

Maputo Fusion

from Ibo by Tom Bullough

“Beware!” said Archimedes, pausing in the doorway of Complexo Xima, eyeing me over his wrap-around sunglasses. “Not all of the womens in this club are womens...”

Complexo Xima was in Alto-Maé, on the edge of the Maputo ghetto. It was Archimedes’s local hang-out: a concrete room crowded with people who could have upset the prejudices of even the crustiest African conservative. Among the plastic chairs and tables, a pair of six-and-a-half foot transvestites in towering blond wigs and netting crop-tops were dancing salsa, the people around them clapping and urging them on. By this time on a Friday night, nobody in Xima was sitting down. The dancefloor swarmed with couples one very thin strip of cloth from full sex, while, above them, Xitende pounded and pulsed: the ultimate Maputo club band, able to play all night without loosening the tempo, the backing singers chanting, the horns blowing in skin-tight waves, the guitar chopping out funk and marrabenta riffs to the rolling, thundering bassline.

“Eeeeeech!” shrieked Archimedes, raising his arms to the corrugated iron roof. “Eeeeeeeech!”

This was the seventh night in a row that the two of us had been out in Maputo, and it seemed entirely possible that Archimedes had maintained this momentum ever since we parted in Harare seven years ago. No longer a student, he now taught music at Eduardo Mondlane University, although his appearances there were clearly no less sporadic than they had been in Zimbabwe, and our journey from club to club was pursued by rumours about Dito – his over-worked Head of Department, whose name Archimedes was unable to pronounce without pulling his shoulders back, lifting his chin and pressing his arms to his sides.

We had been in Xima for only a few moments before a woman with braids and Orient-tinged eyes saw past my hat and long-sleeved shirt, marched through the crowd and towed me onto the dancefloor. So far as I could tell, no-one in Maputo made any bones about their sexuality, and Xima was like Maputo distilled. My partner wore spray-on hipsters and a T-shirt torn strategically open at the cleavage. Crowing and cackling, she tangled me in her arms, rolling

her hips and sliding up and down my thigh; then she bent over, and for the rest of the song we indulged in a series of vigorous humping motions.

Xitende's bassist was a near-spherical, bald-headed man named Gito-Bass. For six long, unhinged hours, he stood among the singers, drummers, guitarists and saxophonists swarming across the small stage, nailing down the rhythm, propelling the club into a musical stratosphere where the ground seemed to dissolve beneath your feet and the crowd more or less stopped dancing and simply stood there vibrating. At which point, grinning, shaking hands and touching fists with his friends and fellow band-members, he slung his bass onto his back, and he, Archimedes and I set out into the warm still night.

It was three o'clock in the morning, and, aside from the few taxi drivers who had woken up to service the emptying club, Alto-Maé was quiet. The plate glass windows of bakers and hardware shops reflected the yellow streetlights - a body or two among the shadows in the doorways - but, with the police as much of a danger at this time of night as any tsotsis, we took the first left down an unlit alleyway and began to weave between the small white houses, passing one of the barn-like concrete churches built by corrupt officials looking to save their souls, pausing near a yard where a party was underway, a young man singing to an acoustic guitar, picking out a tune that sounded distantly Brazilian.

"There!" Archimedes hissed. "That where marrabenta come from! You see the women?"

Within the low wall, a cluster of women were dancing, flickering their hips and adding their voices to the chorus. The movement and the music fed into one another - the guitarist responding with rhythms and flourishes - and you could see at once how, back in the 1950s, Fany Pfumo and Dilon Djindji might have started to throw Portuguese and Brazilian influences into their traditional songs, how they had invented marrabenta: the great dance music of Mozambique.

Gito-Bass lived on a square of white-socked trees, straggling piles of rubbish and tower blocks ten or fifteen floors high. In his candlelit hallway, three old women were sitting against the wall, each with a plume of loaves rising from a basket on her head. For a moment we looked from one of them to another, sending them into a chorus of giggles, then we continued into the stairwell, where the only light was a greyness leaking faintly from the broken doors of the liftshaft.

It was hard to tell how many floors we climbed. The silence, the spiralling and the near-impenetrable blackness combined to remove all reference points, although we had passed at least eight before we walked into a woman who was coming the other way, who screamed invisibly and fled towards the ground.

After that, there were no more than five before we emerged on the large tarred square of the roof, where a single room had been erected in the middle – the lights of Maputo streaming and rippling away in every direction, into the bush and the depths of the Indian Ocean.

The room was small but homely, with a carpet, a couple of chairs, three Wes Montgomery cassettes, a tape player and a single bed where a boy of about fourteen was asleep with an electric guitar. Smiling hospitably and gesturing for us to sit down, Gito-Bass went over to the bed and prodded the boy awake – setting him to work on a long, complex jazz scale, which he repeated without a pause or mistake until sunrise. He removed his shirt to reveal a globular torso and ‘Gito-Bass’ tattooed on his right bicep, threw his arms around my neck to make it quite clear that I was welcome, swallowed several mouthfuls of vodka from Archimedes’s bottle and moved a foot-long cylinder of weed so that he could sit down.

Not long before dawn, the three of us went outside to piss. We stood in a line near the edge of the roof and aimed for the trees in the square. Fifteen or so floors below us, the lights rolled and flowed with the contours of the headland – falling away towards Maputo Bay and rising towards the cliffs where the Presidential Palace looked down on the white-gleaming waves. In places, giant men and women with the strangely beige skin of American sitcoms were enjoying Coca-Cola or laughing into mobile phones. A new, unpainted concrete mosque swelled from a conglomeration of parked cars. A taxi moved slowly beneath ranks of palm trees, passed between the streetlights, the shoe shops and clothes shops of Avenida 24 de Julho, and vanished away into the unlit reaches of the ghetto.

Gito-Bass said something, which, having resumed my interest in Portuguese only a week earlier, I had to ask Archimedes to translate.

“He say,” said Archimedes, after a pause, and for once his voice sounded more sorrowful than dramatic. “He say that here we just care about the music. That is why it is so hard.”

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“I first heard the word marrabenta in 1946,” recalled seventy-seven year-old Dilon Djindji, leaning forwards in his plastic chair. “Back then, I was young and strong. I was always invited to play at parties, and by the end of the party I would always come home with one or two women. It was then that ‘Marrabenta’ became my nickname, because the marrabenta was the one who was always last

to leave the party. The word comes from rebentar, which means 'to break' in Portuguese. But in our slang it also meant to party. So, I was the one who never got tired, who would rebentar until it was morning!"

Dilon was a small, white-haired figure with a Latin moustache, brown suede shoes and a facial expression caught somewhere between wisdom and mischief. We were sitting outside his small square house in Marracuene – fifteen miles north of Maputo – and ever since Archimedes and I had arrived in this dusty, overlooked patch of the bush Dilon had been lauding himself, libelling his manager, smearing the government for paying him insufficient attention and keeping a very close eye on posterity. The claims of singers like Fany Pfumo, Maekwana and Xidiminguana to a place in Mozambican musical history had received not a mention. Dilon was the King of Marrabenta: an 'elephant' of strength and endurance. He railed, cursed and boasted. He slipped randomly between Portuguese and Shangaan, and even when Archimedes and I picked back over my recording later that evening, it proved far from easy for him to decipher.

"I am original music!" Dilon declared. He received a wallet file from one of his thirty-two grandchildren – many of whom were milling around us, dancing and putting themselves in the way of attention – and rifled through a pile of old 7" record sleeves until he found a thesis from the University of Vienna. "Look! You see? The Austrians understand, even if the government doesn't!"

Pushing the paper towards me, he jabbed his finger at a list identifying the seven pivotal figures in 20th-century African music. There was Fela Kuti. There was Franco. There was Thomas Mapfumo, and there too was Dilon Djindji, who had, it seemed, invented marrabenta in 1952. Dilon brandished the paper triumphantly, then he settled back into his chair, picked up a steel-string guitar which was leaning against a tree and finger-picked his way through a quick tune.

Aside from the grandchildren and the occasional passer-by, not a lot seemed to go on around Dilon's house. Back in 1982, the Congolese superstar, Sam Mangwana, had made a kind of pilgrimage here – his song 'Marrabenta' was written in Dilon's honour – and Dilon mentioned the fact so often that it might have happened that morning. A hundred yards away, the EN1 flowed north towards Xai-Xai – the link between Maputo and the rest of the country – but only a footpath made its way to Dilon's door. Even to get here, Archimedes and I had had to walk over a mile from the nearest bus stop.

"So when did you first learn to play?" I asked him.

“I started to play in 1938,” Dilon resumed, returning his guitar to a grandchild. “Back then I had a guitar made from an oil can, with only three strings, and when I wanted to practice I would have to go off into the bush because my father didn’t like it. As a boy, I would carry the instruments for musicians at parties. I would go with them and sit there all night, just watching. Those musicians were playing traditional music, of course. It was not until 1947 that I began to play a five-string guitar, and that was when I invented afina cãomatola, my own tuning system, which is the basis of marrabenta...

“In those days, I had a very sexy style!” He sprang to his feet and performed a series of dramatic pelvic thrusts. “Later, when I came to play in bars in the city I had to learn to behave, but back then I would rebentar all the women! You see that sexy style in the clubs? Well, that was me who started it! Back then, I was the greatest because only I had the marrabenta juice, and the same is true today!” Again he jumped up, shivering his hips. “Even at this age, I am still Marrabenta!”

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Maputo was a city in the business of becoming. On its streets, you could still find the odd crumbling, mould-covered Portuguese villa, but, in the centre at least, they were as rare as patches of wasteground in London – daubed with notices of restoration or demolition. Everything here seemed to be development. Steel and concrete towers grew a floor or two every day. Chainsaws and stone-cutters roared behind hoardings. The roads hummed with pick-ups, minibuses and Japanese saloons, while salesmen in migranous shirts waved calculators and ground nuts, plastic dogs marching up and down the pavement in front of them.

Passing a crowd of adult-less schoolchildren, satchels bouncing on their backs, Archimedes and I turned off Avenida Vladimir Lenine onto a leafy side-street where the words Associação Moçambicana de Músicos arched above a doorway and we arrived in a garden full of fruit trees and people on rows of metal chairs. On a low stage in the corner, a band was playing an exuberant version of ‘Georgia On My Mind’ – a beautiful singer named Xixel bouncing and grooving in flares and a yellow corset while a guitarist named Dario Langa played jazz progressions at a mind-bending velocity, his head back and his eyes closed, a moustache worthy of a First World War fighter pilot perched on his upper lip.

“Music without condom!” said a line of graffiti scrawled across the gaudily-painted walls.

The craze for these public jam sessions had begun in Maputo in the late 1990s, with the Big Jam at Club Tchova Xita Duma – birthplace of Kapa Dêch and Timbila Muzimba, two of the country’s biggest groups. Their effect on Mozambican culture had been revolutionary, if not exactly out of character. This was, after all, a country of the Indian Ocean whose international history predated the arrival of the Portuguese by a millennium and a half, and which had found itself in peacetime for the first time in a generation. For once, people had had both the freedom and the energy to express themselves, and what they had to say was interesting indeed.

A few days earlier, I had gone to visit Tsetse, the leader of Timbila Muzimba and owner of probably the only fluorescent red dreadlocks in Mozambique. The ‘timbila’ in his group’s name were a type of xylophone from the Xai-Xai region – traditionally played in orchestras of twenty or more musicians – and, as Tsetse explained, when Timbila Muzimba started out they were playing close to pure tradition.

“When we first went to Tchova,” he told me, “we were really just looking for a good place to practice. It’s true that we were trying to find new directions – we knew that we couldn’t play the usual fifteen movements of a timbila orchestra in the clubs – but when we got to Tchova we found ourselves playing with Cuban drummers, which none of us had ever considered, and after that everything began to change. We started to play with a bassist, then with a jazz drummer. We started to wear traditional Mozambican costumes and facepaint onstage, which nobody was doing back then, and now we’re playing with a saxophonist and a rapper!”

Looking at the musicians waiting their turn at the Associação Moçambicana de Músicos, it was not hard to imagine how such a transformation might have taken place. There were teenage hip-hoppers, marrabenta guitarists, jazz pianists and bass-playing Rastas – although, as I had seen in Zimbabwe, the alchemy itself was by no means to be taken for granted. In Harare, you would routinely meet musicians with a passion for both mbira and rap music, but – in spite of a lot of talk – the cultural temperature was just too low to bring about fusion. In Mozambique, on the other hand, everything had been in its place – as it had been for Thomas Mapfumo and Oliver Mtukudzi in the 1970s. There were few good things to be said for having no proper royalty laws and a recording industry that made Harare look like Los Angeles, but it did mean that musicians were driven to a standard and versatility that few other African countries could imagine. The demands of the club circuit were such that only a handful of Mozambicans could survive by playing with one band alone – which

meant that everybody else was forced to become chameleonic, to look beyond their immediate enthusiasms, to play trad jazz as readily as the traditional music of their tribe.

This was not something that you could fabricate.

“For a long time people were asleep here,” said Archimedes, nodding along to a group of marrabenta veterans who were playing a Fany Pfumo song with a blues-tinged keyboard and some furious drumming. “Nobody was trying to reach, to investigate. But here we are not like Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a closed country, Mozambique is open! In Maputo, we are playing jazz!”

“You like South African jazz?” I asked him.

Archimedes pulled a face. “South African jazz is too low for us. We don’t want it here in Maputo.”

“What sort of jazz do you want, then?”

“You see, it’s hard to explain.” Archimedes leant towards me, his bulging eyes appearing above his sunglasses. “Jazz is even more than music. Jazz is how you are thinking... You see, here in Maputo we lead a spiritual life. Our life... Our life doesn’t come from the heart. Our life comes from the spiritual.”

As the marrabenta group concluded their song, a new set of musicians moved in to take their place and, for the first time, I noticed that a small, plump boy in a red T-shirt was sitting on the drum stool. He was involved in some kind of argument with a man in a suit, which ended only when the boy ducked suddenly beneath his arm and darted across the stage to where one of the musicians was removing a five-string bass from his neck. With scarcely a word, he secured the instrument and hung it on himself, adjusting the strap to the correct level.

“Was that...” I said. “Archimedes, was that kid just playing the drums?”

“The kid, he make noise!” Archimedes replied, vaguely.

The boy stood in his place, looking around him with apparent irritation that nobody else was ready. He was not a prepossessing child. His shaved head seemed to bubble up between his shoulders and his stumpy legs ended in oversized shoes. And yet, as a singer at least twice his size launched into Howlin’ Wolf’s ‘Smokestack Lightning’, he hit the first note without blinking. Between the first two beats, he swung the neck towards him, reaching to retune a string, then he began to slap out a ground-shaking bassline, picking out fragments of the melody and throwing in trills on the high notes. He grinned and grimaced, rolled his head and closed his eyes, and he would certainly have collapsed beneath the instrument’s weight had one of the other musicians not slid a small amplifier behind him so that he could sit down.

“The kid is playing bass!” remarked Archimedes, approvingly.

“For fuck’s sake!” I hissed. “How old is he?”

“Sofixo...” Archimedes pulled down the corners of his mouth. “Sofixo eight years old.”

With a flurry of notes, the song came to an end and, in the change-over, a woman in a denim jacket tried to entice Sofixo away from the bass with a djembé, but Sofixo was having none of it and instead he laid down a series of lovely sliding notes beneath an Oliver Mtukudzi song – Xixel and a grey-haired guitarist dancing together in front of him. Then he placed the bass carefully on its stand, pushed his hands into his pockets, asked a quick question of the sound engineer, and, before anyone could stop him, climbed up onto the piano stool, where he had to stand to reach the keys.

“Sofixo, he is a streetkid,” said Archimedes, as Sofixo played the organ line to ‘No Woman No Cry’. “He come here four years ago. We used to send him to buy weed for us... Oh, but he never smoked it! People here, they are looking after him. They are paying his school also.”

“Has he got no family?”

“He has one grandmother, but you see this boy! Nobody can stop him from making noise! The womens here they are saying, ‘Oh Sofixo, it is time you go to sleep’, or ‘Oh Sofixo, it is time you must wash’. But Sofixo, he is playing drums. He is playing bass, piano, guitar, timbila... Sofixo is making noise! That’s what we do here in Maputo. We make noise!”

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The small, beach-fronted town of Catembe lay on the southern side of Maputo Bay, where it was visited every forty-five minutes or so by a fat old ferry with a forest of weeds below the waterline. The ferry carried commuters, traffic for Ponta d’Ouro on the South African border and tourists on day trips to the various bars and restaurants on the beach, and one afternoon it also carried me and Archimedes. Leaving the jetty, the two of us set out along the rubbish-strewn sand, handing around a bottle of vodka and talking, as usual, about music. From here, you could look back towards Maputo and almost see the city as a whole. A mile across the bay, the arms of cranes stretched out above high-floating ships, loading goods from the factories of Johannesburg. Beyond them, grid-faced tower blocks stood over their reflections, waist-deep in churches and tenements, while, out to the east, greenery swelled around the shoreline, the

buildings becoming embassies and hotels, the ocean empty all the way to Madagascar.

Jangada was a high-class, open-air restaurant where Chico António held court every Saturday. As Archimedes and I climbed the steps to its teak verandah, we arrived among waitresses, well-heeled tourists eating seafood and Chico fans waiting for the next set. The only real crowd, though, was at the back, where a group of the fusion scene's foremost musicians were sitting at a table covered in ashtrays, wine glasses, beer bottles and coffee cups – the floorboards around them having something in common with a moat. There was Carlitos, former leader of Ghorwane, the biggest group in the country. There was Jorge Domingos, who had been playing with the singer Gito Baloí when he was shot dead in Johannesburg. There was Roberto Isaias from Kapa Dêch, and Dino, mercurial bassist of the great Pazedí Jazz Band. And there, at the head, was Chico – his short grey dreadlocks spilling round his ears, his eyes dark and mesmerising, his beautiful face consumed in moments by a grin of perfect white teeth.

Archimedes and I pulled up a couple of chairs.

Chico António was the unrivalled king of Maputo fusion. Like Sofixo, he had once been a streetkid and had learnt his various instruments at a church school in the ghetto, where he had spent most of his childhood. He had gone on to play trumpet for the Orchestra Marrabenta Star de Moçambique, and to become head of the Alliance Française, but even today he had the look of a vagrant – his shoes worn bald, his clothes so eclectic that they might have come from an aid agency. As Archimedes would often observe, the fusion scene was all about freedom – even giving it a name was considered restrictive – and Chico was like the music personified. Just to get here, he had walked five miles along the shoreline, his guitar on his back, his trousers rolled up to stop them from dragging along the ground.

“In the past it was colonial time,” Chico told me, in French, when we were sitting together later that afternoon. “The colonials didn't give us space to play. They banned marrabenta, and they closed down the venues because they realised that the culture was bringing people together, fuelling the revolution. That was a hard, bad time. It's been thirty years now since we won our freedom. That's a long time, of course, but you must think of it within the context of Mozambican history. Right now, it's a cultural transition time...

“We know who we are,” he added, quickly. “We are African people. But we are African people who are mixing with Europeans, Americans, Chinese... So, to

express who we are we must bring our traditional music together with the music of all these other places. We must be Africans, but Africans open to the world!" As the clouds turned fiery, Chico sat onstage with his acoustic guitar, singing in his rich, haunted voice, throwing jagged chords into the blend of jazz, heavy metal and traditional rhythms that his band was generating behind him. He smiled his magnificent smile, staring out beyond the bay and the city, turning in moments to usher in a drum fill or to conduct a spiralling guitar solo, and not for the first time I found myself thinking of Chicago or New Orleans in the 1950s: these extraordinary musicians, playing their way into the unknown, defining their culture while their wives and children sat hungry at home, while a handful of people bounced up and down in their seats, yelling "Bravo!", and the rest of the restaurant nodded politely, if they were listening at all.

"You must be wise, cool, kind... but the devil too!" Chico continued, as we were walking back along the beach, surrounded by a phalanx of drunken musicians. "Life, you see, is like a zoo. A bar-zoo! You see chickens, lions... And some of us must escape!"

"And what are you?" I asked.

"I myself am a bull!" Chico's teeth flashed in the darkness. "A red bull! I see the zoo from the outside!"

We passed a line of women singing harmonised gospel, and scrambled back up onto the jetty. The crossing to Maputo took only twenty minutes, but there was a bar on the top deck, and it was here that we gravitated, weaving among the lovers canoodling on every staircase, emerging in an open-walled room where a couple were dancing on the booming metal floor – spinning at arms' length, singing to provide the music.

"Where's Miles?!" demanded Archimedes, craning backwards to look at the glistening stars.

"Miles in the sky!" I said.

"That's Miles," said Archimedes, contentedly. "This... This Maputo!"

With a groan from the engine, the nose of ferry turned out into the bay, the deck rolling, the city appearing from the superstructure: a line of light the breadth of the horizon, punctuated by the floodlit, rocket-shaped cathedral, by red-tipped radio masts, mobile phone adverts and the brilliant strata of the tower blocks. Still singing, still dancing, the couple continued to sweep around the floor. Hanging from one another's shoulders, the musicians toasted the Zimbabwean chimurenga, while Chico leant against a nearby railing – his guitar on his back, a beer in his hand, a sunhat on his head on which he had crossed out the word 'Safari' and written the word 'CHICO' instead.

“Okay, maybe you have a wife and kids,” he murmured. “Wife, kids, money... These things aren’t important. You have to see the zoo from the outside!”