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Analysis of Toto – Africa

Introduction

The analysis of Africa by Toto will focus on the musical tradition from which the song draws, the rhythm section, how it was produced and its form, as well as reflections upon who the implied audience might be. The theory will rely on study material from lectures at KMB132 as well as referenced sources from said lectures, and the empirical data will be a handwritten mud-map and published interviews with the band in order to strengthen its validity as much as possible. In the conclusion the overall function of the song will then be discussed through a summary of the key findings.

Rhythm and musical traditions

The track follows a standardized and traditional rock'n'roll-rhythm and beat; a four by four progression with hi-hats in the 16th and snares on every second and fourth beat per bar. This suggests that the song has roots in the modern rock-genre. However, the hi-hats has been replaced by maracas; a South American percussive instrument that is often associated with Latin music. The move to 16th notes and the incorporation of Latin percussive might hint towards the birth of disco, where minorities such as coloured and gay communities often were the implied audience (Ward, 07.10.2016). Note that the drum progression (Appendix 1) for the maracas is noted with x. This sign is used to signalize metal pieces of the drum kit, such as hi-hats or cymbals, so the use of it for the maracas could be misleading. There are the congas in the background, a percussive instrument commonly associated with African music. The congas follow the kick- and snare-drum, but also adds two of the high conga before and after (16th) the third kick. The first and third kick hits the first and third beat of one bar, but the second and fourth hit the 16th beat before each snare, giving the section a unique groove (Appendix 1). This progresses throughout the song, with only minor alternations such as descending toms right before the choruses.

The drum beat was a loop and the song was recorded with a "tape going around the room", where they "put things on one at the time" (Locker, 2015). This is apparently one of the earlier songs were the looping-technique is being used (Parker, 2013). This might hint at how music pieces was edited before; on magnetic tapes that were cut and stitched together, which would make sense since the song was released in 1982; one year before the invention of MIDI and ten years after the invention of the first digital recorder. It also gives a clue that the band relies on sampling; any audio-recording that is not a whole recorded part (Ward, 14.10.2016).

The rhythm-section appears to have balanced the simplistic and complex; toying with expectations as well as being predictable (Whelan, 23.09.2016). Hence, one might reflect upon to what degree the cultural parameters of the song have been set, and due to the variety of the rhythm-section the implied audience has arguably been broadened. The band come from "classical and jazz to country and rock and roll" influences; a pop band that take musical influence from several places (Ward, 2013), and the song was arguably "world music before there was such a thing" (Giles, 2013).

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Chords and harmonies

The song relies heavily on keyboards, as well as acoustic (verse) and electric (chorus) guitars. In Appendix 1, the main riff is displayed over two bars and serves as a hook for the song, since it is a continued and repeated music phrase that becomes a reliable source of momentum (Whelan, 09.09.2016) and recognition. The riff is recorded on a Yamaha CS-80 keyboard (Parker, 2013), and the kalimba-section (Appendix 1) is recorded on a Yamaha GS-1 (Ward, 2013), which is a digital synthesizer. Steve Lukather (the guitarist) explains how they used multiple 24-track-machines for the album (*Toto IV*), and he mentions the hardships of synching them up and getting 10-12 slave tapes per song mixed down to the 24-track (Giles, 2013).

The blending of the familiar and unpredictable continues throughout the harmonies. The verse progresses with an unconventional chord pattern and it follows an unusual duration as well; four and a half bars instead of four (Appendix 2). The exception is the last four bars before each chorus, which follow the common progression. The chorus draws back to familiar territories: if transposed three semitones up – the key of C - the progression becomes Am-F-C-G, effectively making it a modulation of "The most popular progression" (Hooktheory.com); the first and last two chords have switched place. Also known as the vi-IV-I-V or the "sensitive female chord progression" (Hirsh, 2008), this progression has been used countless times (Joan Osborne, Iggy Pop, Bon Jovi and The Cranberries, to name a few) alongside the I-V-vi-IV progression. The vi-IV-I-V-progression repeats three times, and the last section is modified and goes over three bars instead of four, before entering the main riff. The alteration might suggest links to Ragtime performances, where improvisation was a key element, as well as distinguishing the performance from "other contemporary dance music, (which) was recognized as a general trait of African-American music" (Whelan, 11.08.2016). Ragtime is also said to have been the precursor for jazz, a genre that the band was influenced by (Ward, 2013).

The chords in the verses and choruses stay the same, in the following structure:

- Intro
- Main riff
- Verse 1
- Chorus 1
- Main riff
- Verse 2
- Chorus 2
- Main riff
- Solo
- Chorus 3
- Outro (main riff, fade out)

The solo follows the same chord progression as the verse; one single run-through (Appendix 2). An incomplete sheet containing both notes and tablature displays an excerpt of said solo (Appendix 3).
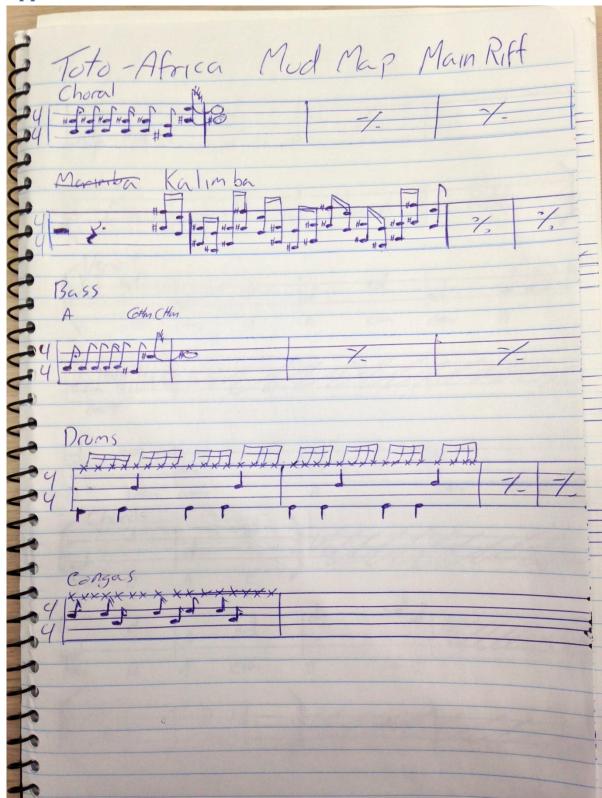
Lyrics and vocals

The vocals are layered as two-toned voices during the choruses combining harmonies, using the same technique as with the drums (Ward, 2013). The lyrics (Appendix 4) become somewhat autobiographical, with a metaphor about being torn between work and family duties (Prato, 2015). This suggests influences by early blues traditions, where a key element is emotional investment (Whelan, 05.08.2016). While emphasising narratives, the lyrics also convey depth. The balance here might be connected to the balance between the simplicity and complexity of the rhythm and harmonies as well (Whelan, 23.09.2016). The lyrics are compiled from several inspirational sources; books, articles and pictures, since the writer had never been to Africa (Ward, 2013). The writing process started spontaneously while playing the chorus (Locker, 2015), again hinting at ragtime associations, while the rest was subjected to more research in attempt to phrase the words in such a way that both the poetry and the story would be conveyed adequately (Ward, 2013).
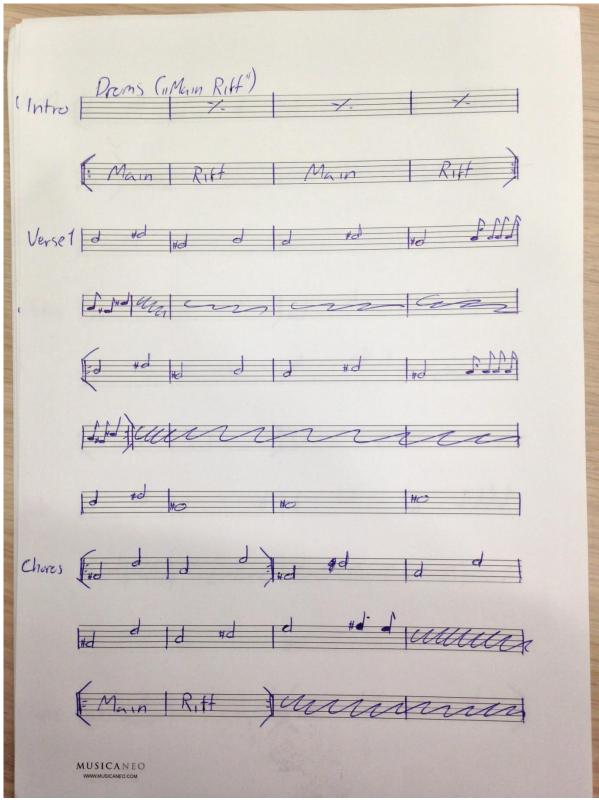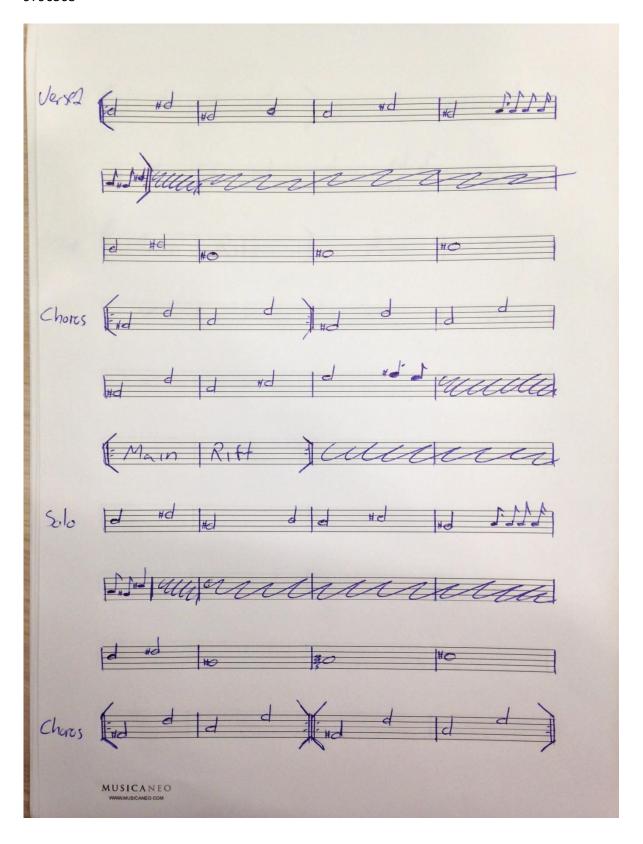
Conclusion

The song draws inspiration from several different sources in its composition, choice of instruments and lyrical content; a balance between familiar and experimental elements that might classify as a song within the world music-genre. There are also evidence supporting argues that the song might fit with the idea of a modern pop song, with recognisable hooks such as the main riff and the unfolding crescendo throughout the choruses. The song relies on familiar instruments and those with cultural connotations, and unconventional and common structures are blended together in percussive and chordal instruments. The lyrical content is narrative and poetic, and several elements of the production techniques – such as looping – were arguably innovative at the time. The song holds several elements that seem contradictory, although the goal appears to have been to make the blend balanced and harmonious. Therefore, elements that might have been off-putting to some could instead become something "accepted" since said elements are most likely not predominant or standing alone, thus opening up the possibility for a wider target audience.
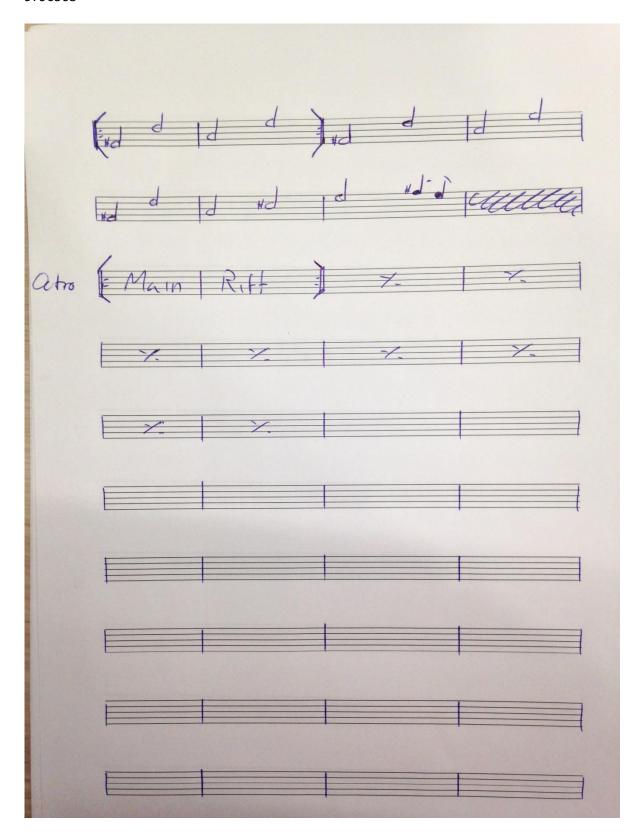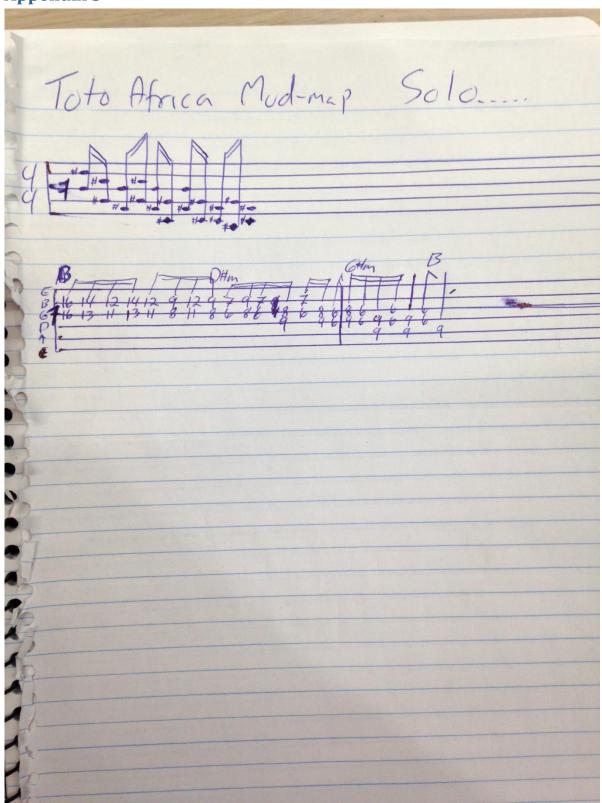
Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

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Appendix 3

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Appendix 4
Lyrics:

I hear the drums echoing tonight
But she hears only whispers of some quiet conversation
She's coming in twelve-thirty flight
The moonlit wings reflect the stars that guide me towards salvation

I stopped an old man along the way
Hoping to find some old forgotten words or ancient melody
He turned to me as if to say:
"Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you"

It's gonna [sic] take a lot to drag me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do
I bless the rains down in Africa
It's gonna [sic] take some time to do the things we never did

The wild dogs cry out in the night
As they grow restless longing for some solitary company
I know that I must do what's right
As sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti

I seek to cure what's deep inside
Frightened of this thing that I've become

It's gonna [sic] take a lot to drag me away from you
There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do
I bless the rains down in Africa
It's gonna [sic] take some time to do the things we never did

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