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## The African Influence on Pop and Jazz Musicians

By JOHN ROCKWELL

**A**frica might seem too large, imposing and omnipresent a continent to be subject to something so ephemeral as a pop and jazz "revival." But right now we seem to be in the midst of just such a revival, nonetheless. Everywhere Western musicians are turning to Africa, either for reaffirmation of a lost or dimly remembered ethnic heritage or for a more abstract kind of inspiration.

To speak of Africa as if it offered a single, consistent musical style is of course a ludicrous over-simplification. As John Storm Roberts points out in his informative book, "Black Music of Two Worlds," Africa offers an area four times the size of the United States, with some 2,000 tribes speaking between 800 and 2,400 tongues, depending on whether some are counted as dialects or languages.

But Mr. Roberts does isolate some general characteristics of black African music — its functional use in society, its indivisibility in the African mind from dance and theater, the use of instruments to imitate the human voice, the primacy of rhythm and particularly the combination of several simultaneous cross-rhythms, and the call-and-response structure. In addition, there is North African music, closely related to — but distinct from — other forms of Moslem music, which is closely related both to black African music and to the folk music of Southern Spain.

In America it has been blacks, naturally enough, who have pioneered the renewed interest in Africa. And of all American cities, it has been Chicago, the home of so vital an eruption of black jazz progressivism over the past 15 years, that has led the way — even if some of the key Chicago musicians have now moved to New York.

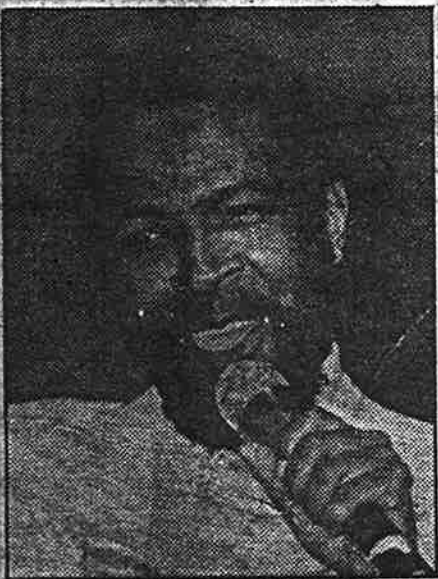
Of the Chicago groups, the Art En-

semble of Chicago is perhaps the best known. But there is also the aptly titled Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, which has a new disk out called "Three Gentlemen from Chicago" (Moers Music 01076, a German jazz label available in import stores or through Daybreak Express Records, 169 Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215).

The ensemble consists of Kahil El'Zabar, who plays percussion and flutes; Edward Wilkerson, winds; and (Light) Henry Huff, saxophones. There are four pieces on this disk, two of them frenzied free-jazz eruptions and appealing as such. But there are also two slow, quiet numbers, and here the measured rhythmic impulse and instrumental coloration suggest a more overtly African influence. (The Ethnic Heritage Ensemble will give a concert March 14 at the Kitchen, the downtown new-music center.)

George Lewis counts his experience in Chicago jazz circles as his formative

*Continued*



Marvin Gaye — "a popular blend of the accessible and the African"

## RECORDINGS

rhythms and polyphonic lines that knit together with an exciting precision. But here Mr. Eno has given his tendencies full rein toward a business of texture that still doesn't impede the music's momentum. After several years of mostly quiet "ambient" disks, this reverts to the world of his solo rock records but purged of rock's more tired conventions, enlivened by Mr. Byrne's own intense and bizarre imagination and inspired by the rhythms and vocal colors of both black and Arab Africa. It is a superb achievement and an intimation of the growing influence Africa is likely to have on Western musicians in years to come. ■

with copyright permission and a desire to improve the album delayed its release until after "Remain in Light."

Heads' fans can rest assured that the revised version is no dilution of the original, even if the one disputed track is indeed a loss. The reason for the copyright problems was that the album is a mélange of densely textured instrumental tracks and "found objects," many of which are tape recordings of voices taken from records or the radio.

The result is a brilliantly alluring record, an aural collage surging with an almost fevered energy. The musical idiom will be familiar to admirers of "Remain in Light" — full of cross-

African evocations are hardly the sole preserve of jazz musicians. Some black pop musicians are turning to the Continent, as well, not least Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. Mr. Gaye has moved to London but also has a home in Senegal, and has stated that he hopes to spend time in Africa and to use more and more African influences to enliven Motown formulas.

His latest album, "In Our Lifetime" (Tamla T8-374M1), is built up over a series of rolling instrumental tracks that recall a blend of George Clinton's densest funk and the super-charged intensity of the Talking Heads' album, "Remain in Light." Add to that Mr. Gaye's winning ways as a singer, and you have what should be a massively popular blend of the accessible and the African — accessible even though one result of the African influence, as it was on the Talking Heads disk, has been a dissolution of the familiar structure of the Western pop song.

Finally, there is the long-awaited duo album of David Byrne and Brian Eno, "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts" (Warner Brothers SRK 6093). This is actually the missing link that should have preceded "Remain in Light" and which helps explain the process by which Mr. Byrne, who is the head Talking Head, and Mr. Eno arrived at their African-inspired idiom. But a problem

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## African Musical Influence

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years, even if he now lives in New York and directs the music program at the Kitchen. Mr. Lewis's work today amounts to a fascinating instance of the way some black jazz musicians are being revealed to have followed a parallel course to some "classical" new-music composers. Mr. Lewis has been calling attention to that parallelism with a fine series of concerts this season at the Kitchen.

His latest album, "Chicago Slow Dance" (Lovely Music VR 1101, available either at specialty shops or through Lovely Music, 463 West Street, New York, N.Y. 10014), enlists three longtime collaborators: Douglas Ewart and J.D. Parran, winds, and Richard Teitelbaum, a well-known electronic composer in his own right. To this, Mr. Lewis adds his skills as a trombonist and electronic composer.

The results, in their quiet, intense way, are enthralling. Mr. Lewis has long been concerned with adducing aspects of the black experience without being blatant or self-conscious about the process. "Chicago Slow Dance" has passages that suggest village drumming and mournful dialogues between voice-like brass instruments. But the music is far from being an ethnic pastiche.

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