Alternate African Reality: Electronic, Electroacoustic and Experimental Music from Africa and the Diaspora. Cedrik Fermont. 2020. Berlin: Syrphe. Liner notes (33pp). CD.

Two years ago, the influential British music magazine, *Fact*, announced to its readership that "the world's best electronic music festival is in Uganda." In the same vein, the album discussed here intends to present a variety of electronic scenes from across the African continent and its diaspora. Released in January 2020 and available as a double CD, and digitally on Bandcamp, *Alternate African Reality* is the latest compilation from the Berlin-based label, Syrphe, and continues the curatorial line explored by its founder and director, electronic musician, C-drík (Cedrik Fermont). Having studied electroacoustic composition in Belgium in the 1990s under the tutelage of Annette Vande Gorne (a former student of Pierre Schaeffer), C-drík became intrigued by the absence of certain regions in the music genres he was engaging with such as *electroacoustic* and *noise*.[1] As a touring artist, he began to locate and connect with experimental scenes outside Western countries, especially in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Since then, C-drík has featured numerous artists from these regions in several compilations conceived as sonic critiques of the hegemonic discourse on electronic music which he perceives as regionally focused on Europe, North America, and Japan.

In a previous publication, evocatively entitled, *Not Your World Music* (2016), which is composed of a book and a compilation dedicated to *noise* music in Southeast Asia, C-drík relates his curatorial line with positions formulated in music scholarship. Co-written with sound artist and sociologist, Dimitri della Faille, the book argues that Syrphe's publications fall in line with Feld's critique of the terminological dualism implied by the term "world music" (2000). "World music" insinuated that Western countries and the rest of the world formed two separate and coherent entities. The book further cites León's analysis of the establishment of Western music industries as being the centre of music production and consumption (2014). As the liner notes of Syrphe's first compilation state, the label similarly intends to "expose the distorted reality the Western world sometimes lives in" (2007: 1).

In order to contextualise this album with previous compilations, the liner notes of *Alternate African Reality* open with a critical review of *Extreme Music from Africa*, released in 1997 by William Bennett, founding member of *Whitehouse*, a 1980s British band pioneering the subgenre of *power electronics*. Analysing the artists' names, C-drík demonstrates that they do not refer to real persons but were invented by Bennett, who it appears is the composer of the tracks presented on his compilation. In addition to this problematic crediting, Bennett's liner notes and track titles essentialise Africa as a violent place, inhabited by sensual girls and where mysterious ceremonies take place, leading C-drík to conclude that this album is a "perfect neocolonial product", fostering a stereotyped representation of electronic music in Africa.

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[1]   Interview in *The Wire*, Issue 440. October 2020.

Countering this narrative, the liner notes then review influential African electronic artists to demonstrate Africa's long history of electronic music production. Among these are the Egyptian, Halim El-Dabh, who pioneered electroacoustic music in the 1940s, and the Cameroonian, Francis Bebey, who, among other aspects, blended traditional tunes and synthesisers in the 1970s. Illustrating the continuity of electronic music in Africa, the liner notes then briefly review recent trends on the continent and its diaspora and conclude with short biographies of the 32 artists who each provided a track for the compilation. Covering 24 countries, the album aims to prove the additional point that electronic music is widespread across the continent and not limited to a few regions.

Not intended to be exhaustive, the album does a fine job in conveying the diversity of productions linked to the African continent, notably by presenting various compositional processes intimately linked to electronic means. For instance, the track by South African, Aragorn 23, illustrates nicely the combination of modular synthesisers and motion sensors to further integrate body movements in electronic sound creation. For his part, the Mauritanian, AFALFL, draws on computer-based algorithms and live coding to present a track framed on a breakbeat pattern. Field recording techniques and soundscape aesthetics are also featured in the compilation, such as Shadwa Ali's piece sounding the bells of her native Alexandria in Egypt, Nigerian Emekah Ogboh's immersion in the streets of Lagos, or Kenyan KMRU's blend of electronically generated drones and recordings of stones rolled on the asphalt. Moreover, the compilation includes tracks inspired by traditional genres, such as Jako Maron's electronic adaptation of the rhythmic patterns of the *maloya* of his native Reunion Island. Many electronic perspectives have become well established local genres, and if the liner notes acknowledge genres such as Malian *balani show*, Angolan *kuduro*, or South African *gqom*, the compilation does not include examples of such genres, arguing they have already been published and promoted. It nonetheless features one track by Mario Swagga and DJ Silila illustrating the fast-paced *singeli*, a recent music scene rooted in Dar es Salaam and a distant outgrowth of the traditional *taraab*.

Although C-drík has excluded genres related to hip hop, a few pieces contain rap passages. Among these are Yao Bobby from Togo rapping on beats produced by his Swiss colleague, Simon Grab, or Swazi Beko The Storyteller who delivers her track as a homage to "Black Women." This aspect is an important element of the political claims made in the compilation's liner notes. In addition to being Western-centered, C-drík defines the hegemonic discourse on electronic music as essentially male-oriented. By including female artists in the compilation – 14 out of 32 – he intends to acknowledge their presence and importance in the soundscape of electronic music. Finally, the diversity of the compilation is further evident through the inclusion of established artists such as Angolan, Victor Gama, who composed for the Kronos Quartet and performed in venues as renowned as the Carnegie Hall, as well as emerging musicians, such as Ugandan female producer, Catu Diosis, who launched her DJ career at the 2019 Nyege Nyege Festival. As a music scholar and film-maker working with Nyege Nyege's artistic network, I sense the recurrent presence of its artists in this compilation. As

the festival has been promoted and celebrated in the past years, I am looking forward to further compilations featuring other artists who might not already benefit from institutional support.

Overall, *Alternate African Reality* represents an important work and participates in the necessary shift from Western and male oriented representations of electronic music. Moreover, compilations dedicated to experimental electronic music linked to the African continent are at present quite rare. Several other well-known labels have been releasing reissues of both celebrated and forgotten artists and historical genres (see Analog Africa), compilations of popular trends broadcast on local radios (see Sublime Frequencies), music circulating on cellphones (see Sahel Sounds), or dance oriented remixes of traditional songs (see Beating Heart). In this regard, Syrphe foregrounds artists who navigate different circuits and who are mainly related to the art world. In addition to the sound compositions, the network of references embedded in the album is probably the most important aspect of this compilation. Emails, personal websites, YouTube pages, and Instagram or Facebook profiles accompany the short descriptions of each artist, encouraging listeners to further their engagement beyond the compilation. This is an interesting gesture, as most labels releasing compilations generally list themselves as the sole contact, becoming thus a privileged mediator between artists and audiences. Syrphe explicitly intends to break away from a gatekeeper stance and to this end dedicates part of its website to an "African and Asian alternative database" listing over 3000 artists, venues, labels, radio stations, or festivals pulsing the electronic and alternative scenes on these continents.

Interactive and participative, the label website further states that Syrphe "is a platform that promotes exchanges, not only discoveries." In this regard, the liner notes do not neatly serve academic concerns about contextualisation as they leave this aspect to the listener's curiosity. For instance, the text does not provide information on the enigmatic title, "122.2.22.22", of the Ugandan-Kenyan duo, [MONRHEA] + Ejuku, but references instead the song's video on YouTube. If one chooses to further explore and engage with the online network of links, some contextual information deciphering the mysterious numbers can be found. Reflecting on the "punk" ethnographic methods of another label, Novak noticed that "(c)ultural preservation in the logic of open source culture, demands that content be backed up collectively through a continuous process of redistribution" (2016: 39). Despite the possible pitfalls of networks relying on the fast-changing environment of the Internet – and a few links provided by the compilation are already broken – the model proposed here by Syrphe resonates with the dynamic stressed by Novak and may well inspire scholars, music producers, and other actors in the cultural sectors interested in developing more horizontal frameworks of curation and exchange.

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