

Ding-Dong!

In June 2018, Guts rang my doorbell in Lisboa. His idea was to discuss the possibility of a collaboration between myself and Heavenly Sweetness to produce a compilation. I was obviously honoured with the proposal, but one week later I suggested creating two all-star bands, one from Guiné-Bissau and another from Cabo Verde, with 3 singers each, inspired by one of the most brilliant figures in African liberation: Amílcar Cabral. With the hard work of more than 30 people, we ended up building this dream. The story is below. Enjoy!

So Why Was This Record Made Anyway?

Before I address that question, 3 quick points:

1. Due to a lack of alternatives, I will use the expression “the West” out of practicality to refer to mainly Europe and North America, and other territories with a main matrix of Western culture.
2. My background as a DJ/researcher and more recently as an executive producer dedicated to Lisbon’s African diaspora for more than a decade has given me a privileged angle for observing the current supply of African music available in record stores in the West. My viewpoint, though, always tilts towards that of the Lusophone African Communities with a special emphasis in Lisbon, my home city and where, with some turbulence, all of them merge. My point of view denounces that life experience, and I assume the readers know about it.
3. This project comprises two bands, one from Guiné-Bissau and another from Cabo Verde. For simplicity, I will refer to them as GB Band and CV Band, respectively.

Here we go: no matter how uplifting and inspirational a project is, it always starts, for me, when I realize something is missing. Since approximately the turn of the millennium, diligent, agile work from mainly small labels has resulted in the release of hundreds of vintage-inspired compilations and re-issues of records from various African countries whose music was largely unknown or ignored in the West. It was no wonder this wave of old but (for Western ears) fresh music has made a large impact in music lovers, researchers and DJs. During the last two decades, every month a number of compilations and reissues of previously unheard music from exotic languages, cultures and influences started to come up in urban record stores all over. These new sounds, from Cuban pioneers to Brazilian psy Rock, from Funk in South East Asia to Master Bass Players in Cameroon, gave music lovers more diversity to work with, more ideas to get inspired by, and some new idols to worship! One consequence of this influx of African vintage culture was what we now call the “Tropical Music” scene, reaching crowds through old school Cumbia parties, influencing Indie bands and bringing coloured flower shirts back to the party scene. In other words, everyone thrilled by this “new” music went on to celebrate it in all possible ways. The Tropical Music scene is distinct from the previous and ongoing World Music scene (**ref 1**) developed in the 80s in that it rejects Western influence in composition and (sometimes) style, and prefers “genuine” recordings that represented the tastes of whenever and wherever the recordings were made.

After two decades of obsessive record and CD digging both in and out of record stores, I have come up with three critical aspects that for me define these contemporary, revivalist releases of African music.

First of all, these records are only very rarely bought by Africans or African descendants, which is counterintuitive, but probably happens for two reasons: because vintage re-issues and compilations released in the West are normally from famous artists in their countries of origin, and therefore not quite exciting if you know them beforehand, and also because old records are not appealing to a new generation uninspired by the colonial past.

Secondly, almost all of the old African music released in the West either falls into one of the following genres, or is very close to them: Reggae, Soul, Funk, Highlife, Psy Rock played by non-Western musicians, Ethio-Jazz, Afrobeat, Soukous. Don't get me wrong: I love much of the music that falls into these categories and my life is much better with them. What would our world be without Fela Kuti, Mulatu Astatke or Tabu Ley Rochereau? But Africa's cultural affluence is so immense that I cannot help but ask why only an insignificant fraction of its culture is promoted and celebrated outside Africa. As an example, Guiné-Bissau, a tiny West-African country - whose music we celebrate here - has only 1,7 million people, but 32 distinct ethnic groups, each one with their own rhythms and grooves.

Thirdly, present-day Western record buyers' tastes lean more towards African music from the 60s and 70s with abundant electric guitar licks, Rhodes funky grooves, powerful rough voices and big afros. Most releases focus so intensively on a specific musical era and old school imagery that it has, for no other reason than taste, somehow become the African music standard in the West, pushing aside contemporary urban African music as inauthentic, kitsch or cheap, even if it is respected and innovative in its home country.

Track Selection

For sixteen years I have kept a digital folder with tracks whose compositions truly fascinated me, but somehow had some sort of serious flaw that prevented them from being successful tracks. The reason for this could be anything from a bad intro to an out-of-tone voice or outright bad mixing. Some of these original tracks are unknown even to native music lovers, others were locally known for a while when released. Playing as a DJ in the duo Celeste/Mariposa all around Europe, it always intrigued me how sometimes very subtle studio mistakes turned groovy dance tracks into lifeless tunes, and the most efficient way possible to test dance tracks is to be an observant DJ. Some tracks worked with some audiences, and not with others, but other tracks, despite my stubborn fascination, *never* worked, no matter where, at what time or how they were mixed. But I still thought they were amazing, although I had to recognise the only way I could share my enthusiasm for these tracks was probably to remake them from scratch, under a new light, which is exactly what we do here. For the CV Band in this project, I chose the tracks from my folder that I felt had the most potential and also represented the true sound of Praia. For the GB Band, the selection process was more complex. While "Pé Di Bissilon", "Citi Cu Liti" and "Dunia Bé Téné" had also been previously released and were similarly given a new life, "Tchon Di Guiledi", "Nô Guiné" and "Riba Bas Di Mi" were all unreleased tracks, and we only knew about them through bootleg mixtapes.

Whose Taste?

This record is made to be enjoyed by whoever loves music, but aims *especially* at being admired, celebrated and danced to by the young people of Guiné-Bissau and Cabo Verde, RIGHT NOW. This is a beautiful idea, but captivating two crowds (the Western crowd and the crowd from each country of origin) with very different tastes is extremely ambitious, and demands tough decisions. For example, deep, rocker-distorted electric guitar riffs are trendy in many contemporary African styles including Semba, Kizomba, Gumbé and Socopé in West Africa, but are seen as outdated chunks of hair metal trash in the West, and often criticised as wrecking "authentic" African grooves. On the other hand, the dirty analog synth sounds and rough voices from African recordings in the 70s frequently influence hip Western contemporary bands, but are often seen by African crowds as archaic and dull. So what should our strategy be? Make it sound more according to Western tastes while ignoring our own convictions? Or make it sound more to the taste of the African crowds but risk selling a record in the wrong hemisphere? My hypothesis is this: today, probably for the first time, there are enough music enthusiasts in the West, that are open-minded and knowledgeable enough to embrace non-paternalistic African music and therefore do not need to consume an aesthetically or time-filtered version of good music. That is what I stand for, and that is what I think makes this record special: the larger-than-life ambition of having on the one hand a fat-groove, joyful record that will touch people and make them dance, and on the other hand a record that avoids what has frustrated me as a record buyer and executive producer.

What Does Bandé-Gamboa Mean?

Amílcar Cabral was the political strategist behind the liberation of both Guiné-Bissau and Cabo Verde, and arguably one of the most brilliant and articulate African revolutionaries. He was born in Bafatá, Guiné Bissau, in 1924 but went to school in Mindelo, Cabo Verde. He would frequently mention both countries were complementary. He argued that while Cabo Verde was a 10-island archipelago comprised mostly of mountains, Guiné-Bissau was in the mainland and mainly flat. While in Cabo Verde it rarely rained, in Guiné-Bissau rain was abundant. He enthusiastically defended the unity of both countries during the liberation war for strategic reasons, but also dreamed that one day they would be one independent country, which happened for only 6 years between 1974, when the liberation war was won, and 1980 when Nino Vieira's coup ended Luis Cabral's presidency of both territories. Amílcar did not live to see this, because he was assassinated in 1972. This project's name, Bandé-Gamboa, refers to a connection between a lively, proud neighbourhood of Bissau called Bandé, and the famous Gamboa beach, right in front of Cabo Verde's capital, Praia, the cradle of Funaná. This Atlantic route was used to carry slaves captured in Guiné-Bissau to the slave-trade platform in the Island of Santiago, and is celebrated here as a symbol of the umbilical connection between both countries, that due to a common history also share a cultural ancestry and fought side by side for self-determination.

Why Did We Work With Live Bands?

By having two top bands that combine old legends and young guns in a common task to renew their own musical tradition, this record, not failing to honour its heritage, is a recording of unrepeatable creative moments that happened in the 1st half of 2019 in Lisboa. More clearly, this record exists with the straightforward objective of showing the world what happened in that encounter. As an executive producer, it was particularly satisfying to see the artists' reaction to creative freedom. The way they took this project as theirs, arriving each morning with original suggestions. To see generations with such different life experiences so fascinated with the others' understanding of groove. My problem was to find ways to integrate so many good ideas while maintaining the project coherent. Isn't that the dream of any executive producer?

Each Band Has Its Own Goal

Because the goals of each band in this project were different, I also had different roles in each one as an executive producer. Why was that? This project has the aim of revealing both Gumbé and Funaná to new audiences, however, these challenges arise in different contexts for each case. Gumbé is the result of a successful musical blend conceived in Bissau in the mid-50s. The urban fusion of the musical legacy from its 32 ethnicities inhabiting the city, joined fashionable influences from Latin America (especially Cumbia) to define the unique, complex rhythm of modern Gumbé. Later, in the 70s, a fascinating period of cultural vitality emerged. Bands like N'Kassa Cobra, Super Mama Djombo and Cobiana Jazz famously revitalised traditional rhythms and fused them with modern Western influences to create deep, sophisticated, psychedelic music that supported the message for liberation, peace and self-sufficiency. The way these bands studied antique traditions to create the sound of the future is, to my knowledge, one of the biggest leaps in musical innovation the world has ever seen. Future prospects for Gumbé looked brilliant, but a coup in 1980 and persistent political instability meant that more recent names like Tabanka Djaz and Justino Delgado became stars despite a tremendously difficult context. They had to thrive in an artistic environment where there was no longer the euphoria and optimism felt during the liberation war when artists were endorsed as central to national identity and unity, and were dearly supported for it too.

Today, despite its unique character, a large diaspora and a great number of talented musicians, Gumbé is rarely in the global music spotlight, compelling many established musicians to commit to

spreading this music. Our intentions with the GB Band were many. First of all, the artists in this band were conscious that Gumbé itself was undefinable, unlike, for example, instantly recognisable Reggae or Soukous. Gumbé today is not homogeneous enough to be recognised as a genre by the general public. It was recorded by many artists with very different ideas about it, resulting in different rhythms that were all presented as Gumbé, so the first challenge was to deliver a truly diverse set of tracks while still maintaining a solid matrix. Another aim was to deliver fresh, contemporary versions of each track, promoting a tight collaboration between two generations that do not always understand each other.

Moving on to the CV Band. Funaná, as is now well documented, is an up-tempo type of music from the island of Santiago in Cabo Verde, originally played with a diatonic accordion and backed by a “ferrinho”, a 60cm-long iron bar with an L-shaped profile, normally taken from a bed structure, that when scraped with a butter knife makes a tense, metallic sound. Portuguese authorities famously forbid funaná, mainly because the “ferrinho” players had, after all, two dangerous weapons in their hands, but also because they feared it could become the soundtrack of agitated evenings, fuelled by subtly anti-colonial lyrics, grog and up-tempo dancing. The 70s brought the world a complete Funaná revolution when bands like Kolá, Bulimundo or Pedrinho introduced the drums, electric bass, keyboards, electric guitar and percussion. Meanwhile, Paulino Vieira had started his stellar journey to create Capeverdean modern music. He jumped in with American, Caribbean and African influences to catapult Funaná to yet another level, and contemporary releases dedicated to Funaná like Analog Africa’s *Space Echo* compilation (in which I participated), or Ostinato Records’ *Synthesize the Soul*, all give a fair idea of the new universe that by then was being created. In fact, music thrived in independent Cabo Verde as it did not in Guiné-Bissau. Occupied Cabo Verde was, by far, the most privileged colony, with literacy rates and education quality above all other African countries occupied by Portugal, due to a strategic option of better educating the Capeverdeans so they could better serve under the Portuguese in the mid-range colonial administration of its mainland African colonies. After the independence euphoria died away, in 1980 Nino Vieira’s coup in Guiné-Bissau divided Guiné-Bissau and Cabo Verde into two different countries. Unlike Guiné-Bissau, Cabo-Verde continued as a more stable, evolving country and had a large diaspora that recorded abroad in Lisboa, Rotterdam, Paris and Boston, where they could find well-equipped studios. Into the 80s and 90s, Cabo Verde and its diaspora produced a vast and diverse amount of music, with a clear highlight in Cesária Évora’s worldwide success that attracted a general cultural interest for the archipelago.

Funaná itself also evolved. After the unique innovations of Codé Di Dona and Sema Lopi, both of which had a massive impact without ever recording top-level studio albums, in the 90s, virtuosos like Tchota Suari, Bitori Nha Bibinha and the band Ferro Gaita achieved great fame and influence and defined a tough, crisp and defying sound that became, from 2016 onwards, gradually available to a Western audience. Although far from the visibility of Ethio-Jazz or Nigerian Highlife, Funaná has built, very recently, some world recognition. Also, its narrower palette of rhythms prevented the identity problems that arose with Gumbé, so our aim with the CV band in this project was actually in the opposite direction: that of testing the limits of Funaná by blending it with other textures, rhythms, slowing it down, etc. Essentially, we wanted to test the versatility of Funaná by opening it up and seeing to what degree it could successfully absorb other musical languages.

(ref 1) “World music” was created out of necessity by music journalists in the 80s at a time when some major artists and labels were releasing music that did not fit any other known categories and has a certain recognisable sound to fit Western ears even though it comes from very different places across the globe. “Tropical Music”, however, is a much less recognisable name. However, it is an expression used all over the West. When I refer to the “Tropical Music Scene” I refer to the records released, the parties organised, and the typical vibe of a young, urban, sophisticated crowd genuinely interested in mainly older music recorded in southern countries across the globe.

