

## Feet Don't Change

“Feet Don't Change” is a joyful jazz work for octet that celebrates what all Americans have in common during a period of historic divisiveness. When I lived in Ghana in 2017, I was deeply moved by the connections between West African and American cultures and felt inspired to compose this body of work which is rooted in jazz but also heavily inspired by 19th and 20th-century European classical and Ghanaian traditional music. By placing these styles alongside one another, I highlight their commonalities and explore my place as a White man performing Black American music.

Experiencing Black American music deepens our collective resilience, cooperation, and vulnerability, the very skills we need to face our social, political and economic troubles. While no one person or performance can tackle the enormity of our country's problems I feel confident that real progress comes from a series of resolute steps, taken together. By celebrating our common identity and values we can walk the path towards a more equitable future with shared purpose. On this long march the Feet Don't Change.

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Mike Piolet - drum set

Miguel Zenon - alto saxophone (track 2)

Recorded at Oktaven Audio by Ryan Streber on 12/12/25

Mixed & Mastered by Dave Darlington at Bass Hit Recording on 3/9/2026

Produced by Joseph Herbst

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In February of 2017 I arrived in Ghana feeling more miserable than I have felt at any other point in my life. It had been eight months since I left the United States to complete a vaguely defined fellowship for musical self-study in India and during this period I became increasingly lonely, confused and weary. I naively believed that immersing myself in a foreign cultural environment would lead me to a totally original musical style but instead my callow plans mainly resulted in a series of disturbing experiences: a gang of angry teenagers hurling stones at me for walking by, getting stranded outside during a historically devastating cyclone, and a child prostitute propositioning me so desperately that her fingernails cut into the skin of my forearm. Even more crushing than these violent episodes was the slow growth of self-doubt, loneliness, and cultural dispossession. Rather than inspire some miraculous musical discovery, these months in India fundamentally challenged my understanding of the world. I needed to leave, and I chose to relocate my studies to a region with a more direct link to American culture.

From the moment I stepped off the plane in Accra, Ghana, I felt a profound flood of joy and relief. Everything from the smells to the clothes to people's facial expressions felt more familiar to me than I could have possibly imagined. After eight months of travelling in places that felt utterly foreign, I immediately felt at home in a way that I never would have expected as a European American.

I mostly felt welcomed in Ghana because of the kind and generous attitude of my new teachers and acquaintances, but my emotions were also the result of the cultural similarities to The United States that permeated every aspect of my experience. The way that the Ghanaians cook, worship, and speak to one another reflects a close connection to America that predates the mere influence of globalization.

Music holds the most ubiquitous commonalities. While I knew intellectually that traditional West African music is the foundation of Black American music, the tangible reality of the kinship between these styles is more powerful than any recording or analysis can communicate. I heard singers cry out *identical* phrases to those sung by Son House and witnessed drummers play *exactly* the same rhythms as Chano Pozo. Experiencing these sounds in person, after eight months away from them in South Asia, renewed my spirit profoundly.

I glided through the next two months of that trip in a haze of study and fellowship. I learned many musical lessons but most importantly I also realized something deeper about myself that has taken the last decade for me to fully

understand: I left my home country because I was looking for something that was missing in my art. I convinced myself that I was following a genuine interest in music from South Asia even though, at that time, my understanding of the styles I purportedly wanted to learn was surface-level and far more technical than cultural. I have since realized that when I boarded that plane to India I was actually searching for an alternative to Black music, and if I've learned anything over the last ten years, it's that, for me, there is no alternative.

I will never stop wrestling with the complexities of dedicating my life to a style of music that comes from the Black community when I am not Black, but an empathetic American will notice similar complexities in virtually every aspect of our lives: Our economic prosperity is the result of the unredeemable suffering and incomprehensible sacrifice of enslaved Africans and their descendants. American dance, fashion, and *every genre* of our music (from Country to Hip Hop) owes an enormous debt to the Black community. Indeed the central hypocrisy of America's culture is that we take the contributions of African Americans, Native Americans and recent immigrants while refusing to afford the individuals in these groups equal treatment. Music may have made these realities more obvious to me, but in this country they are inescapable regardless of what profession one chooses.

I consider the United States my home, and accepting myself means making peace with both the beauty and ugliness of this country. I understand better now that the tremendous, often unacknowledged, contribution of African Americans is central to the identities of Americans of every color, including me. I realized this because when I inserted myself into Asian communities that are much less influenced by African culture, I felt utterly bereft. Those months in India helped me recognize that, as an American, without Black culture, *I have no culture at all*.

Dizzy Gillespie once said, "You can't steal a gift." Unlike the enslavement of African Americans, Black music came into the world through voluntary acts of love, not forced acts of labor. Despite over four hundred years of subjugation and suffering, the African diaspora has consistently used music to assert its humanity. In the process, they invented art that gives meaning to my life and to the lives of others all over the world. Calling music "Black" is about acknowledging and respecting the originators of the style, not determining whose purview it falls under. Moreover, I believe that the resilience, vulnerability, and cooperation that musicians and audiences need to appreciate Black American Music can help us overcome this country's divisions better than almost anything else.

The United States is deeply divided. The prospects for our social, economic, and political future have never looked worse in my lifetime. In spite of all this, I still believe that it is possible to achieve America's promise if we work towards it together. We need each other, and I hope that this music will communicate that message in a way none of my words can.

## **Prelude**

*"I think that you and I might learn a great deal from each other if you can overcome the curtain of my color... White means that you are European still. And Black means that I'm African. But we both know we've both been here too long. You can't go back to Ireland or Poland or England and I can't go back to Africa. We will live here together, or we'll die here together."*

—James Baldwin 1968 Interview

## **Feet Don't Change**

I began chanting this three word phrase to myself while dancing in Ghana, but the exact origin of the title lies in some mysterious place deep in my subconscious. While I often marveled at the other dancer's feet stepping perfectly in time to the many layers of rhythm expressed by the drum choir, I have come to see a greater meaning in these words than a mere description of what I was seeing. Once you feel the beat, your feet don't change.

Across regions and genres, a common stance of joy and fellowship unites all of my favorite music. Grounding my work in these principals gives me a foundation that connects my decisions to my artistic forebears. These people planted the "roots" that connect me to a larger tradition. Just like my heroes I want to unite my community through the joy of gathering and sharing moments together. When we dance together, our feet don't change.

Black music has always flourished in defiance of violence, greed, and white supremacy. My art is intended to be a temporary respite from, a hearing force for, and an organizing battle cry against those forces. I hope that this music represents one of many steps I will take towards these ideals. On the long march towards an equitable future for everyone, the feet don't change.

## **I. Sendoff**

Much like the celebration of life services in New Orleans, Ghanaian funerals are a joyous all-day affair full of food, drink, and ecstatic music. At the first of such ceremonies I attended during my time in Ghana my ears were drawn to a

nine-beat melody played on the gyile (a West African xylophone). When I asked what this melody is for, my guide replied that it is played “to give the departed a proper sendoff.” The word “sendoff” immediately brought to mind the exuberant ensemble displays of early big band jazz, so the title is partly a reference to that, but this piece is mostly inspired by the image I saw that day of a spirit departing earth: not a robed angel gliding serenely into heaven but the burning embers of a human soul piercing the atmosphere, like a shooting star roaring into eternity.

## **II. The Turning**

This piece takes inspiration from the West African traditional piece Agbekor. This musical story has been passed down orally for centuries by the Ewe people of Southern Ghana and Benin to document their tribal war for independence. It has slow and fast movements (in every sense of the word), and in its complete form, Agbekor features over twenty distinct sections of responsorial chants, costumed dances, and improvised rhythmic counterpoint. Many recordings exist, and several performance videos can be found on YouTube.

“The Turning” refers to one particularly memorable rhythm that the master drummer plays to signal that the dancers should change their steps. I used the turning rhythm as a starting point for this composition and it appears in several of the other movements as well. Much of the harmony of this movement is derived from a twelve-tone row that is stated first in the melody of “Sendoff.”

## **III. Hatsiatsia (Interlude)**

This improvised piano piece incorporates elements from several other parts of the suite and it gets its name from the drum-less interlude pieces in Ewe music.

## **IV. Jump Cut**

Dance permeated every aspect of my experience in Ghana, and during my time there I began to track movement and rhythm in many places where I had not before. I first noticed it in the seemingly mundane cadence of walking and speaking, but my awareness eventually widened to encompass everything from the continuous crackle of frying oil to the momentary interjections of a soccer ball being kicked.

This melody is constructed from several pointillistic gestures that recall a boxer’s swift slices and leaps. It is also named after a film editing technique that

employs the passage time as an expressive tool in its own right, instead of merely a container for information: In movies, a jump cut breaks a continuous shot into parts, creating the effect of skipping forward in time.

#### **IV. In the Light**

Walk with me  
You belong  
Where I've been  
All along

In the light  
Up above  
There's a life  
Lived for love

#### **V. Yiila**

The boundaries of Western performances are nonexistent in traditional West African drum/dance/dramas. Performers often become audience members and vice versa. Because live music lasts for many hours during significant events like weddings and funerals, the distinction between a concert and everyday life is unclear. In fact, many African languages have no word for “music.” There are words for particular songs or dances, but the art form itself isn't named in the abstract.

The beginning of this composition is based on a traditional Sisaala rhythmic and harmonic pattern called Yiila. While most of the music I learned in Ghana is paired with specific cultural events (e.g., meals, anniversaries), I heard Yiila in multiple contexts and received mixed explanations about what it is for. I chose to embrace this multiplicity to depict a broad sweep of life's emotion. Over the course of almost twenty minutes, this piece completes a life cycle from early innocence through swaggering youth, eventually leading to oppressive anguish and culminating in overwhelming joy.

As we live through these varied environments together, I hope that the listener begins to experience the dissolution of boundaries that I felt in Ghana. In this world, there is no one intended focal point of attention, there is no delineation between melody and harmony, and there is no line between life and music.

#### **Ebebe Man (Bonus Track)**

*Translates to “The Land of Africa.”*

I learned this piece aurally from Ghanaian atenteben (wooden flute) master Dela Botri. It is an ancient processional that was played on hog tusks for kings and queens in central Ghana over a millennia ago and is still performed today. To my knowledge this lighthearted arrangement is the only recorded version of this song.

### **A Dim and Foreboding Dawn (Bonus Track)**

I first drafted this piece in October of 2020 as the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 promised to take an even higher death toll than the already stunning casualties of the first strain. I revisited the sketch and began arranging it in September 2024, shortly before the re-election of President Donald Trump.

My impulse to expand this composition was motivated by a connection between the two periods: they were both catastrophic events that ensured more tragedies were on the horizon. While we didn’t know exactly how we would suffer during those foreboding months, we knew from experience that it would be terrible and prolonged.

The triumph and tragedy of human history is cyclical. No matter how bad things have been in the past, humanity has still persisted for millennia. We have lived through generations of hardship with no cessation promised only to see periods of unprecedented prosperity arise from the gloom. We might need to live through a dark day and weather a tempestuous night, but I still believe that there is a brighter morning on the horizon if we search the skies together.

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