



Percussion
Roundup **PAGE 84**

hand drum

Snapshot: West Africa

RURAL ROADIE

A lunga (talking-drum) player in Northern Ghana returns to the village after a day of playing in the fields for harvest.

A journey into the Shangri-La
of the percussion world

by Brad Boynton

It's a place where the fence between swung and straight was never built. A place where threes, fours, and fives play together like toddlers in play group. A place where the space between the notes has more merit than the notes themselves. A place where rhythm itself is meaningless without melody and context. As drummers, we know Africa is the continent that gave us the rhythmic DNA for the birth of American jazz, Brazilian samba, and Cuban rumba. With the huge influence African music has had on our own

performance vocabularies as drummers, it may just be time to take the ultimate journey to the epicenter of rhythm itself.

With a lot of cultural objects being manufactured, borrowed, and traded in this Web-linked age of connectivity and travel, we see glimpses of Africa all over the place. Just think of the cajons, congas, and djembes in your local music store or the sounds programmed into electronic drum kits and percussion pads. For many of us, the instruments themselves are our first exposure to the

continent. But it seems like we owe it to ourselves to learn more.

Ghana

Ghana is a great place to go for first timers. Most of us are linguistically challenged, and since the majority of countries in West Africa are French speaking, it's refreshing for Americans to go where the official language is English — and to keep our secret safe! Ghana has been extremely stable since gaining independence in 1957 and has the infrastructure to prove it. Not just in roads, buildings, and exports, but in the

presence of thriving drumming workshops, camps, and institutes throughout the country, many of which are geared toward aspiring western drummers. It's a place where you can track down legendary drummers for a lesson, carve your own drum in a village, or sit in till dawn with a group playing at a wake-keeping.

You can hit the ground running by studying kpanlogo in Accra. You can use the University Of Ghana at Legon and the Arts Council Of Ghana as resources once you land. The Ga people are among the best hand drummers in the world, and there are a lot of similarities between kpanlogo drums and congas, both in their shape and the hand technique used. Use of kpanlogo drums in pairs for highlife music is very similar to the role congas play in a salsa orchestra. Just listen to any Obo Addy and Kukrudu recordings to hear Ga drumming and its ability to cross over into the realms of jazz and highlife.

Then venture to the Volta region to study Agbadza from the Ewe people. Although Jenns Hannemann (the überdrummer persona of SNL cast member Fred Armisen) might cringe at the thought,

the drumming traditions here really are complicated. The Ewe drum orchestras are comprised of many different drums all with different shapes, voices, and playing techniques. And being the land of the 12/8 bell pattern, the Volta region may very well be the place to finally unlock the mysteries hidden inside those pesky groupings of three, six, and twelve.

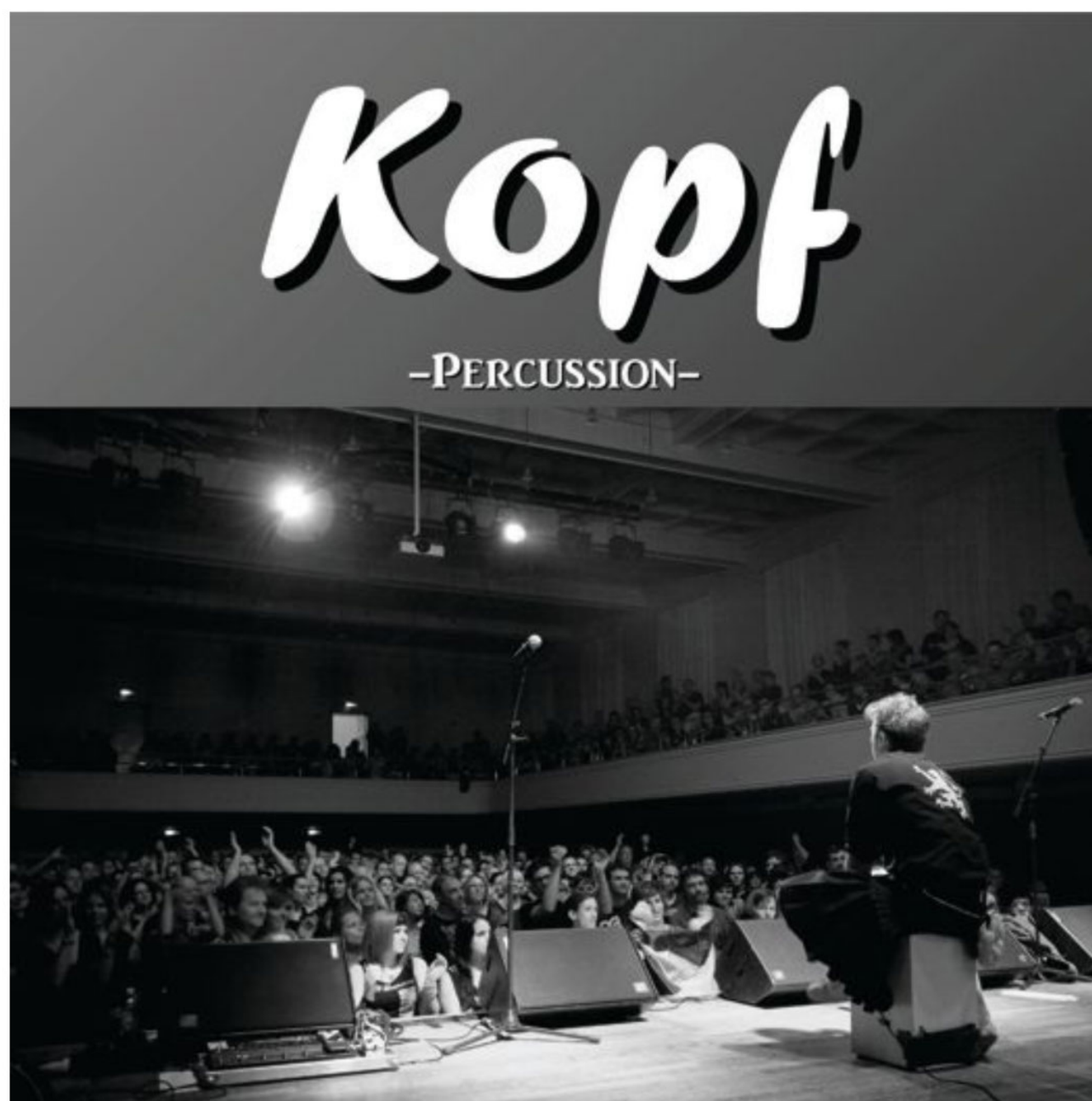
Next, head north up to Tamale to study with the Dagomba, where talking drums still talk. It's a fairytale land with mud huts, princes, oral historians, nomads, and fortunetellers who will all become part of your experience. After inquiring with a local chief about drumming possibilities you might quickly find yourself playing for farmers during harvest, for villagers constructing a new mud compound, or playing long into the night during a full moon.

The Dagomba drummers, or lunci, are oral historians through whom young drummers will often learn the entire history of their people and be able to sing it long before they ever touch a drum. It's a place where the first time they strap on a drum, the drum seems to play itself. It's also an extremely challenging place

for western drummers because the lunci remember their rhythms as linguistic phrases. A simple phrase on the drum could be a paragraph's worth. And because the drum is mimicking spoken language, the intonation is where the rhythm derives its meaning. One wrong pitch bend and you're "talking" nonsense. You'll be the talk of the village the first time you attempt play a phrase on your lunga (talking drum) and break down a few seconds into it because you can't remember the phrase. Go ahead, and laugh with them. It's part of the experience and a great way to get schooled on the value of melody and phrasing in your drumming.

Guinea

Guinea is djembe country, and home to many of the greatest living djembe masters, or djembefolas. Originally joined at the hip with Mali as a part of the Mali (Mandeng) Empire dating back to the 13th century, Guinea is the place to go if you want to peel back the layers that have made the djembe one of the world's most popular drums. This is where you'll find

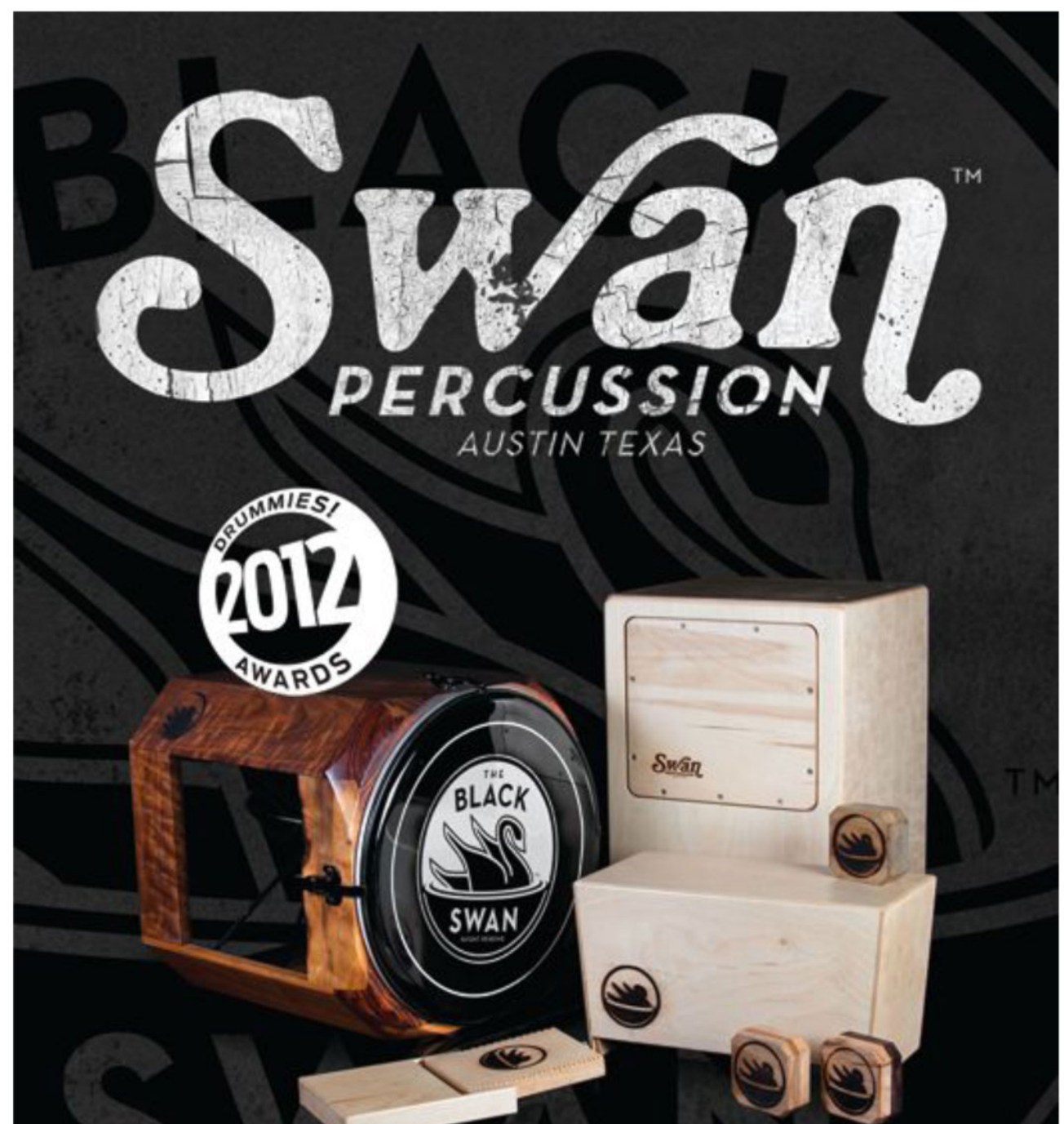


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the Malinke drummers whose djembe tradition is one of the most vibrant and visible in all of Africa.

Specific rhythms aside, djembe arrangements are generally categorized as *village* or *ballet* style. In villages the drums are tuned lower, and often use antelope or calfskin heads that are sometimes stitched on and heated over fire before playing. This dates to an earlier time before blacksmiths and the advent of rings, which subsequently enabled the use of thinner goatskin, which tears under high tension when stitched.

In villages, rhythms usually begin with women raising songs rather than with a drum call or break, and you always have individual players playing the dununs (bass drums), which are strapped on and played transverse with a bell on top. But perhaps the most visible difference between *village* and *ballet* styles is that in villages music is participatory in nature rather than performance-oriented, and often occurs in a circle with singing, clapping, and dancing done by all.

Ballet style, on the other hand, is a more recent and urban development that came

about after independence from French rule. Guinea's first president, Sekou Toure, funded national ballets to give the new nation-state a national rather than tribal identity. Young players like Mamady Keita (Ballet Djoliba), Famoudou Konate (Ballets Africains), Bolo-kada Conde (Percussions de Guinée), and Fadouba Oulare (Ballet d'Armée/Army Ballet) traveled to all regions of the country and brought what they learned back to Conakry, the nation's capital. Over the years of traveling throughout West Africa and the rest of the world, these ballets developed very sophisticated arrangements, hand technique, costumes, and stories. Many of the arrangements that we now consider traditional were woven from the experiences of these early djembe pioneers.

The djembes used in the ballet style are generally tuned extremely high, using the goatskin that most of us are familiar with. One of the most defining characteristics of the ballet-style ensemble is that the

1. Mamady Keita, Guinea. 2. Dunun drums, Guinea. 3. Sabar drum and dance, Senegal.



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dununs (kenkeni, sangban, dununba) are usually played in an upright position by one person instead of by three individuals. As the style implies, these national ballets are comprised of highly trained performers who perform elaborate stage productions for the spectators who remain in the audience, as opposed to the village tradition of universal participation.

In Conakry you'll run across dozens of ballets, and ensembles have sprouted up along with a younger generation of shredders who play fast, hard, and precise. Many of the Guineans living in the U.S. and Europe are former ballet members and lead annual trips back home. They are a terrific asset, and can connect you with local players and instrument makers once you're on the ground. If you're lucky you'll meet a player who can take you to the village to see drumming in its original cultural context.

After Conakry, head to the Hamanah region, birthplace of the dounounba family of rhythms, or head east to Wassolon, the region where Mamady Keita was born.

While you're there, you just might find yourself, drum strapped-on, in the middle of a village ceremony. Mamady recently said to me, "I love to bring foreign students to my village, because when the little boys and girls see these drummers, with their different skin color, who have traveled so far to learn the Malinke drumming tradition, it gives them pride in their culture and makes them want to continue the tradition." Who would have thought we could be an inspiration for young Africans, too!

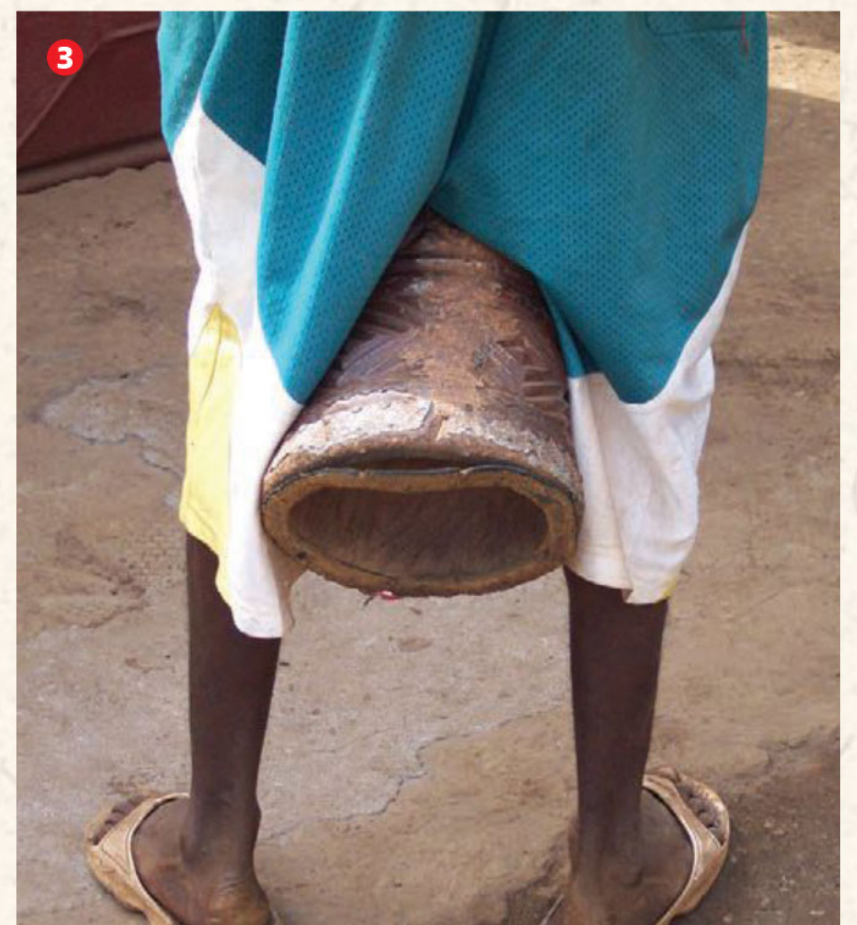
Senegal

You could spend six months in Senegal and barely scratch the surface. Its sabar, tama, bougarabou, and djembe traditions are an endless source for drumming inspiration. You'll see tama players in front of small shops literally playing to drum up business and coax customers in. You'll see sabar drums played at wrestling matches, street parties, and weddings. As you probe deeper you'll find out that there are many distinctive groups of drumming traditions, many of which are hereditary and special-

ize in worship (tabala or xiin) or healing and trance (n'depp).

If you've ever listened to Doudou N'diaye Rose, you know how powerful sabar drums can be. His recording, called *Djabote*, with an orchestra of 50 drummers, is a classic that should be in every serious drummer's archive. These Wolof drummers create long phrases, or baks, which are constantly evolving and lengthening. In Dakar you'll find yourself drinking Chinese gunpowder tea with drummers long into the night as they sing and create the baks that they'll use the following day at the gig.

One of my favorite artists of all time is Youssou N'dour and his Super Etoile de Dakar. These cats have been together since the 1980s and are James Brown tight. He's the leading practitioner of the modern mbalax style, which fuses sabar, tama, and trap drums with full electric band and horns. As a drummer, seeing how Youssou's three percussionists play together without stepping on each other has been a huge lesson in listening.



1. Djembe shells, Guinea. 2. Sabar drummers head to the gig, Senegal. 3. Djembe player, Guinea. 4. & 5. Master djembe player Mamady Keita, Guinea. We'd know those hands anywhere.





1. A woman plays the kariyan bell, Mali.
2. Carving a dununba, Guinea. 3. Praise singers, Guinea. 4. Sabar drummers, Senegal. 5. Sidiki Yayo plays kora, Guinea. 6. Bus-stop water break, Ghana. 7. Famoudou Konate, Guinea.



To move your feet after sundown, saunter down to Youssou's own nightclub, the Thiossane, where you can catch him weekly. You'll see a side of him you won't see on one of his tours in the States, as he lets the understudies sit in with the band and invites visiting artists up to sing and dance. It's the master-apprenticeship tradition alive in the 21st century.

A fun day trip from Dakar is the ferry ride to Gorée Island where you hear the distant sound of djembes coming from the top of a hill where a former colonial castle is now inhabited by locals — a wonderful symbol in itself. Or, if you are traveling between Dakar and Bamako, stop off in Tambacounda, a region famous for its rich djembe tradition. Tambacounda has traditionally been the proving ground for many a djembe master and is the birthplace of Abdoulaye Diakite, who was soloist with the National Ballet Of Senegal for 18 years.

Mali

Historically, Mali was the center of the great Mali (Mandeng) Empire and it is still a huge landmass with a mixture of ethnic groups and instruments. This is the very heart of djembe country. While Guinea may be known for its younger generation of djembefolas, with their mathematical precision and rudimental technique, the Malian style is associated more with melody and tasty solo chops. Many Malian drummers offer workshops in the capital, Bamako, and in surrounding villages.

If you're in Bamako, don't be surprised if you see kora great Toumani Diabaté playing at a café, or Salif Keita at a local club. For more adventure, head into the historic Wassoulou region, legendary for both its singers and crazy ternary rhythms, which a master djembefola can manipulate like a rubber band, slinging you back and forth between hearing a rhythm in three and four, slow and fast, straight and swung.

The largest ethnic grouping in Mali is Mande, which includes both the Malinke and Bambara people. In the Bambara djembe tradition, drums are usually smaller and lower pitched than what you'll see in surrounding areas, and accompanied by just one or maybe two dununs. Music is often accompanied by stringed instruments and balaphone along with the ever-present kariyan bells that the women play to start up the tunes and give them energy. Recordings to get you ready for a trip to Mali should include anything by the late Soungalo Coulibaly or cult hero Segha Sidibe.

NOT JUST YOUR ORDINARY STAND.



If you're up for an adventure, for a trip you'll never forget head up to Timbuktu for the Festival In The Desert, held every January along the Niger River. Often cited as the birthplace of the blues, here you'll experience the stringed n'goni, which has inspired world-renowned artists like Ali Farka Touré and Habib Koité.

Less Is More

Before you go, the first question to ask yourself is whether to go it alone, with a couple of buddies, or as part of an organized workshop. For a first timer, especially one with time constraints, an organized workshop is a way to quickly learn the drumming skills and make contacts on the ground. Plus, workshops are a great way to support the very artists who've brought their craft to the rest of the world. But if you are with a group, remember you are less accessible, and sometimes intimidating. Don't be afraid to venture off on your own even if it means wandering around the market or taking a daytrip to the countryside. If you choose the group experience, stay on for an extra week beyond the workshop because you'll doubtless have numerous invitations into peoples' homes and villages before it's time to leave.

But if you have more time, consider going it alone or just with a friend or two. The old travel adage is true: the smaller the group the more you'll see. Not only is it easier to cram into shared taxis and arrange for private lessons, but a local player might be inclined to invite one or two people back to the village for a few days, whereas a large group might make that experience impossible.

The more vulnerable you are, the more locals will feel comfortable with you and the easier it will be to create the relationships that will take you deeper into the world of music. Two of the craziest experiences I've had in Africa started with me being alone and striking up a conversation with strangers. One was with a Fulani nomad from northern Ghana I met at a bus stop. Ali invited me to go back with him to meet his family, which turned into two months of living with nomads, milking cows, farming, riding bicycles through villages, and drumming. When it came time to leave they gave me a paper sack with guinea fowl eggs, some local juju to keep me safe, and a fist full of money. I told them I couldn't take it, and they said, "You are a traveler just like us. We are the same people, and we know it

is difficult, so please take this and be safe on your journey."

The other time was when I stumbled upon a group of drum carvers who needed a truck battery so they could listen to music in their workshop. After a long discussion about what brought me to Africa and what I hoped to learn, they invited me to live and work with them. I bought them the truck battery and commenced a four-month apprenticeship making and playing drums in the village. Needless to say, neither experience would have happened if I hadn't ventured out on my own.

Ready, Study, Go!

A good way to prepare for study in Africa is to attend workshops in your local community before you go, and to start asking around about trips abroad. I've purposely dropped a ton of names and places in the preceding paragraphs to get the process started. These artists are a great point of entry, to not only get familiar with the music or inquire about workshop opportunities, but most have Web sites and Facebook pages full of information. Many of these artists are recognized by their peers as masters, and together they have influenced generations of players. But before you go, there are a couple of classic books written by American ethnomusicologists worth picking up. Check out John Chernoff's *African Rhythm And African Sensibility* and Eric Charry's *Mande Music*. Both open a window into how Africans see music and offer insight into ways to approach the study of music in Africa.

Whatever you have to do to get there, just get there. Besides being the continent that has influenced generations of our heroes like Elvin, Tito, Papa Jo, Mongo, and Airto, this is most of all about you. Sometimes when we see African instruments in stores we forget to connect them to the culture they come from. One of the side benefits to hopping on that plane is to learn about Africa with its young nation states and their own struggles with modernization, technology, religion, and the shift from rural to urban living. It's a place to confront colonialism, race relations, and the misconceptions many of us have. And as a result, you'll probably learn more about yourself and where you came from than you will about the music you went there to study. Besides, wouldn't it be cool to tell people you've actually been to Timbuktu? ▣

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