

*Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana*. Stephen Feld, 2012. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. 78 b/w illustrations, bibliography, index, 311 pages.

I write this listening to Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, contemplating how to articulate and explore each of the trans-Atlantic artistic connections and sketches sounded by Steven Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana*. Like a bandleader snapping their fingers, counting in the head of a well-known standard, Feld draws you into a series of explorations of belonging, identity, music, and connection both in and outside of the African diaspora, as embodied by the lives of several Ghanaian artists and ensembles intent on moving jazz forward, a concept integral to the music and its surrounding culture.

Jazz, as a genre, and as a musical culture of the black diaspora, has always been interested in what new ideas could be integrated into the music. Jazz has been a constant push for forward progression, as the tune moves on, like the ride cymbal announcing the beginning of the solo section, an old tenor aching its forward momentum into new territory. For artists such as Ornette Coleman, moving forward meant taking the music apart, breaking it down like a model to see each individual piece and rearrange it with new musical systems that the world would know as free jazz. For others, such as Charles Mingus, this meant going backwards, looking to the past and to tradition as the model of where the music should be heading. Feld's work fits comfortably into this well-known idiom of jazz culture. It provides a fresh take on the culture's diasporic connections, harmonies, and dissonances, not simply by covering existing jazz works as a tribute, but rather, by interpreting music and influences from every corner of the Atlantic within a distinct Ghanaian framework. All those interpretations and influences are brought together through a unique concept which the author refers to as "jazz cosmopolitanism", a concept that explores:

[H]ow jazz any-and-everywhere is about the place of race in musical history; how studying African music is always about spirituality and politics; how cosmopolitanism, mine, others, is embodied, lived, uneven, complicated, and not just some heady abstraction floating in the banalizing academic ink pool alongside globalization or identity (6).

Building on his five years lived in the Ghanaian capital of Accra, working with and documenting the work of several musicians and groups, Feld explores this concept through a monograph and a series of DVDs. In doing so, he captures the artistic presentation of the embodiment of jazz cosmopolitanism. The text makes a different turn from others that may present similar ideas, such as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*; Feld's text does not center on critical theory to provoke questions surrounding connection and cosmopolitanism, but chooses to present research in the form of *memoirs*. Each chapter is a chorus improvised over, each DVD a snapshot of lived experience and embodied knowledge. Feld's text gives a medium for artists to tell stories and recount important moments and influences, as though each is taking a

chorus, wailing over the familiar 32-bar tin-pan-alley form in a diasporic improvisation of embodied trans-Atlantic connections.

Musical imagination and lived experience are central to Feld's jazz cosmopolitanism. As stories and sounds, each wailing cry from a horn heard across the Atlantic, each story from an artist, help construct his concept of jazz cosmopolitanism. This allows connections from a myriad of backgrounds and influences to have a place in identity, jazz, and a sense of belonging. The author's concept of jazz cosmopolitanism is not a concrete or static set of philosophies, but rather an action itself, a process, a performance. It is a sort of dynamic dialogue in which people tell their stories, and allow themselves to discuss their interests, influences, passions, and philosophies. Accordingly, each person becomes a site for cosmopolitanism to occur as their stories recall stories, figures, ideas, and accounts, from every part of the Atlantic.

Revolving around memoirs and storytelling, the first chapter ("Four Bar Intro") paints the sketch of the tune he is about to count in, beginning with a statement that is central to the form he uses to explore these ideas, central to jazz, and central to the harmony of trans-Atlantic connection itself: "I'm here to tell stories." (2)

The second chapter ("Vamp In, Head") shows the foundation of Feld's concepts and inspirations behind the text, and the concepts it explores, from jam sessions with musician, Nii Noi Nortey, to their common ground in a veneration for John Coltrane, and an articulation of the head itself, the guiding principle which Feld explores:

Let me suggest that jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra is about histories of listening, echoing, and sounding, about acoustemology, the agency of knowing the world through sound. Let me suggest that this acoustemology, this sonic knowing, is the imagination and enactment of a musical intimacy (49).

We find ourselves through the end of the head, the feel and form established, awaiting the exploration through the next chorus. The next three chapters present memoirs and stories from the core group of artists and musicians which guide Feld's concept of jazz cosmopolitanism and Accra's sense of musical intimacy and trans-Atlantic jazz connections: drummer Ghanaba, horn player, Nii Noi Nortey, drummer/percussionist Nii Otoo Annan, and the *Por Por* ensemble – a group formed by Accra's La Drivers Union playing music with "[b]rass-tube squeeze-bulb horns" (Feld 2012, 164) known as *Por Por*. Each artist sounds a story, taking a chorus over the form, performing their sense of jazz cosmopolitanism in a solo of trans-Atlantic connection. Here, theoretical elements are tossed aside for embodied knowledge, experiences, and endless improvisation from the lived, musical imagination of Accra's finest.

The theoretical elements which the author does extrapolate for analysis come from numerous sources, allowing the text to address discourses in a variety of disciplines, ranging from jazz studies to Ethnomusicology, to anthropology and diaspora studies, to black studies. Yet, it is Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* with which the text seems to be in most direct conversation. Gilroy's text of 1993 has long since become a staple in black diasporic studies. In it, he explores the role of black culture connected across the Atlantic, not distinctly African, European, African-American nor Caribbean, but a

sense of black cosmopolitanism built into a black Atlantic culture. Here, the author uses the text as a foundation for two principal ideas, namely “multilocal belonging” (48) as it pertains to connection, as well as the role music plays in this exchange. The author uses Gilroy’s concept of “multilocal belonging”, as well as core theorising of music, creating such a sense of belonging through transnational interplay and dialogue, together with discussion on the centrality of music itself to these concepts. Such theoretical connections add new analytical elements to music studies to help understand the work of artists who draw on influences and styles outside traditional national and diasporic origins.

In the text itself, these ideas become foundational in looking at how artists embody and create deep diasporic connections that move into new territory, drawing on music far from their cultural origins. Feld ends the text with the seventh and eighth chapters, calling the head back in, before vamping out, recapping each story presented and all the sounds that come with it. Like a musician on the bandstand, quoting solos from the greats, he flushes out what can be learned from each story with a segment of critical theory, rounding out the tune that makes up *Jazz Cosmopolitanism*. Here, the text is taken from a series of sounds and stories to a collective, embodied improvisation on jazz and transnational identity. The stories range widely:

- from stories with musician and sculptor, Nii Noi Nortey;
- discussions of pan-African connections from Bob Marley to Kwame Nkrumah to Jimi Hendrix and John Coltrane;
- to Ghanaba, a jazz musician in Accra, known for his storied musical career, both in Africa and America, and his melting pot of musical influences from every side of the Atlantic;
- to drummer Nii Otoo Annan, and his playing over Feld’s recordings of toads as an investigation into polyrhythms, where class and the music’s ability to transcend class lines is investigated;
- to the *Por Por* ensemble, made up of truck horns played by lorry drivers from La Drivers Union who play a unique style of funeral music, which the author places in relation to New Orleans jazz funerals.

Each memory and each interaction are used as a microcosm of trans-Atlantic connectivity, where the telling of each story becomes the site where the performance of jazz cosmopolitanism is experienced, and where a multiplicity of influences beyond any rigid categorisation of identity reach deeply meaningful connection points. Feld’s decision to present the information through memoirs and stories allows for a wide target audience for this text, as it reads as a digestible presentation of the information. It is easily accessible for non-academic readers curious about the relationship between jazz and the black diaspora. Using artists to tell the stories affords a unique medium for the presentation of concepts such as cosmopolitanism, as it highlights the elements the artists themselves find important, so decentering esoteric academic theory, and instead looking to see these ideas within lived and embodied experiences. For example, when presenting Ghanaba in the third chapter, Feld avoids a dense exploration of the

connections between European classical music and jazz theory, of colonial theory and music, of pan-African philosophy and trans-Atlantic identities. Instead, he simply provides a form for Ghanaba to play over, a medium for him to tell stories of his sense and experience of jazz and identity, leaving the readers to listen, and draw the connections themselves. As the author notes, “[s]tories create analytic gestures by their need to recall and thereby ponder, wonder, and search out layers of intersubjective significance in events, acts, and scenes...[t]o listen closely to stories is to take local subjectivity seriously” (Feld 2012, 8).

With a book as rich in cultural studies, stories, in-depth exploration of concepts such as cosmopolitanism and pan-Africanism as it pertains to music, extending the discussion to other genres of music would be further enlightening. For instance, an exploration of hip-hop (particularly the 1990s era that was so inspired by Afrocentrism and jazz) which connects to similar ideas and how this intersects with African music, would make an excellent extension to the text’s focus on jazz. Further, the author’s stories, with Ghanaba in particular, note how American jazz musicians rejected African music. Building on this, and the numerous trans-Atlantic connections which Feld draws throughout the text, discussion of the connections between American jazz musicians collaborating with Cuban musicians, and what this means for music of the Afro-Cuban diaspora, seems like an appropriate forward move. Feld provides a foundation for interesting future discussions with jazz’s new guard of cosmopolitanism in modern American artists such as Kamasi Washington and Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, who blend all of these musical idioms together into their own form of embodied cosmopolitanism that is currently at the forefront of the music.

As a central figure throughout the text, John Coltrane plays an essential role in Feld’s discussions and shaping of jazz cosmopolitanism. Coltrane serves as a point of connection between different continents and is even the root of his initial connection with Nii Noi. Here, discussion on the relevance of the work of Alice Coltrane would have been welcomed. Her role in sharing and developing Coltrane’s intersection of spirituality and musicality was paramount, not to mention the argument to be made for her compositions, such as “Turiya and Ramakrishna”, evoking an even stronger sense of cosmopolitanism than her esteemed husband and musical partner. With such an emphasis on male figures who have become central figures in the discussion of music, cosmopolitanism, and the black diaspora (John Coltrane, Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix), among others, discussion on figures such as Alice Coltrane would add a necessary perspective and voice to the dialogue surrounding cosmopolitanism, especially considering her role in shaping the work of John Coltrane, and the cosmopolitan sounds and aesthetics associated with the latter half of his career.

The text for *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* comes in tandem with a DVD trilogy that further elaborates the stories which the author uses as the basis for his trans-Atlantic philosophy of jazz cosmopolitanism. The first of these details Ghanaba’s performance of the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*, helping to flesh out the cosmopolitan melting pot of ideas and influences from which Ghanaba is drawing. The video emphasises

the performance itself, in an intimate home video feel that opts for performance over in-depth analysis and presentation of what one might expect to be a formal concert documentary. Instead of the usual expected interviews with artists, scholars, critics, and discussion of sociohistorical and culture context – a form which is familiar to many fans of concert documentaries – Feld keeps the focus on the core of his text: the artists, and their work, filming each performance to create a snapshot of the artist's work and story.

The subsequent films, looking at the music, styles, and philosophies of Nii Noi and Nii Oto Annan as well as the *Por Por* funeral, follow the same formula. Instead of detailed theory-laden elaboration, they present the cosmopolitan philosophy which the author is espousing through documenting the performance and retelling the stories. Feld accomplishes the goal of helping to present the performances informing the text; however, more discussion contextualising the music in regard to the author's ideas of cosmopolitanism would have been welcomed, though each did serve as a vibrant artistic snapshot of each artist's work and stories.

In the third DVD, where most of the film provides integral footage of the *Por Por* funeral, discussion drawing diasporic connections to New Orleans Jazz Funerals could have been integrated into the film even more deeply, though the footage provided a solid foundation for understanding the music itself. For this reason, the films cannot simply be watched independently as concert documentaries, or films discussing concepts from the text; they appear most valuable when watched in tandem with an understanding of the book and the author's ideas around connection and cosmopolitanism.

Overall, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* recognises a new framework of musical analysis based in a transnational sense of belonging, and answers crucial questions about the meaning of music and some of the experiences of the African diaspora. The films, together with the text, explore a deep understanding of the author's concept of jazz cosmopolitanism, where it can freely be both ironic and dissonant, yet multilocal and authentic. At the same time, its connectivity is undeniably trans-Atlantic in the embodied experiences of numerous artists, and within the music of the African diaspora. The medium of memoirs and stories told by both Feld and Ghanaian artists generates an extrapolated framework of understanding and a new sense of belonging shaped by jazz, and a deeper understanding of diaspora, identity, place, and belonging. The text's recalling of stories and influences enables us to make sense of artists and embodied experiences drawing on a multiplicity of origins with a "suspicion of a single home" (Feld 2012, 205), as well as leaving space for the theorisation of the works of modern artists currently bent on moving the music forward – as is always necessary in jazz.

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