Let us be blunt. What little Westerners know (or think they know) about the continent of Africa paints a grim and depressing picture: severe poverty, famine, AIDS, civil war, genocide, child soldiers, corruption, slavery, and so forth, in a virtually endless litany of human misery, cruelty, and suffering. For this reason, many Westerners hold a conception of Africa as the one continent on the planet that has failed to enter the modern world. Asia and South America have seen buoyant economic growth in recent decades, Australia...
and North America were properly tamed by the “civilizing process” centuries ago, and Europe is, at the very least, the progenitor of modernity, the author of humanism and scientific progress. Of course, the reality is much different than such a chauvinistic assessment implies. Africa’s turbulent journey into modernity demonstrates the perils of adopting simplistic narratives of human triumph over greed and exploitation: Africa is a constituent part of the modern world, the flip side, one might say, to the gold coin that is modernity.

Those looking to reclaim a sense of African agency could do worse than to turn to the continent’s rich and diverse musical history, the far corners of which have been beautifully documented in a recently released four-disc box set from Dust-to-Digital Records. *Opika Pende: Africa at 78 RPM*, takes its title from an expression found in the Lingala language of Central Africa, a phrase meaning “be strong” or “stand firm.” And as the curator for this set, Jonathan Ward points out, the term has another meaning: “resist.” A complicated topic in Africana studies, resistance can mean many things, but in the case of African music we have countless examples of musical expression being used as a platform to fight back against racism and exploitation, from Fela Kuti and the Kalakuta Republic in Nigeria to the many songs that defined the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. But in the case of the music found on *Opika Pende*, another kind of resistance, one directed against overly pessimistic summations of African life that would deny African peoples a place in the modern world as authors of their own destinies, begins to take shape. As we can hear in the 100 tracks collected from old shellac 78 recordings gathered from around the continent, African musicians from Cape Town to Cairo have been making their own contributions to the world’s musical language, often bringing so-called “traditional” African musical innovations and instruments to popular musical styles that incorporated elements from around the globe.

The music on *Opika Pende* covers a period from 1909 to the early 1960s, thus making it an ideal document of the kinds of music Africans were making and...
listening to during the long years of European colonialism. Along the more paternalistic shores of the European civilizing mission, numerous musicologists and ethnologists journeyed deep into the bush to document the musical traditions of Africa’s supposedly ancient ethnic groups who were on the verge of extinction owing to exposure to the “corrupting” influences of
Western civilization. As Erich von Hornbostel, an ethnomusicologist observed in 1928, in a quote found at the beginning of the notes to *Opika Pende*, “It is therefore to be feared that the modern efforts to protect culture are coming too late. As yet, we hardly know what African music is. If we do not hasten to collect it systematically and to record it by means of the phonograph, we shall not even learn what it was.”

Such opinions present a vision of African music and African societies that is far too static. “Precolonial” African music, like the societies from which it emerged, underwent long centuries of change rooted in larger social and economic shifts and cultural interactions with neighboring African communities, and more distant peoples stretching from Europe and the Middle East to India and the Far East. Despite such dynamic processes, stagnant representations of African music persist to the present day, as many still hold the outdated view that the importance of African music can be found in the stylistic elements that, through the slave trade, would shape New World musical styles. Thus, historically Western musicologists looking to Africa have tended to overemphasize those elements of the continent’s music that were of primary importance to Western music, particularly the continent’s endless variety of drums and the complex polyrythms that are so characteristic of much West African music in particular.

Yet while the importance and influence of these elements cannot be denied, the rich variety of sounds found on *Opika Pende* point the way towards a more interesting narrative that casts African musicians as protagonists in their own right, rather than accessories to larger global processes that were centered in lands thousands of miles away from Africa’s shores.

The four discs of *Opika Pende* are roughly divided along geographic lines, with the first focusing primarily on the music of North Africa and some of the Islamic areas of Western Africa, the second chronicling the musics found mainly along the coastal areas of Western Africa, the third documenting the sounds of Central and Eastern Africa, and the fourth and final disc tackling the musical worlds of Southern Africa. Throughout the set, the arbitrariness of these boundaries is apparent, as
musical ideas, innovations, and instruments can be traced to multiple regions. Variations of the mbira, the “thumb piano” most commonly associated with the Shona people of Zimbabwe, can be heard on this set in music originating as far away as Nigeria; likewise single or double-stringed instruments originate from areas as far ranging as Guinea in West Africa to the Eastern Cape in South Africa.

Yet the selection of music found on this set can also seem quite random at times, as Ward seems was guided in his selections not by any desire to impose an overarching narrative on African musical history, but rather to showcase the incredible diversity of sounds found in the old 78 recordings distributed throughout the continent during the colonial era. As Ward states in the liner notes, “I have created this compilation with one simple goal in mind: to showcase a diverse amount of long-forgotten music from Africa that transports me as a listener.” In this he has admirably succeeded.

The journeys prompted by the music heard on Opika Pende can indeed lead to some wonderfully strange places. In this respect, some of the music on this set reminds one of the music of the “old, weird America,” a term coined by Greil Marcus to describe the odd assortment of folk musics collected by Harry Smith in the
Anthology of American Folk Music. On disc one, for instance, we are treated to the rather haunting singing of Moroccan women—mainly prostitutes—known as the Shikhat. Often excluded from society, their music is a plaintive affirmation of their humanity, and is accompanied by an upright fiddle and a number of small drums. Alongside the praise songs of West African griots, we also hear on the first disc a soulful 1932 performance by a mandole (an African instrument that is a cross between a mandolin and an oud) player representative of the Judeo-Arabic music found in Algeria during the twentieth century, before most of that country's Jewish population was forced into exile in the 1960s.

Because all the music on Opika Pende comes from commercially released 78 RPM recordings, much of what is documented here is unabashedly popular in orientation. On Disc 2, we are treated to numerous examples of the popular genres of juju and highlife that would come to define West African music during the late colonial period and the early years of independence. Characteristic of this trend is the late 1930s recording of “Egberun Buso” by Nigeria’s Jolly Orchestra. Like much of the juju music of the time
period, the Jolly Orchestra typically combined a guitar—increasingly the instrument of choice for African wage earners—with a wind instrument and several vocalists. The overall effect of “Egberun Buso” is one of playful contentment, mirrored in a translation of the song’s lyrics. “I walked a thousand miles/ Because of the light-skinned lady/ Lend me your agbada/ So that I can go/ Bye bye, Aunty.” In the same vein, “The Jambo Song,” recorded on the Decca label by Calendar and his Maringer Band is a wonderful example of the guitar-based palmwine music (so named for the alcoholic drink often consumed during performances of this music) that predated and influenced the development of juju.

On the jazzier side of things, Disc 2 also includes examples of Highlife, the brass band music first popularized in the ballrooms of the upper classes during the 1920s. “Osu Oblanyo,” by Yeboa’s Band, shows, in addition to the influence of American jazz and the European military brass band tradition, a substantial West Indian influence as well, carried to Western Africa by Cuban and Brazilian traders, among others. The
Caribbean element is also heard on a later highlife recording dating from 1947, the Band of the Gold Coast Police’s “High Life—Dagomba,” another upbeat, and highly danceable tune so characteristic of the genre.

As Ward observes in his notes, commercial recording companies largely ignored Central Africa until the 1950s, when guitar-drenched rumba music took the region by storm. Yet some of the best music found on Disc 3 comes from the East African coast, where indigenous African musics combined with Arab and Swahili influences to create an astoundingly unique array of sounds, such as is found in the taarab music of coastal Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar. “Arabian Congo” by Siti Ganduri, a piece likely recorded in the early 1930s, demonstrates this diversity as the singer is accompanied not only by the riqq, an Arabic tambourine, and the darabukka, or Arabian drums, but also by a violin and a xylophone, suggesting a significant European influence as well. In Okoth Onuko’s “March Guitar,” we also hear the presence of the accordion, another European instrument adapted to local purposes, and made popular by Kenyan musicians during the late colonial period.

European and Western influences are especially prominent on Disc 4, from South African dance band music to the guitar music that became a popular source of entertainment in the region’s many mines. Most notable in this regard is Josaya Hadebe’s “Yini Wena Funa,” an excellent example of the solo guitar music that would make George Sibanda famous during the 1950s. This recording, from around the same time period, deals with the strained relationships between black mine workers and the white bosses who ruthlessly mistreated them and exploited their labor. Hadebe’s beautiful guitar picking and sardonic singing perfectly captures the existentialism of life on the mines, and the daily struggle against the dehumanization of contract labor. Also showing a substantial European influence, one of Opika Pende’s most startling discoveries comes later on the disc, with “Kxomo Muwa,” a Northern Sotho recording from the Limpopo province of South Africa that combines piercing, high-pitched vocals with the use of the autoharp, which had been appropriated by the
Pedi people of the region late in the 19th century and adapted to the local musical language.

Elsewhere on the disc we find musical documents representing cultures further removed from European influences, particularly “Fuzhi Inopenduka Kwenda Lamukiya,” a recording made along the Angolan/Zambian border and featuring the kisanji, the Chokwe version of the mbira. Yet the myth of the untouched rural African outpost must also be dispelled here as well. For as we hear elsewhere, even traditional African songs were being adapted to reflect the altered land-
scape brought about by social and economic change in the region. In “Nkau Haka Khoele,” recorded in 1951 in Lesotho, we hear a traditional threshing song—used to guide the rhythm of those working in the fields—with lyrics altered by the realities of industrialization and wage labor. In a deeply mournful tone, the singer, Clement Nyamane, laments the absence of the men of Lesotho, who have gone away to work in the white-owned mines of South Africa. This is a deeply spiritual music, reflecting both where Lesotho society had been and where it was headed.

As Opika Pende demonstrates time and time again, the power of African peoples to resist their own marginalization was considerable, and nowhere more apparent than in the vibrant music of the continent. Jonathan Ward is to be commended for assembling this riveting collection; not only should it alter our understanding of African music in the twentieth century, it should also cause us to reexamine our assumptions about the resiliency, creativity, and diversity of African societies during the long and difficult years of the twentieth century.