But, as he reminds us, similar expressions are also an important part of the linguistic expression of emotion in other languages and culture—as he writes, “a language’s psycho-ostensive formulas do, in fact, furnish excellent clues to its cultural preoccupations” (109). Icelandic, for instance, has its own set of ready-made, predictable, prepackaged utterances and psycho-ostensive expressions that must be learned before a person can become fully linguistically and culturally competent in Icelandic culture, and, even with only brief reflection on these after reading Matisoff’s book, it was obvious to me that they reveal much about the cultural concerns of Icelanders. Thus, even though Matisoff has here focused on Yiddish culture, his book could easily be used as a model for the study of psycho-ostensive expressions in other languages. It is in any case a book that anyone interested in folklore and language, folk narrative and narrative style, or Yiddish folklore should know.


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Capturing the tumultuous history of Central Africa in the telling of popular music history, Gary Stewart presents a thoroughly researched project in Rumba on the River. Moving in short chronological arcs, he examines the development of Congolese popular music—the guitar-driven dance songs that have swept across the world—from acoustic beginnings in the 1940s on through the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s and into the hi-tech soukous of the 1980s and 1990s.

Relying on historical research coupled with interviews of key figures, Stewart pieces together a story untold in such detail until now. His focus on key figures—Franco, Docteur Nico, Abeti, Rochereau—is not at the expense of the numerous other individuals and groups from either side of the Congo river who helped to create the popular
music of the region. As Stewart unfolds the tale, the reader learns about the political, social, and musical environments of both the Belgian and French colonies of the Congo. Meticulous detail brings the story alive as bands come together, studios form, styles emerge, and personalities are forever etched into national imaginations.

Stewart does a fine job of tracing the development of the numerous styles lumped together under the broad term “Congolese music.” He is able to trace the movements of musicians back and forth across the Congo River, to and from destinations in West and East Africa, and in and out of European centers such as Paris. These paths are central to the development and spread of Congolese music, and Stewart incorporates the travels of musicians and sounds into each of his chapters. Furthermore, Stewart explores the range of motivations behind these movements and presents the political, economic, and aesthetic contexts within which musicians created their art. Stewart’s approach in this regard allows the reader access to a broad contextual view and an enriched understanding of popular Congolese music.

What this book does not contain is extensive musical analysis or social/cultural theory. It does not suffer for this, however, and provides valuable insight and information that may be sidelined in the best of ethnographies and ignored in the worst. Stewart’s analysis is subtly contained within his reporting; his enthusiasm and interest in the musical culture of Congolese pop is obvious in his careful research and cogent prose. The extensive discography, which thankfully focuses mainly on recordings that are available to the curious or eager reader, adds substantially to the value of this book. Whether you are a committed fan of Congolese music looking to learn its history, or a reader more generally interested in the dynamics of art in social settings, this book is highly recommended. Be sure to sit close to your stereo with a few of the recordings referred to in the discography, for you will surely want to listen (and dance) every so often—I guarantee it.