

- Hunters (Bayeye) Within the Greater Sukuma Region of Western Tanzania, *History and Anthropology* 19(4): 229–249.
- 2008b Music Performance on the 19th Century Sukuma-Nyamwezi Caravans to the Swahili Coast, *African Music* 8(2): 6–25.

WEBSITE REVIEW

VoxLox Media. <http://www.voxlox.net>. Steven Feld.

Perhaps best known for his work with the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea beginning in the 1970s, the distinguished anthropologist/ethnomusicologist/linguist Steven Feld has more recently added another distinction – Africanist. Since at least the mid-1990s when he published his well-known article on “Pygmy Pop” (1996), Feld has shifted his keen scholarly lens increasingly towards African music. His fascination with intellectual property and central African music foreshadowed his more extensive work in Ghana that was spurred by his first research trip there in 2004. A year earlier, he founded VoxLox Media, a label that concentrates on the promotion and distribution of his catalog of audio and visual productions over the past eight years. While this impressively prolific body of individual and collaborative work ranges from avant-garde, experimental studio jazz projects and ambient soundscapes to field recordings from the U.S., Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, given the nature of this journal, here I elect to focus on the material stemming from his work in Ghana, which, conveniently enough, comprises the largest portion of this catalog.

Therefore, what I present here departs from many reviews found in this and similar such academic journals; rather than focus on one book or audio recording in particular, this review attempts to synthesize a portion of a scholar’s oeuvre in order to assess its internal thematic congruencies, implications, and contributions to scholarly discourse. Although I am primarily concerned with the “African” portion of his catalog, the larger themes that have guided Feld’s research over the course of his career are apparent. Namely, Feld’s offerings here reflect his continuing fascination with acoustic ecology – connections between music and the natural environment – as well as interests in the ways in which individuals re-imagine their immediate social surroundings to create powerful artistic expressions of self and society. He couples these curiosities with ongoing attention to the temporal and linguistic aspects of the sonic world. Taken together, these recordings also represent an addition to his portfolio of “documentary sound art”, which began in 1991 with his *Voices of the Rainforest* CD (Rykodisc) that drew on his work with the Kaluli. In this way, his VoxLox productions are simultaneously academic and artistic, marrying creative experimentation and personal expression with his commitment to the scholarly pursuit and production of knowledge.

Illustrating this approach, VoxLox Media features Feld's four part series titled *The Time of Bells*. With a few inclusions of examples from the U.S., Japan, and Iraq, this collection predominately focuses on this instrument's sonic/social history in Europe. However, of particular interest here, volume three, released in 2005, showcases the diversity of functions that bells have in Ghana, from their role in por por (pronounced paw-paw) horn honk music among drivers in Accra to contemporary jazz-inspired compositions to the well-known neo-traditional music *kpanlogo* performed by Ga in the urban capital. This volume, like the rest of the series, is concerned with the ways in which the sound and employment of bells shapes, or organizes, temporal ontologies and cosmologies within ritual and everyday life. Overall, Feld shows bells to be much more than mere timekeepers as their resonance combines with other voices to express ethnic, national, and cosmopolitan identities, simultaneously evoking memories of diasporic travels and imaginings of global sojourns.

While on his frequent trips to west Africa, Feld developed a deep relationship with two Ghanaian musicians – Nii Otoo Annan and Nii Noi Nortey. Both men are multi-instrumentalists with a progressive approach to music, pushing sonic boundaries as they cleverly construct new instruments, sounds, and genres. While sharing Feld's non-conformist curiosity for sonic exploration, they also discovered a mutual passion for the music of John Coltrane. The first in a series of three recordings by their trio Accra Trane Station, *Meditations for John Coltrane* (2006), includes collaborative free-form improvisations inspired by Coltrane's later more experimental period (c. 1964-1967). The music features the sounds of Nortey's collection of "afrifones" – African reed instruments modified with saxophone mouthpieces – along with the "African Percussion Kit" of Annan, who combines xylophones, drums, and jazz cymbals to create subtle polyrhythmic textures and grooves. Feld rounds out the low end by plucking the large metal tongues of the three-keyed *ashiwa* box bass.

Similarly, the trio's *Another Blue Train* (2007) pays tribute to Coltrane's memory fifty years after the release of his classic *Blue Trane* recording. Also released in the year of Ghana's golden jubilee, celebrating fifty years of independence from Britain, *Another Blue Train*, takes its inspiration from the trains that connected Ghana's major urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, and Takoradi. In so doing, the album implies a connection between the culturescapes, soundscapes, and technoscapes of Ghana and the Western world. As the trio pays homage to Coltrane's legacy by infusing hints of his vernacular with Ghanaian sensibilities, this trans-Atlantic collaboration represents a type of "feedback loop" (Collins 1987) as jazz becomes re-Africanized, forming a sonic-spiritual connection across temporal and geographic spaces.

A particularly prolific year for the label, in 2007, VoxLox Media also released two projects led by Australian-born visual artist Virginia Ryan, who has lived and worked extensively in Ghana since 2001. First, *The Castaways Project*, initiated in 2003, features Ryan's more than 1000 sculptural paintings, which use washed-up artifacts from Accra's shorelines to evoke Ghana's legacies of slavery, gold mining, and colonialism

as well as local experiences of migration and modernity. In 2006, Ryan invited Feld to collaborate on the project. Reminiscent of his ambient recordings of the Papua New Guinea forest, he produced an hour-long environmental soundscape of the Anomabo shoreline, where some of the material used in the sculptures was taken; additionally, the *Castaways* package includes his fifteen-minute documentary film (DVD) of Ryan's artistic process. The two also worked together on *Exposures: A White Woman in West Africa* (2007), a photographic book, which juxtaposes 60 images of Ryan in diverse domestic, private, and public situations with Feld's insightful essays regarding race (particularly "whiteness"), gender, representation, and power dynamics in west Africa.

Inspired by the visual art of Ryan, particularly her sculptural paintings of blackened sandals washed up on Ghanaian beaches, the Accra Trane Station trio released their third (and most recent) album in 2008 – *Topographies of the Dark*. Recorded in New Mexico, this album brings together Feld's diverse range of social circles as two eclectic American musicians and long-time creative partners of his, Alex Coke (reeds and flutes) and Jefferson Voorhees (drums), converse with the Ghanaian-stacked trio. Together, the quintet produces enigmatic, haunting, and hypnotic jazz-tinged sonic shapes and colors that draw from a free-form, avant-garde, African/American palette. This work, like the visual art that it references, tells the story of movement and memories spanning the Atlantic. Overall, the trio seems more refined and mature; their years-long relationship produces a rapport that is evident, and their interaction with the newcomers seems effortless as it pushes them in uncharted directions.

In 2008, VoxLox also released *Bufo Variations*, featuring Accra Trane Station member and Ghanaian master drummer Nii Otoo Annan. Inspired by the symphony of croaking frogs and chirping crickets that often dominate the nightly soundscape in Accra, Steven Feld continues his explorations of acoustic ecology as the amphibian/insect duet provides the thematic material for a variety of subsequent improvisatory drumming and guitar performances. In this way, Feld asks: what might have happened if Bach was born and raised in Africa? Would he have perhaps produced polyrhythmic sonatas that captured this natural sonic world?

Although in the recording process musicians listened and responded to the thematic material, this backdrop is conspicuously absent on all but one track. One wonders why, and if leaving the ambient track in the mix on the entire album might have given listeners a better sense of the conversations in which the musicians were engaged. Nevertheless, this experimental and innovative recording, yet again, draws attention to connections between physical environment and musical expression, standing as an artistic treatment of acoustic ecology and bridging the nature/culture divide.

More recently, Feld's VoxLox label has released *Klebo! Horn Honk Music from Ghana* (2009), a follow-up to his 2007 Smithsonian Folkways recording (cf. Schauert 2007). Both albums, along with detailed liner notes, examine *por por* music, wherein drivers use old squeeze-bulb car horns in conjunction with local percussion and song to create potent artistic expressions. With these albums, despite the abundance

of scholarship produced on Ghanaian music, Feld manages to shine a light on an unexplored area of this literature. As with his previous projects, he again reveals the ways in which individuals reshape everyday objects, creating a type of sonic bricolage that is in dialogue with its natural and social contexts. These recordings, along with corresponding lyrical transcriptions and translations, offer a rich source of cultural data, providing a window into Ghanaian society; hence they will be of particular interest to those concerned with Ga culture, a social history of transportation, African urban sounds, and cosmopolitan music.

Building on this last theme, Feld offers the film trilogy *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra, Ghana* (2009), illustrating the localization of the global in musical forms (cf. Turino 2000). These three one-hour documentaries draw together his work with the Accra Trane Station and por por musicians, but also include glimpses of his time spent with legendary Ghanaian drummer Kofi Ghanaba (a.k.a. Guy Warren) who has been producing a unique brand of afro-jazz since the 1950s in America and at home. The first segment features a re-invention of Handel's Hallelujah chorus performed by Ghanaba and the Winneba Youth Choir, after which the master drummer discusses the ways that jazz has influenced his storied career. Supplementing the trifecta of Accra Trane Station albums, part two of this film series focuses on Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan, distilling three years of Feld's conversations with these innovative sculptors, instrument makers, and musicians. While Nortey discusses the African legacy of John Coltrane and how it inspired the invention of his afrifone instruments, the film also reveals the creative processes and interactions of the band as it follows them through rehearsals and performances in Ghana and the U.S. Lastly, the film series features a funeral performance by the La Drivers Union Por Por Group as they pay tribute to the memory of a deceased member. Building on the overall theme, Feld subsequently includes a thought-provoking discussion of this performance's relationship with New Orleans jazz funerals. In all, Feld's series invites us to perhaps broaden our definition of jazz, recognizing its particular African heritage and perpetual global proliferations and permutations.

While the catalog and accompanying website is thoroughly impressive, it would be interesting to see a statement by Professor Feld that explains the overall intellectual and artistic connections between the various media projects. For those familiar with Feld's scholarship these linkages may seem obvious, however, for the uninitiated such a clarification may be helpful. I also wondered if it might be possible to imbed the audio on the VoxLox site itself, and perhaps offer a few full-length streaming audio files.

In sum, VoxLox Media represents a prolific body of work that blurs the boundaries between art and academics, nature and culture, as well as innovation and tradition. While much of the catalog, with its experimental and avant-garde sensibilities, may not appeal to some mainstream audiences, this, I believe, is not the intention of this collection. Feld's catalog is as much scholarly discourse as it is creative expression; these materials urge audiences to consider cultural and sonic links between ecology

and ontology as well as musical genres such as art, jazz, folk, and avant-garde. Given its trans-Atlantic scope, the VoxLox catalog also explores interactions of the global and the local as Africa and the West intertwine to create contemporary cosmopolitan canvases of cultural exchange and human ingenuity.

Paul Schauert, independent scholar

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