quite honestly one of the oddest hybrids I have been involved with in my life as a musician; it sounded nothing like Korean music already because the basic timbres of the instruments were clearly African, but it didn't sound like African music, either: the piece gave me a strong feeling of hovering somewhere in a no-man's land where all cultural references became strangely intangible.

While many of these pieces also involved the use of electronics in a somewhat audible way, the fundamental role of the computer was rather subliminal to the audience: electronics were used in the composing and arranging process and/or to conduct the ensemble. But in other pieces, the electronics were more overtly present. For the piece *Brontologik 3.44*, Kurt wrote a software program allowing the computer to engage in a dialogue with the balafon. Aly played phrases; the computer analyzed his pitches and rhythms and a synthesizer played an automated response. But rather than instigating a call-and-response scenario in the regular sense, Aly did not pause to let the computer finish; a complex and multilayered dialogue developed in which the computer occasionally became confused, but that was intentional: we were out to challenge our own perception, but also to test the limits of our electronics! The piece *Balarama* was also a duet with Aly, but this time with me on electronic percussion. Using my electronics, I triggered samples (very short recordings) of the balafons of Aly and Kaba Kouyaté, the other balafonist. But the samples were completely out of tune. As

the piece progressed, the sampled balafons slowly approached their original tunings; all the while, Aly improvised with me using his ‘correctly’-tuned instrument. When the tuning of my samples reached that of Aly’s balafon, the piece ended.

Many of Beta Foly’s pieces were more straightforwardly traditional (of one West African region or another) and others more clearly pop. As a final example of our joint experimentation, however, I’d like to mention *African Loops*. The origin of this piece was Kurt’s idea to record each group member playing a few short but characteristic phrases on his or her instrument. From these short samples, a composition was assembled, and the result was something marginally akin to Western electronic dance music genres such as jungle or drum’n’bass – but obviously using African sounds and phrases. Yéro Bobo Bah, a Guinean vocalist and percussionist, sang a song in Peul language over the computer’s track. This piece, composed in 1996, may have been one of the earliest examples of ‘electronica’ (i.e. DJ/club-culture-related electronic music) to be produced in West Africa – possibly even the very first: I am not sure. The piece became quite popular with DJs in Europe and enjoyed a certain amount of radio airplay, especially in the U.K. and the U.S.; however, because it was based on a fairly rigid computer playback, we almost never presented it in our live concerts. On the other hand, it served as a template of sorts for Burkina Electric, an indirect successor project to Beta Foly which I will briefly discuss below.

During Beta Foly’s six years of existence, we performed numerous concerts in Côte d’Ivoire as well as touring to Burkina Faso and five countries in Europe. Côte d’Ivoire in the late 1990s was a very cosmopolitan place; the country’s strong economy and free atmosphere attracted people from all over West Africa and there were significant communities from outside Africa, too, especially from France, Lebanon, and China. This progressive and open-minded atmosphere encouraged our experimentation. Beta Foly obviously never became part of the country’s musical mainstream; the group was deemed ‘unusual’, ‘strange’, and ‘crazy’ (and, perhaps, ‘counter-cultural’?) by musicians, audiences, and the press, yet was well-respected due to the ensemble members’ obvious skills, and we attracted fairly sizeable audiences although we were never invited to play at very large venues. In Europe, the reception of our music was scattered. We played our first European concert in Vienna in 1996 at the festival Wien Modern, quite possibly the first African group to ever play at the Mozart Hall of the Vienna Konzerthaus, one of the city’s top classical concert venues. Wien Modern is one of Europe’s leading avant-garde classical-music festivals, and our invitation may have stemmed from the curators’ curiosity about what I, a young composer from Vienna, might be doing in Africa, a part of the world they knew virtually nothing about. Later, we played at a mix of contemporary classical festivals, art museums, and jazz and underground rock clubs. Yet we made almost no impact on the most obvious forum for an African music group to play in Europe: the ‘world music’ scene. Indeed, we only performed at one of the major European world music festivals, the Music Meeting in Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

African music concerts in Europe and America are mostly relegated to two circuits; artists established on one of these circuits rarely appear on the other. One is the music scene of the diaspora: popular African artists are invited to perform, usually by expatriate African concert promoters, for an audience consisting almost exclusively of the African community. The other is world music, which caters mainly to European- and American-raised audiences and is essentially also a commercial music scene; indeed, 'world music' was launched as a commercial category pursuant to a meeting of British music professionals in London in 1987, who, in reaction to an increasing number of recordings of non-Western music being issued to the international market, needed to come up with some kind of classification to place these CDs in record stores. Over the years, this became increasingly a pop music scene, although luckily with a somewhat more benevolent and shark-free set of impresarios than mainstream pop.

Nevertheless, 'authentic' traditional music was marginalized (or, probably more accurately, the opportunity to give it a place more prominent than it had previously occupied was missed), and there simply was no space whatsoever for experimental music. And as world music progressed to establish itself as a category and more and more festivals dedicated to this music began to emerge, so did it begin developing into a more unified musical genre. I have even heard of people referring to a 'world music groove', meaning a rhythm of 3+3+2, which has become almost as ubiquitous in world music as the backbeat on 2 and 4 has in rock. And, without any evil intent, but rather with a hippie-tinged naïveté, many world music impresarios seem to enjoy promoting an attitude of togetherness and collective dancing, thereby unfortunately making it increasingly difficult for the unique and special characteristics of singular cultures to assert themselves. And part of the image of the non-Western world thus promoted is one of a somewhat naïve, happy and light-hearted atmosphere, free from the trappings of the industrialized world such as electronics. As African electronic music began rising in the very early 2000s, there was a temporary wave of electronics making inroads into the world music scene, but this has largely ebbed in the meantime. In all fairness, the world music scene has received so much criticism from so many sides - from musicologists to pop stars such as David Byrne - that at this point even complaining about it has become, frankly, almost as boring as the stylistic predictability of the genre itself.

Beta Foly was not a good fit for this scene. We did not really seek to entertain; our mission was to develop an understanding of each other's cultures and to come up with something that was neither here nor there. And we did not buy into the idea that technology was somehow un-African. People around the world have much more in common than they have separating them, and one thing most people definitely share is that when technological innovations become available, they want to try them and use them. The incredible impact of cellular telephone technology in Africa, where few people previously had the opportunity to be connected via phone, is a perfect example of how quickly societies can adapt to new technology and even develop their own culture of use of technology (banking by cellphone in Kenya and other countries is an obvious example, pioneered in Africa).

After Beta Foly ceased operations due to lack of funding, lack of concert invitations, and the deteriorating political situation in Côte d'Ivoire, I kept in touch with all group members. Some years later, I was asked by an Austrian NGO, the Vienna Institute for Development and Cooperation, to devise a collaboration with musicians from Burkina Faso, using electronics. I invited singer Maï Lingani and guitarist Wende K. Blass, both Burkinabè artists and members of Beta Foly, to join me, along with Kurt and two dancers from Ouagadougou. We decided to continue where *African Loops* had left off. The first tour of this new band, Burkina Electric, took place in Austria with a minimum of preparation; it was meant to be a one-off, but we all so much enjoyed the collaboration that we decided to continue. Burkina Electric is active to this day, and we have thus far performed in Burkina Faso, several European countries, Canada, and especially in the U.S., where we have spent many extended periods since 2007. Our first CD, *Paspanga*, was released in 2010 by the American label Cantaloupe Music.



**Figure 1. Burkina Electric**  
Photograph courtesy of Chris Borgman.

In Burkina Electric, we made some deliberate decisions at the outset of the collaboration. Most if not all of our music should be composed together. It should be a danceable music, using some of the lesser-known rhythms of Burkina Faso mixed with some well-known African rhythms as well as grooves of our own creation. We purposely eschewed traditional instruments, preferring to travel throughout Burkina Faso, recording musicians and, with their consent, sampling their instruments' sounds and processing, looping, and detuning then in unpredictable ways. Many of our songs are built on found sounds, recorded during walks down the street; the songs' rhythms and tonalities often follow what is inherent in the samples. Two dancers are members of the group and

create their own choreographies, drawing the audience into dancing with them to rhythms they are unfamiliar with.

While this is obviously a much more pop-oriented group than Beta Foly, we have continued our experimentation unabated, but are now interested in how we can “manipulate” the audience and, by extension, the world music business to come with us on our path of smiling rebellion against traditions and conventions. Some of our music is in odd meters such as 15/4, but the dancers’ choreographies appear seamless. Some of the lyrics are in invented languages, confusing audience members who are close to understanding something, but somehow unable. And we very deliberately avoid the synthesizer patches so often heard in African pop music, going for a raw and very electronically based production aesthetic somewhere between indie rock, electronica, and a yet-unknown type of experimental music. Listeners tend to be initially somewhat surprised, but while some are alienated, the reactions to our concerts have been generally enthusiastic. Burkina Electric has also collaborated with American choreographer Karole Armitage and her company, Armitage Gone! Dance, in the creation of *Itutu*, a piece combining ballet and African dance elements.

I have always found Africa to be an extremely fruitful continent for artistic experimentation. The relative absence of an experimental scene (especially in music; there is much more experimentation in dance, theater, and the visual arts) makes things, if anything, even more interesting by allowing for a largely unencumbered environment. African music, textile design, and many other art forms, based as they are on a pattern-oriented thinking in which repetitive structures give rise to acoustical and optical illusions and games with human perception, is particularly well-suited to electronic simulation and experimentation. The interconnectedness of music and dance in Africa ensures that even the most intellectual construction does not lose touch with the physical. And the open-minded ‘can-do’ attitude of many African artists I have encountered has made experimentation a communal experience leading to many friendships. It also seems to me that the gestalt aspects of many components of African musical structures (and also those in the visual arts) are so clear and recognizable that they react in a fairly benign way to re- and decontextualization; a sense of identity seems to be preserved even when an element is transplanted into a new environment, and many local artists are not too concerned about context, perhaps because they are aware of the robustness of their creations. Collaboration is generally welcomed, and there is a curiosity and willingness to try out new things.

Does that imply that Africa is an obvious probing ground for counter-cultural activities or artistic rebellion? No. But it does support the notion that artists’ attitudes continuously evolve and that people soak up new influences, and that completely new models of protest and of going-against-the-status-quo can and might form in Africa, creating a new social function for future artists and, at the same time, completely new styles of music.

### **Music resources**

**Soundcloud:**

Beta Foly:

<https://soundcloud.com/lukasligeti/lukas-ligeti-beta-foly>

<https://soundcloud.com/lukasligeti/lukas-ligeti-beta-foly-village>

Burkina Electric:

<https://soundcloud.com/lukasligeti/burkina-electric-sankar-yaar>

<https://soundcloud.com/lukasligeti/burkina-electric-ca-va>

Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9A343BD13CA9CB7B>

Lukas Ligeti on Soundcloud:

<https://soundcloud.com/lukasligeti>

**Music purchases**

Burkina Electric:

<http://www.amazon.com/Paspanga-Burkina-Electric/dp/B002ZPIBQS>