

---

## POPULAR MUSIC IN WEST AFRICA

by

EDNA M. SMITH

The recreational music of the West African people is more subject to change than any other type of music, for it is not ceremonially or socially bound to tribal institutions. Innovations and alterations in this music are not generally prohibited by tradition. Thus it has been changed by outside influences, individuals within the society, and integration with other societies. This music is transient: the forms and styles may persist for a short time and then disappear when new forms are introduced. *Konkomba*, *Adidegbo*, and *Kolomashie*, recreational music that was popular a short time ago, are today only a memory.

The new intertribal recreational music today is a synthesis of Western and African music. It is generally ballroom-inspired. The growth and popularity of the night club and dance hall in West Africa have created a demand for suitable music for dancing. At first the musicians copied Western music; the quick step and waltz. Since the patrons of these early establishments were mainly Europeans, the dance bands played for their enjoyment the European music of the day. When the Africans began to widen their own recreational activities and patronize these clubs, a demand was created for a more varied musical offering. African-derived music, such as jazz, calypso, and Latin American music, made its appearance along with the Western-influenced indigenous music. The highlife, Afro-calypso, *Abalabi*, and *Konkomba*, all represent this compromise between African traditional forms and Western music.

### Forms of Popular Music

*The Highlife.* The most popular music of this type is the highlife. The origin of the highlife has been the subject of much discussion. The *Daily Graphic* in Accra recently ran a contest on the subject in the spring of 1960. Widely speculative answers were received which placed the origin of the highlife as far away as Sierre Leone and Nigeria.

Most of the Ghana musicologists, however, agree that the *konkomba* band was a forerunner of this music. These singing bands were accompanied by guitars and percussion instruments. Lang states that the highlife is *konkomba* singing which has been instrumentalized<sup>1</sup>. Nketia, on the other hand, believes that the highlife originates as street music. The players and dancers originally moved from one side of the street to the other, dancing individually<sup>2</sup>.

It is interesting to note that most of the observers give a tribal origin for the highlife. Actually, it is intertribal. Although there are resemblances to the music of some of the people in Ghana, the music is so different from the indigenous music that it can be labelled a new type of folk music.

The highlife, primarily vocal music, is sung in the various vernaculars. There are highlife songs in Ewe, Twi, Fanti, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, and many other West African tongues. Occasionally can be found a highlife in English. The subjects of these songs are similar to those of the traditional songs. They are love songs, songs about death, songs of praise and insult, and songs describing an event or a personage.

The melody line is generally simple with little use made of accidentals. Repeated notes are often used, with the second or third note longer than the first. There is some syncopation, usually of the first beat of the melody. The song *Lai Nomo* illustrates some of the characteristics of the highlife.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ian Lang, "Jazz Comes Home to Africa", *West African Review*, December, 1956, XVII, No. 351  
<sup>2</sup>J. H. Nketia, "Modern Trends in Ghana Music", *African Music*, 1, No. 4 (1954), p. 13.

## Example 1.

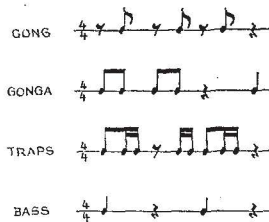


The form most widely used is the binary form. Part "A" is usually sung by the solo voice and then repeated by the chorus and "B" is treated in a similar manner. There are some variations of the above; for example, "A" may be repeated twice to each "B" section or they may alternate with an instrumental solo which uses the material of either "A" or "B".

There is some use of harmony. The chorus may sing in thirds or sixths. The instruments, which are used in the call and response style of African music, may also use these simple harmonies with the emphasis on parallel thirds. At times, as in the indigenous music, the accompanying part is played above the melody part. While there also is some use of unison playing, the playing in thirds is more usual.

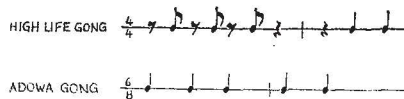
The rhythm of the highlife is not as complicated as that of the traditional music. The music is usually in common time, with very little use made of cross rhythms. The slow triplets and fast triplets are still used.

## Example 2.



The gong beat of the highlife, though similar to the indigenous form, is slightly different. It is usually struck after the beat, as in the following illustration. Because of its similarity to the indigenous rhythm, inexperienced gong players are prone to change into the indigenous rhythm.

## Example 3.



The slow highlife is somewhat different. To differentiate it from the fast highlife, it is often called blues, to describe the tempo. The content of the songs can also be described as "blues" for the most popular theme is lost love.

The rhythm may vary from 6/8 time to 4/4 time or be a combination of both.

## Example 4.



As has been noted above, highlife has spread throughout West Africa, but what is more important, the countries that have adopted the highlife form now have their own

highlife specialists. They compose their own music, copying from the indigenous tradition as well as the Ghana highlife form.

An exception, of course, is the former French colonies, where there is no modern recreational Western-influenced music. In some countries there are new intertribal forms in addition to the highlife; for example, the *Abalabi* in Nigeria and the *Aghadza* in Ghana and Togoland are being danced throughout their respective countries.

The future of the highlife depends on its growth, its adaptation in new countries, and how deeply it is rooted in the home country, Ghana. The development of the highlife depends on the development of the popular town bands which spread the music. By travelling from town to town in playing engagements, they reach a larger audience than their rural counterpart. They can thus popularize their own highlife compositions.

The brass bands and guitar bands in the villages also play the highlife. This highlife is slightly different from that of the town bands for it more closely resembles indigenous music. The indigenous instruments may also be used for performance. In a small village near Po in Upper Volta, highlife is played by the drum ensemble, and it has also been played on the xylophone. On the other hand, the highlife in the towns has been influenced by the Western music; the band's repertoire usually includes the Western dances. The town highlife is also intertribal since the bands are usually composed of members from various tribes and the resulting music is a product of all their experiences.

The dance bands have also attempted to create calypso, rumba, samba, cha cha cha, jive, and similar dance forms. They have failed, for the most part, to copy them. What they have succeeded in doing is to create new forms which incorporate the new idioms into the music.

*The Afro-Calypso.* Based on the West Indian calypso, Afro-calypso is performed in most of the countries of West Africa. Ali Chandi, the self-styled West African "calypso king", and George Brown, the "young tiger", are two of the outstanding performers in this style.

On the whole, there is no clear-cut distinction between Afro-calypso and highlife. The rhythmic effect is similar. The omission of the basic calypso beat and the addition of highlife rhythms cause some confusion in identification. In addition, the calypso form is modified, for the words in highlife are generally more repetitive than in calypso. The following song has a first line which is repeated twelve times during the song.

Early Sunday morning I'm going to take you back  
to your mother  
Early Sunday morning I'm going to take you back  
to your mother  
Early Sunday morning I'm going to take you back  
to your mother  
You don't savey nothing, going to take you back  
to your mother.

The instruments are also used in a different manner. In the calypso there is an instrumental obligato as well as a simple rhythmical instrumental accompaniment. The instruments in West African calypso are used solely in harmony or as a rhythmic accompaniment.

The content of the songs is similar to the calypso. The majority of the songs concern the relationship between man and woman, as in the selection.



harmonized in parallel thirds against the melody. In jazz the thirds will not always work. The musician must listen to the chordal structure in order to improvise correctly. This is difficult for the West African musician since it is not a part of his musical tradition.

There is another problem. The piano is seldom used in these combinations. This is partly due to the fact that there are still comparatively few pianos in West Africa, and the bands depend on the guitarists to provide the chord structure. Unable to read music, knowing only a few chords, the guitarists usually play whatever sounds correct to them. Their knowledge of chords may be limited to the I, IV, and V chords of the key. Moreover, they do not know the minor chords. Even in the better bands, the guitarists play major chords in minor selections.

The inadequacies of the guitarists causes the bands to sound worse than they actually are. Even if the trumpet or tenor saxophonist had a "good ear", it would be impossible to execute a well-improvised solo or play the correct harmony against such odds. As a result, the playing of jazz and European music is of a low standard.

#### *Popular Bands in West Africa.*

The two types of bands found in this area are the dance band and the vocal or guitar band. Both have organizational similarities. For the most part they recruit through apprenticeship. There is no set salary: individuals are paid a percentage of the week's contract.

#### *The Guitar Band.*

The guitar band is the oldest form of band in West Africa. The composition of these bands may vary from a single guitar and drums to two guitars, one or two melody instruments, and accompanying membranophones and idiophones. They contain three singers (two tenors and one bass, one of whom is the guitarist and the leader) and a percussion group.

They organize their musical selections in a similar manner. There is a common position for the guitar solo and a common way of ending, a common way of arranging singers, and a common way of forming chords. There are, however, a few outstanding bands with distinctive styles.

E. K.'s band is one of these. The leader, E. K. Nyame, is self-taught. While he was learning his trade, he played with a band after school. In 1953 he was asked to represent the Ghana musicians by accompanying the Prime Minister to Liberia. After this trip he was finally able to become a professional and concentrate entirely on music.

This is a typical picture of the West African musician: self-taught, working at a trade with music as an avocation. It is no wonder that the musical standards in the area are low.

#### *The Dance Band.*

Most of the dance bands are small, consisting of a rhythm section (guitar, bass, drums, conga, and bongo), three reeds, two altos and a tenor, with the players doubling on the clarinet or occasionally a wood flute, a brass section containing one or two trumpets and maybe a trombone. The leader generally doubles on two or more instruments, which gives some instrumental variety. Some groups are smaller. One such group in Abidjan had only one melody instrument, a trumpet, and that musician doubled as a bartender, so for the most part the band played only vocal music accompanied by drumming.

There are a few larger bands. Saka Acquaye, the leader of the African Tones, has experimented with using five reeds (no baritone sax), seven brass plus the rhythm section, in order to get away from the "rubber stamp bands" of the area. He states that all the combinations here use the same instrumentation, which means that there is no variety<sup>3</sup>.

Before 1954 the majority of the musicians in this area were working in the day time

<sup>3</sup>Saka Acquaye, in a talk at the University College of Ghana, January 2, 1961.

and playing at night or on the weekends. Today the picture has changed only slightly. There are some professional bands, such as those of E. T. Mensah, Victor Alaya, Broadway Band, Modernaires, but most bands are made up of amateurs. The members of the bands of King Bruce and Joe Kelly have day jobs. This division of interest has caused these musicians to be apathetic towards improvement of their skills in Western music.

One reason for the apparent lack of interest is the restrictive musical taste and comparatively low musical standards of the audiences. Audiences in West Africa are not trained to listen to music. Their tribal training taught them to be participants. The music in the schools, with its emphasis on church vocal music, did little to enlarge their appreciative repertoire. So, in the absence of a tradition of listening, the people judge band performance solely on their reaction to the rhythm or the words. Highlife, calypso, cha cha cha, rock and roll, or music that is rhythmically interesting, is popular, while the waltz, quick step, etc., are tolerated and appreciated by only a minority. The dance band's system of apprenticeship also tends to create low standards. The leader may be unable to train the new members long enough for them to learn how to play their instrument. In fact, a new member may travel with the band as a valet or player of the idiophones until he learns enough to participate in the playing. New members often perform with the band before they are ready. One leader in Accra remarked that he had trained his new band for a "long time" and was going to allow them to perform at the next dance. The long time was six months.

Both the guitar bands and the dance bands are intertribal. In Liberia the band at the Duco Palace includes Ghana musicians; Victor Alaya's band includes Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa and many other tribes. E. K.'s band includes Kwabus, Ashantis, Fantes, Ewe, Hausas, and Gas.

The musicians now join bands for financial rather than tribal reasons. The band that offers the most attractive financial reward get the best people. Most of the bands are cooperatives, and the salary of the musician depends on the money obtained. This is a holdover from the traditional praise bands, who divided the money that they received.

Some of the bands try to incorporate indigenous techniques into their music. The West African Rhythm Brothers, formed in 1946, is one such organizations. The personnel is selected from among the indigenous instrumentalists. They are then trained in Western instruments. This enables the band to use both Western and indigenous instruments as well as musical ideas.

Some of the dance band musicians are aware of their inadequacies and would like to improve but they are hampered in two ways. They do not hear enough music by dance bands outside West Africa; and there are no musicians in West Africa of a sufficiently high calibre to be a source of inspiration to the others. Until they become familiar with the wide dance band repertoire as well as with good performers on their instruments, these musicians will not improve their own techniques.

They also face problems arising out of the incompatibility of some features of African and Western music. The problem of thinking vertically instead of lineally in improvisation has already been mentioned. The nature of the European instruments also poses a problem. They are not suitable for expressing the shades and nuances of African music. For example, the drop or the lowering of a tone at the end of a note can be partially expressed on some European instruments, especially the brass. But the smear which is the jazz equivalent of this drop is not exactly the same. The smear is played in a *diminuendo*, whereas the African drop may or not be played in that manner.

Another problem arises from the freedom of expression that prevails in African music. Although there are certain structural restrictions, some of the instrumentalists are allowed to improvise at will. This, however, is impossible in both Western and African-

\*Anon. "West African Roundabout", *West African Review*, Volume 23, Number 302, November 1952.

derived music. Although improvisation is permissible, while one player improvises the other musicians must play accompanying parts or the selection will suffer.

There is also a tonal problem. Tone production in West African music varies according to the tribe. But on the whole most of the dance band musicians have a thin, breathy tone. Whenever a vibrato is used it is so wide that it becomes a trill. This is a result of the varying traditions of desirable tone quality among the musicians.

The low reading skills of these musicians creates a further difficulty. In jazz parlance "they can spell". Since they have little facility at reading music, their choice of songs must be limited to what they can hear on the radio. However, they sometimes copy these songs incorrectly, and so far as harmony is concerned the resulting product is also incorrect. Sometimes the melody is also copied incorrectly or two musicians may have two different conceptions of how the melody should be played.

The few European bands in the area are usually engaged from their home countries for jobs in private clubs. They cater to the tastes of the European members of the population. On arrival in West Africa they may add to their group one or two African instrumentalists, that is, Bongo players.

The future of popular music in West Africa depends largely on the quality of the dance band and guitar band musicians, for these musicians perform more than one function. Besides playing in the bands, they also compose the Western-influenced music. In addition, they are the teachers of a large part of the instrumental music. If they are able to improve their techniques of playing, composition, and teaching, the music will also improve, and the new forms will become firmly rooted in the soil. If not, the new music will wither away and be replaced by musical shoots from outside the area, as they are in the former French colonies.