

As an example of art embracing cultures of diversity, I'll be discussing the collaborative project, and self-titled album, WEMA. **[1]** A live set of select tracks from their release can also be seen on K7 Records' channel. **[2]** In which, a blend of lyricism in Swahili and Spanish meets Afro-Latin beats and percussion, coinciding traditional instrumentation with synthesizers and electronic production. An earnest effort in encouraging unity, this five-piece group embraces a broad spectrum of world influences and individual backgrounds. Members included are (American) Evan Shornstein, (Indian) Jimmy Le Messurier, (Scottish) Lilli Elina, (Tanzanian) Msafiri Zawose, and (Ugandan) Magnus Mehta. **[3]** Together, they create, "an artistic pursuit founded on community; a space in which to harness the transformative power of connection." **[1]** Here, I'll be describing how similar experiences of two members help define the group's identity, and why it matters when considering the social context of music as a force for positive change in the world.

WEMA was brought to my attention upon release in April 2022, from following Evan Shornstein's solo project, Photay. A pleasant surprise by him, members of the trio, Penny, and featuring Zawose, I had no idea what to expect. Hearing WEMA, I was excited by its fusion of styles, and suddenly I had a renewed appreciation for Shornstein's background as a musician. From the beginning, his electronic releases as Photay contained fresh perspectives, because of Shornstein's interest and application of music traditions across cultures. As noted by him, in the description of his debut album, "Half way through the making of this album I spent a month in Guinea, Africa studying hand drumming and balafon. The majority of the album was produced after the

trip while heavily listening to african music and experiencing some wild culture shock.”

[4]

Much before traveling to Guinea though, Shornstein had been exposed to concepts outside of Western music traditions, growing up with his parent’s eclectic music taste, and even participating in an African drum residency from the age of seven.

[5] Despite a background providing diverse musical concepts, Shornstein still feels “a deep Western rhythmic orientation by nature,” due to being raised in America and Western culture overall. With this in mind, Shornstein celebrates learning from others, saying, “This gives me never-ending excitement when challenged by another culture’s rhythmic emphasis,” specifically in reference to the study of African polyrhythms. **[5]**

In conversation with Magnus Mehta, resident producer of *Penya*, it’s easy to see a similar story. When asked about the approach behind productions, Mehta attributes everything to learning from others across the world: “The initial inspiration for this journey came from a 6 months period I spent living in Havana, Cuba, studying and enjoying the rich musical traditions out there - it resulted in me taking similar trips to places like Marrakesh, Kerala, and Istanbul.” **[3]** Mehta credits the uniquely modern ability for common folk to travel abroad as fueling his passion, as well as personal collection, with percussion instruments. By seeking out broad perspectives, he enriches the palette of sounds for projects defying singular aspects of both genre and culture. This cultivation ties directly with WEMA’s mission of worldwide community, as Mehta notes a universal aspect of music, “rhythm in particular has the ability to connect and unify people in a very direct and immediate way.” **[3]**

While results of cross-cultural efforts can be extraordinary celebrations of diversity, creating one-of-a-kind fusions that are more than the sum of each part, the chance of overstepping one's bounds is also always at play. When asked about finding the distinction between "cultural exchange and appropriation," Mehta responds that his background as a mixed-race individual has made the discrete distinction of groups irrelevant to him, at least in artistic contexts. Rather, he has, "always been interested in and inspired by the notion of encouraging cultural fusion in a positive sense." **[3]** On the other hand, Shornstein's response to potential cultural impacts speaks to his background as a white man. Questioned where his music as Photay finds its place, especially when other groups actively face discrimination, Shornstein responds:

As white people, we need to educate ourselves on the many layers of privilege and racism. We need to refine our actions and see that we all benefit from privilege on some level. Perhaps many of us have sped through our lives without ever taking the time to fully stop, educate, and see systemic racism in action. To see our responsibility to fight it actively. I think the pace of our world, fueled by capitalism, has allowed many of us to go through the motions and comply with a completely racist system. As far as music is concerned, music is nutrition. We need it now more than ever to uplift, energize and innovate. **[6]**

The project of WEMA, a group of diverse individuals itself, shows us how we can find appreciation for aspects of everyone around us. WEMA, the Swahili word for 'kindness and benevolence,' actively represents, "a state of gratitude and belief, without

sorrow or grief. It's about giving your entire heart,' Msafiri declares." **[1]** The entire medium of music gives us endless opportunities to celebrate one another. It's a way of pollinating each other's worlds with sound, encouraging us to appreciate both our similarities and differences in kind. As Shornstein collects, "it's hugely beneficial to be as open as humanly possible to whatever opportunities, people or music come your way. You never know how great things will manifest, and the music world is unpredictable and forever in flux." **[5]**

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