



Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana

By Steven Feld

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Feld's book comes after a decade in which the American anthropologist concentrated almost exclusively on acoustic and visual productions. From 2001 to 2011 he worked on documentation and soundscape composition CDs, jazz collaborative projects, works in partnership with artists, radio documentaries, ethnographic films and more. This book then, deriving from the Bloch Lectures in Music delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2009, refers to much of Feld's work in Accra between 2004 and 2011.

This is a very complex and multi-layered text, and at the same time a smooth-flowing reading, for the way it mixes storytelling and dialogue, music-like composition and a multi-sited perspective. Feld refers to Bakhtinian polyphony, integrating in fact some 32 voices in the course of the whole book, orchestrating them as in a musical score with his own narration. The first chapter introduces the figure of Guy Warren/Ghanaba, probably Ghana's most important jazz musician, who strikingly underlines the role of race in jazz history on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Ghanaba, who was in the USA during the fifties as a drummer, denounces bluntly the fundamentally racist discourse of the "diasporic" approach of many African Americans to Africans who were trying to have a say in the scene of jazz. Disappointed by American jazz, Ghanaba returns to his homeland, where he gives synthesis to his musical vision with a project centred on Handel's *Hallelujah*, bringing together Ga drumming, European classical music, experimental jazz, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist religious elements.

Follows an encounter with Nii Noi Nortey, experimentalist jazz and reggae musician, who provides an Afrocentric view of John Coltrane's music, and reclaims the figure of Beethoven to the African continent. These and other reappropriations speak of cosmopolitanism as an ethical response to injustice (p. 114). Music making is often a political

act, in this global perspective, but different accesses to transnational networks also speak of class differences, as happens for the third chapter about Nii Otoo Annan, another polyvalent figure with a much less privileged background than the previous two names. Starting as ritual drummer, but equally active in the jazz and highlife music scene of Accra, Nii Otoo is also Feld's collaborator in a project that connects to thirty years of research starting in New Guinea. First on the relationship between natural sounds and place-making among the Kaluli, and later in Europe with the relationship between bells and forms of regulating space and time, Feld researched in the frame of what he called *acoustemology*. Starting from a curiosity about the role of bells in Ghanaian music, Feld develops a sonic dialogue with Nii Otoo that takes them from the sound of toads and crickets in the streets of Accra to Johan Sebastian Bach, thanks to a series of musical improvisations.

I also note here that this section forms a neat summary on some of Feld's activity from the past decade, one which makes explicit many relationships and connections that were otherwise up to the listener to retrace in the many CDs he published in this period. Talking about discographic productions, it should be remarked that Feld collaborated with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo as a musician in the Accra Trane Station group, other than producer and researcher, so that many of his dialogues about jazz are born of shared experiences and passion, as for the role of John Coltrane in connecting him to the other side of the Atlantic. This fits very well in the general register of the book, which very often avoids an impersonal academic prose to assume the tone of a memoir, with an agility that reminds of Michael Jackson's writing.

All characters of this polyvocal scene are connected with each other, including of course the author, which takes us to the last section on the Por Por music by the Accra Drivers Union of La. The drivers have taken the honk horns from their trucks to set up a group performing for funerals of members of the Union. This becomes an opportunity to reflect on how objects at times come to embody cosmopolitan relationships and affects, as for the trucks. But also speaks to the materiality of sound and its power in performative mourning practices, in New Guinea, Accra or New Orleans.

In all this, Feld underlines how he tried to use intervocality to let the voices featured in the book give justice to all the heterogeneity of cosmopolitanism, and at the same time manages this way to locate himself in the field very well. Finally, I want to underline how this book springs from years of work in sonic and visual media, to the point that it continually refers to CDs, films and other works published before. There are in particular a trilogy of documentaries and a companion CD that should accompany the reading of the book, thus in a sense multiplying its polyphonic power.