

MUSIC

IN

GRACE ABOUNDING

# Unit 1

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# Focus on: Traditional African Music



## Introduction: A Worldwide Music

From Tokyo to Lagos, from Amsterdam to Sao Paulo, from Reykjavik to Jakarta—almost wherever you go on planet Earth at the dawn of the twenty-first century, you will hear American popular music and its derivatives—local music heavily influenced by American pop. The popular music of America—blues, jazz, rock, R & B, and hip hop in particular—has conquered the world. That much is obvious. What isn't as readily obvious and as widely recognized is the extent to which this music was the creation of African Americans, for as we shall see in the music sections that follow each unit in this book, it was African Americans who gave what is now the world's popular music its distinctive qualities and form.

A mere one hundred and fifty years ago, Americans of African descent barely subsisted. They were beaten and starved and forced to toil from daybreak to well past dusk so that their so-called “masters” could wear fine clothing and sip tea on verandas. They were stripped of their heritage—forced to make new lives without their languages and customs and stories and histories and family ties. They were caricatured and humiliated in minstrel shows. Who would have thought, back then, that today, only a century and a half later, the music created by this once subject people would be heard in clubs in Beijing and St. Petersburg and Ramallah and Buenos Aires? It is an altogether astonishing accomplishment—one of the most astonishing in the history of human culture. And it is a great testament to the human spirit—to the ability of a people to prevail over the worst that can befall them.

When different musical cultures collide and create a new kind of music that blends elements of both, that new music has resulted from a process that musicologists call **fusion**. Visit the continent of Africa today and you will hear, from Algiers in the far north to Cape Town in the far south, the sounds of **Afro-Pop**. This music blends elements of American jazz and rock with traditional African and sometimes Islamic music to produce some of the most exciting sounds that the world has ever heard. And oddly enough, the jazz and rock that came back to Africa to influence the creation of Afro-Pop was itself largely the creation of people of African descent, half a world away. The music left Africa in chains and returned triumphant.

To understand the music of the world in the twenty-first century, you must go back to the roots of that music. And those roots, like the roots of the human race itself, are to be found under African skies.



Orchestre Baobab at Live Concert. Popular Afro-Pop band in performance

## The Role of Music in Traditional African Culture

In the United States today, we tend to think of music as a form of recreation and entertainment and not as something created with some specific purpose in mind. Prior to the modern age, however, in traditional cultures like those of Africa, music has generally played a useful role. Lullabies were sung to comfort babies. Proverbs were put to music to teach young children and to train them for adult life. In West Africa, stories were often chanted or spoken by traditional storytellers, or **griots**,<sup>1</sup> accompanied by music played on instruments such as the **kora**, the **balafon**, and the **ngoni**. (See the descriptions of these on page 81.) Typically, the stories told by griots were tribal or family histories and included **praise songs**—songs that presented a series of elaborate names for a person and told about that person’s family history, place of origin, accomplishments, and so on. Music was an important part of many rituals and ceremonies. There were wedding songs, hunting songs, war chants, and funeral dirges, to name a few. In most African cultures, music has always been an integral part of life, not something separate, not something merely ornamental.

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<sup>1</sup> **griot**. For an example of a traditional story told by a West African griot, see the selection from the *Sunjata* on page 47.

## Bob Marley and the Wailers

This anthology contains, with few exceptions, the work of African-American writers and artists—that is, people born in or who emigrated (forcibly or not) to the United States. When necessary, as in the case of Jamaican hero Marcus Garvey, the editors have included the works and biographies of non-Americans who have had a direct and substantial influence on American culture. [Bob Marley](#) (1945–1981) is one such artist whose influence on Americans and on worldwide pop culture is unquestionable.

Indeed, Bob Marley’s music—or, rather, the music of [Bob Marley and the Wailers](#)—is now so widespread that most people don’t even think about its creator when they hear his songs in a television commercial or in the background in the shopping mall. His songs are catchy; just about every human ear on earth finds his music to be (at least) acceptable, if not wonderful. Marley’s music will endure far longer than that of most musicians. If, in a hundred years, his name is forgotten, his spirit will still linger in the backbeat of whatever evolves beyond reggae, hip hop, or rock ‘n’ roll.

But Bob Marley, in essence, does not belong to the world. The world’s people do not all celebrate his name in the same way. He did sing of racial harmony and of peace, but his special audience, the people to whom his heart sang, were the offspring of Africa, wherever they lived, but especially those who came off those slave ships, beginning some 400 years ago. One of the most important facts about his music, a fact usually lost on listeners and marketers, is the underlying source, the root of so many of his songs: injustice, barbaric greed, and exploitation exerted upon black people by white, a cold fact that began in earnest during the fifteenth century, or earlier.

This man could move a crowd like a prophet, and that is how he was and is, by some, identified. He was an amazing performer, a poet, a gifted musician, and a true icon for millions of people. His music lifted and still lifts people, and makes change, but not in a striking, revolutionary manner. Marley’s music soothes souls and affirms optimism, and it endures in the inner ear and stays inside those who love it.

