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The Future of Highlife

Kwesi
Yankah

I HAVE TO BEGIN by giving thanks to organisers and sponsors of the Highlife Month, the initiative of John Collins and the sponsorship of Goethe Institute. For once, the world has been invited to focus on highlife music, over a period of one month... bringing the topic of highlife under close contemplation, through exhibitions, films, live performances, and a symposium such as this.

This is probably the first ever public symposium on highlife music. The big irony being that it took a culturally sensitive foreign sponsor, and a hardworking Oburoni highlife scholar and historian to make this possible.

A symposium of this nature, should have had a proud location in a National Commission of Culture, or Musician Union of Ghana, or Entertainment Critics and Reviewers Association of Ghana (ECRAG), who have specialised in promoting the arts only through awards, some of which are of doubtful merit.

ECRAG

ECRAG over the years has become less and less valued by artists, due to inconsistency in criteria used in giving awards.... Actor of the Year award this year has been given to an actor who has hardly acted in Ghana, let alone over the past year! To ECRAG, the dancer of the year need not have danced in the past year... There is the need for a major overhauling of ECRAG to bring it in line with contemporary award institutions, where recipients are of contemporary relevance....

Collins

I also wish to salute the efforts of

John Collins, the leading scholar of highlife music, for his tireless efforts in selling the scholarship on highlife at home and abroad. The discussion of a theme such as the future of highlife need not dwell exclusively on the content, style, and performance of highlife music. One needs to emphasise here the socio-political matrix of highlife, not just as music and dance, but as a social institution, that has been nurtured and sustained within a social context.

There is the need for occasional emphasis on the exegesis of highlife, and the intellectual traditions in which it is anchored and preserved. It is possible today to announce that a highlife scholar and historian, Dr. John Collins, has been officially brought into the fold of the University of Ghana, at the School of Performing Arts. This is a quiet assurance that regardless of what happens to the future of the music, at least highlife or popular music could for once be the focus of serious academic contemplation in a university. At least one can talk of the bright future of a highlife academy. To date I know of two or so doctoral dissertations on highlife music.

One needs to go further than that in recognising the effective role of highlife in world music. The immediate future calls for the construction of a Highlife Hall of Fame, where the past and present guardians of the highlife tradition are recognised in monuments befitting their status and artistic eminence. In other places, not only do we have a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, monuments have been built for individual popular musicians, such as the John Lennon Cultural Centre in Liverpool, England.

In such monuments lie the future of highlife. Under these circumstances then,

one need not express the fear of losing authentic highlife music under the force of modernity. Highlife becomes a permanent monument intrinsically withstanding the ravages of time.

State of flux

But we need to go a step further. The issue of the future of the music itself cannot be adequately addressed without reference to the present state of highlife, the extent of its resilience and the artistic transformations under which it has undergone over the years.

These transformations range from rhythm, theme, performance, instrumentation, to language, resulting in a broad range of modes: typically falling under the rubric of burger highlife, derived from the Music of Ghanaians in Hamburg and other European cities. This term, probably has itself outlived its usefulness over the years, and has moved beyond the George Darkos, Lee Duodus to a rhythm one can as well call the Lumba Highlife, after Daddy Lumba.

The features of current highlife clearly depart from the normative 4-4 time line, and sometimes qualifies only vaguely as highlife... highlife only in the sense of the Ghanaian language expression utilised. This could be relevant particularly if we should consider the term highlife as a broad rubric, encompassing Ghanaian popular music as a whole.

The highlife variety has in it a substantial dose of the western popular rhythm, brought about by migration of Ghanaian musicians to the West. This rhythm is a clear departure from the range of indigenous musical idioms whose synthesis constitutes the original highlife beat.

Significantly, the instrumental ensemble of such groups constitutes a hybrid between the typical dance band highlife, and the guitar band. Hybrid in

the sense that despite the rustic, idiomatic content of their lyrics, and the extensive use of the guitar (typical of guitar bands), there is an occasional horn intrusion that gives them the character of the typical dance band. Since its exponents grew out of the guitar band tradition, their lyrics have high proverbial and idiomatic density. They are virtually nuggets of narrative poetry.

Besides the pronounced rhythmic departure, there appears to be a gradual de-emphasis on raw instrumental talent of the musician, and greater reliance on instrumental and technological gadgetry. Musical instrumentals are gradually becoming reduced to single piece equipment, capable of producing the effect on an entire ensemble. One-man orchestras and choruses are no longer fictions. They have become a virtual reality in current day music, considerably reducing individual artistic creativity.

But the evolution of highlife music over the years cannot ignore a slight in the character of ownership, that has considerably affected the stability of highlife music.

Big Band Highlife received a big booster in the early seventies through corporate ownership. Private and Public enterprises gave their public relations a further booster through the ownership of bands. The Tema Food Complex had a Complex Dance Band, the Cocoa Marketing Board, the Sweet Beans, Talk of the Town Hotel, Sweet Talks, Continental Hotel, Continentals, Ambassadors, Expensive Stars, Medican Lantics owned by state hotels. This was besides Forces bands from Navy, Armed Forces, Police, etc.

These, of course, were besides the more stable privately owned bands like Ramblers, Black Beats, Uhuru, Tempos Band, etc.

But Big Band highlife was to suffer a decline in the eighties, to be outstripped by the booming business of spinning groups, that charged less and played only copyrighted music. Spinning groups are gradually fading away, and there appears to be a gradual resurgence of live dance band music.

But highlife music has not quite

gone astray as people would think.

Tradition goes on

1) Its traditional exponents are still alive, in all their manifestations a) guitar band music; b) dance band music c) traditional ensembles, d) brass band.

There still exists a resilient core group of highlife musicians and their art

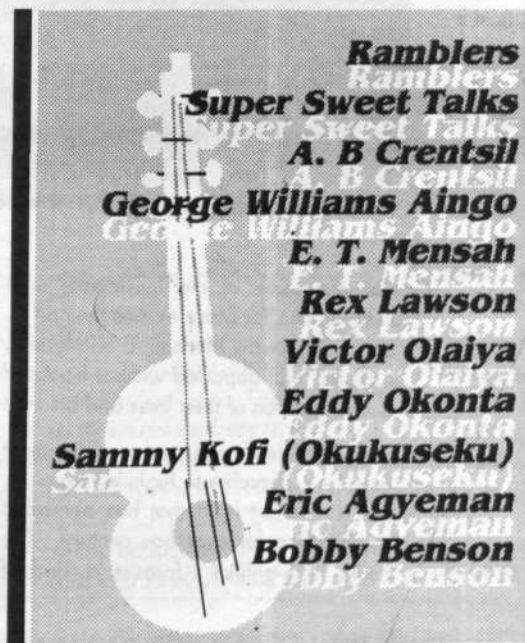
There is no need, indeed, to fear what appears to be 'contamination' of highlife; for highlife itself has always been a syncretic art form: a combination of local rhythms played with western musical instruments; and so long as the basic tenet of highlife is syncretic, one leg stepped within the western dynamic art, further

idiom. Westernised highlife draws in the youth (who otherwise would be repelled); and once drawn in by the rhythm, the process of enculturation is facilitated; social messages are still imparted, morals are still learned. Except for the 'alienated' highlife music of today, our youth would be completely lost.

3) We have not completely lost the pristine highlife idiom, contrary to what others may think: its practitioners and adherents are still going strong, and are passing on their traditions: the timeless highlife cassettes and compact discs now on sale, displaying the music of E.T. Mensah, Ramblers, Black Beats. This makes the original highlife beat almost a timeless phenomenon, providing a

rhythmic frame within which the archetypal forms are defined.

We still have the guitar band consistency of Kwame Ampadu, the narrative character of his music: a combination of song and tale, specialising in the sung tale metaphor. Neither have we lost the consistency of the palm wine guitar exponent, Agya Koo Nimo, with his emphasis on percussion and acoustic guitar, the strong narrative component of his lyrics, which are anchored in the mmoguo tradition of storytelling.



westernisation is unavoidable.

But highlife should not be considered inert, completely insulated from the forces of modernity. The world is growing smaller and smaller, and much as we must strive to preserve our distinct musical/cultural heritage, as a mark of our spiritual identity, we need not make ourselves a cultural island, completely insensitive to changes around us, in the world of technology.

2) The current state of flux of highlife, may hurt the romantic nationalist, or cultural purist, but it provides a welcome bridge for the completely alienated youth of today, who are otherwise completely immersed in the Western funk musical

Enrichment

It is, of course, easy to panic and raise alarm over the threat of extinction of highlife music. The reality is that highlife music cannot just go away. It is being enriched daily by a multiplicity of forms, and variations partly influenced from the west, but also influenced from within through adoption, adaptation, and transformation of basic indigenous rhythms. The motivation is partly artistic, but also partly survivalist. Highlife music need not be seen as inert idiom; it changes its form sometimes for its own sake, and sometimes as a survivalist strategy.

Not only do we have to accept the

dynamics of highlife as a natural artistic phenomenon, we also need not panic about the imminent death of pristine highlife idiom. These are timeless, and can never go away.

What we need to do is to further educate the youth on the original state of highlife, and take them through the process of its evolution.

Education

In Britain, one of the best programmes on television depicts music of the sixties (Beatles, Rolling Stones, etc). Every primary school child in Britain at least knows about the Beatles. There is a sense of documentation and history... a continuous playback of old rhythms and the pioneers of popular music.

What is more important is the perpetuation of knowledge about the genesis and evolution of highlife.

Currently one of the most popular programmes on radio in Ghana here is old time highlife: Joe Mensah, Ramblers, Nana Ampadu, E.T. Mensah, King Bruce, Uhuru Dance Band, Broadway.... The popularity of the programme itself demonstrates the resilience of highlife music.

What we need to do is indulge in an exercise of retrieving the residues of pristine highlife music lodged in GBC, and Ghana Film Industry Corporation. Old records need to be rendered on compact discs.

There is the need for proper



Veteran of 'pristine' highlife: E.T. Mensah

documentation of old musicians, their biographies, life histories, and their art.... Bob Cole, Kwaw Mensah, E. K. Nyame, Kakaiku, etc. departed without intensive documentation of their lives and art.

And finally, we need an endowment fund for research into highlife music, for this is one art form that has pervaded West Africa for over one century. The future of highlife? I foresee a kind of

highlife renaissance; continuous ploughing back into the modern idiom, of more and more traditional elements. Highlife may be rejuvenated not necessarily through adoption of western modes, but adoption, adaptation, and reformation and combinations, of old indigenous rhythms, boosted by modern technology to broaden its appeal. **GR**

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