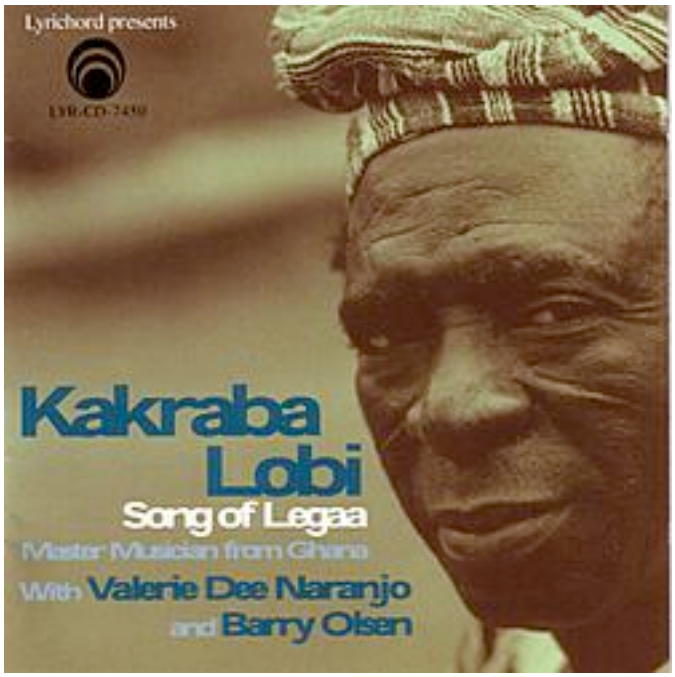

(LYRCD 7450)

KAKRABA LOBI
Song of Legaa
Master Musician from Ghana
With Valerie Dee Narajo and Barry Olsen

ABOUT LOBI MUSIC
West African people have been grooving to the sound of keyboards and percussion for centuries. They've been praying, plowing the fields, building houses, burying the deceased, and healing physical and emotional illness as well.

All of the world's pop musics (Brazilian, Latin, Rock, funk, be-bob, etc.) have looked to African traditional musics for their driving force and breath-the rhythm. It only takes a second or two to recognize this music and the spirit it carries. Alive with movement, vibrant with an ever-persisting conversation.

The scope of this music is vast. When one travels beyond the well-known coastal regions, one finds literally hundreds and hundreds of styles and combinations of voices, instruments and movement.

One of the most captivation is chamber music of the Lobi nation of Ghana, Burtina Faso, and Cote D'Ivorie, in which one or two musicians exhibits the skill to enact the same movement and dialogue that can occur with an ensemble of dozens. Lobi soloists and chamber musicians hold a respect worthy post in their rural villages, where they are most likely to be found. It is well recognized that their extraordinary abilities take many years

to attain, and that their role as both the gate to the spirit world in the sacred ceremony, and the world of joy and laughter in a simple moonlight dance, is important in maintaining the health of each individual and in the bonding of the community.

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTS

GYIL (pronounced JEEL or JEE lee) is one of those chamber instruments. It is the national instrument of the Lobi, Dagara, and neighboring nations. It is one of the grandmothers of the mallet keyboard family, is made from fourteen wooden slats (Legaa wood) that are suspended on a frame, over calabash gourds. Each gourd has one to several holes that support a mirlitron of spider's film, which allows each bar to produce a column of buzzing air. The gyil sounds to the ear as a kaleidoscope looks tote eye - a dazzling matrix of consistent, yet ever changing, interlocking elements engaged in dynamic conversation. It is curious to find that such a powerful sound can be so soothing and healing. Throughout West Africa, people believe that any marimba's woody sound comes from a vibration of water that physically balances the water in the bodies of people and animals.

The gyil is used for everything in Lobi and Dagara life, from weddings and funerals to dances and everyday recreation. Nearly every man in the community can play at least a tune or two, yet the gyil master (an instrument maker as well as player) studies the instrument for much of his life before he is considered worthy to represent the community at sacred events. In that capacity he is, much like a doctor, on call to heal emotional or physical illnesses, and like an academic advisor, always available to coach and evaluate young musicians. The gyil master is especially important as the initiator of the funeral, the Lobi's and Dagara's most important rite of passage.

Played with two wooden/rubber beaters, the gyil is played alone, or in ensemble with a second gyil and/or drummers, singers, and dancers. Like its antecedent the western marimba, the gyil has a vast repertoire, passed from father to son for centuries. The gyil Tradition has "set the tone" for the melody/improv/melody form common in jazz. Even youngsters who play gyil are expected to remember the complex pieces and improvise according to dance movements and the singer's directives.

The KAKRAMA is a 20 to 30 inch mouth bow that is probably a predecessor of the jaw harp and the berimbau. The left hand holds the instrument to the mouth and changes the pitch of the bark string. The right hand holds a stick, which strikes the other end of the string. The player changes the timbre of the instrument by changing the shape of his mouth. Kakarama was never meant to be a complicated solo instrument, rather a way for bachelors to lull themselves to sleep while their married friends were retiring with their wives.

KUAR is the Lobi hand drum. It is made from a crocodile hide stretched across the hold atop a very large calabash. Uars are relatively scarce because in the arid land of the Lobi nation calabash gourds rarely grow large to suit the instrument.

GANGA is the Lobi funeral drum. Thick cow hides are stretched over both ends of a hollowed out tree trunk and played with either one hand and one stick, or with two short sticks. Ganga usually accompanies two gyils.

The KOKOLELE is a simple 8 bar xylophone without resonators that is played by striking the end of the bars with a pair of wooden sticks. Often children on the farm play this instrument out in the fields to keep monkeys and other animals away from the precious crops.

Dagomba Drums-LON, sometimes called “talking drum'” is a double conical drum with two skins fastened on either end with rawhide strips that connect the skins directly to one another. The player places the middle of the drum under one arm which squeezes the rawhide strips to change the pitch of the drum while the other hand strikes the drum with a curved stick. Two lon are played here.

KUNGA, called brekete in the south of Ghana, is a cylindrical drum with two heads that do not readily change pitch. Attached to each head is a short rawhide snare that gives the instrument its characteristic buzzy sound.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS
In Ghana, KAKRABA LOBI is considered to be the gyil's spokesperson by virtue of being one of the only living virtuosos to have mastered the instrument’s vast and difficult repertoire, and to have gained international acclaim as a concert soloist.

He was born in Kalba Saru in the Lobi and Brifo area of Upper west Ghana in 1939. His father is a farmer who was also highly skilled in the art of making and paying Gyil, like his father before him. His brothers, too, make and play gyil. As a child, Kakraba watched and listened intently, and thus became involved in the family tradition.

When he was old enough, Kakraba traveled south to the city of Accra where he was invited by many people to perform. He gave broadcasts for radio Ghana, and in 1957 Professor J.H. Nketia offered him a teaching post in the Institute of African Studies. From 1962 until 1987 Kakraba was a full-time member, and is presently an advising member of the staff at the Institute. His guest lectures at universities in Germany, Japan, Scandinavia, and the United States, and has performed throughout North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. His particular approach to composing and improvising has been studied by percussionists and ethnomusicologists from around the world. He is a musical living legend, considered in his homeland to be the world's gyil spokesperson.

VALERIE DEE NARANJO is of Native American (Ute) and Latin American heritage. She started playing percussion as a child and traveled with her family throughout North and Central America exploring the music of other Native American peoples. She journeyed to West Africa after she learned of the existence of polyphonic marimba music there. Since 1988 she has spent most autumn seasons among Lobi and Dagara peoples in Ghana.

She first performed in Ghana's Kobine Festival of Traditional Music in 1988, after the chief of the festivals host community decreed that women be allowed (for the first time) to play gyil publicly. In 1996 she and Barry Olsen took a first place award in Kobine, becoming the only non-Ghanaians to date to do so. Valerie has also researched and studied in Botwana, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Egypt, Zambia and Zimbabwe; and lived in Johannesburg, South Africa, where in 1994 she opened with Thuli Dumakude Johannesburg's Civic Theatre to its first post-apartheid audiences in the production BUYA AFRICA. She co-directs with Barry Olsen the multi-instrumental/vocal quartet MANDARA and has given performances on gyil, marimba, djembe and other percussion instruments on six continents. She arranged the percussion books for the Broadway hit THE LION KING and currently performs in THE LION KING and NBC's SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE BAND. She has arranged, performed and recorded with Philip Glass, David Byrne, Tori Amos, Hugh Masekela, and the international percussion MEGADRUMS with Airto Moreira, Zakir Hussein, and Glen Velez. She is a clinician for LP Music Group and Vic Firth, Inc.

BARRY OLSEN is a native New Yorker who began his professional career playing trombone in that city's Latin dance music scene, then recently dubbed “Salsa.” Over the years he has performed with almost all the major artists in this field, including Ray Baretto, Eddie Palmieri, Hector Lavoe, Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Marc Anthony, and La India. He has also worked with Paul Simon, David Byrne, Charlie Persip and many others.

Barry lived and worked in Johannesburg in 1994 where he recorded “Ancestral Healing” with Pops Mohammed and “Jazzin Universally” with Airto Moreira, Jose Neto, and several of South Africa's top jazz artists. He is the regular pianist for Chris Washburn's Latin-jazz group Syotos, and appears often with Harvie Swartz's group Eye Contact, playing piano and trombone. On marimba and percussion, he plays in the orchestra of THE LION KING.

TRACKS:

1. Mandela - 5:23

(Kakraba: gyil, Valerie: djembe, Barry: stool)
Two things impress me about Kakraba. He is strong and expressive, whether counseling his children, giving a lecture at the University of Ghana, or chatting with friends. He is and has always been a champion of change and advancement. He left his own village as a young teenager in order to acquaint himself with “other ways of doing things.” He tried many trades - weaving, fishing, driving a cab. He suffered and was rejected. He doubted, reconsidered and tried again. When, at the age of seventeen, he found his true mission - playing the gyil - the sun rose in his life.

The last time that I visited Kakraba in his hometown, Accra, he was championing the cause of women's rights. “In Ghana the women are not given enough rights and responsibilities,” he says, referring to the traditional roles of women. “My own wife Vida handles the accounts, makes family decisions, and even translates for me.”

He and I were busy. We went to the USIS (United States Information Service), all around the neighborhood, to the University of Ghana, and to do a television spot for CNN to talk about the idea that women are capable of doing many things, including playing gyil (traditionally a man's instrument).

No wonder Kakraba, aware of the continuing plight (in 1987) of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, wrote a spirited song saying, “Mandela should be free.” The song has at its center Barry playing a sonorous old stool that he had been sitting on. Kakraba is playing one of his favorite gyils and I am on one of my favorite djembes. Kakraba's interest in combining the gyil with a djembe (an instrument which is outside of the Lobi tradition) may have been inspired by his experience with the National Dance Company of Ghana where he collaborated with artists from many different traditions, most notably with master drummer Mustapha-Tetty Addy. (See Lyrichord LYRCD 7250, “Mustapha - Tetty Addy; Master Drummer from Ghana.”)

Pire and Darkpe Song Cycle -The Funeral

The following two pieces would traditionally be played in a much longer form at a Lobi funeral. Lobi people, like many others, believe that birth and death are but significant occasions in one's eternal life. Therefore, the funeral is one of the Lobi's most important rites of passage. The funeral ceremony of a common person lasts about three days, that of an important elder - a week or so. A chief's funeral can last a month or longer, with the musicians continuously “taking shifts,” and the mourners returning home to rest, eat, and make a living.

The funeral would not exist without the gyil, which not only announces the death of a person, but also provides with its sound vibration the medium for the spirit of the deceased to pass from this world to the next. Traditionally all gyil music is played, sung, danced, and listened to for extended periods, often without a break, so that one musician will step in behind and take over from another while allowing the music to continue uninterrupted. Several songs are played one after another in “song cycles” keeping a consistent rhythm so that the dancing can continue for hours.

2. Pire - 3:10 Improvised in a traditional manner (Kakraba: solo gyil)
Sometimes called “warming the xylophone,” pire is the most important music and the first to be heard. Pire announces to the community for whom the musician has been summoned to play. It identifies the lineage of the musician himself; (when I hear pire, I can identify the player and his teacher). Gyils, unlike Western instruments, do not employ a “fixed pitch,” so pire allows the musician to literally warm up to the pitch center and tonality of the instrument in front of him, as he is often called upon to play instruments other than his own.

3. Po Ma Tema Kapouna Tu Daba (Traditional Lobi) - 6:17
(Kakraba: solo gyil)
This piece talks about the fact that the collision of cultures affects more than each nation's political structure. It is not as simple superficial changes in dress and eating habits. Often family practices, and even individual ways of seeing things need to be re-evaluated.

This piece, recorded live with no overdub, shows Kakraba's mastery of independence between right and left hands, his subtlety, and large range of dynamics and expression. The sound of his voice is intentional. “You got to use the mouth,” he says, “for the song to be strong.”

4. Po Beng Be Kalbada Puo (Traditional Lobi) - 5:04
“There are plenty of women at Kalbada Market”
(Kakraba: gyil, Valerie: gyil, Barry: kuar)
In the rural visages markets occur once every six days, with a core group of merchants traveling a circuit of six communities. Market days are special. Normally sleepy little villages transform as locals take the opportunity to sell their food, clothing and craft, musicians play to stir excitement and earn a little spare change, and generally everyone leaves home for at least a few minutes to “check in.”

5. Kpang Kpan Kpulo (Traditional) - 1:45
(Kakraba: kakarama, Valerie: kakarama)
“A man without fingers is telling me that he is going to beat me. Now just how do you suppose that he is going to do that?”

6. Bagpine Song Cycle - 5:20
Bagbine (pronounced BOG be nay) is music for fun. Any kind of dancing is considered fun. This first piece TINSOR NIBE is actually a work song. Songs that drive the work of any group of people transform manual work, the primary means of building in the village and on the farm.

I thought little of roof building until I was invited to repair the roof of my teacher Baaru’s house in Lawra one morning. Pounding mud onto an adobe roof under a scorching sun became, after a few minutes, almost unbearable. When I began to sing the work song that the other women were singing, the work became a strenuous game. Normally the young men in the village are able to spend many years deeply involved in the building of their communities, house by house and barn by barn.

If you were a young man considering marriage, you would arrange a meeting so that your bride’s father could decide the dowry that you, the prospective son-in-law, must pay. If you were from a family of means, then you and your father-in-law would agree upon an amount of currency, bulk of goods, or number of heads of livestock. For most sons, however, your father-in-law decides how big of a building project you must complete. Regardless of how small a building he may have in mind, you cannot build it alone and so, you rally your friends for aid, promising them that when THEY wish to marry, you will be at their disposal to help them “pay their dowry.”

The rhythm of Tinsor Nibe tracks (follows) the movement of the worker on the ground who picks up a bundle of reeds and throws it in the air toward another man standing on the roof who, on the next beat, catches the reeds and throws them onto the appropriate place on the rooftop.

The next song in the cycle, Ghana Poble, is an open complaint: "Ghana Poble, vyele vyele – Ghanaian girls, they talk too much." This refers to the practice that young girls have of testing their suitor's devotion by sending their closest friends to tempt the suitor.

The next song:
"Bin gede wuo, wala wara daa bin gede wuo ken nguro apatashi- blind man don't go drinking apatashi" (an especially strong distilled liquor).
The final piece:
"Nyen yele Naamwin sosi – we are all under God."

7. Dagomba Music (Traditional) - 3:01
(Kakraba: kunga, Valerie: lon, Barry: lon)
The Wala and Mamprusi are neighboring nations to the Lobi who emigrated to the Upper West of Ghana from Nigeria. They brought with them two types of drums, which are played, in ensemble. This performance is in two sections, the first, Ganga Bele, is music from the area close to the town Wa. The second, Damba Gakai Bambaya is from Tamale.

8 & 9. The Darkpe Song Cycle (Traditional Lobi) – 8:48
(Kakraba: gyil, Valerie: guil, Barry: ganga)
Ganda Yina is one of the first songs that I heard on the gyil. It is a funeral song that say, "the breadwinner is away" (a family has lost its husband or father). Kakraba has arranged this simple tune into an elegant movement. It is usually the first piece that we play to begin a duo or trio program.

The last time Kakraba and I played this song in its traditional setting was for the funeral of the paramount chief of the Lobi people living in the greater Accra area. When we arrived a human corridor opened to make way for the master of masters (Kakraba) of Lobi funeral music. As we took our places we were surrounded by a ganga player (the traditional accompaniment to the funeral gyil) and a crowd of the funeral party.

Everyone listened intently to pire. Old men nodded and young women stilled their playing children in respect to the music. As soon as the first phrase of Ganger Yina came out of the instruments the atmosphere "struck lightning." I couldn't believe how loud everything was! The ganga man was playing as loud as a human being could possibly play, if only to match the power and grace of the dancing.

The second song has two different sets of lyrics with different meanings, which is common among peoples who share the same musical heritage who speak mutually unintelligible languages. One version, Kukur Ganda, refers to the breadwinner's hoe blade that stays busy throughout the growing season to feed the family. This accentuates

the grief of the deceased's family, whom have lost their breadwinner. The other version, Long Kpen Domo (Your Enemy Among You), says: "You don't realize that the person living in your own house is your enemy until something unfortunate happens to you and you find him/her unwilling to come to your aid.

10. Bik Pibe Doye (Traditional) - 3:05
"That orphan is suffering," (Kakraba: kakarama solo)
A father and mother die and leave their child on his own in the road. When the rain comes and beats down upon him, he cries for his suffering, because he has no one to turn to for help. Death is not good for young children.

11. Jon Plek Ple/Sa Yina Ekya da Kpulo (traditional) - 4:26
Kakraba has here produced a brilliant arrangement of a simple and very old traditional song that carries a powerful lesson: "Here a blind man is busy trying to tell me how much he has seen, yet since he is not able to see as I can, what can he possibly tell me?" Perhaps I was a blind person when I first heard Kakraba playing this song during a recent residency at Cal Arts. I fell in love with the piece and asked Kakraba if I could learn it from him. At first he ignored me, but then after two days of my insistence, he muttered something about the song not being very good for me and reluctantly began to teach me.

That night I began to practice Jon Plek in earnest I fell ill – just a little fever. I attributed it to the exhaustion of an intense study/rehearsal schedule (I had flown from New York to spend a few days). I continued to practice Jon Plek. To my delight the piece was coming along – but so was my strange fever.

The night I was to fly back to New York I could hardly walk. Mrs. Ladzepo, Kakraba's hostess had a look at me and said "malaria" (yes, I'd had it before). But later my husband caught my illness (malaria is not contagious). I remembered what Kakraba had said about Jon Plek and made special prayers to the men and women who had in the distant past been part of this song, asking their approval that I be part of it also, assuring that I would play Jon Plek in their honor and for worthy causes. Both of us recovered quickly.

SA YINA EKYA DA KPULO
The second song in this cycle is a dirge that ends many funeral cycles. Sa Yina Ekya Da Kpulo" (Your father's house has gone to spoil).

12. Naamwin Yelle Nibe (Traditional Lobi) - 2:55
(Kakraba: kokolele)
This song says, "People, God has the power to do anything."

13. A Bi Woni Bana Kaaba (Traditional Lobi) - 8:34
(Kakraba: kokolele)
"Take care to share your treasures equally within your family and to treat each member of your family equal care, consideration, and respect. Do not give in to the tendency to choose favorites in your family."

CREDITS

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