

# RESOLVING THE LIMITATION OF PLAYING SEBENE PATTERNS ON THE FIVE AND SIX-STRINGED BASS GUITARS

By Reuben Kigame

## ABSTRACT

Congolese Sebene as a style has become extremely popular across the African continent and in the Diaspora. Traceable back to the early 1970's in Congo, the style was developed and popularized by the band, Zaiko Langanika, having been crafted by the group's drummer who was inspired by the sound of the train they had taken to go to Brazzaville for performance. (Wampayo interview 2018).

One characteristic of this music is the booming bass sound which is achieved by both sophisticated amplification and style of playing. One of the most unique sounds that carries the music is achieved by bumping the thumb on the fourth or the Lower E string in half-muted percussive patterns.

When the average African bass player of Benga, Rhumba or the Sebene is given the five-stringed or six-stringed bass, the ability to produce the percussive booming sound is minimized. Even when veterans try to bypass the challenge by simply avoiding the extra strings, the result is heroic but not the same as playing on the 4-stringed bass and most would admit lack of freedom to improvise.

In this Paper I wish to examine the string structure on the bass guitar and show how technological advancements can end up limiting talent instead of improving it. I also wish to outline how different African musicians have dealt with this challenge before proposing a technical solution through the development of what I am calling "Reuben's convertible Bass Guitar" to be developed between me and an Engineering graduate at the University of Nairobi, leading to a Kenyan solution to a global musical dilemma.

In order to share my story and suggestions as summarized in this Paper, I read several publications on the history and techniques of playing the bass guitar but also interviewed six key Sebene players who have played for at least five years. I also made consultation with several Engineering friends before settling on a young graduate with both the passion for music and that of innovation. The information from select authors, the seasoned players and my years of leading several music bands, writing, arranging and recording different genres of music at my studios has shaped the discussion in this project. This Paper summarizes my findings and offers proposals on how to empower Africa's musicians through alternative technology.

## INTRODUCTION

The bass guitar can be classified in several different ways. Some are fretted and some fretless. Some have four strings or more, including some with seventeen or twenty-four. Some are acoustic and some electric. In this paper, we will concentrate on the electric bass, developed in the 1930's by an American from Seattle called Paul Tutmarc and popularized by his son, Bud in the 1940's, and most of all, Leo Fender, from the 1950's. In October, 1951, with the help of his employee, George Fullerton, Fender began the mass production of the electric bass which he called the Precision Bass or P-Bass. (Slog and Coryat 1999 p.154).

Until the 1970's when extra strings began to appear on bass guitars, almost every bass player played on the 4-stringed bass. Today you can find bass guitars with five, six or more strings. Nevertheless, the four-stringed bass remains the norm for many bass guitarists around the world. (Pfeiffer 2010 p.10). Nearly all the African bass guitar players interviewed for this discussion confirm Pfeiffer's point. Mark Lenini, a Kenyan Masters student of music in Norway who has played with several renowned groups in East Africa, told me during the interview that if he was given a chance to choose a guitar to play Rhumba or any other African style, the four-stringed would be his undebatable choice. During a recording session at my Kigame Media Studios in Eldoret about seven years ago, I was working on some Benga music from a Kisumu-based artist. I called in two of my Benga session musicians, Laban on the Lead guitar and Collins on the bass. I handed Collins my five-stringed bass to cut the bass sections for me. I noticed he was struggling a lot with the flow of the session and so I asked him what was wrong. He told me he was not comfortable playing Benga on my guitar because the fifth string was obstructing his groove. This was the beginning of my interest in this study.

Among the many questions to be discussed in resolving this challenge, three are key:

1. Why do most bass players prefer the four-stringed to those with more than four?
2. How has the African music audiences responded to the four-stringed as compared to the other types of bass?
3. What can be done to ensure that the African bass player always has the four-string option in playing his music?

## WHY THE FOUR-STRINGED BASS IS PREFERRED

From years of teaching, producing and arranging different genres of music for bands and solo artists in East Africa and the Diaspora, I have come to appreciate that the selection of the bass guitar for a particular genre of music depends largely on what one is doing in the specific arrangement. Most R. and B., Rhumba as well as Reggae players have tended to prefer a five-

stringed bass because they can achieve lower notes. Some of those who have done funky slapping during the recordings and occasionally during performances with Sifa Voices preferred the five-stringed because it gave them the freedom to combine low and high strings, especially when playing octave patterns. One of my Key Informants, Mr. Gerishom Walaka, told me during an interview that he would use a six-stringed bass if he was experimenting with playing chords or replicating the “one-man guitar” concept as the case is with regular guitars where one plays chords and emphasizes the notes that produce a melody line at the same time. Both Jeremy Sita who has played with me in Sifa voices and in studio sessions as well as Marshall Dennis Wampayo of the Nova Muzika band said that they would use the five-stringed to play Rhumba but would stick to a four-stringed when playing the Sebene. Jeremy added that he has mostly utilized a 4-stringed to play Benga as well.

In response to my asking Mr. Mark Lenini what he would prefer between the two guitars, he said, **“I find it more comfortable and easy to play. For the African music especially, a four string is my preferred choice because it has a very unique tone for Sebene especially that is hard or hard to reproduce in a 5 string.”**

In view of this diversity, the African bass guitar player may thus defend his preference of the four-stringed bass for several reasons. First, he would argue as did Gerishom and Jeremy that the four-stringed does everything a bass guitar should do and a six-stringed takes you into unnecessary interests and complications. Gerishom would argue that, besides being experimental, the six-stringed tends to replicate the work of a regular guitar, only at a lower octave. So why do most African bass players especially of Benga and Sebene prefer the four-stringed bass?

There are three main reasons why African Sebene and Benga players prefer the four-stringed bass:

1. The use of four strings provides easier movement and stretching of fingers, thus enabling greater accuracy in producing notes or building chords. The four-stringed has a narrower neck compared to a five-stringed and, certainly, a six-stringed and beyond. The wider the neck, the more limited you are with fingering and movement. Mr. Charles Muhindo, who is a worship leader at Resurrection Temple, Embakasi, Nairobi, and a bass/lead guitarist with Nova Muzika for many years, told me that he has heard several bass guitarists who play African music on the five-stringed miss notes by either overshooting or undershooting. In other words, they may aim for a note “C” and end up playing a “C-sharp” or “B” instead. Mr. Walaka confirmed that the wider the neck, the more difficult it is to move especially on the higher notes.
2. The four-stringed is the only bass guitar that provides the African musician with that magical “kick” which is produced by using the thumb to generate a percussive, low-throbbing sound which, combined with the drumset kick, gives the music its irresistible spirit of dance. This may be compared to the throbbing tap that is usually produced in Benga music by the smashing of a toe ring on a piece of wood. This is called Gara. The Gara is originally a rhythmic accompaniment of Nyatiti, an eight-stringed lyre whose idiom Benga borrowed heavily from.

When I asked Marshall Dennis Wampayo to explain the advantages of a four-stringed over a five-stringed bass in playing the Sebene, he said: "I was born With Sebene In Me, So I Never Chose To Play Sebene, But Sebene Chose Me And Made Me It's CUSTODIAN. I am Still Playing Sebene Till Today Because It's My DNA, It Is My Roots, The Music I Was Born Into, Grew Up Listening To And I Have Never Got Tired Listening To It Or Playing It. ..."

Asked specifically about the booming, percussive sound Congolese musicians make on the four-stringed, he said: "It Makes Sebene Warming And Hot. It Easily Coordinates With The Congolese Sebene KICK, Because Of The Tonality when It's Fourth String Which Is the "E" is played with the thumb. ... It Gives The Sebene Bass Guitar Player The Easiest Way To Create The GHOST KICK Which I Call In Kiswahili MTUNGI (translated as big clay pot).

A quick explanation for the concept of the "pot" is significant here. On the one hand, Afro-Cuban music of the past often included real clay pots which, when hit with one's palm, produced a deep, booming sound. To view the Congolese Sebene "kick" in this way is of ethnomusicological significance and could form an important study. On the other hand, drawing from this notion and what we could conjecture as a sheer mark of poverty that made most Africans unable to purchase huge music systems with huge speakers, most would become creative by placing the radio transistor or the small-circumferenced speaker of the phonogram or Vinyl Record player on top of a clay pot to produce this booming, deep bass sound. This would then inspire more engaged dancing as the booming bass sound would accentuate the ecstatic pleasure emitted by the music.

Explaining this "ghost kick," Mr. Wampayo added: "This Ghost Kick Is Very Indispensable As Far As Sebene Is Concerned. It Is Created With The Forth String, the E-string, and Goes Hand In Hand With The Drum set Kick. But Its A Bit Lighter Than The Drum Set Kick. ... The Right Hand Does Not Struggle To Create This Ghost Kick, Because The neck of the 4 Stringed Bass Guitar' Is Small So It Makes It Easier For The Player To Create The Ghost Kick Which is So Crucial In Sebene Style."

Commenting on the "kick", Mr. Walaka added that the four-stringed bass was advantageous to the five-stringed because, "It is simple on fingering especially when playing rumba and sebene,... also it goes hand in hand with the kick i.e when you fold your thumb on the fourth string it has some unique kick emphasis ,it actually adds some unique low frequency on the kick hence making it sound deep and soft, or call it low friendly frequency on kick."

Mark Lenini who has played for me and several other groups including the Safaricom Choir said, "Not only is it easier to wrap my hand around the neck, but it also has a better, deep sound."

- What are t

The 5 Stringed Bass Guitar Advantages:

- It Has The Ability To Hit The Low Pitches.
- It Gives The Player The Feelings To Express Himself In A Wider Way.
- It's Deep In Sound.
- It Makes You Feel You Are In Control Of The Played Music.

8. Yes Whenever I am Playing Sebene I Always Prefer The 4 Stringed Bass Guitar. Kindly Read Response Number 6, To Know Why I Prefer It.

But When It Comes To Rhumba, It Depends With The Kind Of Rhumba.

If It's

RHUMBA PATCHANGA( Soft Rhumba):

5 Stringed

HARD RHUMBA: 4 Stringed.

RHUMBA TCHATCHO( One Drop Rhumba): Both 4&5 Stringed Can Do A Good Job For Me.

9. It Depends With The Style Of The Music.

If Its Sebene ,Hard Rhumba Or Rock,They Automatically Respond Well To 4 Stringed Bass Guitar

But If Its Reggae, RB...They Like When Its 5 Stringed Bass Guitar.

10. I Would To Have A Six Stringed Bass Guitar Manufactured With A Special Button:

- If I Press It Down Once, It Makes The Bass Guitar Becomes 5 Stringed, If I Press It Down Again It Makes It A 4 Stringed Bass Guitar.

And It Can Take It Back To 5 & 6 Stringed Bass Guitar If I Release The Button Up.

11. I Won't Remove Anything From The Guitar I Have, In The Contrary I Would Like To Fix a Kind Of Digital Equaliser Into It, As It Can Be Equalised Just By A Button According To The Style Of Music As I Am Playing Live Music.

12. Play What You Love,What You Feel Comfortable With.

If You Are Not Comfortable, You Won't Improvise, Because Improvisation Is A Result Of Being Comfortable.

4 Or 5 Go With What Gives you Comfortableness.

Thank You Sir.

- L'as D'Asile

- Zanga Zanga

- Shakara Musical

- Tout Choc Star

- Christian Brothers

- Rhema Band

- BENE NOVA

Kenya:

- NOVA MUSICA INT'L

Etc....

Individuals:

DRC:

- Kabatchy Wa Nzambi

- Lina Ngoya

- Ntumba David

- Lazard Taka Sasa.

Etc...

Kenya:

- Rodha Namutembe

- Alice Kimanzi.

Etc...

3. Here Are The Style Of Music I Do Play Most.

- Sebene

- Agwaya

- Mutwashi

- Rhumba

- Reggae

- Roch

- Blues.

4. Yes I Have Been Playing Sebene.

I was born With Sebene In Me, So I Never Chose To Play Sebene, But Sebene Chose Me And Made Me It's CUSTODIAN.

= I am Still Playing Sebene Till Today Because It's My DNA, It Is My Roots, The Music I Was Born Into, Grew Up Listening To And I Have Never Got Tied Listening To It Or Playing It.

The First Time I Played Bass Guitar Officially Is In 1986, So That Should Be 32 Years Ago.

5. I first Learned To Play On 4 Stringed Bass Guitar.

On Fri, Oct 19, 2018, 19:09 Reuben Kigame <[kigame@fishkenya.net](mailto:kigame@fishkenya.net)> wrote:

Thanks, well-received.

Blessings.

Slog, John J.; Coryat, Karl [ed.] (1999). *The Bass Player Book: Equipment, Technique, Styles and Artists*. Backbeat Books. p. 154. [ISBN 0-87930-573-8](#)

Roberts, Jim (2001). ['How The Fender Bass Changed the World' p. 56](#) "The surf/instrumental rock genres of the early 1960s were crucial proving grounds of the still-newfangled electric bass ..."

1. [Jump up ^ "Audiovox #736: The World's First Electric Bass Guitar!". \*Vintage Guitar\*. June 19, 2017.](#)
2. [Jump up ^](#)

I have attached a new well-detailed article on the bass guitar. You can find a bibliography below.

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