

RESOLVING THE LIMITATION OF PLAYING SEBENE PATTERNS ON THE FIVE AND SIX-STRINGED BASS GUITARS

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Abstract

This paper examines the string structure of the bass guitar and shows how technological advancements can end up limiting talent instead of improving it. The main objective is to show how scientific innovation can help overcome challenges associated with music production and performance. The study also outlines how different African musicians have dealt with this challenge before proposing a technical solution through the development of a convertible Bass Guitar, to be developed by the researcher and an Engineering graduate at the University of Nairobi, leading to a Kenyan solution to a global musical dilemma. When published, it is the researcher's conviction that the innovation can be replicated anywhere in the world. To share the researcher's story and suggestions as summarised in this paper, I read several publications on the history and techniques of playing the bass guitar, but also interviewed eight key Sebene players who have played for between eleven and thirty-two years.

Key terms: Bass guitar, convertible bass, Sebene, Sebene kick.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The bass guitar can be classified in several different ways. Some are fretted and some are fretless. Some have four strings or more, including some with seventeen or twenty-four. Some are acoustic and some are electric. In this paper, we will concentrate on the electric bass, developed in the 1930s by an American from Seattle called Paul Tut Marc and popularised by his son, in the 1940s, and most of all, Leo Fender, from the 1950s. In October 1951, with the help of his employee, George Fullerton, Fender began the mass production of the electric bass, which he called the Precision Bass or P-Bass (Slog & Coryat, 1999).

Until the 1970s, when extra strings began to appear on bass guitars, almost every bass player played on the 4-stringed bass. Today, you can find bass guitars with five, six or more strings. Nevertheless, the four-stringed bass remains the norm for many bass guitarists around the world (Pfeiffer, 2010). Nearly all the African bass guitar players interviewed for this discussion confirmed Pfeiffer's point. Mark Lenini, a Kenyan master's student of music in Norway who has played with several renowned groups in East Africa, told me during the interview that if he were given a chance to choose a guitar to play Rhumba or any other African style, the four-stringed would be his undebatable choice.

During a recording session at my Kigame Media Studios in Eldoret about seven years ago, I was working on some Benga music from a Kisumu-based artist. I called in two of my Benga session musicians, Laban on the Lead guitar and Collins on the bass. I handed Collins my five-stringed bass to cut the bass sections. I noticed he was struggling a lot with the flow of the session, so I asked him what was wrong. He told me he was not comfortable playing Benga on my guitar because the fifth string was obstructing his groove: "*Sijazoea hii ya waya 5 na tena hii inazuia mimi kuweka ile sauti nzito ya chini*" (I am not used to this one with 5 strings and again it prevents me from producing that heavy and deep sound.)

In 2009, when working on my joint album with Tanzanian musician Modest Morgan, I called in bass guitarist Charles Muhindo, who travelled from Nairobi to my Eldoret studio to cut the bass sections. Similarly, he raised concerns about his inability to produce that "deep, heavy sound" on my 5-stringed instrument. We had to borrow a friend's 4-string bass for the sessions. This was the beginning of my interest in this study.

Among the many questions to be discussed in resolving this challenge, three are key:

1. Why do most bass players prefer the four-stringed to those with more than four?
2. What options exist for African bass guitar players when faced with the opportunity to perform the Sebene?
3. What can be done to ensure that the African bass player always has the four-string option in playing his music?

2.0 WHY THE FOUR-STRINGED BASS IS PREFERRED

From years of teaching, producing and arranging different genres of music for bands and solo artists in East Africa and the Diaspora, I have come to appreciate that the selection of the bass guitar for a particular genre of music depends largely on what one is doing in the specific arrangement. Most R. and B., Rhumba, as well as Reggae players have tended to prefer a five-stringed bass because they can achieve lower notes. Some of those who have done funky slapping during the recordings and occasionally during performances with Sifa Voices preferred the five-stringed because it gave them the freedom to combine low and high

strings, especially when playing octave patterns. One of my key informants, Mr. Gerishom Walaka, told me during an interview that he would use a six-stringed bass if he was experimenting with playing chords or replicating the "one-man guitar" concept as the case is with regular guitars where one plays chords and emphasises the notes that produce a melody line at the same time. Both Jeremy Sita, who has played with me in Sifa voices and studio sessions, as well as Marshall Dennis Wampayo of the Nova Muzika band, said that they would use the five-stringed to play Rhumba but would stick to a four-stringed when playing the Sebene. Jeremy added that he has mostly utilised a 4-stringed guitar to play Benga as well.

Another Informant, Mr. Patrick Muskego, who works with BBC Africa Service but has been playing the bass part-time for about eighteen years and who is versatile with both the four and five-stringed bass, said that each bass has its advantages and disadvantages. According to him, the five-string has some advantages over the four-stringed. To quote him, "The provision of a lower extended range, e.g., when playing on E flat or D minor, gives the music better sound. Efficient shifting on the fretboard with the provision of the B string, and then again you don't need to tune down, e.g. when playing a song on E flat."

In response to my asking Mr. Mark Lenini what he would prefer between the two guitars, he said, "I find the four-string more comfortable and easier to play. For African music especially, a four-string is my preferred choice because it has a very unique tone for sebene and that is hard to reproduce in a 5 string."

Another veteran bassist, Mr. Etienne Mangala, who has been playing for about twenty years now and who resides and produces music in Canada, did not hide his preference for the four-stringed. When asked about the advantages of playing the four-stringed, he said: "You have full control of the instrument especially if you play Sebene; the four-string is the standard bass guitar that fundamental Sebene grooves were derived from. The top E/4th string elements are used as connecting tissues of the bass lines/ pattern to complement the bass drum patterns."

Given this diversity, the African bass guitar player may defend his preference for the four-stringed bass for several reasons. First, he would argue, as did Gerishom and Jeremy, that the four-stringed does everything a bass guitar should do, and a six-stringed takes you into unnecessary interests and complications. Secondly, Gerishom would argue that, besides being experimental, the six-stringed guitar tends to replicate the work of a regular guitar, only at a lower octave. So why do most African bass players, especially of Benga and Sebene, prefer the four-stringed bass?

There are three main reasons:

The use of four strings provides easier movement and stretching of fingers, thus enabling greater accuracy in producing notes or building chords. The four-stringed has a narrower neck compared to a five-stringed and, certainly, a six-stringed and beyond. The wider the neck, the more limited you are with fingering and movement. Mr. Charles Muhindo, who is a worship leader at Resurrection Temple, Embakasi, Nairobi, and a bass/lead guitarist with Nova Muzika for many years, told me that he has heard several bass guitarists who play African music on the five-stringed guitar miss notes by either overshooting or undershooting. In other words, they may aim for a note "C" and end up playing a "C-sharp" or "B" instead. Mr Walaka confirmed that the wider the neck, the more difficult it is to move, especially on the higher notes.

Given that Benga grew largely from Sebene and Congolese Rhumba, it would be helpful to add an observation made by Mr. Collins Ouma, my Benga session musician, whom I referred to earlier. According to him, the four-stringed bass makes it easy for the fingers to move on the fretboard and does not have too many strings to obstruct you. According to Mr. Ouma, the simpler the music, the more enjoyable it is, and the five-stringed has "this big string that keeps confusing you." Like the other informants, Mr. Ouma enjoys the E-string that helps him to excite the audience through a booming throb.

Mr. Muskego observed that great sound comes with proper plucking and handling of the fretboard. To quote him on the four-string anatomy, "The neck of the 4-string bass is palm-friendly, giving one ample handling position, unlike the 5-string bass, whose neck is wider. One will be required to put in more effort to produce the same results. Muting to avoid rumbling while playing is easier on a 4-string bass.

The four-stringed guitar is the only bass guitar that provides the African musician with that magical "kick" which is produced by using the thumb to generate a percussive, low-throbbing sound which, combined with the drum set kick, gives the music its irresistible spirit of dance. This may be compared to the throbbing tap that is usually produced in Benga music by the smashing of a toe ring on a piece of wood. This is called Gara. The Gara is originally a rhythmic accompaniment of Nyatiti, an eight-stringed lyre whose idiom Benga borrowed heavily from.

When I asked Marshall Dennis Wampayo to explain the advantages of a four-stringed over a five-stringed bass in playing the Sebene, he said that the Sebene not only connected him with his roots but also gave him musical pleasure and identity.

Asked specifically about the booming, percussive sound Congolese musicians make on the four-stringed, he said: "It makes Sebene Warming and Hot. It easily coordinates with the Congolese Sebene kick, because of the tonality when its fourth string, which is the "E", is played with the thumb. It gives the Sebenebass guitar player the easiest way to create the ghost kick, which I call in Kiswahili *mtungi* (translated as big clay pot).

A quick explanation of the concept of the "pot" is significant here. On the one hand, Afro-Cuban music of the past often included real clay pots which, when hit with one's palm, produced a deep, booming sound. To view the Congolese Sebene "kick" in this way is of ethnomusicological significance and could form an important study. On the other hand, drawing from this notion and what we could conjecture as a sheer mark of poverty that made most Africans unable to purchase huge music systems with huge speakers, most would become creative by placing the radio transistor or the small-circumferenced speaker of the phonogram or Vinyl Record player on top of a clay pot to produce this booming, deep bass sound. This would then inspire more engaged dancing as the booming bass sound would accentuate the ecstatic pleasure emitted by the music. Explaining this "ghost kick," Mr Wampayo added: "This ghost kick is very indispensable as far as sebene is concerned. It is created with the fourth string and the E-string, and goes hand in hand with the drum set kick. But it's a bit lighter than the drum set kick. The right does not struggle to create this ghost kick, because the neck of the 4-stringed bass guitar is small, so it makes it easier for the player to create the ghost kick which is so crucial in Sebene style."

My observation as a music producer and arranger is that to realise the best balance between the drumset kick and the Seben "ghost kick", it is preferable to make the drumset kick lighter than the "ghost kick" to allow a strong rhythmic groove from the drumset kick but to accentuate the "ghost kick" with the kind of depth that bounces between pleasure and rhythm. That is how I have arranged and produced several Rumba and Benga projects at Kigame Media. Once you capture the bass guitar and drum set sound clean enough, all you need to do is play around with Equalisation (Eq) via the Board parameters and special effects, whether by ear or by use of presets. For sound engineers, what I am discussing here could be replicated in live sound for stage performance and audience consumption. Of course, for the ultimate balance, it is possible to go the other way (as some producers do) by making the drumset kick heavier than the "ghost kick", but my personal view is that this minimises the pleasure element. Then, given the intermittence of the "ghost kick", which may not be constant or continuous, the first method would certainly be preferable. Going light on the bass sound works best if the drumset kick is heavier. There is a need for more discussion on production techniques, including what is preferred for the production of acoustic instruments, including the Fretless Bass and the Upright options, such as those used in Bluegrass and Latino music productions. A good place to start with this discussion would be to compare Central African productions with Afro-Cuban productions, e.g. those of TP OK Jazz versus a work like the Buena Vista Social Club.

Commenting on the "kick", Mr Walaka added that the four-stringed bass was advantageous to the five-stringed because "It is simple on fingering especially when playing rhumba and sebene,... also it goes hand in hand with the kick i.e. when you fold your thumb on the fourth string it has some unique kick emphasis, it actually adds some unique low frequency on the kick hence making it sound deep and soft, or call it low friendly frequency on kick."

Mark Lenini, who has played for me and several other groups, including the Safaricom Choir said, "Not only is it easier to wrap my hand around the neck, but it also has a better, deep sound." The Sebene was created on a four-stringed guitar, and it creates some kind of cultural identity with the continent and with the pioneers of the style. Many Sebene players, just like those of other Afro-rhythms and genres, are proud to play African music and feel a sense of identity and belonging. In a sense, the historical Ping-Pong of slaves being removed from their homeland of Africa and being sold into the New World, only to be brought back musically, makes it easy for this genre to be enjoyed as an authentic African sound.

When asked what made him play the Sebene and why he continues to play it today, Mr Mangala replied: "Yes, I have been playing Sebene ever since I started learning bass guitar twenty years ago and the reason being that I feel content, fulfilled, connected and I express myself better anytime I play this style of music. On the other hand, this is the only way to continue with the legacy of my forefathers building and developing upon the foundation of the beautiful music they created. This is one good way to preserve and develop African music."

The identity factor is put well by both Mr. Walaka and Mr. Wampayo. In a follow-up interview on the phone, when I wanted to know what was so special about Sebene music to him, he raised his voice in excitement and said, "This is African music! Sebene is the black man's music ... even Rhumba! It makes me proud to be an African and you know African music is very unique. When you play that fourth string and use your thumb to produce that booming sound, you can dance like crazy, but you also feel connected with your roots."

Marshall Dennis Wampayo did not resist pouring out his feelings when asked about what was so special about the Sebene. He said, "I was born with Sebene in me, so I never chose to play Sebene, but Sebene chose me and made me its custodian. I am still playing Sebene up-to-date because it's my DNA, it is my roots, the music I was born into, grew up listening to, and I have never got tired listening to it or playing it." Seeing that it is crucial for the African Sebene player to have his four-stringed unit, what options have been available to him in ensuring this?

3.0 EXISTING OPTIONS

The most common options for the player of the Sebene have been either ensuring that he carries two guitars wherever he goes – a four-stringed and a five-stringed – so that in case he needs to change styles or sound, he can simply unplug one and plug in another. The other alternative has been to simply content with a five-stringed and make do when it comes to the Sebene. In more recent days, there has been another rare alternative floated, i.e. that of manufacturing a bass guitar with two necks, one extending with four strings and another with five. The player would then be at liberty to switch between the two string sets at will.

Since the second option of contenting with a five-string has already been discussed above, let us briefly share the limitations of options 1 and 3. First, it is not easy for many players to afford two bass guitars. Most African musicians are either part of a band where they use band instruments or work hard to own their first instrument of their own. Again, transporting two bass guitars to performances introduces a lot of wear and tear issues, not to mention regular breakages from careless luggage handlers, as most of the musicians have to rely on public or hired transport to get to their performance destinations. Guitar cases are expensive, and flight cases in particular are hard to come by in Africa. The result is a constant loss of tuning pegs, weather impact on strings leading to constant cutting, as well as outright theft of hard-earned and purchased instruments.

In addition, batteries to run the two guitars are expensive and not easily available. To get quality batteries, many African musicians have to import them from overseas. Neither are the strings cheap. It is difficult to quickly manage the technical parameters of changing from the four-stringed to the five-stringed. It takes time, but it is also cumbersome. Sometimes the parties or Church fellowships require that musicians perform song medleys. Changing from one guitar to another can be quite tough.

Regarding the twin-necked bass, not only would it be expensive, but also it is bound to be heavy for the player, especially if he or she has to play standing for some time. It will consume more battery and would be more cumbersome to carry in that it would occupy more space than the regular bass. A case to store the unit would be quite huge and heavy. It would not fit in most overhead bins in public transport and would occupy so much space in trunks/boots of cars.

Having taken a close look at the needs of the African musicians and the challenges discussed above, I was led to imagine a solution, which, if implemented, would considerably reduce the hustles of carrying many guitars for one player as well as avoid the unnecessary struggle of having to endure the limitations and challenges of a twin neck. To deal with this need, I came up with what I am calling the "Reuben Kigame

Convertible Bass Guitar", abbreviated as the RKCB Guitar. Let us look at what this invention would look like if allowed to see the light of day.

4.0 THE RKCB GUITAR

Below is my proposal. It is my hope that I can find the necessary funding to complete my research and fabricate this idea, hoping to bring it into reality within two years of funding.

Proposal Summary and Outline

Introduction

The electric bass guitar presents itself as either 4, 5, 6 or more stringed. The following project aims to converge the basic functionality of all the above bass guitar types into a single bass guitar that should suit the user irrespective of their individual preference.

The 4-Stringed Bass Guitar

Comprises a set of 4 wired strings connected to 4 different tuning pegs above the neck.

The 5-Stringed Bass Guitar

Comprises a set of 5 wired strings connected to 5 different tuning pegs above the neck.

The 6-Stringed Bass Guitar

Comprises a set of 6 wired strings connected to 6 different tuning pegs above the neck.

Plan

The Reuben Kigame Convertible Bass Guitar (RKCB Guitar) will have 6 strings in total connected to 6 different tuning pegs and two specially designed synchronising knobs one that serves to release the 5th string and the other to release the 6th string during musical productions. This would make it adjustable to switch for a variety of user preferences.

Reclinable Neck.

This will make it possible for the neck to become smaller with every depression of any of the two knobs and back to the wide position again when the extra strings are released for a different production.

Challenges to Overcome:

First, the project in its testing stage will require about five million shillings to enable multiple trial fabrications as well as the purchase of existing specimens. Secondly, achieving the reclaimable neck is going to be a major task because it has to be achieved quickly and comfortably enough without ruining the anatomy and functionality of the guitar. Again, I hope that we can develop a prototype that is industry-perfect enough to allow for an inter-session adjustment that will retain the tuning of the strings to the nearest perfect. This requires a long testing stage and a lot of workshop hours.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the foregoing, I hope that this paper can be critiqued with patience and the kind of understanding that gives space to innovative thinking. In a world that considers Africa as a continent steeped in

ignorance, laziness and disinterest in scientific speculation and innovation, I am hoping that the discourse can be practically challenged by positive feedback and support of what is discussed. If Africa could produce the wonder of the pyramids, the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, the Nyayo Pioneer Car and the world's leading money transfer system called Mpesa, a convertible guitar of this kind is not an impossibility given a chance. I hope that whoever opts to take this project forward or adapt it for implementation will have the courtesy of acknowledging my originality and innovation, solely intended for growing African music and performance.

6.0 REFERENCES

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