

FOUR-BAR INTRO

“The Shape of Jazz to Come”



I'm here to tell stories about encounters with jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra. While luminous and vexing to me, I don't expect them to be as memorable or unsettling to you. But I do hope they will be productive of surprise and critical reflection, certainly about the shape of jazz as diasporic dialogue in an African urban modernity, and even more about jazz cosmopolitanism as musical intimacy.

This was hardly what I had in mind when I first visited Accra in October 2004. Not at all. The idea was just a two-week look and listen. Ruti Talmor, then an anthropology graduate student at New York University, invited me to come as she was finishing her fieldwork about Accra's National Arts Centre and the local contemporary art world.¹ I'd help her out with some video work, and she'd introduce me to some musicians and artists.

I was at the time (and still am) at work on a project about how village, church, animal, and carnival bells have created senses of space and time over ten centuries of European pastoral history.² I liked the idea of finding out something about an even older yet very contemporary world of forged iron hand bells played as timekeepers in West African musical ensembles. But I wasn't thinking that Accra would become more than a short musical detour before heading back to Europe and bells, and then home to the last months of the generous Guggenheim support that had me on leave from teaching.

Ruti had been in Accra for more than a year and knew the city well. René Gerrets, another NYU anthropology graduate student, and on his way to begin fieldwork in Tanzania, was at the time visiting her too. We met diverse people connected with Ruti's research and cruised the city in her banana-colored sedan on days it cooperated. This brief scan made me aware of a kind of fieldwork unlike any other I had experienced, certainly distant from my work in a remote rainforest in Papua New Guinea, or from pastoral villages or towns in Europe. It was the possibil-

ity of art world fieldwork in a large and globally layered city, simultaneously engaged with multiple sites, locations, niches, scenes, and styles of production. And it was the challenge, within those multiplicities, to grasp something about the intertwined yet markedly race- and class-differentiated realities of artists, patrons, and institutions with their array of local to global connections.

Things happened quickly. On my first night we dined with Virginia Ryan, a visual artist working with the Italian Embassy in Accra and busy establishing the Foundation for Contemporary Art–Ghana.³ A few nights later we dined again with Virginia and her FCA cofounder and codirector, Joe Nkrumah, a polymath art conservator, cultural historian, and “Uncle Joe” or “Prof” to everyone doing research in Accra. And just a few days later those two conversations led to meeting one of Joe’s Accra art world friends, the sculptor, instrument inventor, and musician Nii Noi Nortey.

That crucial encounter streamed into others, an initial dialogue with Nii Noi about John Coltrane overflowing into what became five years of converging conversations, performances, collaborations, and recording and video projects about the feedback swirls situating Accra’s jazz cosmopolitanism in the transnational diasporic currents Paul Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic and Caryl Phillips calls the Atlantic sound.⁴

Thinking back, those first two weeks in Accra were extraordinary. Never before in a life of much travel had I experienced such an immediate ease of attachment with place, people, scenes; which must have been why it was so easy to say yes when Nii Noi asked if I would consider coming back to Accra to work with him. He said it was “divined” by our first meeting, speaking of the moment I asked if he would like a recording of the rehearsal that Joe, Ruti, and I walked in on when we first arrived at his home.

If Nii Noi’s word of choice was “divined,” mine for that fateful encounter was “captivated.” That was my instant feeling about the recorded material, so much so that on my return to the United States I immediately edited the tapes and sent the CD back to Nii Noi for review. He responded that we were hearing the music’s contours the same way. “I’m telling you, man, it’s the shape of jazz to come,” he said on the phone, seductively quoting the title of a famous Ornette Coleman LP from 1959, one that really did herald a number of 1960s major jazz developments.⁵ With that, I enlisted Ruti’s help to arrange the rental of an acoustically

bright loft designed and built by the architect Alero Olympio. And that's how I returned to Accra to set up a recording studio for a month in 2005 to record Nii Noi and Nii Otoo Annan's *Tribute to A Love Supreme*, in recognition of John Coltrane's classic LP.⁶

For many years before all this I had lived two simultaneous professional lives, one as a musician consumed by jazz, one as an anthropologist consumed by cultural poetics and politics. Of course music had long found its way into my anthropology, and anthropology into my music. But it wasn't until I went to Accra, met Nii Noi and Nii Otoo, and agreed to return that a new synthesis emerged, my lives as musician and scholar more deeply fusing in the possibility to explore how the performance of jazz in Africa, and Africa in jazz, could relate to the anthropology of globalism and cosmopolitanism.

What happened was that I began the *Love Supreme* tribute project working as a producer and as a recordist together with Nii Noi's regular sound engineer, Agazi. But the course of events changed wildly when I fell in love with one of Nii Noi and Nii Otoo's instruments, a bass *mbira* box, and took it away with me to continue and deepen the affair.

Things also changed wildly in that dense month when Nii Noi introduced me to other musicians in his immediate circle, the "divine drummer" Ghanaba (formerly Guy Warren), the country's leading experimentalist, and then the La Drivers Union Por Por Group, a union of minibus and truck drivers who invented a jazzy honking music for antique squeeze-bulb vehicle horns. Central to both introductions was meeting one of Nii Noi's close friends who had been working both with Ghanaba and the La Por Por Group for many years, the photographer Nii Yemo Nunu.

That month of work in 2005 led to spending up to six months in Accra during each of the following five years, exploring the African legacy of John Coltrane and playing in Nii Noi and Nii Otoo's Accra Trane Station band; following the intersections of African, European classical, and African American musical idioms in conversation with Ghanaba; tracing routes of music and transport, and of honk horn funerals with the La Drivers Union Por Por Group.

During those longer visits from 2006 through 2010, I lived in the neighborhood of Nima, remarkable for its blended overlays of village and cosmopolitan features. Each day I encountered a bustling mix of artists, politicians, business people, drivers, street sellers, tailors, carpenters, school children, local workers, and consummate hustlers. Down the road

was the compound of the politically ever-present Akufo-Addo family (“as close to aristocracy as it gets here,” in the words of someone who knows), as well as a longtime favorite restaurant haunt of international and local elites. All around was a class-mixed cross-section of Ghanaian neighbors, with a few Nigerian, Moroccan, Syrian, Lebanese, Ukrainian, Thai, Serbian, Indian, Dutch, Swiss, and German in the mix. And in the blocks just beyond, a multilayered world of everything from “fitters” and “panel beaters” (mechanics and automobile body repairers) to computer dealers, dry goods sellers, and drug dealers, all their words, worlds, and works framed by the resonant soundmark surround of kids taking over the streets as *fufu* was pounded and local mosques (the area has a major Muslim history in Accra) and Pentecostal churches vigorously broadcast their faith. Among other things, life in Nima taught me a great deal about everyday listening to sonic stratigraphy.⁷

Over these years Nii Noi and Nii Otoo also visited me at home in New Mexico, and we’ve taught, toured, and performed together in Ghana, Europe, and the United States. Accra Trane Station CDs were issued year by year to document the work: *Meditations for John Coltrane* for 2006, *Another Blue Train* for 2007, and then, in 2008, Nii Otoo’s *Bufo Variations* and *Topographies of the Dark*, a quintet collaboration with the American jazz artists Alex Coke and Jefferson Voorhees.⁸

Along with Accra Trane Station, the La Drivers Union Por Por Group was featured on *Musical Bells of Accra*, coproduced with Nii Noi in 2005–6, followed by their own debut CD, *Por Por: Honk Horn Music of Ghana* in 2007, and then *Klebo! Honk Horn Music from Ghana* in 2009.⁹ Nii Yemo Nunu became my collaborating photographer, coresearcher, and Ga translator in these projects, also playing a critical production role in the three hour-long video documentaries that accompany this book, one each about Ghanaba’s *Hallelujah!*, Nii Noi and Nii Otoo’s *Accra Trane Station*, and *A Por Por Funeral for Ashirife*, released as the *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* DVD trilogy.¹⁰

This body of work overtook my European bell project and much else over the last six years, but for most of that time, with the exception of copious diaries, I didn’t write a word about the Accra jazz world. Why? Well, first, it felt more natural to let photographs, recordings, video, and performances express the sensuous substance and spirit of my inquiry as an artist among artists. Both as a matter of credibility and engagement, I wanted to make everything immediately accessible in Ghana, to make

sound and image the centerpiece of our collective musical exchanges. Besides, I didn't set out to gather material to write another scholarly book. And as it all got going, I bluntly asked Nii Noi, and then the others, "What do you want out of working with me?" Their priorities were unanimous and pointed: first, to have their creative work well documented and to get paid for it, and second, through the prestige of that documentation, to get more gigs, income, and resources useful for the continuation of their work.

The time to write and the space for it arrived in a grand way, through a generous invitation to give the Bloch Lectures in Music at the University of California, Berkeley, in the winter–spring semester of 2009. Grand because January 2009 marked thirty years since my first setting foot in Berkeley, grand because once again I arrived with an intense writing project. The first time around I had returned from research in rainforest Papua New Guinea to sit down and write a dissertation. During that writing, Bonnie Wade invited me to her ethnomusicology seminar to give the first presentation of that sound-and-sentiment research. Thirty years later it was Bonnie, as chair of Berkeley's Music Department, who was facilitating a return to Berkeley to pour jazz cosmopolitanism onto the page, the pleasure enhanced by the opportunity to present six illustrated lectures and screenings of the three films.

The Bloch talks were academically hybrid, an attempt to present jazz cosmopolitanism through encounter stories and their global pre- and after-lives. My concern was first and foremost to convey some glimpse of the musical intimacy I gained in my Accra encounters, to voice the complexity of knowing African musicians with complicated lives, people whose unique practices and contributions were valorized neither in jazz, art, or experimental music discourses, nor in those of ethno/musicology. I wanted to tell stories about how my life as a musician and researcher became critically entangled in other searching musical lives, lives whose detail, nuance, and difficult positioning mattered to me far beyond academic intrigue. I wanted to focus on the poetics of irony in the making of musical cosmopolitanism.

But I also wanted to focus on the politics of con/disjunctions, and specifically to signpost an awareness of how telling stories and representing my encounters in the global city of Accra involved at least three overlapping genealogies of power: how 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."

How then to write about musical cosmopolitanism? How to inquire into the substance of unanticipated global entanglements in contemporary musical life-worlds? How to render the entanglements of ethnographic precision and personal empathy? The kind of intervention I offer you means to clear space to talk about cosmopolitanism from below, to reimagine cosmopolitanism from the standpoint of the seriously uneven intersections, and the seriously off-the-radar lives of people who, whatever is to be said about their global connections, nonetheless live quite remotely to the theorists and settings that usually dominate cosmopolitanism conversations in academia.

My attention to subjectivity and voice thus comes out of work that disaggregates multiple and proliferating vernacular cosmopolitanisms from elite multiculturalisms, like the seminal work on "discrepant cosmopolitanism" by James Clifford in his *Routes*.¹¹ But it is equally a matter of ethnographic commitment to revealing how histories of global entanglement are shaping contemporary African musical life-worlds. Listening to histories of listening is my way to shift attention to acoustemology, to sound as a way of knowing such worlds, and particularly to the presence of intervocality, to intersubjective vocal copresence, to the everyday immediacy and power of stories. These are my means to represent the politics and poetics of cosmopolitan dialogues with my Accra interlocutors.

During the months of writing and lecturing in Berkeley, I was very much caught up in the complexities of finding this kind of storytelling voice for the work. And I understood that to be why I often encountered quizzical looks and comments from listeners when the talks were presented. Yes, I knew, many expected something more conventional: more conventional theory, more conventional analysis, more conventional critical distance, more of the familiar *locus classicus*—the music in its sociocultural context. A gentle edge was there in the reactions, a sort of "that was very interesting, but you didn't really analyze 'the music' or tell us what it means." While people indulged me in my storytelling, I could tell that some were anxiously waiting for me to get to the bottom of it all, to perform an analytic authority.

OK, stories are not analyses in the academic scheme of things. But this

does not mean they are unanalytic. Stories, as shown many times and ways by Michael Jackson, as well as by Kathleen Stewart and Keith Basso, all brilliant among anthropologists for their equal talents as story writers, analyze by the ways they encode memorability.¹² They analyze by their narrative selection, juxtaposition, and sequence of lexical elements and vocalic performance. Stories create analytic gestures by their need to recall and thereby ponder, wonder, and search out layers of intersubjective significance in events, acts, and scenes. Stitching stories together is also a sense-making activity, one that signals a clear analytic awareness of the fluidity and gaps in public and private discourses. To listen carefully to stories is to take local subjectivity seriously; to repeat them shifts focus to remembering, to how musical experience becomes meaningful by being vocally emplaced, to how, as Alfred Shutz put it long ago, in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, remembering “lifts experience” from “the irreversible stream of duration.”¹³ The work of “lifting” out from storied disjunctures, confluences, and contingencies makes the analytic gesture here of foregrounding irony in the poetics and politics of memory.

A vocal focus on encounters, memorability, and stories also turned out to be a form of mimicking that came naturally from the framing of local discourses in Accra. Locally, the indicative phrase “a story to tell” is a common way of marking the authority of having experienced something significant, particularly in relation to travel or newly gained expertise. In the Ga language, the framing phrases *mata nye adesa ko*, “I will tell you a story,” or *miye adesa ko ni mata nye*, “I have a story to tell you,” regularly set up and mark a narrative as one that comes from serious things, things well observed, seen clearly, heard profoundly, felt and taken in deeply. For my interlocutors, stories are rear-view mirror reflections; they are the mode of remembering things past, of resisting closure, of embracing life as reverberation. Ghanaba titled his autobiography *I Have a Story to Tell* . . .¹⁴ And when told, stories produce heightened engagements, often eliciting many questioning frames, as well as confirmation of emphatic sorts I regularly heard rendered in diverse ways, but often enough in alternately melodic and staccato Ghanaian English with phrases like “By all means!” “You see!,” “Wonderful!,” *Eh hehh!*, or “It is *noo* small thing, not at *alll!*”

Anyway, it was most often encounter stories and their poetics and politics of irony that I put on the table in the Bloch lectures. That was the centerpiece of the search for how to evoke and complicate jazz cosmo-

politanism as musical intimacy, and throughout, to make the seeming contradictions palpably intervocal, to keep the whole a more-questions-than-answers sort of affair.

What went with it, in addition to audio and video clips, was an emphasis on how storied memoryscapes are narratively articulated with and through visual images. This was inspired by the everyday importance of image circulation alongside stories and sounds in Accra's public culture. It was also inspired by the interleaved image-text storytelling so poignant in the mixed genre works of W. G. Sebald, whose texts are broken up by photographic images, clippings, drawings, or engravings. Sebald's images foreground, pretell, retell, parallel, punctuate, dissociate, confuse, focus, or encapsulate textual storytelling elements in their immediate or not-so-immediate location. They make copresent text more resonant by pointing forward or back in ways that encourage rereading and re-viewing. They make memory at once soft, a shimmering flash to dream on, and hard, a precisely placed peg.¹⁵

Decisive moments came while discussing these text-image interplays with Virginia Ryan, both a visual artist and the author of an Accra memoir. Our conversation came naturally out of a collaborative book project, *Exposures: A White Woman in West Africa*,¹⁶ sixty question-laden photographs of and by Virginia in African settings, accompanied by my essay on race and the photographic representation of whiteness. We talked about the textual and pictorial risks of othering in memoir voice, and the worries of making people (including ourselves) out to be strange curiosities. On the other side, we talked about the worries of embrace, of making everything a bit too wondrous or easy to naturalize. In both cases there was the gritty issue of getting close, but in that closeness, respecting the bounds of privacy and dignities of difference.

After leaving Berkeley, four returns to Accra in 2009 and 2010, plus U.S. performance tours each year with Nii Otoo Annan, provided opportunities to present, paraphrase, read, or reveal the shape and content of the lectures to key local interlocutors. What all of those dialogic editing conversations told me was that the only honest thing to do was to shape the book even more directly as a memoir of encounters. And that meant to do even more work that mimics the way many small moments add up to ever-repeating or recycling memories, and to keep the pieces short, ear-centered, and vocalic. Doing so also serves to better evoke what intrigues me most about the memoir genre, how the playback of my

voice among other voices turns dialogism into intervocality. It also serves to evoke how stories, sounds, and images coalesce to blur the genre lines of memoir and ethnography.

So: am I aware that the memoir genre is risky when one lightly performs theoretical agendas in vocality, editing, and footnotes? Yes. All the same, I'm here to insist that stories clear substantial space for representing contemporary musical biographies at the cosmopolitan crossroads of modern jazz and modern Africa. I'm here to ask you to listen to how stories reveal Accra's jazz cosmopolitanism across the intimacy-making bridge of acoustemology.