

Fall 2011

Highlife in the Ghanaian Music Scene: A Historical and Socio-Political Perspective

Micah Motenko
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School for International Training
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Social Transformation and Cultural Expression

Fall 2011

Highlife in the Ghanaian Music Scene: A Historical and Socio-Political Perspective

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Data Collection Date: November 1st, 2011 – November 30th, 2011

Abstract

1. **Title:** Highlife in the Ghanaian Music Scene: A Historical and Socio-political Perspective
2. **Author:** Micah David Motenko (mmotenko13@wooster.edu; College of Wooster)
3. **Objective:** The objective of this project was multifaceted:
 - i. To understand the history of Highlife music and its various offshoots in Ghana, with regards its socio-political and cultural significance over time.
 - ii. To examine the current music scene in Ghanaian cities and analyze it with regards to its socio-political and cultural significance. This investigation was two-fold:
 - a. To ascertain the way of life of a musician in contemporary Ghana, as well as others involved in the music business.
 - b. To investigate musicians' perceptions of the cultural and socio-political significance of popular music in Ghana, as well as those of others involved in the music business.
4. **Methodology:** I lived in the cities of Accra and Kumasi for a total of 30 days during the month of November, 2011. To achieve my research objectives, I used a combination of formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation. I interviewed 7 musicians and 1 professor/musician in Accra, as well as 1 musician, 1 CD shop owner, and 1 DJ in Kumasi, making a total of 11 interviews most of which I recorded. For my participant observation, I observed 4 concerts total in Accra, all consisting of a mixture of genres including Highlife and Gospel. I participated in 2 Highlife keyboard lessons, 2 Palmwine guitar lessons, and 3 drum lessons, as well as playing a brief saxophone solo with a live band. For my non-participant observation, I observed a total of 4 live band shows in Accra, as well as casually listening to and often recording many other musical instances during my overall stay in Ghana.
5. **Findings:** My review of the socio-political, musical, and cultural history of Highlife revealed that the genre and its various offshoots are the product of a constant melding and reformation of cultural influences both foreign and domestic. This phenomenon was also related to Highlife's effect on and influence from the broader socio-political and economic changes in Ghana's history. The second part of my findings, consisting of my interview and observational data, shed light on the more recent historical changes in Ghana's popular music such scene as the popularity of church music, economic instability in the late 1970's, the explosion of synthesizer usage, and the influx of Westernized media via television, radio, CDs, and the internet. My data revealed that making a living through music in Ghanaian cities has many difficulties often depending on various middlemen, and requires musicians to be versatile. I also discovered that musicians regard classic Highlife as Ghana's original popular art form and have complicated opinions regarding its continued preservation through factors including education, the impact of Western culture on the youth, and the promotion of live music.
6. **Conclusion:** I state that many of the forces influencing change in Ghana's music scene have a complicated multitude of often contrasting effects. As history has proven, I assert that the tradition of Highlife and live music will continue to be culturally reinterpreted through a mixture of these forces, therefore not dying out but simply taking a new form.

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Introduction

Statement of Problem

My love for listening to music has been developing ever since I can remember. From hearing Motown as a young boy, to Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, Lauren Hill as an adolescent and countless other bands as well, I have always been attracted to exciting sounds and catchy melodies. Beginning in high school, I became aware of the socio-political context in which all of this music existed. Most striking to me was the quality of popular music (as distinct from classical or “art” music that has a small, elite audience) as an implicit melding of cultural traditions and as a more explicit commentary on the society in which it is so relevantly embedded. As a musician myself, my interest in the socio-political backdrop of the music I listen to and play continues to grow.

Early on in my undergraduate education, I was exposed first to the Afro-beat of Fela Kuti and then to Highlife music, and was instantly intrigued by their blend of what was familiar and foreign to my musical understanding. Upon traveling to Ghana for a semester abroad, I became aware of the melding of European and traditional indigenous cultures that presents itself in nearly every part of modern Ghanaian life. I became extremely curious how Ghanaian people view their homegrown popular music, Highlife, within the context of this cultural dichotomy. More specifically, I wanted to know how the musicians themselves perceive of the cultural significance of the music they play, and how they feel older “classic” Highlife, newer popular genres such as Hiplife, and the influx of imported, largely Western popular music, fit into the cultural *mélange* that is modern-day Ghana.

Justification for Study

This topic is of personal interest to me as a newcomer and fan of classic Ghanaian popular music and as a sociology and music student interested in music's relationship with culture and society. More importantly, I wish to contribute to the relatively underrepresented field of study on African popular music. This is especially significant in order to alert Western academic audiences to the fact that modern West African music and culture is unique, cosmopolitan, and relevant. African popular music is worth studying as a rich microcosm of the wealth of globalized social issues and various hegemonic concerns resulting from the state of relations between the Western and developing worlds.

Review of Previous Research

The main body of research literature that I reviewed for this project was that by Professor John Collins of the University of Ghana, Legon. As the preeminent scholar and historian on Ghanaian Highlife music, I found his material to be by far the most informative and detailed, as well as the source on which most other texts about Highlife are based. His 1994 book *Highlife Time* was my main literary resource, presenting the overall history of the music as well as specific accounts into various topics, people, and factors related to Highlife music. As a supplement to enrich my understanding of the more recent socio-political influences to the Ghanaian music scene, I used Collins' 2005 article entitled "A Social History of Ghanaian Popular Entertainment Since Independence." Other articles written by Collins, looking through Highlife history through various lenses, were also of use to add to my understanding of the full breadth of factors associated with the Ghanaian popular music scene.

Other texts helpful in my understanding of this topic were Kofi Agawu's 2003 book critically examining and supplementing the current field of research on African music, entitled *Representing African Music*. I also found John Miller Chernoff's 1979 book *African Rhythm and African Sensibilities* to be helpful in helping me understand Highlife's influences from traditional Ghanaian music. Additionally, various articles on the subject contributed to my understanding of Ghanaian popular music, such as "The Political Meaning of Highlife Songs in Ghana" by Sjaak Van der Geest and Nimrod K. Asante-Darko (1982).

Aims of the Study

I wish to place Ghanaian popular music into its socio-political context, especially with regards to its more recent offshoots such as Hiplife and Gospel Highlife. I also wish to examine the way of life of a modern, urban Ghanaian musician and his perceptions of the socio-political significance of both older and newer musical styles popular in Ghana.

To achieve this, I will first review the history of Ghanaian popular music paying special attention to the cultural, social, and political factors involved in its history. I will gather such information both on older forms i.e. Highlife, and newer forms such as Hiplife. I will be sure to report on the apparent significance of the music within Ghanaian culture.

I will then interview Ghanaian musicians and other individuals involved in the Ghanaian music industry. I will inquire about the way in which they make a living, how they play their music, and their general way of life. I will also inquire about their opinions on the cultural significance of the different types of popular music in Ghana, looking specifically through the lenses of cultural preservation, foreign influence, and the comparison between older vs. younger

audiences. I will supplement this information by participating in and observing various musical events in Ghana.

Through this combination of original field research and literature review, I aim to achieve at least an introductory view of the socio-political significance of the various forms of Ghanaian popular music as well as a general picture of the current Ghanaian music scene.

Definition of Terms

The term “Syncopation” refers to beats or rhythmic pulses that exist on the “offbeats” of a given musical measure. For example, if a western military band piece is in 4/4 time, a given musical measure can be subdivided as follows: 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and. The “and” exists directly in between beats 1, 2, 3, or 4 and is called the “offbeat.” In this case, a given rhythm would be syncopated if it existed mostly on the “and” offbeats of main beats 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Definition of the term “polyrhythm” has been a topic of much concern to the community of scholars on African music. Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines “polyrhythm” as “the simultaneous combination of contrasting rhythms in music.” These contrasting rhythms all follow the same general tempo. In the context of African music, this most often manifests itself in the combination of rhythmic repetitions of varying lengths being played over one another. For instance, a rhythm that repeats itself every 4 counts is played alongside a rhythm that repeats itself every 6 counts, which is being played alongside a rhythm that repeats itself every 3 counts. Examples and further explanation of this concept can be found in Kofi Agawu’s book *Representing African Music* (2003:79-81) and John Miller Chernoff’s 1979 book *African Rhythms and African Sensibilities*.

Finally, the term “gig” simply refers to musical business opportunity.

Methodology

I gathered the data for this project in Ghana during the month of November, 2011. All of my research was conducted in Accra except from November 7th-11th, when I was in Kumasi to learn palm wine guitar from the master of the style Koo Nimo, and to conduct a few interviews. Overall, I used a combination of interviewing, non-participant and participant observation, and a review of relevant research literature to compile the data that informs my findings.

The core of the data collected from my field research lay in the 11 total interviews I had with various people involved with music in the cities of Accra and Kumasi. I made contact with them through a variety of means. I began the process by going to two concerts recommended to me by my advisor, Dr. Nathan Dampety. These concerts served as opportunities to meet contacts that I would presumably interview, as well as to observe the dynamics of live music in Accra. The first of these concerts was a “Gospel Rock” show at the University of Ghana at Legon on November 4th, 2011; which featured a Gospel Highlife band as well as a prolonged sermon from the famous Ghanaian pastor, Reverend Dr. Opambuo. I sat in the audience, taking note of the surrounding demographic of people, their behavior, and other relevant characteristics such as the apparent sponsors of the event, quality of the PA system, etc. At the end of the event as the band was preparing to depart, I met my first would-be informant and Highlife keyboard teacher by simply approaching him and introducing myself to him as an eager musician and student. After a brief conversation, I got his phone number and told him that I would call him to arrange a meeting so that we could discuss being a musician in Ghana. I also said that I was eager to learn Highlife keyboard, and that I could teach him some of my Jazz piano skills in exchange. I nearly repeated this conversation the following night at a Highlife show at the National Theatre in Accra sponsored by the Ghana commission for Road Safety. I approached a traditional drummer

and the house keyboardist at the end of the show, again saying that I was a musician and student, eager to converse about the life of a Ghanaian musician and to exchange teaching Highlife music for jazz music. Offering my informal instruction in Jazz piano seemed to especially excite the keyboardists that I met, and seemed to be an important reason for them to want to follow up with me at a later date and effectively become one of my informants. I also ended up interviewing a Reggae singer from the same event who had escorted me home afterwards and seemed insightful and passionate about the issues pertinent to my project. I attended a total of four shows in Accra, the other two being a live band performance at the bar Chez Afrique in East Legon on the night of November 12th, 2011; and another live band performance at Bywel's in Osu on the night of November 24th, 2011 in which I took an impromptu tenor saxophone solo. I used most of these shows both to observe and to obtain contacts to potential informants.

Once I had the phone numbers of the musicians I wanted to interview, I called them to arrange a meeting. Most of my musician contacts were eager to be interviewed as well as to exchange keyboard lessons, although one keyboardist did not seem excited about being interviewed and therefore I asked him a few casual questions and quickly moved on to the lesson exchange. Therefore, through meeting musicians at certain Highlife (or Highlife related) shows, I was able to obtain informants as well as some participant-observation through Highlife keyboard lessons, Palmwine guitar lessons, drum lessons, and a brief saxophone solo over a Highlife song at the Bywel's show.

I also found multiple informants through chance interactions on the street and on the campus of the University of Ghana, Legon. One such meeting was during the beginning of my time here in Ghana, well before my field research began, when a music student approached me because I was carrying my mandolin (which I brought to Ghana as a recreation, unrelated to my

research plans). He seemed intrigued by my foreign instrument and we exchanged contacts after he told me that he was a musician and was interested in playing with me. While I have not yet played music with him, he ended up agreeing to be interviewed as was one of my most insightful informants. Other such instances included an impromptu interview with the owner of a CD shop which I initially had visited just to shop. I had also met a Rastafarian music teacher while eating lunch at the Bush Kanteen in Legon one day in September, who I ended up befriending and interviewing during my field research in November. Therefore, some of my most varied and enriching contacts were made through chance interactions.

I made several contacts through people I had already known by their association with the SIT group I was a part of. SIT staff member Kwame Owusu put me in contact with his good friend DJ Amazing, a DJ in Kumasi that plays older Highlife, or “*adadamu*” on Saturday mornings for the Fox FM radio station. The program coordinator of my SIT program “Papa Attah” put me in contact with two very important informants – Koo Nimo, a master of the Palmwine guitar style that influenced Highlife, and John Collins, the preeminent scholar on popular music in Ghana. I interviewed both of these masters and got two lessons in Palmwine guitar from Koo Nimo. I was also put in contact with a guitarist at University of Legon through the keyboardist I had met at the Gospel Rock show on the 4th of November. Therefore, many of my contacts were made through people I already knew throughout my travels in Ghana.

Apart from interviewing, my participant observation was achieved mostly through my lessons with various musicians including 2 lesson with keyboardists Solomon and Kwabi (1 lesson each), 3 lessons with traditional drummer Kontor, and 2 lessons with palm wine guitarist Koo Nimo; all whom I had made contact with through means previously described. I also got the chance to play an impromptu tenor saxophone solo with a Highlife band playing at Bywel’s

in Osu. In doing so, I got the chance to employ some of the Highlife style I had been listening to and observing throughout my research, such as the accentuated use of offbeats and the repetition of rhythmic and melodic motives. My non-participant observation was achieved through going to various musical events that were recommended to me by people I knew, most notably my advisor and my homestay mother, Magdalene Fynn. My musical background, consisting of 6 years of alto saxophone playing, 16 years of piano playing, and 2.5 years of mandolin playing in the genres of Classical, Jazz, and Bluegrass, all greatly informed my appreciation of my various participant and non-participant observations. Finally, the relevant research literature that I reviewed was obtained through the SIT library at the Department of African Studies at Legon, and through the generosity of Professor John Collins.

Thusly, my data was collected through a combination of interview, participant observation, non-participant observation, and review of literature on the subject. In the interviews, I usually used my Olympus digital recording device to record the conversation, while writing down the salient points of the conversation in my journal. In one case, one of my keyboard player informants did not agree to be recorded and I felt he would also feel uncomfortable if I was writing things down while he was talking, so I simply conducted an informal interview and paraphrased his comments directly afterwards on a piece of paper. During another instance of an informant at Legon, I did not record because I felt that asking his permission would disrupt the flow of the conversation, so I just wrote down notes on everything he said. In the rest of the interviews, I recorded the conversation and wrote down the salient points in my journal. All of my interviews began with a set of questions written down, however oftentimes I would depart from my list in favor of impromptu questions that were more in tune with the direction of the conversation. I did this because in many cases, I ended up getting

richer, more insightful answers from informants when the conversation developed naturally, towards specific subjects that they were more knowledgeable or passionate about. Therefore, some of my interviews were formal and others were informal.

In order to extract data from the interviews, I listened to the recordings after the fact and took note of how they could relate to my research questions, writing down these thoughts in my journal. To analyze the data, I would simply go through my notes on each interview and see how the main points that each informant made related to each research question.

For my non-participant observation, I took note of the important features of the events I was viewing, such as the demographic of people visiting, their behavior, the band's behavior, the quality of the speaker system, the qualities of the physical spaces, and so forth. I wrote down these observations within 24 hours after each event so that I would be able to freshly recreate the experience on paper. I did not bring pen and paper to the event itself for fear of being awkward, disrespectful, or even condescending. This data was analyzed through the same manner of going through my notes and seeing how the facets of each event related to my research questions.

My participant observations, in the form of lessons, were all recorded. I practiced what the teachers taught me on the guitars at Koo Nimo's house, on a keyboard that my homestay mother had in her house, and on a talking drum that I had bought in Tamale during my travels during the second month of my stay in Ghana. Analysis of this data included simply recounting my experiences and practicing the Highlife, Palmwine, and various drumming styles.

I chose to use these methods because of their appropriateness to my specific field of research. I found interviews to be especially pertinent to my study because of my research questions concerning Ghanaian musicians' own perceptions of issues such as tradition, western cultural influence, and music education. To answer these questions, it is entirely necessary to

actually talk to the musicians themselves rather than performing a less direct research method such as content analysis or library research. While content analysis or library research can provide information that deals with a much larger number of subjects than is possible with interviewing, such data has a high probability of being inaccurate and over generalizing. In this case, the musicians themselves have the best voice to speak to their own mental perceptions. Furthermore, a combination of formal and informal interview techniques was necessary because of the varied qualities of the people I interviewed. Some were of academic persuasion, some were not, some were old, some were young, and they all had different personalities. Therefore, it was necessary to adapt each interview's method to the specific personality of each informant in order to preserve the accuracy and richness of the content they were providing.

A combination of non-participant and participant observation was also necessary in this study because of the inherent pros and cons of each method. Observing musical events as a non-participant was important because I was able to focus on the many subtle facets of the performance that the participants themselves were not removed enough to notice. However, in these cases I was missing a component which many contemporary researchers hold dear – what it actually feels like to “do” the deed that one is researching. Being a participant in the field one is studying is essential because it reveals to the researcher certain topical facets and experiences that are unattainable through other, less intimate means. In my case, I was not able to actually perform live music (besides my short sax solo) because of my status as an amateur in the field of Ghanaian popular music, but I figured that learning the styles on my own instrument, piano; and on the crucial Highlife instrument, guitar; would be at least a good beginning in giving me a taste of what it feels like to actually play the music. I also arranged lessons in drumming out of a more personal interest, however I will include them as part of my participant observational

fieldwork because they invariably contributed to my general understanding of the rhythmic facets that inform the basis of Highlife music.

While the research methodologies that I chose to perform were well suited to my project, they were not without their difficulties. First and foremost was the language barrier during interviews. Oftentimes I would receive answers to my interview questions that led me to think the questions were being misunderstood, especially with issues of misinterpreted verb tense and replacing “why” with “when,” “where,” and so forth. In future studies in Ghana, I would do more research as to how to phrase questions in a way that made more sense with the Ghanaian way of speaking English, and in some cases I may hire a translator to break through the language barrier more. Another difficulty was time. Had I more time to conduct research, I would have spent more time learning Highlife keyboard and rehearsing with one of the bands I had observed, with the hope that I could get a deeper experience being a participant observer. I would also have spent more time in a larger variety of libraries, making sure that I had gathered the totality of relevant research literature on Ghanaian popular music. A related difficulty was the inability for me to access the online resources that I do in America, such as JSTOR. At the many internet cafes I visited in Ghana, I found that the connection was either too slow to allow the downloading of documents or that access to the scholarly websites was blocked because of subscription issues. Finally, in the future I would interview some Highlife musicians to get their perspective on the many issues regarding the change in the music scene. Despite these certain setbacks, the research methodology that I used was effective at gathering the data I needed, and provided an excellent complement to the research literature I reviewed.

Findings

Part 1: History

It is no secret that popular West African musical styles, especially newer forms, have been the subject of relatively little scholarly attention. Many ethnomusicologists have dismissed these popular forms, inferring implicitly or explicitly that they are of little substance and are merely obscure byproducts of some contact with outside cultures (Collins and Richards 12). Furthermore, African music in general is often presented ahistorically and in general further mystifies the significance that popular music holds in African life, history, and culture.

West African popular music, more specifically Ghana's Highlife, is a rich, unique musical form that dates back to the early 20th century and has spawned many sub-styles. Similar to Western popular music such as the Beatles, certain Highlife songs are recognized by most Ghanaians old and young and are a part of their national identity. Ghana's homegrown popular music has, so far, lasted the test of time and is itself a window into the political, social, cultural, and economic events in Ghana's history.

In describing the general process influencing West African popular music, Professor John Collins uses what he calls the Trans-Atlantic Black Diasporic Feedback loop. This concept states that the first slaves, removed from Africa and transported to various locations across the Atlantic, brought their polyrhythmic music with them. They inevitably exchanged influences with the people around them and developed their own distinct music, such as work songs, the blues, and adapted military band music. Through various means of communication such as explorers, traders, and later radio and phonographs, music of the African Diaspora was transported back to Africa. In Africa, the music was further developed and eventually found its way back across the Atlantic to influence African Diasporic music further – a good example

being Santana's blend of Latin-American (part of the African Diaspora) rhythms and rock and roll. The key here is that this musical exchange is not a one-time or even a two-time transfer; rather it is a circular phenomenon that continues to go back and forth simultaneously and add to its layers of influence (lecture 07SEP11). Additionally, in the face of ethnomusicologists who insist on a strict distinction between "authentic" traditional music and newfangled popular music, it is important to note that a similar pattern of circular influence exists between traditional and popular music within West Africa and has for centuries.

Highlife, in such a manner, has its roots in the musical exchanges of early trading in West Africa. In a chapter in *World Music, Politics, and Social Change*, authors Collins and Richards argue that West Africa has been constantly incorporating foreign culture into its own because of its "trade-dominated social formation" and active merchant capitalism (1989:14). Thusly, Merchants brought European instruments such as the guitar, banjo, and various brass instruments to West Africa during the 19th century, perhaps even earlier (Collins and Richards 1989:18). It was through contact with these instruments, as well as with European people and culture as a result of colonialism, that Highlife was born.

According to Collins, Highlife has three main original influences from abroad: coastal regimental fife and brass bands, music of the seamen gathered in sea-shanties, and the piano music and hymns of missionaries and school teachers that were popular with the black Christian elite. The fourth influence is the local indigenous recreational music (Collins 1996:x). The colonial governments stationed on the coast of West Africa established military bands and would train the local indigenous population to play their repertoire of both military and popular European music. By the 1840s one such band was stationed at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. In the early 1870s, West Indian Regiments were brought to the castle to fight in the Ashanti wars of

1873-4 and 1900, and would often play their syncopated Afro-Caribbean music such as Calypso. They influenced young Fanti brass band musicians and by the 1880's were combining the West Indian clave rhythms and their own West-African styles such as 6/8 polyrhythm with the brass-band music they had been trained in (Collins 2004:7). This music, called *Adaha*, became popular throughout southern Ghana and by the 1920's many provincial towns had such brass bands that played both *Adaha* and European music. In fact, *Adaha* is still performed during Christmas and Easter parades in coastal Fanti areas of Ghana, and brass-band music in general is often used at traditional Ghanaian festivals (see Appendix A, Fig. 1).

The sea-shanties on the coast included blacks from all across the African Diaspora as well as from other African countries. The sailors were known to play certain portable instruments they had acquired from their travels such as guitar, banjo, harmonica, and accordion. Particularly notable are the Liberian Kru sailors who were employed by European trading ships around the 17th century and had settlements across the coast. They were famed guitar men and taught guitar to Ghana's Jacob Sam who in 1928 made the 1st Highlife recording for Zonophone together with his Kumasi Trio (Collins 1996:xii).

Piano music and hymns were taught by Christian missionaries and school teachers throughout Ghana's colonial history, and became popular with the educated black Christian elite in Ghana.

Around the turn of the century, many new musical styles were created that combined indigenous music rich with drumming, polyrhythms, audience participation, and dancing, with the music from these three main foreign sources. In addition to the aforementioned *Adaha*, there was the Fanti *Osibisaaba*, the Ga *Timo*, *Dagomba* guitar songs brought by the Kru sailors, among many others (Collins 1996:xiii). By the 1920's, this diverse collection of styles had

spread throughout southern Ghana and began to be incorporated into the repertoires of three main types of performing ensembles: local brass bands, Palmwine guitar bands, and dance orchestras (Collins 1996:xiii).

Local brass bands were simply an extension of the aforementioned coastal regimental brass bands that learned West-Indian styles and combined them with European styles. The *Adaha* that they played, blending local, Caribbean, and European music, spread as early as 1880 and is the earliest recognized form of Highlife music. These bands became popular in many provincial towns by the 1920's and in the 1930's the style was blended with Akan traditional music, creating yet another genre called *Konkoma* and referred to by Collins as a "poorman's" version of the brass band since they did away with many of the expensive imported brass instruments (Collins 1996:xiii).

Palmwine guitar groups were influenced by the guitar styles of the aforementioned merchant sailors. These groups proliferated in lower class drinking bars (which, in the case of Palmwine, was simply an arrangement of seats under a tapped palm tree) and used the guitar as well as local percussion instruments such as claves, drums, and the rhumba box-*apremremsua*, or giant Akan hand-piano (see Appendix A, Fig. 2). Artists such as Jacob Sam also adapted the sounds of earlier Ghanaian music played on the traditional harp-lute *ciperewa* to the guitar, as well as adding the sailors' finger-picking styles, therefore creating more indigenous-sounding Palmwine styles such as *Odonson* (personal communication, 08NOV11). Similarly, scholar Robert Sprigge analyzed perhaps the most fundamental and popular Highlife progression, recorded by the Kumasi Trio in 1928 as "Yaa Amponsa," as a combination of indigenous rhythms, two-fingered plucking style picked up by kru sailors, and the harmonic progressions of hymn music (Collins 1996:xii). These various forms, made into songs and played and sung by

small musical groups under tapped palm trees, were usually of proverbial nature, oftentimes telling of marital problems or other domestic concerns (personal communication, 08NOV11).

Finally, the dance orchestras, beginning in the World War I era, were very large bands put together by educated English-speaking West Africans and performing for the local westernized elites. They played music via sheet music and imported recordings, including ragtime, light classical pieces, banjo songs, negro spirituals, Calypsos, and Western ballroom dances (which took much influence from African American and Latin American genres), and by the 1920's began incorporating local melodies into their repertoire (Collins 2004:5). The earliest of such dance orchestras in Ghana was the Excelsior Orchestra formed in 1914. According to Yeboa Mensa, older brother of Highlife "king" E.T. Mensah, the term Highlife was coined by lower-class Ghanaians standing outside of such elite clubs, who could hear the elaborate orchestrations and were watching the fancily dressed, money-bearing patrons entering the clubs (Collins 1996:43). Such shows involved not only such dance bands, but imported silent films and vaudeville-style acts. All together, the evening's entertainment was called a concert party in Ghana and was the beginning of a tradition that would be crucial to the development of Highlife music.

Essentially vaudeville-style blackface minstrel acts, concert parties were initially imitations of imported western concerts. Such influences include the school concerts performed on stage in Ghana every year for British Empire Day, the bible stories and morality plays put on by Christian missionaries, foreign films starring Charlie Chaplain and the blackface comedian Al Jolson, and the vaudeville and music-hall of visiting musicians (Collins 1996:vii). Combining all or many of these influences, World War I era Ghanaian actors began staging shows, putting on some white make-up in an imitation of the Western blackface actors and singing, tap-dancing,

and telling jokes. The shows often involved local brass bands as well as other musicians assigned to play imported ragtime, foxtrots, and other contemporary ballroom dance tunes. Such performances were held as part of the dance orchestra shows mentioned above, and often as a part of school concerts. The shows were expensive and held solely in English, and were therefore reserved for the educated black elite and a small handful of Europeans (Collins 1996:vii). They featured little to no African-influenced artistic content.

That is, until Fanti comedian and concert party actor Bob Johnson formed his own group in 1930 and began performing for villagers and the urban poor. Johnson incorporated some local Highlife music into his act in addition to the popular Western songs, and also fused the imported blackface minstrel character with that of the mischievous Ananse the Spider from the Akan tradition (Collins 1996:viii). Collins calls this transformation a “hijacking” and Africanization of the elite concert party tradition, especially considering the cheaper price and more common audience of Johnson’s show. Furthermore, his act was partially translated into Akan for his less westernized audience, and often employed local *Konkoma* Highlife musicians to supplement the house musicians (usually just two) and to help advertise the show (Collins 1996:ix). In 1935, Johnson joined the Axim trio and began touring outside of Ghana elsewhere in West Africa. The Axim trio became the prototype for an explosion of such groups by the 1940’s, when by the higher class concert parties of Accra had died out (Collins 1996:ix).

By the 1940’s, Highlife was being played by the *Konkoma* and *Adaha* brass bands, Palmwine groups and guitar bands playing both coastal and indigenized inland guitar styles, and the dance orchestras and smaller ensembles of the widely popular concert parties. These popular styles were, by the 1940’s, largely geared towards lower class people of provincial towns and villages. Each style had a complex of influences from Western, Diasporic, and traditional

African sources and was therefore significant not only in its diverse musical blend but its spreading of imported cultural elements into the hinterlands of Ghana. For example, Collins points to the touring concert parties during this mid-war period as an early introduction of distinctly urban fashions to rural and provincial areas of Ghana well before radio and television became popular (Collins 2005:3). Furthermore, the concert party tradition features groups from various ethnic backgrounds, mainly Akan and Ga, and therefore began to introduce a trans-ethnic consciousness across Ghana (then the Gold Coast) during the mid-war period. This phenomenon became increasingly important during Ghana's push for independence, discussed later.

Upon the onset of the Second World War, American swing music had become very popular in West Africa because of the arrival of foreign servicemen. American soldiers, arriving in Ghana in 1942, enjoyed swing and attended newly-formed local drinking spots that played the popular western music. More importantly, foreign servicemen formed dance bands playing swing-style jazz music that combined themselves and some Ghanaian musicians. Thusly, Ghanaian dance orchestra musicians were taught swing jazz techniques and songs. These bands were smaller than the dance orchestras of the first decades of the century, more the size of an American jazz combo (Collins 2005:17). With the departure of the foreign servicemen near the end of World War II, the bands and their audiences became fully Ghanaian and the music became Africanized.

The most important band in this transformation was The Tempos, founded in 1940 (see Appendix B, Track 1). Their lineup featured Ghanaian pianist Adolf Doku, saxophonist Joe Kelly, drummer Guy Warren (later known as Kofi Ghanaba), and trumpeter E.T. Mensah. Their instrumentation, reflecting the change towards smaller jazz combo-style Highlife groups, was alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, trombone, trumpet, drum set, bongos and maracas, double

bass, and guitar. Following the departure of the foreign servicemen from The Tempos, E.T. Mensah became their leader and incorporated Highlife songs to their repertoire, while still retaining a strong swing influenced sound (Collins 2004:3). Drummer Guy Warren (Kofi Ghanaba), who had spent time playing music in London, brought Afro-Caribbean influences to the band and therefore added bongos and maracas to the lineup and Calypso songs to their repertoire. They became the most popular dance band in West Africa by the 1950s and proceeded to influence a horde of other dance bands who modeled their instrumentation after The Tempos' (Collins:2004:3). In fact, trumpeter Louis Armstrong visited Ghana in 1956 and greatly impacted the Highlife style with his trumpet playing. During the 1950's, Highlife had effectively added swing, Afro-Cuban music, and Calypso into their complex of influences. This smaller jazz combo-style Highlife band was popular in the urban centers, while Palmwine Highlife remained popular in rural areas.

Also of note during the World War II period was the expansion of Ghana's mass communications infrastructure. Radio stations were set up to disseminate wartime information and the British government set up cinemas playing propaganda films (Collins 2005:19). Certain music such as *Konkoma* Highlife was used for recruitment and propaganda as well. After the war, the Ghanaian record industry developed, imported records flourished, and the film capabilities set up by the British continued to play education and propaganda films to both urban and rural folk in Ghana (Collins 2005:20).

During this postwar period, sentiments for a push towards independence were growing throughout the country and Highlife bands were not afraid to show their support to Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party (CPP). Concert parties such as the Axim Trio staged plays in support of Nkrumah and on some occasions were arrested by the British. Popular

Highlife recording artists such as E.T. Mensah and E.K. Nyame also wrote songs in explicit support of the CPP (Collins 2005:2). More than a simple lyrical support of independence, Collins (2005:22) suggests that the use of sophisticated foreign instruments by Highlife bands “became the optimistic sound-symbol or zeitgeist for the early independence era – when an inherited European socio-political system was about to be likewise Africanised.” Palmwine guitar bands also expanded during the period, adding a double bass and imported percussion such as bongos and becoming known as guitar bands. These popular guitar bands also wrote pro-independence songs. Related to the independence movement was the trend during this period towards a more self-conscious indigenization of Highlife performances, in which Highlife songs were used more heavily by concert parties and lyrical content (and even band names) were changed to reflect African and Pan-African themes (Collins 2005:21).

In this context, Collins (2005:5) describes the overall scholarly agreement that both the producers and consumers of West-African popular music have been from an intermediary class of people between the wealthy elite and the subsistence farmers. These people include artisans, laborers, cash-crop farmers, electricians, carpenters, etc; and indeed many of Ghana’s famous Highlife musicians began their professional lives in this category. These were the people that Nkrumah drew much of his popular support from, and it is no wonder they played such a big role in mobilizing the independence movement especially considering their far-reaching audience into the villages and towns of inland Ghana. Collins (2005:5) states that these bands, “being in the middle of things, so to speak, are in the perfect situation to act as cultural and artistic bridges: between the high and the low, the urban and the rural, the old and the new, the local and the foreign.”

During the 1950's, the social functions of Highlife went well beyond their support of Nkrumah's political party. The guitar band and concert party Highlife, both of which are a mixture of Akan and Ga musicians, helped spread ideas of national trans-ethnic unity across the provincial towns, villages, and hinterlands of the Gold Coast (Collins 2005:3). This was done both through explicit pro-independence African unity lyrical content and through the combination of sung languages (Fante, Twi, Ga, and English). Furthermore, the musical and artistic content of Highlife is so multi-ethnic and even multinational that it could be argued to have been promoting national unity regardless simply through its musical blend.

Consequently, the Highlife bands performing in the inland areas of Ghana also promoted ideals of urbanization. This imported urban dream of sleek, stylish, and high-class fashions was present in their lyrics, as well as urban dangers such as prostitution, drunkenness, the breakup of the extended family, and economic hardship (Collins 2005:3). The plot of the concert party shows that traveled to these areas often covered these distinctly urban topics as well. Overall, Highlife played a big role after World War II in socializing the Ghanaian public in preparation for many of the modern changes that would occur during the rest of the century, namely independence, urbanization, and forging of a national unity.

As the new president of Ghana starting in 1957, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah supported music through multiple efforts, including establishing state Highlife bands and endorsing existing guitar bands to accompany him on trips abroad. Nkrumah also established a national curriculum for traditional African music in schools and universities, the Arts Council and the Ghana Dance ensemble, and formed two performers unions. These unions catered towards what were the two main forms of Highlife music happening during this time: the urban dance bands and the more

provincial guitar bands and their associated concert parties (Collins 2005:24). When Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966, these two unions were dissolved.

In the 1960's, the Highlife band scene changed considerably, stemming from the influx of a new generation of popular music from overseas and the electrification of the guitar and various organs and keyboards. "The Twist" by Chubby Checker, Soul artists such as James Brown, The Beatles, and many other burgeoning popular Western artists became very popular with the youth of West Africa through radio, records, and actual visits paid by several artists. Both guitar bands and dance bands began playing many of these imported pop hits (see Appendix B, Track 5), and specialized pop bands popped up all over West Africa. In fact, competitions called "pop chains" were held in Accra during holidays and featured many student pop bands playing the latest Rock and Roll hits (Collins 1996:156).

Soul music hit West Africa and Ghana in 1966, and psychedelic Rock music of Jimi Hendrix and Santana came afterwards in 1968 (Collins 1996:156). Bands flourished, and thanks to the additional influences of African genres such as Congo Jazz, there began a great variety in the styles of pop bands during the mid-late 1960's. Dance bands, guitar bands, and pop bands blended influences including Highlife, imported Pop, Latin-American music, and new styles from other parts of Africa.

Although Kwame Nkrumah had been overthrown in 1966, proud "black consciousness" ideals continued to thrive in West Africa thanks to the righteous Pop music of the black American post-civil rights generation. James brown especially had a large influence on West Africa, with his syncopated rhythmic arrangements, "black and proud" hit, and subsequent visit to Ghana in the late 60's. In the 1970's, partially thanks to these proud 'Afro' fashions, the diversity and artistic experimentation of these popular bands flourished even more. Nigerian

Fela Kuti introduced his Afro-Beat sound, a blend of traditional African music and American Jazz, Soul, and Funk. Fela's blending of African and popular Western styles prompted many other new and existing bands to do the same, creating genres such as Afro-Rock (popularized by London-based band Osibisa) and Afro-Soul (Collins 2005:24). In 1971, the massive Soul to Soul concert in Ghana brought popular Western pop artists such as Wilson Pickett, Ike & Tina Turner, and most notably Santana alongside popular Ghanaian bands such as the Soul group Psychedelic Aliens and father of Palmwine guitar Kwaa Mensah. Santana had a big impact on Ghana, injecting the Latin-American influence into many bands' sounds and inspiring a host of young Ghanaian musicians to combine their own indigenous music with Western rock. Furthermore, this period of musical experimentation inspired some artists to go "back to the roots" and place their indigenous musical influences well above foreign influences, therefore creating yet another genre of folk-Highlife. Most popular were Palmwine guitarist Koo Nimo (see Appendix B, Track 3) who stayed true to the old style of Palmwine by using *aprempresemna*, gourd shaker, bell and guitar instrumentation (see Appendix A, Fig. 1) and incorporating a small amount of Latin-American and classical guitar into his authentic sound. Artist Wulomei pioneered the sound of indigenous Ga music with the addition of an acoustic Highlife guitar, and sparked a whole host of similar bands (see Appendix B, Track 4). Neo-traditional genres also emerged, such as the Ga Kpanlogo that had influences from the Highlife clave style and Elvis's style of dance (Collins 2004). Finally, Jamaican Reggae music also influenced Ghanaian artists in the late 1970's.

The period from the 1960's to the late 1970's was one of extreme diversity of musical genre, artistic and African roots-conscious experimentation, and proliferation of live music and

the music industry in general. Collins (2005:25) describes the highpoint of Ghana's music scene during the period.

By the early seventies Ghana boasted over seventy Highlife guitar bands (cum Concert parties), scores of private or state run Highlife dance bands and literally hundreds of pop and Afro-rock/beat bands linked to schoolboy 'pop chain' competitions. Catering for these were four recording studios, numerous dancing night-clubs (60 in Accra alone), and two local pressing plants that produced hundreds of thousands of records a year.

Sadly enough, the collapse of the Ghanaian economy in the late 1970's due to the mismanagement of the Acheampong/Akuffo regime began a rapid decline in the music scene. The commercial music sector dwindled, record manufacturing nearly ceased, and Collins (2005:26) estimates that around one quarter of Ghana's musicians left the country for better conditions elsewhere. Following were two military coups by Lt. J.J. Rawlings, and a two-and-a-half year night curfew that nearly killed the existence of nightlife. In 1984 Rawlings' government imposed a 160% import tax on band equipment and in 1988 music education was demoted in the school curriculum (Collins 2005:26).

Despite certain positive changes in the music sector, namely the creation of a new and still existing musicians union MUSIGA, the live music scene was nearly non-existent by the early 80's in Ghana. To fill the void, remaining artists began using cheap electronic alternatives to a live band. First were the "spinners," using mobile discos and filling dance floors during the early 1980's (Collins 2005:26). More popular was the Burger Highlife craze, created by exiled Ghanaians living in Germany (see Appendix B, track 6). Burger Highlife had similar guitar and melody patterns as the classic guitar band Highlife, but used drum machines and synthesizers as a cheap alternative to hiring drummers and a horn section. Important to note is that Burger Highlife bands mostly recorded in the studio and were played by way of the "spinners" in clubs

across Ghana, rather than performing live. This synthesizer craze was emulated by a vast number of Highlife bands (see Appendix B, Track 7), including artists who had not previously used drum machines or synthesized horns. These bands were both a result of the international disco craze and the digital trend during the period, as well as the fact that bands with fewer personnel and synthesizers were significantly cheaper to operate.

Another byproduct of the late 70's was the expansion of Gospel music. The economic decline during the period led to a general trend towards spirituality and the churches themselves, mostly of the Africanized Charismatic or Apostolic variety, began adding full Highlife guitar band instrumentation to their existent drumming groups for the dancing and clapping that fills their services (Collins 1996:185). During the 80's, Highlife musicians flooded into the Churches, being the only places where live music was a mainstay and where there were no import taxes on band equipment due to their status as religious/charity organizations (Collins 2005:32).

Then, in the early 1990's, Hiplife arrived in Ghana as an imitation of the latest African-American style to hit the international scene, Hip-Hop. Backed by computerized beats, Hiplife musicians (oftentimes only one of them) would rap and sing in English and the local vernacular and record it cheaply in studios (see Appendix B, Track 8). With Hiplife came an even smaller, cheaper to produce, more highly synthesized version of what Burger Highlife was in the 1980's and was the voice of the Ghanaian youth. In a personal interview with Professor Collins, he explained how the situation in the late '70's paved the way for the explosion of Hiplife. With the near-distinction of live music, demotion of music education in the schools, and the exile of many musicians, there was a breakdown of the system of transmission of music from the older generation to the younger. With the only option being musical education through the churches,

many would-be band musicians turned to find their own unique place in the popular music scene of Ghana and took to rapping via Hiplife (personal communication 18NOV11). In short, Hiplife gave the youth a voice in the absence of musical role models.

Recently, there has been a small resurgence of live music due to certain factors that Professor Collins outlined during our interview. The increase in tourism in recent years has sparked both the recording industry and the live music scene to reproduce “classic” Highlife for foreigners wanting authentic Ghanaian entertainment, the return of the children of many exiled Ghanaian musicians with “enlightened” musical values has led to the creation of some live bands and clubs, and the increase in the international “world music” market has created job opportunities for Ghanaian Highlife artists (personal communication 18NOV11). Collins explained that, due to Westerners’ ideas of authentic sounding Ghanaian music, they do not want to hear the highly synthesized popular Ghanaian genres of late and therefore have helped in the small but steady resurgence of live Highlife. However, from my personal experience, I can say that even this live “classic” Highlife still involves a synthesized horn section, probably for financial reasons. Regardless, live music is making a small comeback due to these factors, albeit catering to a largely foreign and/or Western audience. In fact, according to Collins, Hiplifers started to perform live in 2002 and in 2004-5 and “jammer Hiplife” which combines indigenous rhythms and instruments with Hiplife, was created.

It is within this context that I will now discuss my interview data. There exist several different contemporary manifestations of the complex history I have outlined above, such as the huge popularity of Gospel recordings and the high quality of live church music, the existence of nightclubs catering largely to a foreign audience, certain Highlife revival efforts, and of course the hugely popular Hiplife hits that are played incessantly on radios in Accra. The interviews I

conducted with a variety of informants have enlightened me to many of the issues that lie at this threshold into the next era of popular music in West Africa.

Part 2: Interviews and Observations

The Business Aspect – Gigging, Promoting, and Making a Living

Speaking to the gradual resurgence of the live music scene in recent years, I was able to discern much information about the practicality of working as a musician in contemporary Ghana. I quickly found out that most live band “Highlife” musicians are well rehearsed in multiple genres. Keyboardist Solomon explained how, over the 11 years he has been playing keyboards, he has expanded his repertoire from Gospel to include popularly requested Highlife songs, popular Reggae songs, and even some foreign “cools” (slow, relaxing Western artists such as Celine Deon and Kenny Loggins), in addition to the occasional Hiplife song or popular Ivory Coast tune (called ‘Soka’ in Ghana) (personal communication 12NOV11). His set list with the band he regularly plays with includes songs from all of these genres, and his band plays gigs at a variety of events and venues in which they play mixture of genres depending on the gig. For example, at a spot (bar) gig, they will play mostly Highlife and Reggae with maybe a Gospel tune or two at the beginning, usually at the request of the barman. At a wedding however, they will play only Gospel at the service since ‘profane’ musics are not allowed in church, and then play more Highlife and other popular dance tunes at the reception (personal communication 12NOV11). As another keyboardist Kwabi put it, “Being a musician is hard work – you have to learn everything; jazz, Highlife, Reggae, Soka, cools...” (personal communication 13NOV11). According to them, most gigging musicians play many genres and types of gigs as to get enough business. In fact, all of the shows that I attended had at least two genres played throughout, especially since the Gospel genre includes Highlife style dance tunes as well as slower, more melodic praises.

Most of the musicians I talked to told me that getting enough business is all about the “links” (contact people) you make – networking, in essence. Solomon explained that in addition to the band he plays with regularly, who knows many organizers, he also makes contacts with other bandleaders who will hire him out as a keyboardist for certain gigs. While many musicians solely perform at spots and nightclubs, Solomon attests to the importance of playing a variety of gigs through a variety of contacts – including funerals, weddings, and in church (personal communication 12NOV11). Solomon also noted that of all the gigs he has with his main band, funerals are the most profitable (personal communication 12NOV11). In general, it appears to be a balancing act between a long list of potential employers who will call you with relatively short notice to play a gig, varying frequency depending on the season and other various factors (personal communication 12NOV11, 13NOV11).

However, money seems tight for the Ghanaian musician. Student Guitarist Nana Kwame I (I have appended “I” to his name since I interviewed two student musicians named Nana Kwame; the second one will be referred to as ‘Nana Kwame II’) explained to me a hypothetical week for a typical Ghanaian musician without any fame or international recognition. Most gigs are on Fridays and Saturday nights, with maybe a club gig on a Wednesday or Thursday. A typical gig without a third-party sponsor will pay from 20 to 50 cedes to each musician in one night. So, even considering the best case scenario with these figures, a musician will go home with 150 cedes in one week, which after cab rides home from the gigs does not amount to much to make a living on (personal communication 14NOV11).

Therefore, it seems that most musicians have to rise above that reality in order to make a living. The first and most obvious option is to get name recognition so that venues will pay more money for you and you might even get asked to play sponsored shows or even get famous

enough to headline an event at a larger venue. However, getting famous (as many musicians around the world will attest to) can prove very difficult and often boils down to luck with certain business contacts. Keyboardist Kwabi told me that “if you really want to make money, you have to record” (personal communication 13NOV11). However, without name recognition in the first place it is doubtful that people will buy your CDs. In fact, student musician Nana Kwame II told me that most money comes from gigs and not CD sales, due to the fact that young people will often copy music via computers (personal communication 20NOV11). Their differences of opinion may be based on their different ages, occupations, or recognition, but regardless this particular issue remains unanswered by my data.

There are other avenues for the musician to take in order to make enough money to support gigging locally. Reggae musicians Kofi and General are both very passionate about playing music and have taken up other occupations to support their passion. Kofi is a music teacher and drum maker primarily, and plays music informally and gets occasional gigs. He is very content with his situation and finds passion in all of his work, since he says that all of his jobs relate to music in one way or another and he feels purposeful with each occupation (personal communication 19NOV11). General is a phone trader more often, gets occasional gigs singing Reggae songs that he writes and has recorded, and is active in his musicians union.

Finally, student musician Nana Kwame II suggests the option of becoming an academic and writing, researching, and “posting videos” on the music that one enjoys playing in gigs (personal communication 20NOV11). In his words, “there are many aspects to get money [being a musician], like teaching. If you only focus on performing you’ll kill yourself; you can focus on research too.”

Connected to this issue is the variety of middlemen and third-party organizations (managers, promoters, sponsors, and the government) that have the potential to help musicians make a living solely by performing live. As drummer Kontor put it, “you can’t market and do everything by yourself” (personal communication 14NOV11). Student musician Nana Kwame I spoke of the importance of having a good manager, who is ultimately responsible for developing business relationships (“links”), increasing name recognition, and demanding substantial wages from employers – effectively, building up various types of capital for the musician (personal communication 14NOV11). However, Nana Kwame I revealed that few musicians are able to develop such name recognition and that most are relatively poor. Traditional drummer Kontor blames this fact on the managers and promoters, saying that they always go for the cheaper Hiplife acts and never want to promote more indigenous sounding musicians (such as Kontor) or even live-band Highlife acts, therefore “bringing African music back to Ghana” (personal communication 14NOV11). He attested to the vast amount of talent and knowledge in traditional music that Ghana has to offer, that promoters refuse to capitalize on.

What promoters should be doing, says Kontor, is taking musicians such as him out of the country in order to make more money. This sentiment was echoed by several of my informants, who attested to the fact that the big money is to be made outside of the country (personal communication 14NOV11, 14NOV11). Particularly frustrating to Kontor is the fact that various bodies in Ghana will pay much money for foreign acts to come play in country when they could be sending Ghanaian cultural acts such as Koo Nimo outside the country to act as “ministers” of music (personal communication 14NOV11). Frustrations with the government’s seeming unwillingness to promote musicians were echoed by Nana Kwame II, who said that it was difficult for sponsors to invest in live shows, and therefore the government should stage free

shows in order to preserve the culture and promote further interest in live music (personal communication 20NOV11). Presumably, this would create more of a market for live music both domestically and abroad, and make it easier for corporate sponsors to finance live events.

Such sponsors are another topic of financial concern to the musicians I interviewed. Nana Kwame I said that making a living playing music is all about sponsorship, and quite often sponsorship outside of Ghana (personal communication 14NOV11). Sponsors are quite often cell phone companies, as was the case with my visit to the Gospel Rock concert at Legon, where Vodaphone flags, kiosks, and larger tents were everywhere. Another show, the Road Safety event at Accra's National Theatre, was sponsored by the road safety commission of the current government in Ghana. The music at the show was varied and excellent, however the extremely scant number of audience members (probably less than 30) hinted at some incompetence on behalf of the advertising responsibilities of the government sponsor. This fact further supports my informants' claims about the government's insufficient support for music.

According to Professor Collins, there are some sponsors that are in part responsible for the resurgence of live music in Ghana. Collins points to a push for live music by "different entrepreneurs," and also the French embassy that created the popular Highlife club Alliance Francais. Collins also points to the children of formerly exiled Ghanaian musicians setting up clubs in Accra (especially the Osu section) for contemporary live music like live rapping (personal communication 18NOV11).

Overall, it seems that sponsors themselves are willing to support live musical events, but the middlemen promoters and managers are not pulling their weight and have a bias towards cheap and already popular Hiplife musicians. Not to mention the government's relatively lackluster support of more classic, culturally representative forms of live music, namely Highlife.

Their support looks especially scant upon considering Kwame Nkrumah's support back in the 1960s.

During my data collection process I also had the chance to interview a DJ and a CD shop owner, who enlightened me to the consumer end of the music business. Contrary to the live music business, DJ Amazing testified that Highlife is where the money lies in radio, not Hiplife. Since Highlife (especially old live-band Highlife from the 50's-70's, called *adadamu* or "oldies" essentially) attracts an older demographic of listeners who will actually respond financially to radio advertisements, radio Highlife is highly profitable (personal communication 10NOV11). Hiplife, while very popular, has a young listener base that does not have much dispensable income and will probably copy music illegally via computers to get their music. In fact, much Hiplife is available free on online websites. Therefore, it seems that radio is the only sector where classic Highlife is the dominant money generator. However this may only be true in the city of Kumasi, where classic Highlife or *adadamu* is generally much more popular than in Accra (personal communication 10NOV11). From my own experience, I can say that Highlife is played on many Kumasi radio stations, business kiosks, and CD shops and is often the soundtrack of choice for Kumasi tro-tro drivers.

In CD sales however, Highlife is not the dominant seller. Gospel reigns supreme in the CD market, making up roughly half of the CD's that shop owner Peter's sells (personal communication 09NOV11). This reflects an important point about consumer music in contemporary Ghana – that Gospel is by far the most frequent interaction that most Ghanaians have with live music. Consequently it is also the most popular consumer music, especially for ages above adolescence (personal communication 09NOV11). Also noteworthy is the fact that locally produced music, such as local Gospel, Highlife, and Hiplife, is significantly more

expensive than foreign music (personal communication 09NOV11). This is because many local CD producers are not too well-equipped and have high production costs. Also foreign music, being easily available online, is often copied illegally and can be sold very cheaply. Therefore, in Kumasi at least, a local Hiplife CD will usually cost 5 or 6 cedes, Highlife roughly 4.50 cedes, and a copied foreign CD 1.50 cedes or less (personal communication 09NOV11). Since many customers, especially youth, come in without much money and “just want to listen to music,” they will go for the foreign Hip-Hop, R&B, or Reggae. Older customers with more money often buy Gospel, “cools” (imported soft rock), and an unpredictable demographic of customers will come in to buy the local Highlife (personal communication 09NOV11). Furthermore, most of the Highlife that is sold is of the post-1980’s synthesized variety, leaving the classic *adadamu* Highlife largely unpurchased.

Finally, it is worth noting that most of the informants I interviewed, upon being asked about the avenues through which they make the most money, told me first and foremost that they were not in it for the money. In the words of DJ Amazing, “[Music] is my life; I don’t rush for money. I know when the time comes the money will come itself” (personal communication 10NOV11). This passion-before-money approach was echoed by several of my informants, especially the two Rastafarian Reggae artists, Kofi and General. However the older musicians I interviewed such as Koo Nimo and Kontor seemed more concerned with various third parties – managers, promoters, unions, and the government – in their obligation to ensure musicians enough royalties, pensions, and concert fees to retire on (personal communication 08NOV11, 14NOV11). Regardless, it seems that love for playing music is more of a concern for the musicians I interviewed than the monetary value of the profession. This fact may not hold true

for young Hiplife and Hip-Hop musicians though, who appear to have different values than their older counterparts. I will discuss this in more detail below.

The Cultural Aspect: Tradition, Foreign Influence, and the Youth

Every person I interviewed respects Highlife music as Ghana's original, culturally representative form of music, much like the Jazz of America or the Reggae of Jamaica. Whenever there is a Ghanaian cultural celebration such as a national holiday or an individual funeral or wedding, Highlife is the music of choice because it represents Ghana's culture by portraying its traditions (personal communication 14NOV11, 12NOV11). In fact, it appeared as though most of my informants regarded Highlife music as equal to traditional drumming and dancing in representing Ghana's cultural traditions.

My informants mentioned various qualities of Highlife that make it continuously relevant and enjoyable. Many spoke to the fact that it attracts both old and young audiences, therefore bridging generation gaps. While there is certainly a larger demographic of old-timers who support the classic Highlife music, their enthusiasm does reach the young generation. For example, keyboardist Solomon said that as a young musician, he began learning Highlife because so many older men would come up and request classic Highlife songs during shows he was playing. According to him, youth will often hear the songs that the older men are requesting at performances and playing in their homes and will begin developing a taste for the music (personal communication 12NOV11). My experiences have verified the youth's enthusiasm for the live band Highlife sound. At the Road Safety show at the National Theatre, the audience was comprised of roughly half young people and was dancing and singing enthusiastically, albeit being minute in number. The Gospel Rock show was an even grander display of youthful

enthusiasm, boasting a huge hoard of University of Legon students crowding the stage, jumping up and down, and cheering at the combined performances of Rev. Dr. Opambuo and the Gospel Highlife band. While part of their enthusiasm should be attributed to the visiting Reverend and the popularity of Gospel, it was clear that they were also in wild appreciation of the energy of the Highlife-style dance music upon which so much of contemporary Gospel is based. A huge number of Gospel songs use the exact same rhythms, instrumentation, chord changes, and even melodies that classic Highlife songs do (personal communication 12NOV11). Additionally, DJ Amazing proudly explained how his Saturday morning *adadamu* (classic Highlife from the '50's-'70's) radio show attracts not only rave reviews from old audiences but from young people as well (personal communication 10NOV11).

My informants also appreciate Highlife for its educational quality. In the words of DJ Amazing, the lyrics “talk sense,” advising the listener of important issues such as morality, family problems, money, and death; as well as providing political commentary – in general, speaking to the problems and issues relevant to Ghanaian daily life (Collins 2005:28; Van der Geest 1982:27). According to music teacher and Reggae musician Kofi, Highlife “teaches you how to live” (personal communication 19NOV11). Nearly all of my informants referenced the educational qualities of Highlife in one way or another, and it is clear from my literary research that this fact holds true from the origins of Highlife until the Burger Highlife craze in the 1970's (Collins 2005:28).

Finally, Highlife is appreciated by many of my informants because of its timelessness. Besides its ability to appeal to young audiences despite its age, it is also less repetitive and monotonous than newer sub-genres such as Hiplife. According to DJ Amazing, Hiplife is overplayed and therefore popular songs get forgotten when newer ones come about, since

listeners eventually get sick of hearing the same songs over and over again (personal communication 10NOV11). In fact, Reggae musician General, who has been listening to popular music in Ghana since the 1980's, attests to the fact that recent subgenres themselves are more passing than classic Highlife and are not sustained for long due to their listener base jumping quickly to the newest fashion (personal communication 17NOV11).

This brings me to the most pressing topic concerning the preservation of what is now a classic cultural tradition: the youth and their preferences. Despite the many perks of Highlife echoed by my informants, the youth seem mostly interested in foreign music and Hiplife. As I previously mentioned via an interview with Professor John Collins, Hiplife and Hip-Hop are a major part of the identity of the younger generation, who in the absence of secular live-musical role models to look up to, seek to define themselves against live, un-synthesized forms of music that are outdated or “colo” (colonial) (personal communication 18NOV11). CD seller Peter speculates that young people are especially attracted to foreign music CDs because of their ability to teach English through their lyrics, as well as their curiosity in learning more about the world – not to mention the CDs' cheaper prices.

However, there is a definite negative side to these new influences that is, as some of my informants say, causing a cultural transformation to occur. Palmwine guitarist Koo Nimo says that Hiplife lyrics “do not lend themselves to Ghanaian decency practice” (personal communication 08NOV11). Many scholarly resources verify that the lyrics of Ghanaian popular music post-Burger Highlife focus largely on the topic of romantic and erotic love (Collins 2005:28) not to mention that popular imported Hip-Hop such as that of rapper 50 Cent focuses on such profanities as murder, guns, prostitution, etc. Reggae artist General spoke to his observations that an influx of Western media such as TV and mp3s starting around 2000 has

pushed many poor urban youth to assume a once scant gangster mentality. This mentality is essentially imported from the United States, where Hip-Hop music was a reaction to such urban plights as gang warfare, the crack/cocaine epidemic, the prevalence of firearms, economic depression, etc. As professor Collins noted in our interview, this “ghettoization” context is non-existent in the cities of Ghana, where American Hip-Hop is simply the latest black American fad to come through the diasporic feedback loop (personal communication 18NOV11). However, both General and Kofi speak of the emergence of a gangster mentality in some of Ghana’s youth, resulting in an emergence of profane and deviant behavior in some cases (personal communication 17NOV11, 19NOV11).

More widespread than any imported gangster mentality is the American ideal of individualism that seems to be influencing many youth in Ghana. American Hip-Hop has a huge culture of egotism, greed, and individual stardom that is coming into Ghana via the influx of foreign media, especially with the help of the internet. One manifestation of these imported cultural values is the tendency for Ghanaian Hiplife and Hip-Hop musicians to care more about the money than the process of creating music. Reggae artists Kofi and General both commented on the legion of young Hiplife “boys” who are just trying to make money, and professor Collins and Kontor remarked about the lack of creativity and the financial motivations behind Hiplife (personal communication 17NOV11, 19NOV11, 14NOV11, 18NOV11).

This growing change in cultural values among the youth is also linked to the churches in Ghana. Professor Collins spoke about the Church’s current encouragement of a protestant work ethic like the one that helped build America, preaching ideals such as internalized excellence, an individual relationship with god, and hard work for a deferred gratification (personal communication 18NOV11). Furthermore because of the failure (or “sabotage,” as Collins

suggested) of Pan-African socialism and Africa's inability to reap the fruits of their participation in the global capitalist economy, many Ghanaians have accepted this turn towards a protestant individualist ethos (personal communication 18NOV11). Both Collins and singer General remarked about the fact that many Ghanaian churches denounce traditional cultural aspects such as the respect of one's ancestors, which is another factor in many young people's ignorance of Ghana's community-oriented traditions and turn towards individualism (personal communication 18NOV11, 17NOV11).

Because of these imported and domestic factors that are causing young Hiplife and Hip-Hop musicians to distinguish and separate themselves from earlier generations, there has been a definite cultural shift towards individualism, an unwillingness to perform live, and financially motivated musicianship. Many of my informants expressed concerns that the culture of Highlife and live music is dwindling as a result of this trend. Drummer Kontor reported a void of instrumentalists since every aspiring youth wants to sing or rap, and Professor Collins reported a decrease in the quality and versatility of instrumental musicians (personal communication 14NOV11, 18NOV11). However, Professor Collins' claim is questionable due to my informants' descriptions of the wide variety of genres necessary to know as a performing musician.

As I mentioned earlier, there has been a growing market for live music and classic Highlife in tourists and foreigners, however student musician Nana Kwame II sees this as a simple extension of economic imperialism. Foreigners are taking traditional Ghanaian culture and refining it into things such as research papers and profitable music (i.e. Paul Simon), just as European corporations take raw Ghanaian cocoa and refine it into hugely profitable chocolate products. They are then selling this refined form back to Ghanaians at a high premium. He

asked me the question of why music students across the continent learn the imported vibraphone instead of the traditional African xylophone, in order to illustrate this point (personal communication 20NOV11). I will refrain from expanding on the plethora of factors that could prove or disprove this bold theory, but I will say that it is a prime example of the sentiments that many of my informants shared about the unwillingness for Ghanaians to capitalize on their own rich culture of Highlife and traditional music, instead favoring newer, more culturally diluted genres such as Hiplife.

At this point of fear that cultural traditions are being underused, underappreciated, and forgotten by the youth, most of my informants have turned to the importance of education. Nearly all of them have explicitly expressed the cruciality of increasing music education in schools and promoting live concerts to increase positive musical role models. Nana Kwame II illustrated this point quite by comparing African traditional music with Western classical music. He explained; if musical traditions are fostered by government sponsorship and education and people understand the importance of the music, they will attend concerts and pay to hear it being performed much in the manner that Westerners patronize their Classical music (personal communication 20NOV11).

Expansion of education is certainly crucial, however there are many efforts already in place to ensure that the individually-minded, western-influenced Hiplife and Hip-Hop culture is not the only musical and cultural force in modern Ghana. Countless festivals, funerals, weddings, and other Ghanaian celebrations feature energetic and masterful traditional music as well as live Highlife. Some of my informants did not think that the culture was dying off at all in fact, including keyboardist Solomon who asserted that traditional culture and Highlife have their place, and that the youth do often hear Highlife and traditional music at festivals (personal

communication 12NOV11). Additionally, Nana Kwame II admitted that growing up, many youth begin to believe in the significance and importance of traditional music, much like he himself did (20NOV11). While there are plenty of legitimate concerns as to the future of preserving Ghana's musical traditions, there exist several growing efforts to support such preservation.

Conclusion

In explaining the interaction of foreign and domestic cultural forces affecting the changes in Ghana's music, student musician Nana Kwame I offered an extremely poignant comment that summarized the youth's desire to follow foreign cultural influences.

We are all trying to learn outside our box, so that's what makes us lose what we have [in Ghana]. But still, there are guys who really play the local [music] really good, as in America how you guys also learn different music but there are guys who play really good Jazz... You see, human beings, we are dynamic; we are not static. And the world is also dynamic, not static. So you can't tell me that you are going to have One, as in One always. It's going to change; even in America, most of your cultures back there, has been being transformed. So basically, I can't say that we are losing it – it's still there, but basically, based on globalization, most things are going to be fusing together.

He is right, in fact. From the beginning of the development of Highlife, from the sea shanties of the Kru people to the influx of Afrocentric Western Pop in the 1960's, Ghana's popular music has been changing and developing due to a combination of outside cultural influences and the inevitable cultural development of the Ghanaian people themselves. Even drum-and-dance genres that most Ghanaians consider completely traditional, such as the Ga Kpanlogo, were at one point newfangled blends of traditional and foreign cultural influences and were subject to criticism. Such is the essence of popular music and all music in general; it continuously draws from a variety of influences and, as Nana said, is not static.

There are a number of factors that some of my informants either labeled as positive or negative, but that in fact affect the music scene in a multitude of ways. My informants did not necessarily polarize any such factor, but I see it necessary to preemptively dispel the tendency for readers to think of things as solely positive or negative. For example, I found that the Ghanaian Church is in-part responsible for the recent turn towards individualism and egotism in contemporary popular music genres such as Hiplife. At the same time though, the Church is by

far the biggest force in ensuring the livelihood of live music and instrumental musicianship in Ghana, training most of the country's instrumental musicians (personal communication 18NOV11). Similarly, foreign cultural influence is causing, in part, the youth to turn away from traditional music and find interest solely in imported or Westernized domestic forms of entertainment. However it is foreign culture that is also causing the explosion of the World Music market and the tourism that are fueling the existence of live music in various clubs in Accra. Additionally, the popular foreign influence of Reggae has inspired many Ghanaians to adopt the Rastafarian religion, which in turn inspires many "back to roots" sentiments and a general wariness of profane ways of life. Informant and friend Kofi is a prime example, loving Reggae music but dedicating his life to teaching traditional Ghanaian drum and dance in local schools. Finally, television and mass media are largely responsible for many of the Western cultural influences that degrade the continued vitality of Highlife, however widely popular television shows like Ghana's Most Beautiful and TGIF are proudly celebratory of Ghana's cultural traditions and promote cultural staples such as Highlife and storytelling. It is more accurate to think of the factors affecting music in Ghana as multi-dimensional, rather than polarizing them as positive or negative.

All-in-all, what is happening to the music scene in Ghana now is a logical continuation of the historical overview in the first part of my findings that told of a successive blending of cultural traditions. As Professor Collins stated, there will always be a younger generation to react to the older generation's music, as is the case with some newer Hiplifers going back to live performance, improvisation, and certain indigenous instrumentation as a reaction to the over-computerized monotony of much of the popular music to come out of the 1990's (personal communication 18NOV11).

Throughout my library research, interviews, and observations, I received much data that pointed to a decrease in live music, diminishing cultural values, and a Westernization and individualization of the youth. At the same time, however, my data pointed to the continued existence of traditional culture and Highlife, albeit often operating within a new cultural context. Such is the case with the foreign world music market, Western interest in traditional African art, the extreme prevalence of live music in the churches, the inclusion of popular music studies as a sought-after field among university students, and many others factors.

Whatever the future of the Ghanaian music scene may be, it will consist of a mix of the cultural traditions that have been influencing Ghanaian music for generations – traditional and modern, classic Highlife and Hiplife, old and young, foreign and domestic, secular and religious, and so forth. In this sense, Highlife as a live music art form will always exist somehow in the cultural fabric of Ghana.

Informants

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Appendix A

Figure 1: A brass band playing for the traditional annual thanksgiving festival in the Krobo Odumase region of Ghana.

Figure 2: Some typical Palmwine percussion as used by Koo Nimo: The giant Akan hand-piano, called rhumba box or *aprempremsua* (left) and a gourd shaker and bell (right).

Appendix B

See attached Audio CD.

- Track 1: “Nkebo Baaya” by E.T. Mensah and The Tempos. An example of the Tempos’ musical blend and smaller, Jazz-combo-influenced size.
- Track 2: “Ama Ghana” by Agyeman Opambuor. An example of the electric guitar bands during the 1960’s and 1970’s.
- Track 3: “Aburokyire Abrabo” by Koo Nimo. Palmwine guitar music – an example of “back to the roots” music of the 1970’s.
- Track 4: “Akosua Serwaa” by Unknown. An example of the trend of Neo-traditional Ga music of the 1970’s started by band Wulomei. Part of the “back to the roots” movement during the 1970’s.
- Track 5: Unknown by Ramblers Dance Band. An example of the Soul explosion among popular Highlife dance bands during the 1960’s.
- Track 6: “Ako Te Brofo” by George Darko. An example of the Burger Highlife craze and consequential use of synthesizers beginning in the 1980’s.
- Track 7: “Adea Ede” by Dr. Paa Bobo. An example of the synthesization of Highlife music during the 1980’s.
- Track 8: “Give & Take” by Atumpan. An example of contemporary Hiplife music.