THREE KILOS OF COFFEE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, by Manu Dibango, in collaboration with Danielle Rouard, translated by Beth G. Raps, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, 146pp, index, discography, photographs.

Three kilos of coffee is the autobiography of Manu Dibango, prepared with the assistance of Danielle Rouard. I first read it in its original 1989 publication by Lieu Commun, and it has now been released in an excellent translation by the University of Chicago Press. The "three kilos of coffee" are what Dibango took with him as a child to give to his foster family when he left Cameroon for an education in France.

The book is a gem, well within the venerable genre of life history, for Dibango's story unfold against a broader socio-historical backdrop of varied aspects. One point that elevates its significance is that it spans the genre as well. When I read life histories, I generally find Francis Hart's classification of autobiography useful.[1] Hart suggested that people who tell their life stories generally seem to be interested in one of three things: demonstrating the historical continuity of the self in relation to broad cultural patterns and changes, as in the memoirs of great personages; demonstrating the ethical integrity of the self in relation to social and moral law, as in an *apologia*; or demonstrating the essence of the self in relation to nature, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*. *Three kilos of coffee* seems to be a memoir, an apology and a confession rolled into one.

First, as a memoir, the book is significant partially because Dibango himself is significant. Dibango is a key figure in the development of African popular music as well as in the transformation of African popular music from a collection of local styles and experiments to a global phenomenon. All kinds of familiar names keep popping up throughout the book, and Dibango seems to have known and worked with everybody. He is like the Mountbatten of African popular music. Moreover, he is associated with people in a distinctive way: he is the man they call to help them sound "African" in their music. What is an "African" sound? Actually, the trick answer is that for many people an "African sound" came to mean whatever Manu Dibango was doing. Dibango and his musical mind were the university within which African traditional roots were both elaborated and researched by innumerable musicians and seekers. The photo section features Dibango with an impressive variety of musical stars: Art Blakey, Bella Bellow, Aïcha Koné, Don Cherry, Johnny Clegg, Mory Kanté, Harry Belafonte, Herbie Hancock, Miriam Makeba, Stevie Wonder. From his early friendship and work with his in-law Francis Bebey and with Joseph Kabasélé to his various collaborations, from his early nightclub efforts in Kinshasa and Douala to his huge international hit with "Soul Makossa", he has maintained an aura of African integrity even while his music ranged far and wide. He was lionized in Africa by V.I.P. politicians as well as by lumpenproles. Recruited by Ivorian President Houphouët-Boigny, he was given honorary citizenship and made a guest of the state; the President was feeling concerned with what seemed the relative shallowness of his country's musical inspiration, and Dibango spent four

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[1] Francis R. Hart, "Notes for an anatomy of modern autobiography", in *New directions in literary history*, ed. Ralph Cohen, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1974.

years in Abidjan helping to establish a distinctive "African" sound for the Ivorian national radio-and-television orchestra.

It is certainly a worthwhile endeavour to contemplate the career of this great man. After "Soul Makossa" in the early 1970s, it was years before another African hit in Europe. I have often felt that African musicians and their European collaborators, formerly more than now perhaps, have a tendency to force crossover music into an assemblage of stylistic models. It is as if there are two separate parts in a song moving side by side, the "African" (represented by and expanded rhythm section and indigenous instruments) and the "Western" (represented by the vocal style and song structure). There have been several successes in this vein when the Westerners are well-enough known, though there are hundreds of failures by African musicians. For interesting comparisons to Dibango's career, I recommend Gary Stewart's excellent book, *Breakout.*[2] When I read it, I was struck by the way that the African musicians profiled in the book found that a crossover hit was a grail which continually eluded them. *Breakout* is a book that deals with their frustration as they knock on the outside wall of an industry that cannot comprehend them. The musician's perspectives on what happened to them when they tried to cross cultural boundaries with music are deeply ironic: having prepared themselves with artistic and cultural discipline, they embark on their mission with a faith that they must be heard on their own terms, and this faith is sustained with their unwillingness or inability to adapt their music to the world it would conquer and change. Throughout all this, what is impressive are the sheer creative energy of the musicians and the way they push it, and, within the modesty of their circumstances, their self-consciousness of themselves as avatars of an age of intercultural understanding based in African sentiments. Dibango, however, is the one who did it, but he did it because of his openness to influence. "In music", he says, "there's no past and no future, just the present". He accepts the judgment of critics who call him a vampire and a pillager: "How can you create if you don't immerse yourself in the material of your times? No creator can avoid being a vampire ... The 'empty-bellies' from Africa to Paris take their own paths, sometimes wary of adverse influences that would take their hearts far from home; I pursue my path in solitude. The continent is an inexhaustible reserve of primary musical material". Dibango gravitates towards any and every music, from Mozart to Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis.

I have sometimes used the notion of an "organic" development of African popular music, a kind of development that cannot be forced, to talk about the process whereby Highlife or Soukous can absorb and revitalize other genres like Reggae or Latin or Soul. This process can take years. Meanwhile, the mainstream continues to generate prolific output for its hometown patrons: it amazes me how slowly some of the genres change; songs from the 1960s and 1970s still sound good, indeed often better, than current ones. For that part of a genre's repertoire that is evolving and attempting to absorb outside influences, the result must be a distinctive style, in which the various

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[2] Gary Stewart, *Breakout: profiles in African rhythm*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992. (*Ed:* reviewed in this issue)

elements and influences work together seamlessly rather than in counterpoint. Many of the African musicians I knew in the 1970s (Victor Uwaifo, Nana P.S.K. Ampadu, Sonny Okosun, Sunny Ade, Jerry Hansen, Sweet Talks Band, Fela Anikulapo Kuti) were interested in breaking into the Western market. I had representation agreements with them to try to find them recording contracts in the States, but I was not successful. It seems strange now, but although I reached some well-placed and appropriate people, no one thought that African music would go anywhere. Fela went deeper into his roots to find the connection to African-American jazz, while the others went the other way, extending themselves into Soul or Reggae; they were stars in their own countries, but nobody made the big crossover, not even Fela, who to me seemed the most likely. I wrote to them all to cultivate their own markets. Today, many of them tour the world, and their music is available at local stores, but they are still marginal. Up to now, nothing has equalled the success of "Soul Makossa", not even Mory Kanté's "Yekayeka" or Dibango's own "Abele Dance". To my mind, Dibango was always the best, and for many years the only, example of a musician who could bring African, African-American and Western styles together "organically". I believe that this ability stems from the way he immerses himself in and masters on their own terms the genres he works within. His Reggae album, "Gone Clear", for example, is a masterpiece. Done with such personnel as Robbie Shakespeare, Sly Dunbar, and Randy and Michael Brecker, it partakes of multiple genres without being dominated by any one. In short, I admit that I am a fan, but I would have confidence in the claim that Dibango is a figure of considerable historical importance.

Historical importance? A musician? As an apology, *Three kilos of coffee* is the story of Dibango's struggle to maintain his integrity between the two worlds — Western and African — which he embraced enthusiastically and felicitously. Yet there is more to the story than that tired old dichotomy. Dibango begins his book talking about contradictions, and defines himself in terms of many. The opening image, a government registry's parchment birth announcement that he compares to a talisman, sets the stage: his father from one tribe, his mother from another; his father's family as rural farmers, his mother's family as long-standing urbanites; his parents Protestant, the country predominantly Catholic; and so on. From the first, he defines himself as divided and marginal, unable to identify totally with anything or to fit in anywhere, "a broken bridge between worlds". He portrays his life as an effort to flee from his contradictions, as a search for a place to put himself together. And of course, it is music that solves the contradictions.

I do not know if I can convey the subtlety of the following distinction, but what was interesting to me is that Dibango does not idealize music as such, yet he shows how it enabled him to define himself. When Dibango lays out his mise-en-scène, he starts with the portrait of personal and social contradictions and then moves directly to his musical career, which he more or less drifted into during his student days with some pre-*sapeur* compatriots. The book follows his carer through bands and nightclub ventures, focusing with bitter honesty on the numerous difficulties and frustrations he faced when working in African countries. He was not sent for European education in order to become a musician, yet he goes with the flow in

attempting to establish himself with respect, and somehow his optimism and openness to influence keep him going. There are many musicians' autobiographies in which music is objectified as something the protagonist learns (with more or less of a struggle) that gets him or her into certain situations or lifestyles with certain types of people: the music is objectified as something out there that he or she found access to and mastered. When Dibango is winging it in a new idiom and afraid of making a fool of himself, he is mainly looking at his fellow players and worried about letting them down, looking at his audience and sensing that image and fashion are often more important than mastery. Dibango avoids another common tone of musical autobiography, for there is no self-aggrandizing over-interpretation of self, an indulgence that has bound many a life-history subject to his or her amanuensis. In Dibango's case, there is a kind of modesty that allows music to become the central metaphor of his life, in the sense that it stands for him. Even while he is cataloguing the gigs and the deals, and although he describes his bands as vehicles to realize his vision, there is an intuition of music as something immeasurably vast that transcends the contradictions he is experiencing. With regard to the confessional aspect of *Three kilos of coffee*, music is not idealized, but it seems almost an ontogenetic or astrological principle that patterns his destiny, to which he gives himself, making himself a vessel it may pour into and overflow; his autobiography is a demystification of its processes. He does not reach this point, but a strange kind of humanistic spirituality, sympathetic yet graciously detached, qualifies his descriptions of people and personalities in varied musical scenes, as if the god within is merely speaking through one of many manifestations. Despite his humility, Dibango is not insignificant. Therefore, the apologetic and confessional side of the memoir is the personal focus on whatever made him a symbol for so many people, and in that sense, his unique historical role as a professional musical avatar speaks of a broader perception that created such a role. I know a lot of people in West Africa who try at their most serious level to define themselves in terms of music and who would know exactly what he is talking about.

Thus: the book is full of information and beautiful observations. Dibango comes across as worthy of his reputation. He is straightforward, modest, honest articulate. He is amazingly generous; it seems he even tries to give his own success away to those who become involved with him. The book is a fine read: I would definitely assign it to a class. I would like to close, however, by temporarily elevating the book beyond the autobiographical genre.

Dibango is well-educated, and I would call him a practical scholar with an endowed chair. In such a vein, *Three kilos of coffee* is his contribution to the discussion of the meaning of popular music. This area of enquiry, formerly considered a rather derivative terrain, has been the focus of many recent publications. Such works are typically justified and attract attention (with validity, to my mind) because of the way they use popular music as a context of meaning that ties cultural development to socio-historical circumstances, or, Erlmann's words:

> "If tradition has to do with the construction of images of the past and with the ways in which historical continuity is created in popular consciousness, and if it is in popular performance in particular that such images are expressed most ambiguously, then studies

of popular performance offer perhaps one of the most rewarding venues for scholarly enquiry into the workings of popular consciousness."[3]

Dibango does not have a Ph.D. or footnotes, but he has important things to say about the themes that are the focus of so many recent books. His matured intellect shows through in his elegant and ironic descriptive style, which renders ambiguities with tolerance and even amusement. He does not waste words, and the words he uses are well-chosen. The point is that Dibango is educated and extremely sophisticated, and he himself made a lot of the things we study happen. In an African vein, he is an elder to contemporary researchers, yet in a Western scholarly vein, I have no trouble taking his autobiography to be an ethnographic text. If we cannot accept it as such, then all the talk and publications about reflexivity and ethnographic textuality are mere cant. The musical career he documents represents extended research on issues of cultural meaning, an effort to reconstitute and revitalize a sense of "African culture" within the expressive institution where he grounded his search through performance. Therefore, with reference to the institution he is describing, he is able to provide wonderful documentation. In many ways an outsider, he has the self-consciousness of an ethnographer, and to borrow a phrase, he was there before the white men came. He tells us what so-and-so was thinking and what so-and-so was trying to do. Rather than getting his information from an archived interview, he was in the field. As a participant, too, he is able to tell us about many of the subtle pitfalls of this area of intellectual inquiry. Dibango's agenda is focused on the "what it is" of African music, and to my mind his intimate participation in its definition elevates his book. His is the synoptic consciousness we students of popular culture are trying to represent in our work. Of course, Dibango is not directly concerned with issues in symbolic anthropology. He is after bigger fish.

Dibango has a concept of the "Négropolitain", which is an obvious commentary as well as a balancing and updating of the nostalgic symbolism evoked by Senghor and the *Présence Africaine* writers. The concept is more accepting of the inexorable historical dynamic of modernization, and it is grounded in his experience resolving the contradictions by which he initially defined himself and in his attitude of openness to new influences. His perceptions seem always to have been grounded inn a multicultural universalism in which he sees himself as part of the whole world and not only Africa. "A mutant species", he admits, still ambivalent about its past, about its future, about the achievements of the West and about its place on the world stage, "is having trouble finding herself . . . When Africa talks of ethics, it advocates a return to roots. This is a facile solution which goes nowhere. I would accept it if it opened up a new path. We have never left our roots. Like all continents, Africa has its past; like others, it has been colonized. That time is over. Creativity is our only path to health — making way for the imagination." The African sensibility he carries is "the Africa I keep in my head", "nourished by my encounters." "African music was and remains a music of encounters; in this lies its attractive power", he says, and he welcomes a new generation guided by strong individualism and humanitarianism,

[3] Veit Erlmann: *African stars: studies in Black South African performance*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p.12. (*Ed:* reviewed in this issue)

brave enough to defy whatever puritanical dictates would tie it down. Erik Erikson talks about great men as providing leadership by demonstrating "a conception of truth in action",[4] uniting consciousness and history by struggling with the contradictions of identity and achieving a resolution that speaks to the common experience of people in a given time and place. Manu Dibango is such a person, and *Three kilos of coffee* is an important document about a leader of the Third world, about music and about culture.

John M. Chernoff, Pittsburgh

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AFRICAN STARS: STUDIES IN BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN PERFORMANCE, by Veit Erlmann, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, edited by Philip V. Bohlman & Bruno Nettl.) Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, xxi plus 214 pp., music examples, photos, bibliography, index.

Readers who are acquainted with Dr Erlmann's earlier writings will naturally expect to find again here a high level of scholarship based on rigorous research; and this book will certainly not prove a disappointment in that respect. The title seems a little surprising, however: (a) The title's initial punchline, *African Stars*, is pretty close to that of another recent publication: *African all-stars: the pop music of a continent*, by Chris Stapleton and Chris May (London & New York: Quartet Books, 1987). (b) Upon opening the book, I had expected a study of *contemporary* performers, while in fact it deals only with certain artists and groups active before the 1940s. (c) "Black South African" covers a number of ethnic groups (officially at least nine); yet the performers discussed are exclusively Zulu (apart from the Afro-Americans, in Chapter 2). How is it that the names of other major groups such as the Sotho, Tswana or Xhosa do not even appear in the Index!

Nevertheless, it is the content which counts, and this book is certainly a very significant and welcome contribution to South African culture history. Veit Erlmann's extensive theoretical and practical expertise in the field of African ethnomusicology, and especially African popular music — and the fact that his personal experience of African culture is not limited to South Africa alone (his earliest fieldwork having been done in West Africa) adds considerable depth and breadth to his handling and evaluation of the data. The culmination of this is to be found in Chapter 7: "Conclusion: South African Black music and the wider African field". One might perhaps suggest that readers who are unfamiliar with the specifically South African scenario, and wish to get it into perspective, might find it profitable to begin with this final chapter before proceeding with the main body of the work.

The research for this book began early in the 1980s when South Africa was approaching the final phase of the anti-apartheid struggle. In the Preface, the author

[4] Erik H. Erikson: "Psychological reality and historical actuality", in *Insight and responsibility: lectures on the ethical implications of psychoanalytic insight*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1964, p.205.