

OUTRO



AKWAABA MUSIC

A forward-thinking label is bringing a huge range of African music to the mp3 generation.

words: **CERVASE DE WILDE**

One of the most exciting labels of the year has yet to release music in any physical format. Akwaaba Music, which puts out the work of African artists exclusively via iTunes, is breaking the mould in other ways too: its catalogue includes both long forgotten roots music and the freshest sounds from urban Africa. Sublime Angolan semba from '60s star Carlos LaMartine features alongside banging kuduro tunes from the streets of contemporary Luanda, and the gentle songs of Malian diva Mamou Sidibe appear next to dance-focused coupé décalé from Côte d'Ivoire.

The man behind the label, Benjamin Lebrave, is a rare example of someone whose innovative and open-minded approach is allowing his enterprise to thrive while others in the music industry tighten their belts. Born and brought up in Paris, but today based in California, he says his interest was sparked by a friend's trip to Ghana: "he brought back some hiplife tapes. He would describe these outdoor bars, music with lots of bass, people moving, it's dirty sound system music. I thought 'this is fantastic', but they were tapes and at the time I played vinyl." When his work at a digital distributor in San Francisco seemed to be coming to an end, Lebrave's thoughts turned to the music on those African cassettes.

"I thought 'what the hell is going on in Ghana, why is none of this music on iTunes? I know how it works now, it's not very complicated to be on iTunes. The only African music on iTunes is stuff that's produced in Paris, London, Brussels, New York,'" he says. "So I flew to Ghana. Everyone I knew in Paris thought I was crazy, because I was completely unprepared and I didn't know anyone. Although it was a huge culture shock, I got lucky or did well, depending on how you look at it. Within 24 hours, I was connected with guys already who fed me music, introduced me to djs, producers, took me to studios."

The fruits of that and subsequent trips can be heard on compilations like *Move It Chaleh!*, which features bubbling Ghanaian hiplife and Ivorian coupé décalé, or Akwaaba Sem Transporte, a kuduro album which has generated plenty of blog interest over the past few



months thanks to a remix competition run in collaboration with Diplo's Mad Decent label. While plenty of bands and producers have turned to Africa for inspiration over the past couple of years, Akwaaba's policy of making the raw sounds of Africa quickly and cheaply available to Western music fans provides a fascinating window into the continent's huge range of musical cultures and styles.

The label's low overheads and a light-on-its-feet business model are reliant on technology which even ten years ago was only rarely available. Lebrave points to the impact of cheap recording equipment and widely available pirate CDs on those listening to and making music in the West African countries from which his catalogue derives. But it's the greater ease of communication which has made his Fair Trade business model possible: "I rely on cell phones, which now have massively penetrated Africa," he says. "It's enormous, it's life changing over there because you have countries with very little infrastructure. Most of the artists I work with don't have a bank account. I use Western Union. I'm in LA, I give them the money, they give me a code, I text message the guys, and within minutes they get the money. They even get paid in dollars, which makes them very happy."

Lebrave hopes to become involved in the mechanics of the music business within Africa, as well as being a conduit to the iPods of Western teenagers for coupé décalé stars like Kedjevara, whose recent *Le Meteorman* album would appeal to fans of funky house or soca. "I want to participate not only with the creative process but with local distribution," he says. "I want the artists to be in charge - I hope that ten years from now I am completely irrelevant and I have moved on. I hope to empower people locally and give them the tools to do what they need to do."

More info at www.akwaabamusic.com or twitter.com/akwaabamusic. *Move It Chaleh!*, Kedjevara's *Meteorman*, Carlos LaMartine's *Histórias da Casa Velha* and Akwaaba Sem Transporte are out now.