

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Sweet Mother: Modern African Music, by Wolfgang Bender

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w95q7s8>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 18(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Lederer, Mary S.

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.5070/F7183016819

Copyright Information

Copyright 1990 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Wolfgang Bender. *Sweet Mother: Modern African Music*. Translated from the German by Wolfgang Freis, with a foreword by John M. Chernoff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

"Compact and usable, yet comprehensive and copiously illustrated": these are the words that greet—or maybe warn—potential readers from the back cover of Wolfgang Bender's study *Sweet Mother: Modern African Music*. Comprehensive it is, and as such, it is a difficult book to review.

Let me perhaps begin with a personal anecdote, which describes how one reader—this reviewer—got past the warning and found a book that was not only comprehensive, but also comprehensible. I hadn't even started reading *Sweet Mother* yet when my sister found the review copy on my desk. She skimmed the chapters, read the back cover, skimmed again, and decided that it would make the perfect birthday present for a friend of hers who teaches elementary and junior-high-school music. So she ordered it.

After I began reading, I started thinking about how a person who has very little exposure to African music would be able to handle the constant parade of names, songs, dates, and even just words that are an essential part of a work like this. I am not a musicologist, so the terminology was a little hard to follow, but I do have a lot of recordings by African artists, so the names, at least, were somewhat familiar. I thought of my sister's friend, and resolved to make a tape for her, a tape that would follow the structure of Bender's book, giving examples by region and style and using the artists Bender himself cites to flesh out his work.

Having spent countless hours listening to these tapes, I had pretty much come to the conclusion that most of what was going on would probably remain beyond my grasp, since I had not the time to do any extensive research on the subject. But the exercise of making the tape for my sister's friend brought the information in Bender's book into sharp focus. As I read and made the tape, what began as a litany of "Yeah, yeah, I've heard of that" became a chorus of "Oh, I get it!" and "Oh, so that's how it works!" and "Yeah, now I hear it!"

For example, Bender discusses the influence on Zimbabwean *chimurenga* music of the *mbira* and the spiritual ceremonies in which *mbira* music is essential. I turned to my tapes and selected an *mbira* piece and a piece by Thomas Mapfumo, one of *chimurenga*'s best-known artists. Bender asserts that the influence of *mbira* music makes "modern" music very traditional. And, yes, when played in the context of *mbira* "spirituals," Mapfumo's music sounds very traditional. I may have known it for a while, but now I understand it.

When I began *Sweet Mother*, I was impatient with the stream of information; perhaps Bender sacrifices depth in favor of breadth, but

then I suspect this is less a book for trained musicologists and more a book for folks like me, who have a whole lot of tapes and an enormous appetite for African music, but who need an outline of where all this stuff comes from.

The breadth of *Sweet Mother* has both positive and negative results. Bender has much to say, and he often seems to leap from one paragraph to the next, moving through topics at break-neck speed. However, he has compiled an extensive bibliography (a bit weighted in the area of German scholarship, but understandable, given that his original audience is German); in addition, he has included a discography that is extensive if not complete (completeness would be impossible, anyway), that follows the sequence of the chapters, and that is grouped by region. The bibliography compensates for lack of depth: if you want to know more, you can figure out where to look. The discography makes the breadth manageable: you can hear what Bender is saying. In addition, the text is extensively supplemented with photos, lyrics, and diagrams, and there is an appendix of relevant musical terms. One could perhaps wish for an index to make the reference features complete, and one looks forward to an index in the event this book is ever revised.

I would recommend this book to people who listen to African music but don't know much about it; I would even recommend it to people who have no knowledge of African music. I would say this: pick out a couple of recordings from the discography, or even a couple from the library or record store that you've always wanted to listen to but thought you wouldn't understand. Then you can sit back and, using both book and music, wind your way through a most delightful musical experience. *Sweet Mother* will take away a lot of the mystery.

Mary Lederer