

review music

this week's essential reading

'Is the era of free streaming music coming to an end?' by Marc Hogan, Pitchfork

'Nowadays, my expectation of finding music on the internet for free is so high that I feel slightly offended when I can't do it. It's kind of a warped mindset, actually'

The rough guide

Electronic sounds from Cape Verde to Ethiopia are showing just how diverse and expansive African music can be. **Andy Battaglia** surveys some of the best new releases from the continent

So much electronic music identifies as "cosmic" that it is reasonable to suspect any that does not as somehow lacking in self-regard. Certain strains stake a stronger claim than others, though, and expectations, once the cosmos is invoked, remain high.

Consider it a triumph then that *Space Echo: The Mystery Behind the Cosmic Sound of Cabo Verde Finally Revealed* makes good on that cosmic contention several times over.

The new compilation of dizzyingly rhythmic African dance music stretching back decades comes with a rich backstory suggestive of both worldly and otherworldly origins. In 1968, the story goes, a cargo ship carrying an array of synthesizers bound for Brazil got lost at sea and wound up, mysteriously – and maybe a bit mystically – in waters near the tiny island republic of Cabo Verde (or Cape Verde, as it is also known).

There, off the north-west coast of Africa, the machines worked their way into hands that endeavoured to play them in new ways.

Most of these ways, in any location, would have been new in the late 1960s and 1970s, when synthesizers were novel and unique. Suffice it to say that in a place where even electricity was scarce, technology and terroir came together in an interesting fashion.

Most often referred to in talk of wine-making, the term "terroir" covers a lot of linguistic ground by accounting for all the aspects that make a particular land just that: particular. For grapes, factors include soil, elevation, humidity, proximity to the ocean – the list goes on. For electronic music, terroir applies no less significantly, as a planet's worth of differences and variances in sounds can attest.

African dance music abounds in terroir of a kind that has made it something of a trove of late for lis-

teners in search of particularity. New releases have streamed out at a significant clip, with historical resurrections and contemporary work in the mix, and a continent already vast and expansive has come to seem only vaster as sounds from it broadcast out far from home.

At the root of any dance music, of course, is rhythm, and it would be hard to find examples of African music of any kind that didn't make rhythm a top priority. On *Space Echo*, beats saunter and skip from the start, with a lively song called *Pinta Manta* described in the liner notes as an "anti-saudade" anthem.

"That feeling [saudade] can bring you down," Antonio Sanches says of his song, inspired in part by time he spent in Portugal. At home in Cape Verde, Sanches transformed that famous sense of Portuguese sadness and nostalgia ("saudade" has long and complicated tracts of translation surrounding it) into a song that "tells the story of a happy man, a man like me, someone who celebrates life!".

Portuguese culture has long played a formative role in the Cape Verdean islands, which draw on other cultures, too, as a result of their location in the middle of maritime routes between Africa, Europe and America. The liner notes in *Space Echo* do a studious job of charting different influences and heritages at play in rhythms that have been invigorated and invented there, and even just an absent-minded listen reveals clear alliances with Afrobeat, salsa, American soul and R&B, as well as other sounds with lots of life in them.

Dia Ja Manche by Dionisio Maio flits over wildly funky guitar and surprising keyboard sounds that wouldn't sound out of place at a wedding party in the Middle East. *Pontin & Pontin* by Bana summons churning, cyclonic salsa lines, and Quirino Do Canto's *Mino Di Mama* jumps up and down in time to antic rhythm guitar that sounds too fast to have actually been played by hand. Tchiss Lopes's *Mundo D' Margura* swirls around a central organ figure that evokes a fun, festive sense of carnivalesque mania.

Everything on *Space Echo* is danceable in a vintage, vaguely disco-inflected kind of way, but devotees to faster speeds can get an accompanying fix from another recent African treasure: DJ Katapila's *Trotro*. Released by the enterprising label Awesome Tapes from Africa, which offers rich archival records for sale as well as a store of recordings for free online, the album collects tracks made in 2008 and 2009 by a Ghanaian artist with a frantic, entrancing sound. The title track suggests origins from modest means but casts a mesmerising spell, with drum-machine slaps that are minimal in terms of sound but maximal for the attention they command. *Cocoawra*



Space Echo
Various artists
Analog Africa,
Dh60



wiggles and shakes, and *Ice-Inc* lays back with a leisurely lean.

The range of sounds all draw on a similar store of hand-forged characteristics that would seem to be at least partly responsible for African dance music's expansion into so many other parts of the world. In an electronic-music scene where production sounds gleam and formalism reigns supreme, *Trotro* offers a sort of corrective – aware of certain guides and constraints but not so interested in adhering to them. It's loose and alive.

Another recent African release, Mikael Seifu's *Zelalem*, mixes dance-minded beats from Ethiopia with a remarkably exploratory wash of other sounds. Tracking them all makes for the best kind of aural wandering, with pathways that lead from snatches of skittering techno to down-tempo sample spells and soulful ambient interludes.

The album opens with a dramatic vocal sample of a man delivering an address. "The world is divided into many, many different categories," he says, in a

spoken-word tone. "One of the categories which interests those of us who are concerned with advancing humanity the most is that between the conscious and the unconscious. This division must be properly understood."

Zelalem, in its dreamy, transporting way, delivers a means for understanding at least part of that division.

The music is so divergent and diffuse that it can sound as if sourced from dozens of different albums in the midst of any one song, like a mind flitting through

inner thoughts without fear of misdirection or distraction. The effect throughout it all is so enrapturing that the wooziest, most weightless ambient spell can carry the same momentum and power as sections with skittering, simmering beats. That's the best kind of dance music – never far from the dance floor, even when it wanders.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.

At the root of any dance music, of course, is rhythm ... on *Space Echo*, beats saunter and skip from the start

the playlist African beats

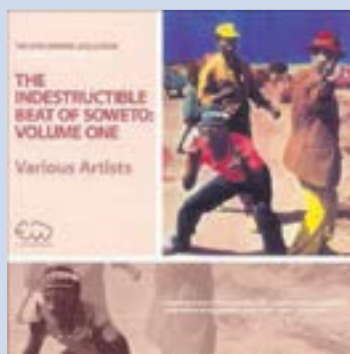
Who is William Onyeabor?
William Onyeabor
(Luaka Bop, 2013)

Onyeabor is a funk musician from Nigeria who turned his back on music for religion. This release resulted in a new appreciation for his music, and a supergroup featuring David Byrne toured and played his songs.



The Indestructible Beat of Soweto, Vol. 1
Various Artists
(Shanachie Records, 1986)

This compilation from 1987 was important in introducing African music to western audiences, with infectious, ingratiating melodies and rhythms that are, indeed, indestructible.



Next Stop Soweto
Various Artists
(Strut Records, 2015)

This series devoted to the history of South African dance music has been through four volumes, with the most recent – featuring "Zulu Rock, Afro-Disco and Mbaqanga 1975-1985" – released just last year.

