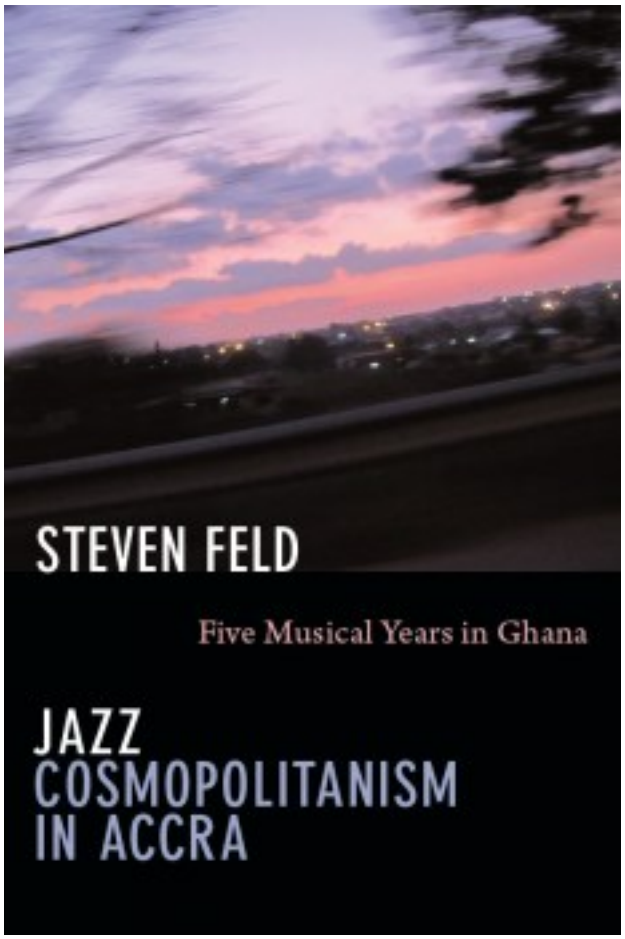
Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana

Reviewed by Dave Wilson



“That’s music’s strength, I think, the way everything can come together politically and spiritually, without reading books” (118). These are the words of Nii Noi Nortey, one of the cosmopolitan Ghanaian jazz musicians with whom Steven Feld collaborates in his latest book, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana.* The book tells the story of several projects in which Feld engaged between 2005 and 2010 as a documentary filmmaker, jazz performer, music producer, and anthropologist. In his introduction he states that he never intended to write about his experiences (perhaps following Nii Noi’s thinking), choosing rather to tell the stories of Ghanaian jazz musicians through the media of film and recorded music. Fortunately for us, an invitation to give a series of lectures at the University of California, Berkeley inspired him to synthesize his observations in written form. The result is an artful combination of memoir, ethnography, biography, and history, with important contributions to both theoretical ideas of cosmopolitanism and methodological practices in the field and in ethnographic writing about music and musicians.

As his original projects focused on collaborative methodologies that emphasized the voices of the musicians with whom he was working, Feld builds his narrative around their stories and perspectives. He structures the book like a jazz tune, each section bearing labels such as “Four-bar Intro,” “Vamp in, Head,” and “First Chorus, with Transposition.” He allows his own voice to emerge alongside the voices of Ghanaian musicians, just as it does in their musical recordings and documentary films. Rather than wrestling with the positionality of the ethnographer, he immerses himself in creative cooperation with the musicians, knowing that a special kind of intervocality would emerge and that an intimate process of dialogic editing would be possible. Feld articulates these processes throughout the book as he poetically tells the story of how his life intersected with the lives of these musicians for five very meaningful years. In the process, he not only unravels the complexity of that unique intersection but also interweaves (and sometimes challenges) what he terms “genealogies of power”: that jazz is always about the place of race in musical history, that African music is always about spirituality and politics, and that cosmopolitanism is complicated and ripe for analysis and not “just some heady abstraction floating in the

banalizing academic ink pool alongside 'globalization' or 'identity'" (7). Feld engages with the discourse on cosmopolitanism on his own terms, mostly allowing his collaborators to speak for themselves about their views of the world and the ways in which they position their music philosophically, aesthetically, and ethically.

After a skillful introduction of his musical and theoretical framework in "Four-bar Intro," Feld outlines the content of the book in his introduction, "Vamp in, Head: Acoustemology in Accra: On Jazz Cosmopolitanism." In that section, he not only introduces the web of relationships that connect the musicians he works with in Accra, but he also tells the stories of how his life became intertwined with theirs. He emphasizes the richness of each of his intimate musical encounters, but stresses that their overlapping nature and common threads provide for an analysis of jazz cosmopolitanism, describing that cosmopolitanism as "the agency of desire for enlarged spatial participation . . . [which] plays out in performances and imaginaries of connectedness, detoured and leaped-over pathways storied and traveled from X to Y by way of Z" (49).

Feld continues into four ethnographic chapters, the first three of which deal with individual musicians, the last with a community. In "First Chorus, with Transposition," he tells the story of Guy Warren/Ghanaba, a Ghanaian drummer who worked as a musician in America in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, returning to Ghana thereafter with conflicting feelings towards American jazz and its idea of Africa. Though Feld's most concrete collaboration with Ghanaba was the production of a documentary on *Halleluja!*, Ghanaba's performance of Handel's *Messiah* using talking drums and ideologies from many world religions (described in Feld's introduction), this chapter focuses on Ghanaba's (and Feld's?) challenge to the place of Africa in the jazz history narrative and the embedded issues of race and class.

"Second Chorus, Blow Free" deals with Feld's primary collaborator, Nii Noy Nortey, a saxophonist who also performs on instruments of his invention, "Afrifones." Nii Noy was instrumental in connecting Feld to each of his other musical collaborators, and through their serendipitously formed group Accra Trane Station (with Nii Otoo Annan of the next chapter), he participates with Feld in the clearest example of what Feld terms "musical intimacy." This chapter not only tells the story of their intimate creative cooperation, but also highlights Nii Noy's perspectives on discourses of Africa in the music of John Coltrane as well as discourses of Beethoven's African ancestry. Feld, through interweaving his voice with Nii Noy's, challenges his reader not to dismiss a perspective that seems to universalize and Africanize both Coltrane and Beethoven in one breath, but to consider framing Nii Noy's conceptualization with regard to philosophers like Habermas and Appiah, for whom cosmopolitanism is an ethical and transformative response to contemporary injustice. Nii Noy and Ghanaba connect here as moving in unison, positioning African and African-American jazz sensibilities in relationship to Europe (see p. 114 for this insightful discussion). This series of intellectual moves by Feld is just one example of how he solidifies his intervocality with his collaborators, clearly articulating the sophistication of their cosmopolitan conceptualizations of their music.

In "Third Chorus, Back Inside," Feld describes his collaborative endeavors with Nii Otoo Annan, the percussionist with Accra Trane Station. As many of their projects outside of Accra Trane Station involve interactions with soundscapes, readers of Feld will find themselves in familiar theoretical territory. Feld summarizes his own body of work on sound, place, and space, giving a satisfying bird's-eye view on ideas of soundscape that have driven his work for decades. In this conversation he includes explorations of spirituality and class, both important aspects of Nii Otoo's life and music making. He also unapologetically deals with his own position in relation to the financial operations of Accra Trane Station and the seemingly inescapable consequences of class difference, providing useful insights for any musical ethnographer.

The last ethnographic chapter, "Fourth Chorus, Shout to the Groove," depicts a community of lorry and minibus drivers (Accra's La Drivers Union) who have developed a tradition of performing with their honk horns at the funerals of members (highly reminiscent of New Orleans jazz funeral musical practices but with no evident connection). The rich ethnographic detail of this chapter leaves the reader with a deep sense of familiarity and intimacy with the stories, sounds, symbols, nicknaming practices, and ritual practices of the community. He extracts some extraordinary stories, including how drivers helped the daughter of US Ambassador Shirley Temple Black acquire some "proper ganja . . . she was a real smoker" (192; see pp. 207-210 for more on the intriguing place of Temple Black in Ghanaian lore, including a shrine built to her that Feld was forbidden to describe). Through this narrative, Feld shows us how the drivers' cosmopolitanism echoes in the memory embedded in the sounds of their music and in their physical representations of the past on their lorries, which carry them into the future.

Throughout his ethnographic writing, Feld describes his own interaction and influence on the musical practices of the interconnected, yet disparate jazz community of Accra. And yet, when describing his conversations *about* their

music, he is always asking questions and allowing the musicians' answers to speak for themselves. I, perhaps like many young ethnographers, am continually weighing my own interaction with and influence on the musicians with whom I work. I struggle with how much of my own experience or creative ideas to insert into a conversation in the process of learning from musicians about their own practice. In Feld's writing about his five-year stint in Accra, I find great encouragement for my own collaborative efforts with musicians in Macedonia with musicians and DJs from the interconnected jazz, hip hop, and house music scenes. In both its content and form, this work has provided great inspiration and challenge for me as I consider how to position myself in my field of research and how to frame it as a writer. Feld's idea of musical intimacy (following Svetlana Boym's "disasporic intimacy") is not just a theoretical construct, but also a reality in which he himself participates, as do, in their own unique ways, musical ethnographers the world over. His storytelling mode allows him to foreground not only his own experience, but also the voices of his collaborators. And by moving most of his discussion of existing academic discourses to the endnotes ("Horn Backgrounds, Riffs Underneath," a must-read for a full understanding of the work's contribution), Feld allows his narrative to poetically speak for itself as it asserts his and his collaborators' musical, theoretical, and ideological innovations concerning jazz, Africa, and cosmopolitanism.

In addition to his effective usage of the storytelling mode, Feld provides an exemplary illustration of the seamless integration of multiple roles as a documentary filmmaker, musician, anthropologist, historian, and tour promoter that many ethnomusicologists and other scholars of music find themselves juggling. He deftly handles the complicated demands of these roles and faces their inherent challenges while developing meaningful relationships with his fellow artists. Feld realizes that not all Ghanaians would view these musicians as cosmopolitans, but that fact seems to actually reinforce his discussion of the discourse on cosmopolitanism and its relationship to race, class, and other structures of power. Indeed, he opens many doors for his readers and tells us stories of why these types of music making are important beyond Ghana. He leads us to a more refined understanding of cosmopolitanism, not to provide a series of answers, but to provoke in each of us more thoughtful questions about our music, our research, and ourselves.

Links:

- VoxLox [1], Feld's publishing company
- The Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra companion CD [2], with audio previews
- The Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra DVD trilogy [3], with trailers for Film 1 [4], Film 2 [5], and Film 3 [6]

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