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BLUES: COPELAND'S AFRICAN INSPIRATION

By ROBERT PALMER

LEAD: JOHNNY COPELAND, the Texas bluesman who was at S.O.B.'s on Wednesday and Thursday, has never written a scholarly study on the West African roots of the blues. But while the scholars have been theorizing, Mr. Copeland has been busy putting theory into practice. On a recent album, and now on his Afro-Blues '87 Tour, he has been working with a mixed group of African musicians and

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The impact of West African musical traditions on the blues is, of course, a historical phenomenon, and the four West African musicians who have been added to Mr. Copeland's regular band for his current tour play contemporary African pop music and jazz. Today's African pop music is heavily influenced by Latin music and American funk, and so is blues. These are the common elements that make Mr. Copeland's fusion possible, not some distant ancestral connection, though there's just enough similarity, especially between West African and American vocal styles, to indicate that the connection is there.

In any case, the fusion works splendidly. On his own, Mr. Copeland is a powerful performer, and his band has a churning rhythmic authority. With the addition of Smith Haliar's crisply percussive polyrhythms and Konte Maufila's rhythm guitar and vocals, the Copeland band generates an irresistible momentum, punctuated by a horn section of one American and two African musicians. The audience reaction at S.O.B.'s on Thursday was telling. There was listening, but no dancing, during the straight blues portion of the show; after the African musicians joined the group, the listeners crowded onto the dance floor.

The Africans' lighter, more swinging brand of funk made a splendidly fluid rhythmic basis for the Americans' blues improvising. The blues added grit to the Africans' lilting lyricism. There's great potential to this mixture, and one got the impression that Mr. Copeland and his musicians were just beginning to explore its ramifications.