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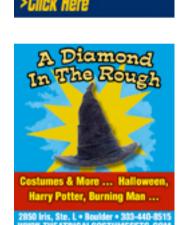
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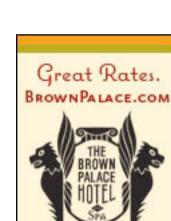


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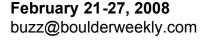
Wedding











Take a Look in Africa

Entertainment

A brief glimpse into the white, male ego as a tool to analyze the Afropop movement in America, alternative musical communication, the paradox of post-colonial artistic expression, and possibly other cool things by Dale Bridges

Movies/Film Reviews

The man is making me uncomfortable.

He is 5'10", approximately 160 lbs, 50ish, fashionable in that vague metrosexual way that's common amongst middle-age males of a certain income level, brown hair with brush strokes of gray, avocado-green sweater, khaki pants, expensive-looking hiking shoes, designer glasses. He is the classic example of a prosperous American liberal. He probably attended a very good college, and at that college he probably

majored in something practical — finance, botany, computer sciences — but he probably also enjoyed elective courses in Eastern philosophy and Latin American literature. He looks successful. He looks open minded. He looks like the type of person who listens to NPR. Oh, and he's white. Very very white.

It is difficult to ignore this fact, particularly because the

man is dancing to live music played by a local Afropop band named the Bizung Family. It's his dancing that is making me uncomfortable. If I had to choose a single word to describe the strange way he is contorting his body to the rhythm of the music, I would say "awkward." There is a lot of thrusting going on in the pelvic region, accompanied by a great deal of head-bobbing and arm-flapping. He

looks like a large, uncoordinated crane attempting to take flight for the very first time. The Crane is not alone. There are approximately 45 members of the audience, and 90 percent of them are white. Three of the five band members are white. I am also white, just in case you're wondering. There is nothing wrong with being white. It's not a genetic flaw or a cultural disease; it is simply a racial classification used to define a group of humans with a common ancestry and a glaring lack of melanin.

However, there is something slightly unnerving about a roomful of affluent, Anglo liberals dancing to African music, and I'm trying to figure out why.

the songs are in his native tongue. The music is cheerful and energetic, but the lyrics are often heartbreaking. The white people smile and dance while Alidu sings, "Oh, what a struggle. Suffering. Starvation. / Come in liberation. / Take a look in Africa, take a look in Africa, take a look in Africa." This communication gap is one of the difficulties faced by international musicians who are attempting to create art that represents their culture while at the same time catering to a blossoming Western market. World music has become increasingly popular in the United States over the past 10 years, but some believe that popularity comes

One of the problems is that there is a language barrier between the artist and the audience. Mohammed Alidu, the

lead singer/drummer/songwriter of the Bizung Family, is from the Dagbon region of Northern Ghana, and most of

boost album sales, others consider this too large a sacrifice. The Bizung Family has a few songs in English on their upcoming album, Land of Fire, but most are in Dagbani. It is obvious from the beaming faces in the audience tonight that these listeners love the Bizung Family's music. But it's difficult to tell whether or not they understand the entire message. There is a cultural barrier that both sides want to cross, but the process is not as simple as it looks.

at a price. While some Afropop musicians have started singing in English in an effort to avoid confusion and

Aside from The Crane, most of the people on the dance floor are young women, college students, neo-hippies, with T-shirts that display various reggae bands and environmental slogans. The Earth is Our Mother. Clean Air. Clean Heart. They are currently facing one another in a small circle. Every once in a while, one of the young women will step inside the circle and, after receiving whoops of encouragement from her compatriots, proceed to dance solo to the music. The Crane hovers just outside this circle. He clearly wants to join in, but he is hesitant. As a modern male, he has been taught not to encroach upon female territory uninvited. The women are not purposefully trying to exclude The Crane. They either don't notice he is there, or, like many women who are accustomed to dancing in clubs, they instinctively withdraw from strange dudes in order to avoid being unwillingly fondled.

music and culture in front of him — he just has no clue how to make that happen.

Connecting to people from other countries is nothing new for Alidu, who has been performing African music in

My heart goes out to The Crane. Even though he looks ridiculous, I honestly think he is trying to connect with the

various venues around the world for more than 12 years. When I asked Alidu whether or not he believed American audiences understood the meaning of his songs, he thought about the question for a while before answering. "There is a lot of sadness in the world," he finally said. "I want to bring happiness to people's hearts. I want to share joy with my music, but also I want to speak the truth. It is not easy. When people dance, they are happy and that is good. It is good for the world. Music speaks to everyone, and I have to trust that the people will hear my message." This answer was kind of confusing. At first I thought he was talking in circles to avoid the question (this happens a

instrumentation than I do. As a proud member of America's Generation X, I have been taught that lyrics are the most important part of any song. Now, the lyrics don't always have to be good (I'm a genie in a bottle / You gotta rub me the right way), they don't even have to make sense (Get down, turn around, go to town, boot scoot boogie), but they do have to constitute the driving force of any chorus that comes on the radio. There is nothing wrong with loving good (or even bad) lyrics, but fixating on one aspect of music can sometimes desensitize listeners to the other facets of the art form. This is something that I hadn't really thought about much

lot in music journalism), but then I realized that Alidu actually has a completely different concept of music and

until I started researching this article. About a month ago, I interviewed Alidu at a dimly lit coffee shop on Pearl Street while Miles Davis played in the background, and it was a strangely Zen-like experience. I don't want to get all New Agey and spiritual about it, but Alidu's voice has a calm, almost-musical quality to it that is sort of hypnotizing. Part of it is his quiet tone, which makes you lean in close to hear him; part of it is his accent; but mostly it's the careful, rhythmic manner in

In essence, Alidu doesn't talk — he sings. I know that last sentence makes me sound like a schoolgirl with a crush, but it's true. If I didn't bring a tape

which he pronounces his words.

recorder with me, I would have missed half the interview. I spent most of the time listening to the sound of his voice and thinking about rainbows and puppy dogs. But there's more to Alidu's metrical vocal cadence than the fact that it soothes stressed-out music journalists. His

speech patterns are an indication of why he believes music can cross linguistic barriers. Alidu sings when he talks, and his drum talks when it sings. Alidu is descended from the Bizung lineage of talking drum chiefs in Dagbon. The talking drums (and the technique used to play them) were invented by Alidu's great great great grandfather, and they are designed to replicate the tones and rhythms of human speech.

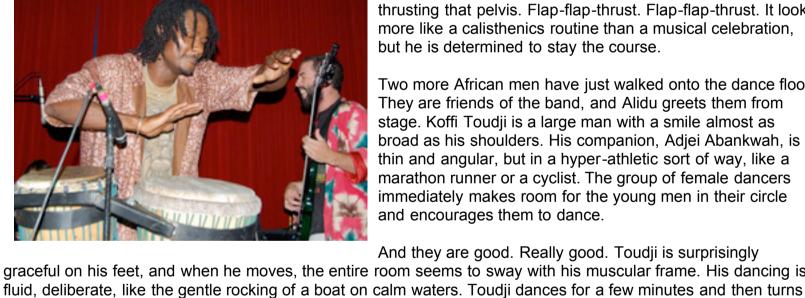
In Dagbon, master drummers like Alidu are not just entertainers; they are musicians, court historians and record keepers. Ancestry is very important to the Dagomba people, and family history is recorded in the rhythm patterns of the talking drums. Each family has a "proverb" that must be played by the master drummers at weddings, funerals, festivals and various other social events. A proverb is a short axiom that is chosen by the family, translated to the language of the talking drum by the master drummer, and used to praise the family name.

"It is a history," said Alidu. "When I see some person, I might not know them, but I still know them with my drum and I play their family. It's not something that we write down, but we all know it. When you play their drum song, you praise them to make them feel important and part of our culture."

In Dagomba culture, the talking drum literally has a language of its own. Therefore, when Alidu says, "Music

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone understands what the talking drums are saying — even in Dagbon, the general public is not fluent in the talking drum language — but it does indicate a form of artistic communication that differs from Western models. And that helps explain why Alidu can communicate with his audience in Boulder despite vast language and cultural barriers.

Sort of. I don't know. This all sounds good on paper, but honestly, I don't think I really understand the whole equation. There's still something missing, and I can't figure out what.



of just how inelegant he looks.

speaks to everyone...," he is not merely being philosophical.

his pasty brow, but he's still flapping those arms and thrusting that pelvis. Flap-flap-thrust. Flap-flap-thrust. It looks more like a calisthenics routine than a musical celebration, but he is determined to stay the course. Two more African men have just walked onto the dance floor. They are friends of the band, and Alidu greets them from

Meanwhile, The Crane is still dancing. Sweat is pouring off

broad as his shoulders. His companion, Adjei Abankwah, is thin and angular, but in a hyper-athletic sort of way, like a marathon runner or a cyclist. The group of female dancers immediately makes room for the young men in their circle and encourages them to dance. And they are good. Really good. Toudji is surprisingly graceful on his feet, and when he moves, the entire room seems to sway with his muscular frame. His dancing is

stage. Koffi Toudji is a large man with a smile almost as

the floor over to his friend. Abankwah has the style and confidence of a professional dancer. He attacks the dance floor with leaps and twirls that are thrilling to watch. His performance seems to energize the band, and Alidu begins to pound out a scorching rhythm on his drum, eliciting smiles and cheers from the crowd. The Crane is viewing all of this from outside the circle, and if possible, he looks even more alienated than before. His flapping doesn't quite have the same gusto, and I wonder if watching these new dancers has made him aware

The Crane's deflated appearance makes me feel a bit alienated, as well. At first it was kind of amusing to watch him make a fool of himself on the dance floor, but throughout the course of the night, I've come to identify with the man. I like him. I hope he sticks around until the end of the show.

Eastern history — and it probably wouldn't kill us to brush up on U.S. history. But we seem particularly oblivious about Africa, and that ignorance allows us to turn a blind eye toward that part of the world. Afropop has deep historical roots that stretch all the way back to the murky waters of colonial tyranny and oppression. Anyone who seriously wants to understand Afropop needs to know at least something about where it comes from. When many African countries gained independence from imperialist powers in the 1900s, they recovered a continent in shambles. There was poverty, war, disease. Modernization hit Africa hard, and it altered the economic

Another problem that concerns the Afropop phenomenon is that Americans don't generally know much about African history. Granted, we don't know much about European history, either, or Canadian history, or Middle

and social structure almost overnight. Young men and women left their families and flocked to the cities seeking work. But life was hard in the cities, too. Desperate to make sense of the changing world, Africans turned to music for inspiration and expression. They began to combine traditional African styles with modern instruments and Western pop sounds to form a hybrid genre that could bridge the gap between the cultures. The music often contained upbeat rhythms and melodies, but the lyrics reflected the socio-political hardships of the times. This gave rise to an entire generation of rebellious artists who created music that educated and mobilized the populace. The golden age of Afropop lasted 50 years, from approximately 1940 to 1990, and helped mold the perception of Africa both internally and abroad. Ironically, the recent decline in the popularity of Afropop on its home continent has coincided with its rise in the countries that once colonized Africa. There are now Afropop bands in almost

fascinated by the art form their ancestors helped create through acts of international oppression and violence. And here, it seems, we really get backed into a corner. Since Afropop is an art form forged out of the need to understand the horrors of colonialism and we (meaning Western culture representatives) are the colonizers of the modern age, it is sort of impossible and kind of insane to think that we could ever truly understand Afropop. And if we can't truly comprehend the genre, how can we really borrow from it or appreciate it without becoming the

colonizers once again? Quite a conundrum. It seems I have taken us straight into the heart of quagmire.

every major city in the United States and in many European nations. White people across the globe are suddenly

The Crane is tired. He has flapped his last flap, and now he is standing by himself watching the other dancers. I am tired, too. All the optimism and energy has been drained out of me. Trying to understand the convoluted

The Crane musters the energy for one last flap-flap-thrust routine.

There is only one way out of this whole mess: complete and total surrender.

to go home and turn off my brain. Drink a beer. Listen to some Garth Brooks lyrics. No thought required for that. The Bizung Family launches into its final song.

relationship between post-colonial art and post-postmodern liberalism is no way to spend a Thursday night. I need

I look around for my coat.

Abankwah spots The Crane standing alone and motions for him to join the circle. The Crane shakes his head. It's too late. The moment has passed. The Crane has closed himself off. Abankwah leaves the circle and walks over to The Crane with a huge smile on his face. He hesitates for a moment, possibly trying to figure out how he can get this middle-aged white man to let down his guard, then Abankwah

The Crane's face is beyond mortification. He has no idea how to handle this turn of events. The audience cheers him on. The Crane blushes. Then he smiles. Then he starts to giggle. Soon, he is willingly gliding across the floor like Ginger Rogers in the arms of Fred Astaire. Alidu plays his talking drum. Not to be outdone, Toudji looks around for another pathetic white dude to dance with. I realize too late that I am the only other pathetic white dude in the room. Before I can protest, he plucks me easily from my seat and drags

playfully takes The Crane by the hand, pulls him in close and starts to waltz him around the room. The look on

me onto the dance floor. I am horrified. This is not part of the plan. I am supposed to sit in the corner and observe. I am supposed to be a serious journalist (or voyeur — whatever). I try to pull away, but his grip is tight. What the hell is happening? He begins to waltz me around the room against my will. I try to keep from stepping on his huge feet. This is ridiculous. He is holding me so close that I can feel his heartbeat. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump*. His feet are enormous. His hands are enormous. This man is like a mountain. *Thump-thump*. Thump-thump. The crowd cheers me on. I want to die. I have never been so embarrassed. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. The crowd cheers. I try to smile. Well, damn, it's not so bad. Take a look in Africa. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump*. Abankwah twirls me like a ballerina. I giggle. Suddenly, everything seems so simple. Take a look in Africa. *Thump-thump*. Thump-thump. Is this all that we need to do? Could it really be this easy? Alidu plays his talking drum. Take a look in Africa. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. The Crane smiles at me. We smile at each other. Alidu plays his talking drum. Take a look in Africa. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump*. I can hear it. I can hear the drum. Take a look in Africa. Thump-thump. Take a look in Africa. Thump-thump. I can hear it. Take a look in Africa, take a look in Africa, take a look in Africa.

On the Bill The Bizung Family will perform at 9 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 22, at Trilogy, 2017 13th St., Boulder, 303-473-9463.

Respond: letters@boulderweekly.com

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Their new CD, Land of Fire, will be out soon: www.bizung.com





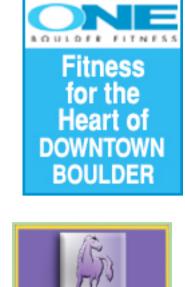
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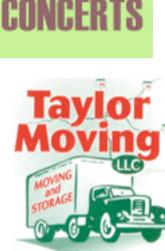
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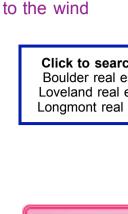
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