

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Highlife Music, Hiplife, and Leisure in Ghana

Nate Plageman. *Highlife Saturday Night: Popular Music and Social Change in Urban Ghana.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xvi + 318 pp. Map. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$28.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-00729-2.

Halifu Osumare. *The Hiplife in Ghana: West African Indigenization of Hip-Hop.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xii + 219 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$33.64. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-349-43767-2.

Jesse Weaver Shipley. *Living the Highlife: Celebrity and Entrepreneurship in Ghanaian Popular Music.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. xiii + 329 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$28.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5366-9.

As a Ghanaian who loves Highlife and Hiplife music, and as a social historian who has used and who values music as historical source, I have found it instructive to read side-by-side the works on highlife and hiplife by Nate Plageman, Halifu Osumare, and Jesse Shipley. They fit well in a shared narrative framework and speak to a century or more of musical improvisation in Ghana. A combination of internal musical resources and external influences coalesced to create highlife music in the early decades of the twentieth century and to forge hiplife out of hip-hop in the closing decades of the century. The historical connections between highlife and hiplife are evident, providing a chronological thread for the three works: Plageman's study closes in the 1970s and 1980s, when the phenomenon of Highlife Saturday Night ended due to adverse political and economic developments in Ghana; the 1980s served as a transition period when cassettes and tape recorders moved leisure indoors in an era of military rule and curfews; and Osumare and Shipley pick up the thread beginning in the 1990s, with the importation of hip-hop and its indigenization into hiplife. With different levels of granularity, all three authors tell a story of youth musical creativity and identity driven by generational tensions, of class and social mobility, and of gender and the ambivalent place of women on the stage of Ghanaian popular music. It is a story of how technology shapes the production, distribution, and consump-

tion of music, beginning with the big band orchestras that made Highlife Saturday Night a special feature starting in the 1920s for the middle and aspiring middle classes in coastal towns such as Sekondi, Cape Coast, and Accra. It moves then to the democratization of highlife and Saturday Night, with the advent of small bands or combos playing at the nightclubs that proliferated after World War II, transitioning to digital and electronic music from the 1990s that shed the need for bands and instruments. This is also a story about power, relations of power, and money. The interest of the state in the social control of urban patrons of highlife and hiplife meshed with the claims-making and identity politics of ordinary town-dwellers, while the quest for social mobility by highlife and hiplife artists was facilitated and co-opted by corporate capital (racially white), which has sought globally to profit off black popular music.

But all three also have different emphases or foci in the stories they tell. Plageman describes and analyzes the social phenomenon of Highlife Saturday Night in Ghana, and leisure as a site of activity, creativity, and interrogation: “When men and women left their homes for an evening of music and dance, they did so not to escape the realities that marked the remainder of their week, but in order to address them, unmake them, and reconfigure them in ways they best saw fit” (5). Plageman’s book provides a history of highlife from its antecedents in the 1890s through the 1970s, along with the social transformations that marked Ghanaian society in this period (13). He focuses on dance band highlife, which began in the 1920s and by the 1930s had given birth to Saturday Night in towns, and the various constituencies that would contest the meaning of Saturday Night. These ranged from the social clubs and their middle-class members who pioneered the phenomenon to the urban working classes that claimed access to it and the dance band musicians themselves. Other constituencies were the colonial state that came to appropriate the music as an instrument of social control and the nationalist government of a newly independent Ghana that exploited highlife in its political mobilization of the masses and later came to privilege its use as a medium of education and social control for the young nation.

Osumare is interested in the big picture of Ghanaian hiplife as an indigenization of the African American hip-hop, though she gives attention to the indexical figure in hiplife, Reggie Rockstone, whose photo adorns the cover of the book. The book advances two major arguments. The first addresses the circulation of musical and dance influences between Africa and its diaspora in the Americas, what Osumare calls the “arc of mutual inspiration”: “The circle of musical and dance influences from Africa to its diaspora and back again, represented by these rhythmic musical genres from all regions of the African continent, is what I call an *arc of mutual inspiration* that has existed since the Atlantic slave trade” (1). Hiplife in Ghana represents the latest installment in this arc of musical inspiration that links Africa and its diaspora across time and space. Osumare is particularly interested in the “indigenization” of hip-hop in Ghana as highlife, as evident in the sub-title of her book. Hiplife, while a transformation and indigenization of an African

American musical form in Ghana, at the same time draws on local roots, including an older use of rap in highlife by Ghanaian artists such as Gyedu-Blay Ambolley. In this regard, “Ghanaian hip-hop can be perceived in reality as a revision of Ghana’s own local popular sounds, language, and cultural propensities that existed throughout the twentieth century” (31). Thus, importing hip-hop and its translation into hiplife was in reality a process of “re-indigenization” (177). The book’s second argument examines how hiplife provides a lens to focus on the tensions between globalization and localization and the reality of neocolonialism in today’s “borderless” transnational capitalism.

Shipley provides a picture of hiplife as a transnational musical form in his triangulation of musical influences and the mobility of hiplife artists between Ghana, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as a deeply textured feel for the local context of hiplife musical production and circulation in Ghana. His mission is to interrogate the changing ideas of Ghanaian identity through the story of hiplife. Shipley is also interested in hiplife artists as entrepreneurs, and he very ably tracks the production, distribution, and reception or consumption of hiplife. He follows the music’s circuits through recording studios, the private radio stations that gave hiplife airtime from the 1990s, urban markets, and cyberspaces in an era of digital music. Following individual artists in their musical endeavors, we are presented with firsthand descriptions of the making of hiplife music in the challenges and frustrations of young artists whose financial constraints demand ingenuity and social connections in the making of beats. Shipley also touches on the recording of music and the necessary airtime that brings recognition, a following, and hopefully a corporate sponsor in an age where financial rewards do not come from the sales of albums. As a filmmaker, Shipley appreciates the importance of narration and public image to artistic success. He analyzes the sociolinguistics of hiplife, carefully interrogating the social contexts in which hiplife is produced and circulated, and the use of language as performance by Ghanaian youth. The hiplife artists have appropriated speech forms and oratory that hitherto were the reserve of elders, thereby refashioning “traditional forms of oratory ... for electronic modalities” (13). Shipley examines how the creative and imaginative use of words in hiplife, anchored onto older highlife rhythms that resonate with both older and younger Ghanaian audiences in Ghana and abroad, has become an important component for hiplife success. In Ghana, the utilization of older highlife rhythms by young hiplife artists has endeared the new genre to an older audience that grew up on highlife, while in diasporic sites such as the Bronx, the same hiplife with older highlife rhythms—hence distinct from African American hip-hop—enables younger Ghanaians to imagine themselves as Ghanaians in the midst of larger black communities, creating what Shipley describes as a “sonic nationhood” (26, 230).

There are shared and unique insights among the three books. Plageman traces the roots of highlife and its offshoots, from *osibisaaba* and *ashiko* in coastal towns in the twentieth century to *konkoma* in the 1920s, the equivalent

of a poor man's brass band in the interior. These Plageman describes as "proto-highlife musics." All were deeply influenced by European brass bands from the late nineteenth century. Underscoring the connections between new genres of music and youth identity, he notes that for "young men, *osibisaaba*, *ashiko*, and *konkoma* were also potent forms for the creation of a new form of masculinity" (55). That male elders, chiefs, missionaries and colonial officials would be opposed to these forms of music is not surprising. Highlife emerged when local orchestras in the middle-class social clubs combined European chord sequences with local rhythmic patterns to develop a new form of music that was featured on printed programs for ball dances from the 1920s (77). It is striking that when the nationalist government of Kwame Nkrumah adopted highlife as a "national" dance music in 1960 and moved to rid it of its European or foreign influences, the name they proposed for a purified highlife form was "Osibi," a return to roots and to *osibisaaba* (149).

In addition to the generational and class dynamics of popular music, there was also a strong gender bias. Highlife was the product of coastal social clubs formed by educated young men. But ball dances required female partners in order to flourish. So, the educated "gentlemen" (*akrakyefoo*) of the coastal social clubs embarked on a social mission to make "ladies" (*nnwurannom*), teaching them not only the ball dances, but the social etiquette that went with it. Moreover, the proto-highlife musics such as *osibisaaba* and *konkoma* were banned at these social clubs. It is this social engineering, Plageman points out, and the fascination of the working classes for the "high life," that recommended this new art form to the colonial administration as a potential social instrument for reshaping unruly urban masses. Growing numbers of resident British began to attend these ball dances and to mix socially with the educated Africans. Highlife musicians were mainly men, and even into the 1950s and 1960s, most bands refused to admit women, some even fearing that menstruating women would corrupt the musical instruments (192). These gender biases continued into the era of hiplife. Shipley highlights the Ghanaian opposition to female hiplife artists in a society where young women often do not have the right to speak in public. This underscores the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, and successful female hiplife artists must negotiate being both modern and moral, financially successful and social respectable. The contrasting personalities of Mzbel and Abrewa Nana speak to these tensions, the former flaunting a sexually provocative style, the latter exhibiting a demure style (163–64). Scandalously, when university students at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi assaulted Mzbel after a concert at the university on October 1, 2005, the public seemed to feel this was justified by her sexually provocative performance on stage. And even worse, when armed robbers robbed and sexually assaulted Mzbel and one of her female dancers at her Accra residence a year later, "the public seemed more concerned with her moral culpability than that of her perpetrators" (164).

To conclude, reading these three works together has been an intellectual feast. Plageman's well-researched book made a concise argument about Highlife Saturday Night, and the reasons for its rise and decline in Ghana social life. The succinct articulation of a thesis provided a clear roadmap through the rich archival evidence. The book is beautifully written, and this was a balanced intellectual meal. Osumare is a big picture person, and her major arguments are convincingly argued: the "mutual arc of inspiration" linking Africa and its diaspora, the indigenization/re-indigenization of hip-hop in Ghana, and corporate capital's exploitation of black musical creativity in Africa and the diaspora. The book's source base is narrower, and discussions on Africa's political economy would strangely reference works on music instead of the rich literature on political economy. For example, Osumare relies on a hip-hop book by Ntarangwi for her analysis of the political economy of East Africa in the era of structural adjustment (148). Much of her analysis of structural adjustment in Ghana is based on one article by Bofo Arthur. Shipley's book is a gem, replete with invaluable insights that I will mine for years to come. Shipley's hand is a confident guide through developments that were sometimes serendipitous but would have huge ramifications for musical creativity and hiplife in Ghana, such as the launch of Kiddafest and Fun World in the 1990s at the National Theater of Ghana, which by 1999 featured over sixty-five rap groups in a week-long program and had inadvertently become an incubator for future hiplife stars (71–74). Kiddafest and Fun World legitimized hip-hop to some degree for a Ghanaian audience. But the book is dense in its pursuit of multiple theoretical and ethnographic insights and could easily have been more than one volume. The book requires unpacking. It does, however, reward the patient reader. Of the three books, the one that most captures the spirit of leisure in Ghana in its active and reflexive forms, of leisure as plain fun in addition to being constructed and contested and all the concepts scholars like to unpack, is Plageman's *Highlife Saturday Night*. He reminds us that: "While many men and women used the music as a means to relax, have fun, and enjoy an evening out on the town, many others employed it to mediate relationships, articulate understandings of similarity and difference, and generate consensus and conflict with those around them" (3).

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