

For Ibibio Sound Machine, Every Song Tells a Story

By Jon Pareles / March 1, 2017

It didn't matter what she was singing; the words just sounded good.

That was the genesis of [Ibibio Sound Machine](#), a London band that releases its second album, "Uyai," on Friday. "Uyai" ("beauty" in the Nigerian language Ibibio) is an album full of positive-thinking songs and [deep, inventive grooves](#) that hotwire decades of African, European and American music. Western pop fans will hear echoes of Michael Jackson, James Brown, Gary Numan, Prince, Talking Heads and, yes, Miami Sound Machine; African music devotees will recognize threads of juju and Afrobeat from Nigeria, high life from Ghana and makossa from Cameroon.

Eno Williams, the band's singer, was born in London but grew up in Nigeria before returning to England. Most of the time she sings in her ancestral language, Ibibio, from southern Nigeria. The band's guitarist is from Ghana, its drummer from Trinidad, its percussionist from Brazil and its saxophonist and producer from Australia. Where some world music bands seek exotic hybrids but end up settling for the lowest common denominator, Ibibio Sound Machine is a global coalition that builds a true synergy.

Ibibio Sound Machine grew out of London's determined coterie of Africophile musicians. It was sparked when Max Grunhard, an Australian saxophonist and producer who led an Afro-funk band called [KonKoma](#), heard Ms. Williams singing in Ibibio. The language has "ups and downs, it's got dips, it sounds very rhythmic," Ms. Williams said in a Skype interview from the band's London studio. "I remember singing just a phrase of one of the stories I got told as a child, and immediately he picked up on the fact that it was really rhythmic and it was unique and different."

Mr. Grunhard and other KonKoma members, including the Ghanaian guitarist Alfred Kari Bannerman, started assembling songs with Ms. Williams, initially looking toward vintage African pop. They gathered other musicians, including Anselmo Netto, a percussionist from Brazil. When Ms. Williams first heard him, he was playing a talking drum, an instrument used in Yoruba music from Nigeria that can mimic the syllables of speech, sometimes playing a running commentary on the lyrics.

"He played a talking drum like a Yoruba person," Ms. Williams said. "It immediately, it literally spoke something to my heart. And then, through our conversations, talking and exchanging music, I found out that he's got family that actually speaks Yoruba, that probably migrated from Nigeria, although he had never been to Nigeria." She added, "It's the universal nature of music, the fact that the world is getting smaller because we're all connected musically."

They assembled an album's worth of material, and were trying to decide on a band name when someone jokingly suggested Ibibio Sound Machine. It stuck. Ms. Williams is happy to acknowledge that she's a fan of Gloria Estefan's old band, Miami Sound Machine. "They had all that African percussion, and that just got my body moving," she said.

Many of the songs on "Ibibio Sound Machine," the band's debut album, were based on Ibibio folk tales — including one about a [talking fish](#) — set to tracks that meshed African and American funk, with scrubbing guitars and a snappy horn section.

Three years later, after Ibibio Sound Machine has toured from Thailand to Iceland, "Uyai" makes its hybrids even more experimental. Styles are cross-pollinated; the tone can be meditative, as in "Quiet," or frenetic, as in "[Trance Dance.](#)" Although the songs generally started with band members jamming together, they also have an electronic overlay, a new willingness to flaunt the possibilities of the studio.

The songs also address the present; in the tradition of much African music, they make themselves the conscience of a community. "Passing on culture, passing on morals, that's the backbone of the Ibibio culture," Ms. Williams said. "A song or story always had a meaning."

In "Lullaby," a woman sings her child to sleep with admonitions on virtue. In "The Chant," a woman reaches back to a chant she heard as a child to carry her through fearful moments.

The utterly danceable "[Give Me a Reason,](#)" which opens the album with a punchy, upbeat hybrid of funk, synth-pop and makossa, is about the [Nigerian schoolgirls abducted](#) in 2014 by Boko Haram.

"It struck a chord in me," Ms. Williams said. "Why couldn't children be given the opportunity to go to school? And then there's a bigger picture: Why can't we just be free to be who we want to be? But on the other hand, we wanted it to be upbeat — we wanted it to be a hopeful song. We just want to make people aware that despite the doom and gloom, there is something that can lift you up."

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