

Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana. Steven Feld. 2012. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 328 pp.

Over the past several years, Steven Feld has produced an impressively prolific body of artistic/academic work focusing on the cosmopolitan cultural landscape of Accra. This remarkably diverse collection includes a 3-part video documentary (Feld 2009b), multiple albums of his jazz trio Accra Trane Station (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008), collaborations with visual artist Virginia Ryan (2007a, 2007b), two albums of honk-horn music from The La Drivers Union Por Por Group (2007; Feld 2009a), an ambient sound recording of the urban Accra environment (2010), a recording of bells in Accra (2005), and an experimental duet between croaking frogs and a Ghanaian drummer (2008). (All of these items are available through his VoxLox label; cf. Schauert 2011). Intended as a companion to these various materials, Feld's book can equally stand on its own as he weaves these seemingly disparate entities into a cohesive statement about musical cosmopolitanism in Africa; in so doing, Feld augments discourse on both jazz and cosmopolitanism, refracting them through prisms of globalization, migration, race, class, and space.

Initially, "Four-bar Intro: The Shape of Jazz to Come", acts as a kind of preface in which Feld first reflects on his somewhat serendipitous entrée into his work in Ghana. In 2004 he was persuaded to accompany a graduate student to west Africa with the intention of only staying a few weeks, but ended up spending the better part of the next five years there (2005-2010, periodically). The remainder of this section is keenly reflexive as Feld recalls his grappling with the politics of representational style, finally deciding to construct the text as a "memoir of encounters" (9). Throughout the book, these memoirs mingle with ethnography and life history, creating a dialogic narrative that reveals "how histories of global entanglement are shaping contemporary African musical life-worlds" (7).

In the following chapter, Feld tells the story of his initial encounters with the various musicians he has worked with in Accra. Presented as a type of travel log, the reader gets a sense of peering over the shoulder of the author, exploring and discovering cosmopolitan, spiritual, and political connections between America (the West) and particular musicians in Accra. Imbuing his text with both immediacy and intimacy, Feld tells his story through a rich tapestry of conversations with the various artists, capturing the emergence of personal/professional relationships and foreshadowing the intellectual terrain to come. The reader may feel as though he is present as Feld bonds with Ghanaian musicians over shared passions for jazz and a particular love for John Coltrane. To conclude this chapter, Feld breaks from this narrative approach, telescoping out to highlight his theoretical and analytical objectives, stating that primarily he is arguing for "jazz cosmopolitanism as the agency of desire for enlarged spatial participation... [wherein] performances of connectedness are necessarily erratic, uneven, and ironic" (49).

In the "First Chorus", Feld paints an evocative portrait of the enigmatic and

controversial figure Kofi Ghanaba (a.k.a. Guy Warren). Fusing personal conversations with life history and social analyses, this chapter illuminates the politics of race relations between American jazz artists and Africa as Ghanaba recounts how he was unfairly rejected from the U.S. bebop scene in the 1950s. As an outsider looking in, Ghanaba's discussions offer a much needed global/African perspective on the American bebop era. Placing their discussion within the context of the popularity and criticisms of Nigerian drumming star Babatundi Olatunji, Feld and Ghanaba particularly point to the pervasive exoticism, prejudice, and racism of American jazz artists and audiences at the time. Lastly, this chapter provides some insight into Ghanaba's staging/re-imagining of Handel's Hallelujah chorus (*cf.* Feld 2009b); mixing European, American, African, Christian, and Buddhist imagery, aesthetics, sounds, and practices, Feld shows how Ghanaba crafts a complex cosmopolitan performance that blurs temporal, generic, and geographic boundaries.

Feld's "Second Chorus" explores the life, work, and his own relationship with the Ghanaian multi-instrumentalist and sculptor Nii Noi Nortey. Focusing here on the intersection of politics, spirituality, and performance, Feld elucidates the cosmopolitan confluence of Black Power and Pan-Africanism that filter through Nortey's melding of jazz, funk, reggae, and soul music. This chapter illustrates that Nortey's oeuvre acts as a crucible wherein a black Beethoven fuses with the sensibilities of jazz and John Coltrane to produce a personal art and ontology. Along the way, Feld highlights how this Ghanaian musician has harnessed music to popularize a black consciousness in Africa and its diaspora, encouraging the reader to imagine Nortey's art as a deep cosmopolitics (114).

Subsequently, Feld chronicles his relationship with Ga drummer Nii Otoo Annan. Beginning with Annan's life history, Feld soon detours through his own biography in Papua New Guinea, giving the reader a sense of how he came to his understandings of acoustemology and the profound links between environments, music, and, particularly, bells. This sets up a discussion of the creative process behind *Bufo Variations*, an album in which Annan channels the spirit of Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali, performing a series of improvisations on various Ghanaian percussion to a soundtrack of frogs and crickets recorded in Accra by Feld. Discussing how such a work, and its subsequent live performances, reinforces his formulation of jazz cosmopolitanism, Feld also highlights, here, the connections between ecology and artistry. Lastly, narrating his sojourn with Annan to New York City where, as they prepared to perform this piece, they visited various jazz clubs and met Ali, Feld's discussion ties contemporary African experiences with the history of American jazz.

In his final "chorus", Feld turns his attention to por por honk horn music of the La Drivers Union. The centerpiece is an Accra funeral for a prominent deceased La union driver (*cf.* Feld 2009b). Through this event, Feld bonds por por to the jazz funerals of New Orleans, illustrating how memory and music have preserved and transformed the black Atlantic. Feld also offers a perspective of Ghanaian drivers' history, analyzing horns as both material object and sonic signifier of social class, reputation, and

spirituality. In all, Feld persuasively argues here for the durable materiality of sound and its ability to emplace experience and create cosmopolitan networks.

Lastly, the chapter “Beyond Diasporic Intimacy”, comprises, as Feld states, “four nonconclusions and six more stories” (202). However, hinting at finality, Feld’s lens is certainly wider here as he addresses larger questions about the meanings and experiences of cosmopolitanism, including, most noticeably, those regarding identity, memory, and migration. Building on Svetlana Boym’s concept of diasporic intimacy, Feld shows jazz cosmopolitanism as a way to refashion, or collapse, “spaces of significant differences” (206); it is a way in which various, often distant, localities become entwined in an “intervocality” that constitutes collections of personalized stories, music, and memories. That is, Feld encourages us to consider how the world is embodied and emplaced in intimate, often artistic, re-imaginings of it, which embrace and deploy a poetics of paradox and irony.

In all, Feld’s brilliant work should have a broad impact and appeal, offering significant contributions and interventions to interdisciplinary discourses on jazz, Ghanaian music, cosmopolitanism, as well as (urban) Africa and its diaspora.

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References

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