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# The Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra Project: Interview with Steven Feld

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## Steven Feld and Charlotte Grabli

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- 1 Steven Feld is an anthropologist, filmmaker, musician, and sound artist. He is a Senior Scholar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fé, and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of New Mexico. In the 1970s, he developed an anthropology of sound that engages expressive forms that are in between language and music and the relationships between human and non-human sounds in the acoustic environment of the Papua New Guinea rainforest. His successive research, in Melanesia and Europe, on the history and culture of bells, and in Ghana, on bells and jazz cosmopolitanism, is marked by various conceptions of listening, and issues of using sound as a primary medium for ethnographic research.
- 2 Recording sound is central to his use of playback and feedback and his “dialogic auditing” and editing methods inspired by Jean Rouch, with whom he studied in Paris in 1974 (Feld 1987). The production of CDs also allows him to make his ethnography listenable, moving away from the “textual fetishism” that marks his discipline (Boudreault-Fournier and Feld 2019). The two vinyls (1982, 1985) produced at the time of the publication of his first book *Sound and Sentiment* (2012 [1982]) offered sensory access to his own experience, and to the complex relationships between ambient sounds, bird calls, cries, poetics and song in the Kaluli environment of Bosavi. They were followed by numerous recording projects through which Feld sought to link the anthropology of sound to an “anthropology in sound” (Brenneis & Feld 2004).
- 3 In 2004, Feld started a new project in Ghana, where he studied acoustemology—one’s sonic way of knowing and being in the world (1996)—from the standpoint of avant-garde jazz musicians. This multimedia project brought together new conceptions of recording and histories of listening, as his lives as musician and researcher became

critically entangled. In Accra, he worked as a producer and as a recordist, before performing as a musician with the Accra Trane station band in Africa, Europe and the United States. From 2005 through 2010, he produced ten CDs and three documentary movies featuring the drummer Ghanaba (formerly Guy Warren), the country's leading experimentalist, the two members of the Accra Trane Station, Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan, and 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 horn. In 2012, Feld published *Jazz Cosmopolitanism*, his first book on his work in Ghana, and an exploration of how the performance of jazz in Africa, and Africa in jazz, could relate to the anthropology of globalism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>1</sup>

- 4 In the following interview, Feld discusses his encounter with various musicians and visual artists and how their readings of the Black Atlantic came into dialogue during the 2000s. His discussion of his artistic collaborations, and excerpts of his recording and video projects, also show creative ways to address the history of race in music and the sensory memories of the slave trade in coastal Ghana.

Charlotte Grabli [CG]: How did you come to work in Ghana and to develop a new kind of inquiry (2004-2008), as both an artist and a scholar, in which playing and recording music were more important than academic writing?

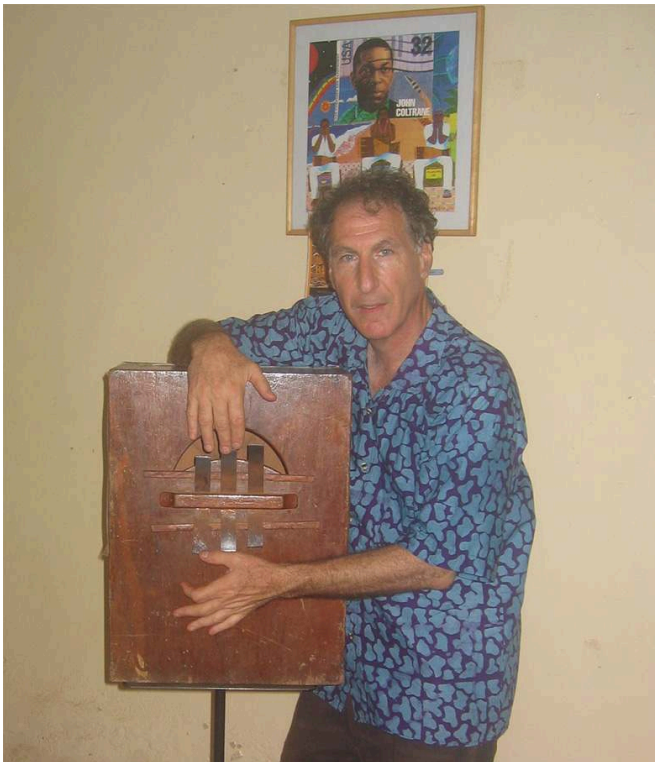
Steven Feld [SF]: One of my New York University students, Ruti Talmor, now a professor in Pitzer, invited me to Accra where she was doing an ethnography of the National Arts Centre. I was in Europe doing some research for a project on bells. Ruti said there was interesting art going on in Accra. So, we agreed that I would come for a few weeks, help her do some filming for her Ph.D. project, and she would introduce me to the arts scene. A few days after I got there, I met Nii Noi Nortey, and I was captivated by his introduction to the world of African jazz.

All to say: I did not choose Ghana as a research site, nor go there with a research agenda. I just found Nii Noi charismatic and was very interested in the music he was playing. Six months later, I went back for one month and set up a small recording studio. There I began a recording project with Nii Noi Nortey and his colleague Nii Otoo Annan. I was just thinking: this music needs to be heard, and I have the resources and know how to do it. So I was just compelled by the music, and the musical friendship that greeted me.

CG: How did your recording projects and the method you call "listening to histories of listening" help you to understand the way the Accra Trane station celebrates the African legacy of John Coltrane?

SF: On the first day we met, I recorded a rehearsal at Nii Noi's studio. Once home I edited the tracks and sent them back to him. We began to talk on the phone about how we were hearing the music. On that first visit Nii Noi also showed me his shrine to John Coltrane. I had followed Coltrane's music closely since I was 15. Forty years later, thanks to Nii Noi and Nii Otoo, I realized that I could re-listen to this music and re-imagine it through African eyes and ears. It was such a gift, all those days of listening to Coltrane, and listening to Nii Noi and Nii Otoo tell stories and play. It gave so much more meaning to a music that had inspired me for a very long time.

Fig. 1: Steven Feld with his upright ashiwa bass box.



© Photograph: Nana Agazi, 2006.

I'm a musician, so I started taking lessons and learned to play the ashiwa African bass. And then Nii Noi and Nii Otoo asked me to join them as Accra Trane Station. So after just a year, I was touring and performing with them as a trio in Africa, in Europe, and in the US. I recorded everything we did, and played it back, doing what I call "dialogic auditing" and editing. For five years we played, recorded and filmed, each year doing a CD and a few DVDs too. This was all before I wrote a word of the *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* book. I was just a musician among musicians, as we all learned to improvise together and feel ourselves, together in difference, in the music. Also during this time I was exposed to so much about Nii Noi and Nii Otoo's knowledge of both Western and African instruments, and their abilities to move fluidly from traditional and ritual musics to experimental improvisation.

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I had to rethink relationships between something called "tradition" or "traditional music" and something called "jazz." The challenge for me was to strip away all of the American nationalist bullshit—the nationalist idea that jazz is this unique North American contribution to a world of sonic art, a world that compelled white people into forms of participation, collaboration and admiration for the accomplishments of African Americans. That it was part of a democratizing narrative both within the United States and the world. Of course, I had rejected that idea for a long time because I knew that the narrative of jazz was also the narrative of American racism. And that jazz had aided American imperialism and militarism.

African Americans accomplished so much with this music, but jazz was used to marginalize them and to exclude them from many musical opportunities open to whites.

Through Nii Noi, I was able to connect this history to African liberation struggles. I had read a bit of W.E.B. DuBois, but this was the first time I came to think seriously about the articulation of 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights and African independence movements.

CG: What does the Accra Trane Station's tribute to John Coltrane reveal about these relationships? Nii Noi Nortey wanted Coltrane's LP classic *A Love Supreme* to be locally recognized, but without doing a straight copy. How did you understand his approach to jazz?

SF: That was a real revelation for me because I realized that unlike American musicians, or jazz musicians in South Africa and Europe, Nii Noi did not want to master jazz as if he had studied in a conservatory in the US. He wanted to create instruments and a music full of sonic diasporic references that show that he has listened to, admired, and cared about that music. He did not want to copy it but to cite it, to acknowledge it within his own way of listening and playing.

This is what was so important to me: African musicians playing their own idea of jazz, their own kind of music. They were bringing in their history of listening. I was literally listening to their history of listening and playing along with it when we were musicking together.

This was a radical alternative to the idea that musicians from India or Africa or other countries could go to music school and learn the music of John Coltrane the same way they could learn the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. And that the only way they could show appreciation of this music was to play it very well. Nii Noi and Nii Otoo resisted jazz assimilation while embracing diasporic agency.

Fig. 2: Nii Noi with "Africa brass."



© Photograph: Steven Feld, 2006.

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CG: In 2005-2007, you also made a documentary on the percussionist Ghanaba (Guy Warren) that features his talking drums version of Georg Handel's *Hallelujah* chorus and a conversation on jazz, European and African music. How did his experience of jazz in the US from 1953 to 1958 inform Ghanaba's reading of the Black Atlantic? And how did he influence avant-garde jazz musicians of the next generation in Accra?

SF: Ghanaba was Nii Noi's mentor and an experimentalist. He went to the US in the 1950s and played with some of the jazz greats. He met Charlie Parker. He rehearsed with Thelonious Monk. And he came to have a life-long friendship with Max Roach, the most celebrated be-bop drummer of the period.

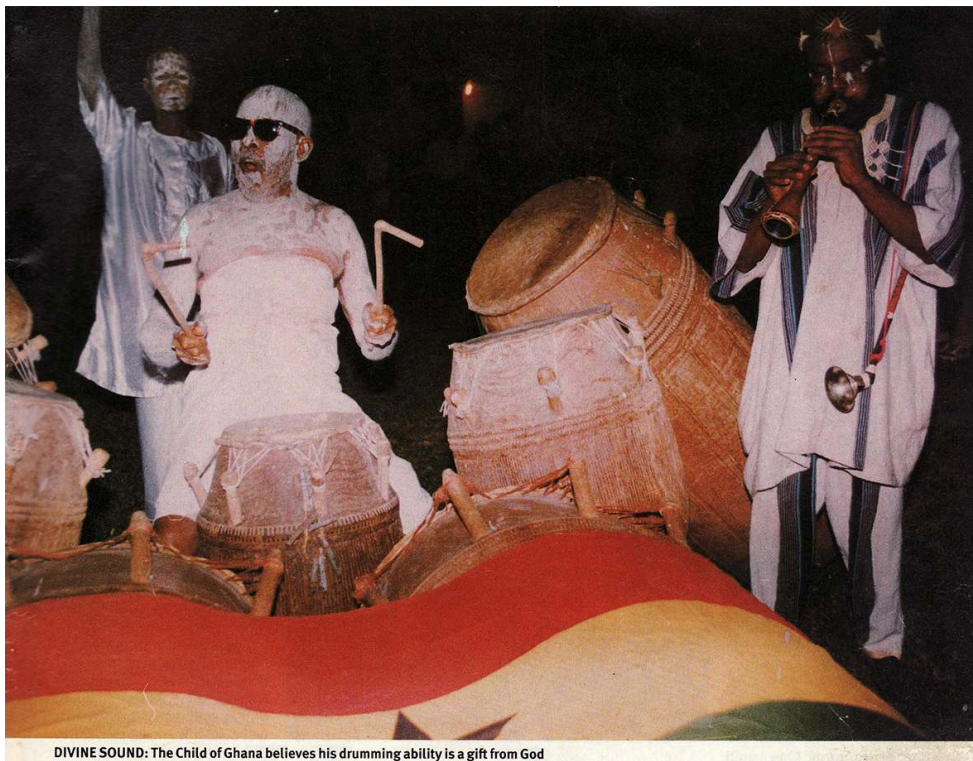
Ghanaba realized that, in America, people wanted him to perform a caricature of his Africanness. They wanted him to sit in the background, wear African clothing, and play a drum that looked African. He could play jazz very well on a drum jazz set, but people didn't want him to do that. He realized the only place that American jazz had open for Africa at that juncture was to keep it exotic and in the past.

Ghanaba became very bitter about this, and it led him to think of jazz as a racist invention. Indeed, he often said that jazz would always be limited and colonial if it kept Africa, and particularly African percussion, in the past, and denied its role in the present and future. African musicians, he said, heard jazz for years on radio, and were long in dialogue with it, incorporating it into their own music. He said Americans just wanted a little taste of Africa added to their jazz. So he went home and played African music, adding a little bit of jazz!

That inspired Nii Noi to develop hybrid instruments, sounds, and consciousness. This, he said, was the way for Africans to be in constant dialogue with diasporic perspectives. What was radical was that Ghanaba and Nii Noi said “We don’t care about this idea of authentic jazz and African American music. We care about Africa as a place with a very creative power: we listen to these things, we use them as we want, and we bring them into our own music. We refine and we develop.” Ghanaba coined the term “Afro-jazz” to refer to this new music in the 1960s; it’s also the title of one of his famous records.

Ghanaba played Beethoven and Handel with African drums to surprise those who thought his musical worldliness was limited to American jazz. He continued to shock the world because he invented one hybrid musical project after another. The whole concept to getting out of any kind of slavery, he said, was to invent new things. So, he wanted to play Beethoven and Handel with African drums to create a dialogue with European art music. He literally referred to the *Hallelujah* project as freeing African music from its slavery. Having acted in the famous Haile Gerima film *Sankofa*, Ghanaba was very conscious of the historical memory of slavery, and its profound impact in Accra. And he took a very radical and active stance against the preservation, or heritage-ization, of the West African slave forts along the Ghana coast.

Fig. 3: Nii Noi performing with Ghanaba.



DIVINE SOUND: The Child of Ghana believes his drumming ability is a gift from God

© Photograph: Nii Yemo Nunu, 2005, Kotopon Afrikan Images.

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CG: In your collaboration with Australian-born interdisciplinary artist Virginia Ryan, you have also used recordings to address the sensory dimensions of the memory of the slave trade, through a composition of the sonic materials found along the spaces of the Ghanaian shoreline at Accra, Prampram, Jamestown, Labadi, Anomabo, and Korle Gonno. Can you speak about the Castaways project and the way it shifts the focus from the slave forts to the shoreline and the water?

SF: Virginia Ryan, as an artist, had a profound experience on the beach in Ghana, watching things wash up onto the shore in front of the slave forts. She realized that all of the focus in the history books was on the production and exportation of slaves. Yet as an artist she thought about a porous yet violent place where water touches the land, of history washing in and out, of the power of water in constant motion. When I met her in 2004, I saw a few hundreds of these 8 × 11 Castaways on the floor of her studio, sculptures that she was beginning to make from objects picked up along the ocean's edge.

At Anomabo with her, I heard in the sound of the ocean a history of listening, a history of the audible memory of slavery and the forts. In the dungeons, people were hearing not just screams and brutality but the constant motion of the water coming in and out. Their history in shackles was this history of water that brought intruders who beat, raped, and abused them, and took them away.

I suggested to Virginia to read Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and joined her in this project. I put microphones under the sand, recording water touching land. And from these recordings, mixed with sounds of the beach and of the ocean, I made a sound environment. Nii Noi and Nii Otoo collaborated with me on the soundtrack to the film. I wanted others to hear that ocean currents, often a sound of calm, was also a sound that terrorized people, that created horrific sensations and memories in their bodies.

In placing slaves on ships and in chains, water motion was also a form of auditory torture, a form of habituation to the feeling of being unable to escape being slapped in one direction and then another. Your equilibrium is being knocked off, you cannot stand firm when you are like this. I began to think of this as a sensory memory of the trauma of deportation. But I did not want to do this with a sledgehammer; I wanted to create a space to reflect. The only direct visual reference comes in the film, when Ryan looks through a tourist book of slave castle photos. So we collaborated as artists approaching this traumatic history, but not simply to dwell in its violence. Our focus was memory. When you see and hear a child's tattered shoe wash up onto the shore, you have a space to wonder about the how and why behind that moment.

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CG: How did you collaborate with Virginia Ryan and Nii Noi Nortey and other musicians on this project and how did they articulate their perception of the memory of the Black Atlantic?

SF: Nii Noi is also a visual artist. He makes sound sculptures and has a very deep sensibility as a visual artist as well as a musician. Virginia Ryan worked closely in Ghana with one of Nii Noi's closest friends, the museologist and conservator Joe Nkrumah. Together, Virginia and Joe started the Foundation for Contemporary



Art in Ghana in 2004. It was a very important moment for promoting the work of African contemporary artists. As Virginia Ryan's husband was the Italian ambassador to Ghana, she used the resources of the Italian embassy to get this Foundation started. She was doing a kind of artistic philanthropy as well as making her own art and finding multiple ways to support, nourish, and collaborate with Ghanaian artists. Nii Noi was a strong part of this moment, connecting his sound art with contemporary visual art. Ryan was introduced to him by Joe Nkrumah. What was most beautiful to me about that period 2004 to 2008 (when Virginia left Ghana) was that it helped promote a new spirit of collaboration between outsiders and Ghanaians. Ghanaian contemporary artists had more exhibits and exposure. Accra Trane Station was performing. I was making the CDs and DVDs. We were making art installations and exhibitions all over the city. It was a very energetic period. This is another reason why I did not really try to push my academic side at that time. I just focused on being an artist among artists, making sonic and visual collaborations.

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## NOTES

1. The "Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra" project now includes a book, five DVDs, and eleven CDs from the period 2005–2016. Since 2016 new projects have been developed, like the photobook/CD/DVD *Cool Running. The Story of Ghana's Honk Horn Lorries and Por Por Music*, a collaboration with photographer and oral historian Nii Yemo Nunu, and the German photographer and visual artist Hannah Schreckenbach. A new CD/DVD/photobook is in development about Ghanaba to celebrate his centenary, a collaboration with his daughter Midie, and Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Yemo Nunu. They have received many positive reviews in music, anthropology, jazz, and African history journals and magazines. The book and one of the films received major prizes. Some of the CDs have been lauded in international jazz journals. On African soil they have created a collaboration at Wits University in Johannesburg. Nii Noi, Nii Otoo, with painter Nicholas Wayo and Steven Feld were just about to travel there in March 2020 when Covid-19 shut things down. The book has recently been translated into Italian, and other translations are under discussion. The films are available with subtitles in three languages and have been shown in festivals in Africa, Europe, and the US. Their US distributor has made them available for streaming and they have now been seen by many students around the world, in addition to theatrical shows. All project royalties have been returned to the musicians and artists, creating a more honest, equitable and sustainable model for collaborations.

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## ABSTRACTS

In this interview, Steven Feld, an anthropologist, filmmaker, musician, and sound artist, discusses his multimedia project on "Jazz Cosmopolitanism" in Ghana. From 2004, Feld started to study acoustemology—one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world—from the standpoint of avant-garde jazz musicians and visual artists in Accra. He worked as a producer and as a sound engineer, before performing as a musician with the Accra Trane Station band in Africa, Europe and the United States. In the following years, he produced CDs and documentary movies featuring musicians such as the drummer Ghanaba (formerly Guy Warren), the country's leading experimentalist. In this interview, Steven Feld discusses his encounter with these musicians and visual artists and how their readings of the Black Atlantic came into dialogue. At the same time, his discussion of his artistic collaborations, and excerpts of his recording and video projects,

reveal creative ways of addressing the history of race in music and the sensory memories of the slave trade in coastal Ghana.

Dans cet entretien, l'anthropologue, cinéaste, musicien et artiste sonore Steven Feld évoque son projet multimédia « Jazz Cosmopolitanism » au Ghana. En 2004, il commence à étudier l'acoustémologie – une manière de connaître et d'être au monde par le son – du point de vue d'artistes visuels et de musiciens de l'avant-garde jazz à Accra. Il travaille comme producteur et ingénieur du son, avant de se produire en tant que musicien avec le groupe Accra Trane Station en Afrique, en Europe et aux États-Unis. Au cours des années suivantes, il produit des CD et des films documentaires présentant des musiciens tels que le batteur Ghanaba (anciennement Guy Warren), le plus grand expérimentateur du pays. Dans cet entretien, Steven Feld parle de sa rencontre avec ces musiciens et artistes visuels et de la manière dont leurs lectures respectives de l'Atlantique noir sont entrées en dialogue. L'évocation de ces collaborations artistiques et les extraits de ses projets multimédias témoignent, en même temps, des manières créatives d'aborder l'histoire de la race dans la musique, ainsi que la mémoire sensorielle de la traite esclavagiste dans la région côtière du Ghana.

En esta entrevista, el antropólogo, cineasta, músico y artista sonoro Steven Feld evoca su proyecto multimedia “Jazz Cosmopolitanism” en Ghana. En el 2004, comenzó a estudiar la acustemología –una manera de conocer y de estar en el mundo a través del sonido– desde el punto de vista de los artistas visuales y de los músicos de la vanguardia del jazz en Accra. Trabajó como productor e ingeniero de sonido, antes de presentarse como músico junto al grupo Accra Trane Station en África, Europa y Estados Unidos. En los años siguientes produjo CDs y documentales que presentan músicos como el baterista Ghanaba (antes Guy Warren), el más gran experimentador del país. En esta entrevista, Steven Feld habla de su encuentro con estos músicos y artistas visuales y de la manera en que sus respectivas lecturas del Atlántico negro pudieron dialogar. La evocación de estas colaboraciones artísticas y los fragmentos de sus proyectos multimedia dan cuenta de las maneras creativas de abordar la historia de la raza en la música, como también de la memoria sensorial de la trata esclavista en la región costera de Ghana.

Nesta entrevista, Steven Feld, antropólogo, cineasta, músico e artista sonoro, fala de seu projeto multimídia « Jazz Cosmopolitanism » no Gana. Em 2004, ele começou a estudar acustemologia – uma forma de conhecimento e de estar no mundo pelo som – do ponto de vista de artistas visuais e de músicos da vanguarda jazz em Accra. Ele trabalhou como produtor e engenheiro de som antes de se produzir como músico com o grupo Accra Trane Station em África, na Europa e nos Estados Unidos. Nos anos seguintes, ele produziu CD e filmes documentários apresentando músicos como o baterista Ghanaba (antes Guy Warren), o maior experimentador do país. Nesta entrevista, Steven Feld fala de seu encontro com esses músicos e artistas visuais e da maneira como as suas respectivas leituras do Atlântico negro vieram a dialogar. A evocação dessas colaborações artísticas e os trechos dos seus projetos multimídias evidenciam simultaneamente os modos criativos de aproximar a história da raça na música e a memória sensorial do trato escravista no litoral do Gana.

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**Palabras claves:** jazz, Ghana, cosmopolitismo, Atlántico negro, memoria sensorial, proyectos de grabaciones sonoras, proyectos de video, artistas visuales

**Palavras-chave:** jazz, Gana, cosmopolitismo, Atlântico negro, memória sensorial, projetos de gravações sonoras, projetos vídeo, artistas visuais

**Keywords:** jazz, Ghana, cosmopolitanism, Black Atlantic, sensory memories, recording projects, video projects, visual artists

**Mots-clés:** jazz, Ghana, cosmopolitisme, Atlantique noir, mémoire sensorielle, projets d'enregistrements sonores, projets vidéo, artistes visuels.

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