

POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE: THE RENAISSANCE IN LIBERIAN MUSIC, 1970-89

By

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To all the Liberian musicians who died during the war--
(Tecumsey Roberts, Robert Toe, Morris Dorley and many others)
Rest in Peace

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ACS-** American Colonization Society (the organization that founded Liberia)
- AFL-** Armed Forces of Liberia (the national army)
- BTC-** Barclay Training Center (army barracks in Monrovia)
- ELBC-** Radio Liberia (state-owned)
- ELTV-** Television Liberia (state-owned)
- ELWA-** Eternal Love Winning Africa (SIM radio station)
- INPFL-** Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (Prince Johnson's rebel forces)
- LAP-** Liberian Action Party
- LD-** Liberian Dollar (the "Liberty")
- MICAT-** Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism
- MOJA-** Movement for Justice in Africa
- MULA-** Musician's Union of Liberia
- NCC-** National Cultural Center (at Kendeja)
- NCT-** Liberia's National Cultural Troupe
- NDPL-** National Democratic Party of Liberia (Samuel Doe's Party)
- NPFL-** National Patriotic Front of Liberia (Charles Taylor's rebel forces)
- PAL-** Progressive Alliance of Liberia
- PPP-** People's Progressive Party
- PRC-** People's Redemption Council
- SIM-** Sudan Interior Mission
- TRC-** Truth and Reconciliation Commission (of Liberia)
- TWP-** True Whig Party (Party of Presidents Tubman and Tolbert)

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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This is a grassroots level history of Liberian musicians and culture producers during the two decade period from 1970-1989. The study utilizes music and oral testimonies of popular musicians as a lens with which to examine and interrogate broad-based social, cultural and political changes that took place in Liberia during the two decades. Importantly, these two decades neatly correspond to two very different governmental regimes in Liberia. From 1971-1980, the nation was ruled by the last civilian president of the long-standing True Whig Party (TWP), Africa's oldest political party, which dates back to the mid-19th Century. In 1980, the first ever successful military coup took place in Liberia, ushering in the military dictatorship of Samuel Doe, who ruled for the next ten years until his capture and death in 1990 at the hands of a rebel warlord. Therefore, this study examines these two decades from a fresh perspective, namely the musicians and singers who lived through these turbulent times in Liberia and produced songs that reflected the zeitgeist of the age. My central argument is that these artists articulated a vision of peaceful co-existence and ethnic pluralism that was later betrayed by the armed factions that plunged the nation into a long and bloody civil war.

CHAPTER 1
GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF LIBERIAN POPULAR MUSIC IN THE 20TH
CENTURY TO 1989

Then, forward sons of Freedom, March!
Defend the sacred heritage!
The nation's call from age to age
Where'er it sounds 'neath heaven's arch,
Where'er foes assail,
Be ever ready to obey
'Gainst treason and rebellion's front,
'Gainst foul aggression,
In the burnt of battle lay the hero's way!
All hail, Lone Star, all hail!¹

–Edwin J. Barclay

In the past Liberian history was written (by Americo-Liberians) almost exclusively to praise the heroism of the early settlers against the 'uncivilized' aborigines...the (history) books are replete with references to 'advanced' 'Christian' 'Western' pioneers as opposed to 'backward' 'primitive' and 'slave-trading' tribal people.²

–Martin Lowenkopf

Of course we continue to have a flag, a national anthem, an army (which some bad boys call a 'burial squad'); all these suggest that we are an independent country. But don't we feel frustrated and humiliated by the fact that the resources of this country are expropriated by foreigners and a small class of Liberian collaborators?³

–Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson

Those men came from afar with their Western ways and ideologies. Now look what they have done to us! They have stolen our wealth, used us like guinea pigs, and all the while laughing behind our backs at us trying to imitate their ways imposed on us.⁴

–Hawa Anderson

¹ "The Lone Star Forever" (national song) composed by Edwin J. Barclay.

² Martin Lowenkopf, *Politics in Liberia; the Conservative Road to Development* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), 148.

³ Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson, "Rice and Rights: The Struggle for Economic Development and Political Freedom in Liberia," in *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, ed. H. Boima Fahnbulleh (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 139.

⁴ "Africa" poem from the ELTV program "Heritage" hosted by Doughba Caranda, 1989.

Themes and Arguments

This dissertation constructs a grassroots history of Liberian musicians and their shared visions for a peaceful, progressive, multi-ethnic Liberia from the boom decades after the Second World War until the outbreak of the Liberian Civil War (in the final days of 1989), focusing on the turbulent decades of the 1970s and 1980s. I am interested in these musicians' artistic production and at the stage of performance because their musical compositions serve as a lens with which to examine societal changes during these two decades before the outbreak of national conflict. In this introductory chapter, I review the relevant literature that has impacted this study and briefly discuss my methodology. Next, I will present an overview of the central themes I will be addressing throughout the study. The following political history narrative is divided into two sections, the first deals with the historical background to the study from foundational 19th Century material through the 1960s. In the second section I will present a detailed overview of the political events that most heavily impacted the two decades in Liberia that form the time frame for this study; the 1970s and 1980s.

Literature Review and Methodology

Africanist historians have traditionally left the domain of African musical production and consumption to the purview of ethnomusicologists. This state of affairs is slowly changing with various historical monographs being published such as *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (1985) by David Coplan, *Rumba on the River* (2000) by Gary Stewart, *Arrest the Music!* (2004) by Tejumola Olaniyan, and *Intonations* (2008) by Marissa Moorman, geographically situated in South Africa, Congo, Nigeria, and Angola respectively, to cite but a few examples.⁵

⁵ David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1985), Gary Stewart, *Rumba on the River; a history of the popular music of the two Congos* (London: Verso

The central quandary faced by this author in attempting to write a literature review of works on Liberian popular music is that there is a dearth of academic writing on the subject. There was no dominant narrative to critique on the topic of Liberian popular music history. There are a handful of encyclopedia articles and a small section in a recent book that presents an overview of Liberian culture and customs written by a Nigerian scholar, Ayodeji Olukoju.⁶ Therefore, on the one hand, it is exciting to present the first history on this subject. There exists a body of literature however, that has inspired my study, and amongst which I believe this study, in a future book form would find a comfortable place.

First, I will address the music history monograph describing the development of the Congolese sound; *Rumba on the River* by Gary Stewart. Presenting Congolese rumba as an urban art form, Stewart documents the rise of a recording studio system owned by foreigners (Greeks) in Kinshasa of an earlier epoch that parallels in some ways the history of recording studios in Liberia that I discuss, such as Studio 99. Stewart addresses the advances in recording technology, in this case the gramophone, whereas I address the advances in audiocassette technology that occurs during the 1970s. Stewart also documents the genesis of the musician's union in Congo, and the success of Congolese musicians in exile. The strength of Stewart's study is the breadth of

Publishers, 2000), Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music! Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), Marissa Moorman, *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

⁶ Ayodeji Olukoju, *Culture and Customs of Liberia* (New York: Greenwood Press, 2006), 140-144. For encyclopedia articles on Liberian popular music, see John Sheperd and others (eds.) *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume 6: Africa and the Middle East* (London: Continuum Press, 2005), 148-150; Ronnie. Graham, *The Da Capo Guide to Contemporary African Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 110-111 and Bram Posthumus, "Liberia; Music from the Ashes" in *The Rough Guide to World Music; Africa & Middle East* (vol.1) (London: Rough Guides, 2006), 188-191.

the time span covered, which allows him to document the genealogies of three major stylistic schools throughout the course of various bands' disintegration and reformation over several decades. This is a much wider scope than my two decade study. Lacking in sustained analysis however, the book does not address major theoretical questions, instead aiming at description and documentation of the performers' careers and performance venues. He comes perilously close to positing this musical history as a type of national history, which I find rather problematic. However, the accessible work does contribute to the literature on both the production and the consumption side of an African music industry.

Tejumola Olaniyan has written an amazing study of Fela Anikulapo Kuti in his *Arrest the Music*: authored by a passionate yet scholarly fan with a deep knowledge of Yoruba culture and history. Although he is enamored of Kuti's musical canon, he is not uncritical of his male chauvinism in gendered power relations within his self-constructed Kalakuta Republic and Kuti's penchant for labeling anything he liked as "African culture." This study highlights the contradictions and paradoxes between Kuti the hedonist and Kuti the political activist and would-be "black president." Fela Kuti might not be Africa's most popular musician (at least not in Liberia were he came and performed on a few occasions) however, he is certainly one of Africa's and the world's most fascinating characters who also happens to be a musical genius. It is the "intellectual density" of this musical genius that Olaniyan unpacks within a socio-political context of OPEC Nigeria under a series of corrupt and autocratic civilian and military regimes. This deployment of biography-as-history has certain parallels with my study; especially the subsections where I focus on individual artists' careers such as Princess Fatu Gayflor, Miatta Fahnbulleh, and Tecumsey Roberts, many of whom knew Fela Kuti personally.

Another inspiration was *In Township Tonight!* by David Coplan. This work is descriptive of the social organization of performance cultures of black South Africa. It is a pioneering work that viewed emergent musical genres such as *marabi* jazz as creating something new, instead of simply speeding up the disintegration process of “traditional” South African music as older ethnomusicologists may have viewed it. I have incorporated many more direct quotes from African musicians that Coplan did, and the African voices in Coplan’s book tend to be masked by his own voice. Coplan does not separate musical performance from other diverse types of African performance such as dance, poetry recitation and theatrical works, whereas I believe that the differences are significant. Therefore, I have saved my theatrical themed research on Liberian cultural troupes for a later work except for one brief section on the dance drama “Redemption of the Liberian People.”⁷ I am only focusing on the musical artists who developed solo careers after emerging from the incubators of the national cultural troupes. Coplan’s scope is broad, and the book filled a major lacuna in South African cultural history while simultaneously drawing upon the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology and musicology. It is an effective intellectual cross-fertilization. One memorable example that Coplan dwells on is the musical renaissance that occurred in Sophiatown before it was bulldozed. This well known example has parallels with my study of the little known popular music renaissance in Monrovia: especially during the peak years 1977-1984. There are also parallels between the ways in which Coplan documents the resilient opposition to the systematic racial oppression of apartheid to the ways I demonstrate musical opposition in Liberia to the further militarization and ethnic balkanization of society in

⁷ Not to mention the fact that the inclusion of this material would have doubled the size of this dissertation.

the post-coup era (after 1980). Similar to Coplan, I am also attempting to “place black performance culture in the context of the historical processes and social forces that shaped it.”⁸

In terms of methodology, I gathered information on my topic from roughly four broad sources. The political history of the time period was garnered from various published secondary sources and personal accounts. Secondly, I gathered information on the music scene by shifting through seemingly endless reels of Liberian newspapers on microfilm. I also borrowed extant copies of Liberian newspapers when possible. Thirdly, I gathered over 125 interviews with informants, the vast majority of which were conducted personally by travelling to Liberia twice and touring all of the major Liberian ex-patriot communities in the United States.⁹ Finally, I collected as much Liberian music from the time period as possible on vinyl, cassette and CD (see the discography section). By interrogating each of these four sources equally, I was able to slowly build a coherent narrative describing a history of the music scene during this period and the varied ways in which Liberian musicians played a part in and reacted to political, cultural and social developments.

The current state of affairs still leaves the field of the historical study of African popular music relatively unexplored and pregnant with possibilities for future historians of African popular culture. The interviews that I conducted and strongly rely upon can be considered fragments of lived experience that are complimentary pieces of a larger historical mosaic.

Why should present and future Africanist historians take the study of music to heart? As ethnomusicologist Banning Eyre eloquently states “for thousands of years, music has been one of the most essential of cultural expressions. Music has been an important part of all cultures in

⁸ Coplan, 2.

⁹ For an extensive list of these interviews see appendix 1.

their daily life, at celebrations, at ceremonies, for pleasure, and serves as food for the soul.”¹⁰

This holds especially true for many African societies with emphases on oral culture, storytelling through song, and less general reliance on print media. As Musa Zimunya, a professor of literature in Zimbabwe stated: “A lot of historians...writing about the Africans of this country completely forgot a very vital dimension of the African spirit, and that is music, song. (Africans) sought to express their anxieties, joys, fears, and hopes through music...it is a glaring gap in the entire history of this country that no one has sought to establish the role of music in the lives of common people, outside the colonial influence, in (both) the rural and urban areas, and what this music is doing all the time.”¹¹

There is a long history of Liberian popular songs carrying socially understood messages that shed light on historical processes. For example, nationally, one of the most famous Liberian folk songs ever; “Chicken Crowing for Day,” informed merry-makers that it was time to leave the dance and head for home. This song is popularly known by the onomatopoeic title “Kokolioko” which describes the sound of the rooster’s crow early in the morning hours.¹²

The first section of the lyrics is as follows...

Kokolioko, Kokolioko
Kokolioko, chicken deh crow for day
Eh yah, eh yah!
Eh yah, chicken dey crow for day (2Xs)

¹⁰ Banning Eyre, *Playing with Fire: Fear and Self-Censorship in Zimbabwean Music* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Freemuse, 2001), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² Various Artists, *Black Star Liner; Reggae from Africa*, Heartbeat CD HB 16, compact disc, c. 1983, Poli-Rhythm, Ltd

However, this same folk song reworked into a reggae version by Miatta Fahnbulleh was also utilized by Liberian Action Party (LAP) politicians on the campaign trail in 1985 as a metaphor to signify that if their party was elected a new day would dawn politically.

This dissertation's focal point is the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, when Liberia experienced a series of profound political crises. The decade of the 1970s also witnessed a new generation of socially engaged youth coming of age as the nation confronted these rapidly changing political realities at the crossroads. It was the end of the Tubman era (president for almost three decades, from 1944-1971), and the future was ripe for significant realignments; both culturally and politically. Unfortunately, the incoming President Tolbert's "new international order" of greater equity and justice was largely rhetorical.¹³ The political theme of the Tolbert era was a consciousness of the need to build a more inclusive society, encapsulated in his slogan of "total involvement for higher heights." While genuine reform efforts would have effectively jeopardized the vested economic interests of the president's close-knit extended family.

Grassroots Cultural Revival

The decade of the 1970s witnessed a cultural revival that expressed itself in a virtual explosion of music and theatre. In general, without potentially dangerous explicit criticism of specific politicians, Liberian musicians re-worked contemporary debates into their hit songs. Popular music culture also reflected changes in priorities and values of the larger society, especially within the emergent generation which was alienated by the patronage politics of the former Tubman era. During the mid-1970s we witness a sea change in young people's attitudes in Liberia, similar to what historian Laura Fair describes as the "creative fashioning of social and

¹³ D. Elwood Dunn, *Liberia and the United States during the Cold War; Limits of Reciprocity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 87.

cultural materials” in contrast to “fixed identities based upon genealogy, biology or race” in Zanzibar during the early decades of the 20th Century.¹⁴

The newly formed guitar bands and singer-songwriters featured in this study represented the voice of the new generation that came of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s. After a brief period of dabbling in psychedelic Afro-rock, this new generation of popular musicians superseded the older practice of performing exclusively foreign “copyright” hit songs, and instead created a new hybrid genre of music that not only celebrated Liberian grass-roots musical traditions but also reflected contemporary events while simultaneously blurring the distinctions between traditional and modern, rural and urban.¹⁵ The blurring of the rural-urban divide was largely a function of massive rural to urban migration during the post-war period that radically transformed Monrovia and enlarged slum areas which were organized into ethnic enclaves.¹⁶

Politically, the decade corresponds to the administration of the last True Whig Party (TWP) president, William R. Tolbert Jr. who became president by constitutional succession in 1971, and was deposed in a bloody coup d'état on April 12, 1980. This self-described “revolution” entailed the installation of the military regime of the People’s Redemptive Council (PRC) and was dominated by a clique of previously rank-and-file soldiers. Therefore, the two decades that form the core time period of this study neatly map on to two political regimes, one civilian, the other dominated by military personnel that quickly devolved into an autocracy.

¹⁴ Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press: 2001), 43.

¹⁵ Cynthia Schmidt, “Liberianische Pop-Musik: Altes und Neues,” in *Liberia; Leben wo der Pfeffer Wachst*, Liberian Working Group (Bremen, Germany, 1989). Translated by Dr. Ingo and Christina Heidebrink.

¹⁶ Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 36-38.

These political realities would have important repercussions on the nascent music industry, and would heavily influence the topical material produced by Liberian singer-songwriters

After two research trips to Liberia, a tour of the largest Liberian communities in the U.S. and the conducting of over one hundred and twenty five interviews, one of my central conclusions is that the study of Liberian music and musicians careers helps us to further document the aspirations of ordinary Liberians during the political crises of the 1970s and 1980s that led directly to the Civil War. The hopes and dreams for a multi-ethnic, progressive Liberia can be ascertained by a close examination of both the musical production and actions taken by this artistic avant-garde. Singers such as the cultural nationalist Princess Fatu Gayflor introduced a new genre of popular “grassroots” music that was sung in a variety of local African languages (as opposed to strictly English) and lyrically dealt with the daily struggles of the majority of citizens to survive by employing popular parables and, allegories.¹⁷

Performing pan-ethnic dances such as the “moonlight dance” in her work with the Liberian National Cultural Troupe, Gayflor articulated alternative visions for her country’s future by highlighting commonalities that existed amongst the sixteen major ethno-linguistic groups instead of focusing on their differences. Many singer-songwriters of the “cultural revivalist” persuasion such as Gayflor, received their training in various cultural troupes, including the Liberian National Cultural Troupe (NCT), and the Liberian Cultural Ambassadors (LCA), and then subsequently launched solo careers. Dance troupes formed in local high schools led to the formation of new theatrical formations that performed on both national and international stages in which the multi-ethnic indigenous cultural patrimony was celebrated. The National Cultural Center (NCC) at Kendeja, located just ten miles southeast of Monrovia, was the home of the

¹⁷ Princess Fatu Gayflor, *The Golden Voice of Liberia*, Studio 99 102, c. 1984, 33rpm.

NCT, which presented shared visions of communal identities in which all Liberian ethnicities were given equal levels of attention and respect on a national stage (both literally and figuratively) before entering a period of rapid decline due to neglect in the 1980s. In doing so they were actively echoing and championing the pan-ethnic social ethic of the “gree-gree bush” otherwise known as the Poro and Sande “secret societies” which represented a pre-colonial period indigenous system of governance.

Secondly, the study of Liberian popular music during the late 1970s sheds new light on the grassroots cultural revival which was a direct reaction to the American cultural orientation of the ruling class and the TWP that had ruled the country for 133 years and was toppled by the 1980 coup d'état. Influenced by the ideology of pan-Africanism, the “cultural revolution” in neighboring Guinea and the African- American “black power” movement, members of this emergent generation (including those who founded and joined musical groups), attempted to forge new cosmopolitan identities that did not completely ignore the rich indigenous Liberian cultural heritage. Through these musical leisure time pursuits, they urged a need for change in the way the Liberian heritage was conceptualized and emphasized newfound cultural priorities. This reconstructed “African nationality” directly challenged Liberia’s exclusionary foundational national mythology.¹⁸

An example of this phenomenon was the inception of the Kru musical ensemble Tejajlu, which means “the youth have come together” in the Klao language. During the late 1970s, Tejajlu’s music became associated with the political rallies of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), which was one of the main political opposition groups to the continued rule of the

¹⁸ Dunn, 186.

TWP. Over time, even the very Kru rhythms deployed in their songs were associated with youthful protest music.

There are many examples of visionary African musicians during this period that used music to critique oppressive social realities and to suggest paths towards emancipation. The collaborative inter-racial group Juluka that formed during and in opposition to the racist apartheid system in South Africa during the mid-1970s shared an alternative vision of what a future South Africa could look like with their audiences. They effectively challenged notions of racial separation that formed the bedrock of apartheid ideology.¹⁹

The negative connotations associated with having rural “up-country” origins were briefly turned on their head with the advent of the April 12, 1980 coup. When this coup brought an indigenous Liberian man, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, from the countryside into the presidential chair (or “throne”) for the first time, musicians such as Miatta Fahnbulleh attempted to musically interpret and simultaneously influence the direction of this self-proclaimed “revolution” in explicit songs and newspaper interviews which will be examined in Chapter 4. When the country began to slide towards ethnic strife due to the discriminatory practices of the military regime, musicians such as the duo Zack & Gebah spoke out against this trend.²⁰ This documentation of musical history serves as a lens to examine an alternative political and social

¹⁹ Johnny Clegg and Michael Drewett, “Why Don’t You Sing about the Leaves and the Dreams? Reflecting on Music Censorship in Apartheid South Africa,” in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, ed. Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2006), 133.

²⁰ Zack & Gebah, *Just For You*, Tabansi Records POLP 180, cassette, c. 1988.

ideal that was betrayed by the onset of hostilities that led to the fourteen year long armed conflict and serves to underscore the rich complexity of Liberian social life.²¹

Challenges Facing Liberian Musicians

Finally, within the parameters of this study I am attempting to understand the institutional, cultural, and economic barriers in place during these two decades that have historically thwarted a thriving local music scene in Liberia from gaining an international audience. Liberian musicians, especially women musicians, faced numerous disadvantages on the ground while pursuing successful careers in the male dominated music industry. These challenges included the privileged place American music occupied in radio broadcasts and nightclubs, the lack of a supportive musical infrastructure for training and recording, and the traditionally low status of musicians in West Africa encapsulated in the derogatory Pidgin English term “grona boy” which was synonymous with vagabond or street urchin. Predictably, popular musicians actively challenged these discourses which relegated them to a subordinate status and entered debates on the nature of social stratification within the new political dispensation.

For example, popular musicians of the new generation challenged the dominant pre-war dichotomy of “Congo vs. country” (descendents of the American “pioneer” settler families vs. indigenous Liberians) and instead emphasized the fluid nature of societal identities in which background could become less of a social constraint than before the franchise was extended to the indigenous population in 1964. In reality, the fluidity of these categories had been increasing

²¹ Gary Armstrong, “Life, Death and the Biscuit: Football and the Embodiment of Society in Liberia, West Africa,” in *Football in Africa: Conflict, Conciliation and Community*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 183-209. Local pride was also expressed musically by composers writing songs in support of local football (soccer) teams. Football was (and remains) a national leisure pursuit that was directly connected to new musical forms as praise singers emerged to compose songs for various clubs (teams) and former successful footballers such as Robert Toe and Lucky Shango entered into the music industry upon retirement from the sport during this period.

since the post-war Tubman era, when membership to the TWP and the Freemason lodges was opened up to indigenous Liberians who adhered to the Western-oriented political, religious, and cultural values of the close knit Americo-Liberian families.

American Cultural Domination

Although many Americans might not be able to pinpoint Liberia's exact location on a world map, throughout history Liberia has frequently been referred to as "America's Stepchild"²² U.S. President James Monroe, an ACS member (during the 19th Century) referred to Liberia as a "little America destined to shine gem-like in the darkness of vast Africa."²³ Writing in 1976 Martin Lowenkopf observed that "Liberia still looks first to the United States and to the Western world for protection, technology...and cultural inspiration."²⁴ The effects of American cultural domination cannot be overstated within the urban centers of the Liberian coast, of which Monrovia is the prime example. Liberia, was also culturally characterized by those from surrounding Francophone nations as "little America" and was thought of by many as an island of stability administered by the American Embassy similar to the geo-political, neo-colonial role Panama played in Central America and the Philippines played at the beginning of the 20th Century. In other words Liberia formed a part of a global American economic empire.

By the 1950s, the U.S. was the largest foreign investor and trade partner of Liberia, focusing mostly on the mining and plantation sectors. Mirroring older social conceptions on the East African Swahili Coast, urbanity and the practice of living in coastal settlements in Liberia

²² For example a 2002 PBS documentary film on Liberian history directed by Nancee Oku Bright was entitled *Liberia, America's Stepchild*.

²³ William Powers, *Blue Clay People, Seasons on Africa's Fragile Edge* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 20.

²⁴ Lowenkopf, 1.

have traditionally been associated with the *kwi* or “civilized” lifestyle, since this is where the black American immigrant settlers set down roots in the 19th century. Christian mission churches in Liberia constituted the training grounds for many future popular singers, and the musical fare was gospel music and hymnology of American origins. Popular music made by African-American artists such as mega-stars Stevie Wonder and Donna Summers dominated the airwaves during the 1970s and 1980s, and the U.S. Dollar (USD) was legal tender in Liberia until 1985.

The special relationship with the U.S. practically meant that youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. along with pan-African movements in other parts of (especially) Anglophone Africa radicalized Liberian youth and inspired emergent political movements that asserted new social identities. These primarily included the Movement for J

tice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) which encouraged debates and activism around issues of core political values and economic “neo-colonialism.” During this period we witness a dynamic switch from desirability of “Congo” (“Americo-Liberian”) identity to a more flexible and inclusive African identity, especially during the post-coup period demonstrated by the widespread adoption of indigenous “struggle names” within leadership of the aforementioned opposition movements.

This study focuses on events that unfolded mainly in the Liberian capital city of Monrovia. Today the city is home to over one million people, yet during the 1970s it was only about half that size. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the history of urban Monrovia has been inextricably interwoven with Liberian national history, since Providence Island (located in the middle of the Mesurado River but currently connected by a causeway to the city center) has been mythologized as the birthplace of the modern nation, coupled with the very nature of the

city which was home to the majority of the political elite and a continuing magnet for rural-urban migration, especially since the 1960s.

Early Historical Background

This over-arching historical narrative seeks to document the influence of various strands of world music on Liberian popular music. My interest lies in the techniques, materials, content, and modes of communication employed by popular music performers within the music-making process. For hundreds of years before 1822 when the colony of Liberia came into existence, the indigenous Africans who inhabited this territory were involved in what I would call the “greater Atlantic world of sounds.” Kru sailors originally from what is present-day southeast Liberia were the first to introduce instruments and sounds from the greater Atlantic world to the Liberian coast to create what could be described as proto-highlife music.²⁵ According to highlife expert John Collins, Kru mariners were important in West African music history because they “Africanized” the guitar, introducing new playing styles, they introduced proto-highlife songs to the West African coast, and they formalized Pidgin English.²⁶ The Kru originated palm wine guitar style of highlife music was locally called the *daryea* style and was revitalized by guitarist Hartey Coleman from Maryland County in the 1960s.²⁷

According to David Coplan “in South Africa, group vocal music was by far the most highly developed indigenous musical tradition.”²⁸ With this fact in mind, according to Kru soloist Tarloh Quiwonkpa, due to their traditional penchant for and excellence in the practice of

²⁵ An example of this sound can be found on Various Artists, *Folk Music of Liberia*, Folkways Records, FE 4465, c. 1954, 33rpm, track 10. This is a typical example of an early recording made in the field in which the names of the musicians were not even noted.

²⁶ John Collins, interview with author, May 22, 2008, University of Ghana at East Legon, Ghana.

²⁷ Maxwell Jacobs, interview with author, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.

²⁸ Coplan, 147.

vocal harmonizing; “the Kru were (and still are) like the South Africans of Liberia.”²⁹ However, there is no direct linear connection between the popular music of the 1970s and the Kru’s legacy, since the influence of the palm wine guitar highlife style Kru music waned by the Second World War, except for the fact that this palm wine guitar style was one of the genres that influenced the new wave of Liberian electric highlife.³⁰

Liberian music is “all mixed up.” Liberian highlife has always been defined as a syncretic sound with a strong Caribbean influence. Gebah & Maudeline Swaray have described their music as fusing elements of Liberian traditional music with soukous, jazz, reggae, and calypso.³¹ The term I have chosen to use to describe the majority of groups and artists during this period is Liberian electric highlife which is an amplified mix of West African and Caribbean influences in a modern guitar band format. One distinctive element of Liberian pop music is the presence of a certain “Bassa beat.” This is apparent in the *Gbema* moon-dance song. Therefore, Liberian musicians identify with this “*Gbema* beat.”³²

During the Second World War (segregated) African-American troops were stationed for considerable periods of time on Liberian soil near Robertsfield airport, just forty miles outside of Monrovia. At this juncture, new African-American musical styles introduced by imported vinyl records, the introduction of radios, vaudeville acts, and dance-oriented jazz ensembles that catered to the entertainment needs of American troops stationed in Liberia during the Second

²⁹ Tarloh Quiwonkpa, interview with author, May 31, 2007, via phone from St.Paul, MN.

³⁰ The term “electric highlife” refers to guitar bands using amplified sound; electric guitars and microphones as opposed to acoustic guitars and other unamplified instruments.

³¹ Gebah and Maudeline Swaray, unpublished interview with *Front Page Africa* editor-in-chief, Rodney D. Sieh. June 6, 2007.

³² George “Gee-Mann” Sikpa, interview with author, July 1, 2007, Philadelphia, PA. One example of this is the music of the musician Meka Suz. Her music, sung in the Dahn language, contains traditional songs with the “*Gbema* beat.” Jodi, the Liberian hip-hop artist also uses this beat, so it represents at least one shared rhythm.

World War, supplemented the imported music of the Americo-Liberian settlers and became the dominant influence on Liberian popular music.

Almost all genres of American popular music in the post-war period heavily influenced Liberian music from jazz & swing, rhythm & blues to funk, gospel and psychedelic rock; especially the music produced by African-American recording artists. Added to this musical mix was music of the Caribbean; musical genres such as pachanga, cha-cha-cha, meringue, calypso, and beginning in the early 1980s; reggae. The music of neighboring African countries also contributed to the melting pot from highlife from Ghana & Nigeria to Krio (Creole) music from Sierra Leone to Congolese rumba. Africanist anthropologist Bob W. White offers some helpful terminology that is not only applicable to the history of the musical influence from Congo to Cuba (and back to Congo), but his term “transatlantic cultural flows” could just as readily apply to flows back and forth between Liberia and the U.S. (the so-called “boomerang effect”).³³ In other words, the roughly four hundred year long period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade which brought roughly twelve million enslaved Africans (alive) to the shores of the Western Hemisphere also brought musical ideas which were then drawn upon as inspiration centuries later.

In places like Brazil, Cuba and North Carolina, enslaved Africans brought musical traditions and rhythms with them, constructing musical instruments such as drums based upon the models remembered from before captivity. These African musical traditions merged with musical traditions of the Americas, western and southern Europe and became creolized. This new Creole music later evolved into various new genres of music such as rumba, son, meringue,

³³ This is a reference to the title track “Boomerang” by the Senegalese rap group Daara J. See Daara J, *Boomerang*, Wrasse Records 105, compact disc, c. 2003, track 1. The song explicitly celebrates this black Atlantic world phenomenon.

gospel, among others. These styles then found their way back to West Africa. In the case of Liberia this occurred through the immigration of freed slaves from the American south and east coasts. In the case of Congo, this influence was activated through the importation of gramophone records for sale in Congo (and Senegal) during the late colonial period. According to Bob W. White, this new form of “urban cosmopolitanism” was “more accessible and ultimately more pleasurable than the various models of European cosmopolitanism.”³⁴

19th Century Historical Background

Liberia literally means “Land of the Free.” Liberia was viewed as “solid as a rock politically” and a beacon of stability throughout Africa as other post-independence governments fell regularly.³⁵ Liberia is Africa’s oldest republic, and alongside Ethiopia was one of the two territories on the African continent that was never colonized by a European power. Liberia is the closest thing that America has to a colony in Africa since the groups of settlers most closely associated with the founding of the republic in 1847 were black freedmen (and women); elements of the free black population in pre-Civil War United States. Agents of the American Colonization Society (ACS) which was formed in the Davis Hotel in Washington DC in 1816 established a small colony at Cape Mesurado (Montserrado), the location of present-day Monrovia in 1822. Importantly, as summed succinctly by the TRC report; “the indigenous inhabitants of the territory claimed for Liberia were largely antagonistic to the establishment of the Liberian nation.”³⁶ This land was purchased at gun-point by white ACS agents from local

³⁴ Bob W. White, “Congolese Rumba and Other Cosmopolitanisms,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 168, no. XLII-4 (2002): 663. See also Richard Shain, “Roots in Reverse: Cubanismo in Twentieth-Century Senegalese Music,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 83-101.

³⁵ David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 125.

³⁶ Republic of Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report* (Monrovia, Liberia, 2009), 4.

authorities and formalized with the “Ducor Contract.”³⁷ These settlers emigrated largely between 1820 and 1865 before the outbreak of the American Civil War.

Terrified by the recent Haitian Revolution, the ACS, composed of the “liberal wing of the slave-holding class” viewed Liberia as a potential future home for the entire free black population of the U.S., and did not believe that political and social equality could ever be achieved between the two “races.” Political scientist J. Gus Liebenow asserted that “the heart of the conflict between Americo-Liberians and tribal peoples has been the issue of land (ownership).”³⁸

Liberian sociologist Emmanuel Dolo labeled this form of “black colonialism” as a distinct pathology of “abused becoming abuser” and decried Liberia’s traumatic “dysfunctional foundations.”³⁹ The slave plantation psychology delivered what Dolo calls the “superior-inferior myth” which led to various forms of discrimination against non-settler populations.⁴⁰

Overall, the “Americo-Liberian” population has been homogenized within the historical record, with internal class differences glossed over. Furthermore, this Americo-Liberian group often referred to as “the pioneers” in older historical accounts, have been massively over-represented in the official historiography, since they never constituted more than five percent of the total population of Liberia. On the other hand, as stated by Zamba Liberty, the common assumption underlying much of Liberian historiography was that all indigenous ethnicities

³⁷ Ducor was the local indigenous place name for what became Monrovia.

³⁸ J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia; the Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, 1969), 25.

³⁹ Emmanuel Dolo, *Democracy versus Dictatorship: the Quest for Freedom and Justice in Africa’s Oldest Republic-Liberia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 23. See also Ibrahim Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers; Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ Dolo, 32.

“shared the same values, were similarly politically and socially structured, and had the same objective vis-à-vis the emigrant ethnicity” which was not necessarily the case.⁴¹

Terrance Ranger stated that “All nationalisms need myths...but what is important is not so much whether the myths are true or false but what kind of heroes they portray.”⁴² In the case of settler dominated Liberia, the figure of Matilda Newport emerged as a foundational and symbolic heroine, who became the basis for a national holiday (Matilda Newport Day) which we will be examining in Chapter 3. Her “brave deeds” during the Battle of Fort Hill where she allegedly lit a cannon with her pipe, blasting a cannonball into the indigenous armies to “save the day” pitted the minority, portrayed as more intelligent, resourceful and courageous, against the majority, portrayed as an unthinking mass; a barbaric and murderous horde. It is not surprising that this holiday was vanquished shortly after the 1980 coup.

William Powers writing about Liberian maps of the 19th century observed that “The coast was the extent of the consciousness of the black aristocrats.”⁴³ Their numbers were steadily bolstered by the arrival of enslaved Africans that had been “recaptured” by the anti-slavery squadrons patrolling the West African coastline. Unable to be repatriated to their original homes, these recaptives were given to settler families to use as apprentices on their farms. These “Congo” recaptives frequently adopted the 19th century Western clothing, converted to Christianity and learned the English of their adoptive families. Furthermore, there was widespread intermarriage (both formal and informal) between the two groups over time.

⁴¹ Clarence E. Zamba Liberty, *Growth of the Liberian State; An Analysis of Its Historiography*, (Northridge, CA: The New World African Press, 2002), 40.

⁴² Terrance Ranger, “I Did Not Set Out To Deconstruct; an Interview,” in *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe*, ed. Mai Palmberg (Uppsala, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2001), 225.

⁴³ William Powers, *Blue Clay People, Seasons on Africa’s Fragile Edge* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 43.

Eventually, (at least by 1900) after the influx of recaptives had ceased, the two groups had effectively merged through intermarriage, and all people of recaptive and American descent were collectively referred to as “Congo people” by the indigenous majority. Liberians loved to use Biblical metaphors such as “Jews and Gentiles” to refer to differences between Americo-Liberians and (indigenous) country people. They took this metaphor a step further, and “Samaritans” were those “half-castes” who were “born on the side” out of wedlock between an Americo-Liberian man, and a “native” woman.⁴⁴

The settler dominated government always displayed a patronizing attitude towards the original inhabitants but was willing to incorporate the recaptives through a process of acculturation. The Liberian constitution clearly stated that “the purpose of the state is to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa and to regenerate and enlighten the benighted continent.”⁴⁵ President Edward J. Roye, founder of the TWP, publicly declared that the goal of the government should be the “elevation of the native tribes” from their benighted position. He inveighed that ‘heathenism and superstition will disappear like the morning fog before the mighty railroad,’ harbinger of civilization.⁴⁶

In the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries at independence there was a class that inherited the privileges of colonization: the new ruling class. As Louise Bourgault points out, however, “In Liberia which lacks a colonial history, the Americo-Liberians together with a small group of educated indigenes acquired a similar privileged position before the Civil War.”⁴⁷ This

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Bowier, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴⁵ P. Anyang Nyong’o, “Popular Alliances and the State in Liberia,” in *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa*, ed. P. Anyang Nyong’o (London: Zed Books, 1987), 214.

⁴⁶ Dolo, 23.

⁴⁷ Louise M. Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 53.

state of affairs led to radically different musical cultures, since the settler minority brought the music of the American South with them, and regarded indigenous Liberian musical traditions as inferior and associated with “heathen” practices that were quite un-Christian. During the 19th Century, derogatory terms for indigenous populations were commonly used such as “primitives”, “aboriginals”, and “uncivilized.”⁴⁸

Early to Mid-20th Century

Curiously, there is scant mention of music in the standard political histories of 20th century Liberia, in defiance of the fact that music plays a central role in West African social life. In order to address this lacuna, I am attempting to reconstruct a social history of Liberian musicians. During the Cold War, Africa was viewed by many observers as simply an arena for superpower competition, a perspective that denied any sense of African agency. Visiting author John Gunther commented about Liberia during the 1950s that it was a “perverse advertisement for colonialism, since subjects of the countryside were worse off than their counterparts in neighboring French and British colonies.”⁴⁹

The downfall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the end of the Cold War but heralded the beginning of armed conflict in Liberia which would rage intermittently for the following thirteen years. Liberia has been (and remains) currently linked in the popular imaginary with images of child soldiers and the brutalities inherent in internecine conflict. In juxtaposition to these obsessions with more recent bloody conflict (and its apparent resolution in 2003 with the departure of former warlord and ex-President Charles Taylor), this study represents an attempt to weave an alternative historical narrative that focuses on popular aspirations that were betrayed.

⁴⁸ George Klay Kieh Jr., *The First Liberian Civil War: the Crises of Underdevelopment* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 127-8.

⁴⁹ Sanford J. Ungar, *Africa: the People and Politics of an Emerging Continent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 93.

During the 1970s and 1980s Liberian musicians articulated a vision widely circulating within the broader population of a peaceful, multi-ethnic, and progressive future for their country. This was roughly thirty years before the United Nations peacekeeping intervention in 2003. This vision is what has been described as the "path not taken." This study has as one of its many objectives to disrupt the standard binary social divisions in this history, since this group of popular musicians came from both Americo-Liberian and indigenous backgrounds yet united around a common vision. It is still necessary to underscore precisely when and where these divisions were reified through population mobilizations by various historical actors.

The 1960s

By 1960 a new elite was ruling Liberia which was no longer exclusively based upon blood, religion, or language, but upon class, wealth, education, influence, loyalty to the president and their commitment to the furtherance of the goals of the TWP. However, key leadership positions within the single-party state were still occupied by politicians from prominent Americo-Liberian families. The University of Liberia (UL), established in 1951 alongside the post-war expansion of mission schools, produced a generation of literate graduates. The children of country people represented the majority of students at UL, since the ruling oligarchy could afford to send their children to the U.S. for higher education. Commenting on this era, Martin Lowenkopf observed "there has been some assimilation into the dominant group, particularly among coastal tribes, but the few assimilated tribesmen were required to deny their traditional identities and values and to embrace those of the dominant group."⁵⁰ By contrast, housed in the Barclay Training Center (BTC) the soldier "defenders of the nation" lived in slum-like barracks with dusty alleyways and open drainage ditches which overlooked the Executive Mansion.

⁵⁰ Lowenkopf, 2.

The 1960s were a time of tentative musical experimentation for Liberian musicians; however, most were still performing “copyright” music: largely musical hits from the U.S., the Caribbean and Europe. The Melody 8 Band was drawing crowds by performing a wide range of musical styles from soul, country & western, twists, fox-trots, cha-cha’s, highlife, and calypso. Nightlife was thriving in downtown Monrovia, on Carey St. Gurley St. and Warren St. at places like the Roxy Nightclub, Mama Rena Dancehall, and the SAC Tower (the Saturday Afternoon Club) and the Ducor Palace Ballroom with its famous Chandelier Room. Defying all odds, some of these 45 rpm singles records have survived. For example, researchers have discovered a 1963 recording of the Melody 8 Dance Band performing “Amour in Twist” and “West Point Calypso” within the Voice of America (VOA) sound archives.⁵¹ Morris Dorley (a.k.a. Morris Dolly) was one of the first artists to break from a solid repertoire of “copyright” cover songs, and attempt to create his own electric guitar version of “Afro-Liberian” music. Early hit songs of Dorley’s supporting band the Sunset Boys included “Ngangama” which was described by some as “meringue-highlife music.”⁵²

1970, the End of the Tubman Era

The remainder of this introductory chapter will be occupied with a chronological political overview of the time period I will be concentrating on, namely the two decades from 1970-1990. My intention is to provide a political framework with which to understand the enfolding drama of the social class of Liberian musicians.

⁵¹ West Point is a notorious overcrowded poor neighborhood with slum-like conditions in Monrovia. The lyrics of this early 45rpm single describe life in West Point as “woman, man, pekin (child) and all, everybody living at the mercy of God.”

⁵² Matthew LaVoie, “Lost Liberian 45s from the 1960s,” VOA News Online, <http://www.voanews.com/english/africa/blog/index>.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, President William V. S. Tubman, Liberia's only "president-for-life" and de facto national "paramount chief" was elected in 1944. He was the only Liberian president to rule for such a long period: almost thirty years, and die of natural causes while in office. Tubman profoundly shaped the course of Liberian politics by concentrating personalized power in the presidential office more than any other predecessor. Liberian historian Joseph Tellewyan states that "during this protracted period of one-man rule, Liberia and Tubman had become almost inseparable and synonymous."⁵³ He was widely known as "Uncle Shad" (from Shadrach, one of his Old Testament middle names) and he promoted a cult of personality based upon his image as "uncle" to the nation. He is generally thought of as a modernizing beneficent dictator who brooked no opposition.⁵⁴ Tubman used new revenue from mining concessions to incorporate the whole country into a huge TWP patronage machine; the 'party-state.'⁵⁵ On the cultural front, Tubman's administration attempted to establish a national music academy to train future musicians but the project failed and was never attempted again. Tubman's educational policies were a catalyst for change. He supported scholarship programs for Liberian students to study abroad (mostly in the U.S.) and in turn, some of these scholars formed opposition groups after he died to put pressure on the Liberian government, including the Movement for J

⁵³ Joseph Tellewyan, *The Years the Locusts Have Eaten: Liberia 1816-2004* (New York: Xlibris Corporation Press, 2005), 515.

⁵⁴ Arthur F. Kulah, *Liberia Will Rise Again; Reflections on the Liberian Civil Crisis* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

tice in Africa (MOJA), the Union of Liberian Associations of the Americas (ULAA), and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL).⁵⁶

The Diamond Jubilee Celebration of President W.V.S. Tubman is a vinyl record that was released in 1970. There are precious few extant copies of this record, but it has great musical significance, because it demonstrates that by 1970 Liberia had not yet found its own unique popular musical sound. Instead, Liberians celebrated the 75th birthday of the most powerful man in Liberia with musical genres that originated in other places such as marching band music (Side 1), the quadrille dance (from the southern American square dance), calypso, merengue, rumba and cha cha cha (Side 2). The second side of the record, played by the Liberian National Police Band is instructive. The songs include “Tubman, Hero of Africa” (a calypso), “Birthday” (a merengue), “Liberia is Our Home” (a rumba), “Liberia” (a cha cha cha), “Zovella” (a traditional Lorma song), and “On the Road” (a quadrille).⁵⁷

Tubman died unexpectedly after surgery in a London clinic on July 23, 1971, leaving his vice-president William R. Tolbert Jr. to assume the reins of power by constitutional succession. Tolbert stepped into a political vacuum created by Tubman’s death, since he had served as Tubman’s vice-president from 1952-1971. According to Dew Tuah-Wleh Mayson “with Tubman’s death, the serious contradictions which had long been festering in Liberian society were suddenly brought to a head; greatly disturbing the social equilibrium.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Abiodun Alao, John Mackinlay and Funmi Olonisakin, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords; the Liberian Peace Process* (New York: United Nations University Press, 1999), 17.

⁵⁷ *The Diamond Jubilee Celebration of President W.V.S. Tubman*, The Liberian National Police Band, Lt. Col. J. Godfrey Mills, conductor. c. 1970, 33rpm.

⁵⁸ Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson, “Rice and Rights: The Struggle for Economic Development and Political Freedom in Liberia,” in *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, ed. H. Boima Fahnbulleh (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 134.

1971 and the Tolbert Inauguration

In 1971, after becoming the first sub-Saharan African country to affect a peaceful and constitutional transfer of power upon the death of Tubman, the new President Tolbert declared “We can take pride in the fact that this nation stands today as a true example of stability.”⁵⁹ This apparent stability would not last long. According to Liberian writer Emmanuel Dolo; “The decade of the 1970s crystallized the political struggles of Liberia in terms of struggles over land, access to political power, for economic justice, and for cultural inclusion in a new national consciousness based upon the proud heritage of indigenous cultural traditions and patrimonies. Popular music often provided a backdrop to this activism.”⁶⁰

1971 represented a crossroads in Liberian history due to the uncertainty unleashed by the passing away of President Tubman; the only president most Liberians had ever known. During a speech at Tubman’s funeral, Vice President William R. Tolbert stated “we are like lost sheep without a sheppard.”⁶¹ After being sworn in as president, Tolbert sought to reconfigure the Liberian socio-political order and simultaneously build a loyal modern bureaucracy.

According to Amos Sawyer, Liberian political scientist and frustrated 1979 mayoral candidate for Monrovia, Tolbert sought to “rationalize the presidency without diminishing its excessive exclusive privileges.”⁶² After half a century of repression, loosening of controls had a profound effect. By the 1970s, Liberia was no longer a “beacon of hope” for members of the worldwide African Diaspora, but instead, to critics, the country most closely resembled a neo-

⁵⁹ David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 125.

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Dolo, interview with author, July 26, 2006, via phone from Minneapolis, MN.

⁶¹ Tuan Wreh, *The Love of Liberty; the Rule of President William V. S. Tubman in Liberia, 1944-1971* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1976), 124.

⁶² Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), 287.

colony managed on behalf of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Corporation and other multinational mining corporations.

Economically, Liberia sustained the highest growth rate in all of sub-Saharan Africa in the decades after World War 2, but the influx of foreign investment led to distortions in the economy and exacerbated social inequalities. Liberia was the world's richest source of natural rubber, but continued to import tires from the U.S.. In 1971 a global recession hit the world economic system and the demand for key Liberian exports such as rubber, iron ore, and timber slowed. At the same time there existed massive economic inequalities as 60% of the national income was held by 4% of the population, overused U.S. dollars were the official currency, and the national monetary policy was controlled by First National City Bank of New York.⁶³ The international oil crisis of the mid-1970s led to a higher cost of importing rice at the same time that the sales prices for rubber and iron ore had dropped precipitously which was bad news for the Liberian GNP.

The privileged position of foreign culture was furthered by local radio broadcasts. Programs of the period on state-owned radio station ELBC typically gave the impression that all things Liberian were of inferior quality, while all things foreign were of superior quality. The broadcasts were never in local African languages; instead they highlighted foreign music, the sermons of foreign preachers, and exclusively advertised foreign manufactured products. When foreign music was played, the origin was not remarked upon, but when it was time for "mass music" the switch was announced, however, the well-educated broadcasters could barely pronounce the names of the African artists. Therefore, social critics observed that "on the radio station our taxes paid for, we hardly ever heard our own music."⁶⁴ As historian Stephen Ellis

⁶³ Togba-Nah Tipoteh, *Democracy; the Call of the Liberian People* (Ostervala, Sweden: Tofters Tryckeri Ab, 1981), 55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

noted of the early 1970s, “young Liberian sophisticates danced to Motown at parties and despised African music.”⁶⁵

Political activist Togba-Nah Tipoteh argued that the Liberian government promoted education for development of a “foreign civilization” in Liberia, and the pernicious form of education made Liberians look down upon themselves, but look up to foreigners, which he characterized as an unwritten policy of “mass confidence-breaking.”⁶⁶

According to the 1974 census, the population breakdown by ethnicity was as follows; Kpelle (the largest single ethnic group) 20% as compared to Americo-Liberians at only 2%. From the figures below, note that the Kpelle ethno-linguistic group is by far the largest constituency, but the Bassa ethnic group comes in a close second place, and the Krahn are a relatively small minority.⁶⁷ One argument in Chapter 2 will be that different musicians chose to target different socio-linguistic group audiences by choosing to compose lyrics in their specific languages. In general, in this process the coastal groups were favored over the hinterland groups. Also ethnic groups with larger constituencies such as the Kpelle and the Bassa were favored over those with small numbers of speakers such as the Dei (Dey).⁶⁸ It is remarkable that a category for

⁶⁵ Stephen Ellis, *Mask of Anarchy: the Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 43.

⁶⁶ Tipoteh, 15.

⁶⁷ In addition, according to the many published maps of Liberian ethnicities, the coastal groups where the largest concentration of population lies, and where Monrovia is located, are (going from the southeast coastal littoral adjacent to Cote d’Ivoire to the northwest coastal border with Sierra Leone) as follows; Grebo, Kru, Bassa, Dei, and Vai. Monrovia, and the rest of Montserrado County has a wide ranging mix of all of the ethnicities found throughout the country, but they tend to be organized into segregated neighborhoods such as New Kru Town, the Buzzi (Lorma) Quarters, Bassa Town, etc.

⁶⁸ Here are the broad ethno-linguistic categories in terms of the percentage of the overall population...Mande speakers (Western branch); Mandingo (Malinke), Vai, Gbandi (Gbande), Kpelle (Kpessi), Loma (Lorma/ Buzi), and Mende.

Mande speakers (Eastern branch); Gio (Dahn), Mano (Ma).

West Atlantic speakers (Southern branch); Gola, Kissi (Gissi).

Americo-Liberians was even included in the census, since former President Tubman had officially banned the use of the term in the media.

Tolbert was the son of a wealthy rubber baron who spoke in homilies about the “lofty goals of national destiny...to achieve a sustained upward thrust for ever-escalating rounds of distinction.”⁶⁹ At President Tolbert’s inaugural speech his new inspirational political slogan “total involvement for higher heights” implied full participation of all Liberians in the task of “nation building,” including new levels of integration between the various “sections” and classes within society. After several years in “the throne,” however, Liberia was still relatively un-integrated. The living standards of most working people dropped by more than half from 1971-1979, and the class divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” rapidly widened. Political scientist and MOJA founder Togba Nah Tippeteh observed at the time that “those who do the hard work catch hard time, while those who do the easy work get the easy life. This is what is called ‘monkey work, baboon draw’ in Liberia.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile, industrial unrest spread during the late 1970s, and by 1978, there were more unemployed persons than employed.

1979 and the Formation of Leftist Political Opposition

The present strategy for economic development is based upon ‘bad economics’ but it is also based on ‘bad politics;’ because, faced with the situation of increasing inequalities of income and wealth, the government is alienating a vast majority of the population who tend to dismiss government’s development programs as yet

Kwa speakers (Kru branch); Bassa, Dey (De), Grebo (Glebo), Kru (Kroo), Belle, Krahn.

Furthermore, from the 1974 census, as reproduced in J. Gus Liebenow’s *Liberia, the Quest for Democracy*, the national population figures are as follows...

Kpelle – 20%, Bassa – 14 %, Gio – 9%, Kru – 8%, Grebo – 8%, Mano – 7%, Loma -6%, Krahn – 5%,

Gola – 4%, Kissi – 3%, Mandingo -4%, Vai – 3%, Dei - 0.5%, “No tribal affiliation” – 2.9%.

⁶⁹ William Powers, *Blue Clay People, Seasons on Africa’s Fragile Edge* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 22.

⁷⁰ Tippeteh, 33.

another attempt by the ‘big shots’ to dupe them...meanwhile, the problems of poverty and underdevelopment continue to stare us in the face.⁷¹

–Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson

Journalist Michaela Wrong observed that “in most African nations...the political elite, business elite and social elite are one and the same thing. Rubbing up against one another at private schools, in clubs, and at high society weddings, its members share an incestuous intimacy.”⁷² Instead of describing modern-day Kenya, she may have well been describing the ruling elite in Liberia during the 1970s. However, also during the 1970s a new counter-elite was emerging as young Liberian products of American colleges and universities sought jobs in public administration back home in Liberia. This new generation was influenced by ideologies of radical nationalism then in vogue. For example, PAL founder Gabriel Baccus Matthews espoused an ideology of quasi-Marxist African nationalism. Musical groups like Tejajlu were singing songs such as “Africa Must Unite” which echoed these emergent pan-Africanist political sentiments. As previously mentioned, there were two large pressure groups in the late 1970s; the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) which later became a political party: the Progressive People’s Party (PPP) and the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA). PAL was organized in the U.S. by Matthews in 1975, and by 1978 they had opened offices throughout Monrovia.

PAL’s stated goal was to put an end to social inequalities in post-independence Africa. As military historian Jeremy Levitt stated; “Spurred (and inspired) by anti-colonial movements throughout Africa and the civil rights movement in the U.S., Liberian youth and students demanded a new political order in Liberia” which was reflected within contemporary popular

⁷¹ Mayson, 139.

⁷² Michela Wrong, *It’s Our Turn to Eat; the Story of a Kenyan Whistle-blower* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 175.

music as we shall see.⁷³ MOJA later shifted their focus to a domestic agenda characterized by a focus on the achievement of “civil, political, and development rights” for the indigenous masses.⁷⁴ There were continuing adult education classes for AFL soldiers taught by PAL & MOJA leaders at the Marcus Garvey High School. These classes aimed at not only improving the literacy levels of the soldiers, but also to raise their awareness of the disparities in Liberian society. Master Sergeant Samuel Doe and other future coup-makers of his cohort attended these evening school classes.

The Tolbert administration’s proposed price increase from \$22 to \$30 per one hundred pound bag of rice (the national staple) was presented as a way to promote the sale of locally grown rice, but in reality it was intended to help write off the government debt and to enrich Tolbert family members involved in the rice importation business. Commenting during his sojourn in the late 1970s, exiled South African musician Hugh Masekela declared “(Liberia) was governed by a Christian minority of the descendants of American slaves, who treated the indigenous population almost like slaves. Americo-Liberian opulence and vulgar wealth existed in the midst of embarrassing ethnic poverty, ritual secret societies, and deep superstition.”⁷⁵ These conditions were about to boil over in a major urban insurrection.

The Rice Riots or “Black Saturday”

On April 14, 1979 a major urban uprising erupted in Monrovia as police attempted to suppress a planned early morning demonstration march against the proposed rice price increase. The Rice Riots (also known as the “riots for rice and rights”) or “the day Monrovia stood still”

⁷³ Jeremy I. Levitt, *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: from ‘Paternalitarianism’ to State Collapse* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 192.

⁷⁴ Tuan-Wren Mason and Amos Sawyer, “Capitalism and the Struggle of the Working Class in Liberia,” *Review of African Political Economy* 2 (1979): 15.

⁷⁵ Hugh Masekela and D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 258.

occurred during Easter Weekend, which had major religious and symbolic significance in this predominantly Christian country, including the obvious reference to the metaphorical resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.⁷⁶

Tragically, the situation rapidly deteriorated as police fired live ammunition into the crowd as widespread looting ensued with many soldiers joining in. All commercial ventures on downtown Broad Street and Camp Johnson Road were looted and ransacked, including music supply stores. Eddie Gibson remembers that the instruments from the Electro-Lite Music Store on Broad Street were for sale all over the city after they had been looted during the Rice Riots. At that time there were no window bars in place, just glass windows on the shops up and down Broad Street and Camp Johnson Road, the other main commercial shopping street.⁷⁷ According to Emmanuel Dolo, the Rice Riots were a “seminal event” in Liberian political life which temporarily led to “complete state paralysis.”⁷⁸

The Rice Riots shattered the notion of “Liberian exceptionalism;” the notion that Liberians were somehow different than citizens of neighboring West African nations. During the Rice Riots, Levitt tallies “40-140 civilian (mostly student) deaths, 400 wounded, and roughly \$40 million in property damage. George Kiah argues that during the Rice Riots, the army (AFL) was passive in response to President Tolbert’s shoot-to-kill orders and the “crisis of legitimacy reached a crescendo.”⁷⁹ Testing the newly signed Mutual Defense and Non-Aggression Treaty of

⁷⁶ Republic of Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report* (Monrovia, Liberia, 2009), 99.

⁷⁷ Eddie Gibson, interview with author, June 1, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁷⁸ Dolo, 32.

⁷⁹ Kieh, 12.

the Mano River Union (MRU), President Tolbert called on Guinean troops to restore order in the aftermath of the riots.⁸⁰

The Rice Riots were a manifestation of critical social, economic, and political shortcomings with deep root causes within the national polity. The rallying cry following the Rice Riots was “In the name of the people, the struggle continues!” To many observers, these riots represented a “culmination of more than one hundred years of national leadership that appears to have eroded its constituent’s participation in a meaningful way.”⁸¹ Liberian journalist Samuel Slewion observed “In the end, Tolbert’s presidency can be likened to a restaurant that gets a new paint job and hangs a big sign out front proclaiming ‘Under New Management’ then stages a Grand Opening. However, when the customers arrive, they quickly discover that the menu remains the same and the cooks are the same people, offering the usual fare.”⁸²

The 1979 Organization of African Unity Conference

Liberia’s hosting of the 16th annual Organization of African Unity (OAU) ordinary session conference in 1979 cost the Tolbert government (and Liberian taxpayers) over \$100 million, including the hiring of an ocean liner to provide additional rooms. Billboard sized photographs of the visiting African presidents lined the route from downtown Monrovia to the newly constructed Unity Conference Center in Virginia (a suburb).⁸³ The high cost of hosting the conference increased tensions throughout the country. At the time, Tolbert was the OAU chairman, and he had a private bungalow built for each visiting African head of state. Meanwhile musicians in the group Liberian Dream composed a song entitled “OAU, Welcome to Liberia!”

⁸⁰ Kulah, 21.

⁸¹ Nyong’o, 224.

⁸² Samuel Slewion, interview with author, Aug. 14, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

⁸³ Lamb, 98.

in which they attempted to reinterpret the meaning of the convention in pan-Africanist terms as opposed to wasteful spending on a male-dominated club for dictators.⁸⁴ This topic will be explored further in Chapter 4.

Introducing Master Sergeant Samuel Doe

A. Romeo Horton recalls that the then Master Sergeant Samuel Doe was posted at the OAU conference center gate (with a front row seat as it were to the debaucheries and opulence). In his autobiography, Horton states, “After my release, Doe sent for me; during the OAU conference he was one of the guards at the gate to the villas where the (various African) heads of state were staying. Several times I passed through the gate I handed him (“dash” or “cold water”) money; he said he never forgot my gestures to him.”⁸⁵ Instead of standing guard duty while the ruling heads of state from across the continent partied, at some point, Doe and his cohorts decided that they wanted to join this decadent and exclusive club.

During the Tubman and Tolbert eras, Liberian elite culture remained still largely modeled after the plantation society of the American South. Formal wear was still top hats and long-tailed morning coats. Samuel Doe, the alleged “man of the soil” brought this “anachronistic little universe” to a bloody and abrupt end.⁸⁶ As stated in the TRC report, “the symbolism of indigenous underdogs toppling an entrenched repatriate elite establishment was overpowering.”⁸⁷

Doe was born in Tuzon, Grand Gedeh County in 1951. His father was a private in the AFL and Doe followed in his father’s footsteps and joined the army in 1969. At the time of the coup, Doe

⁸⁴ Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band, *OAU, Welcome to Liberia*, Makossa International Records, M2345, c. 1979, 33rpm.

⁸⁵ A. Romeo Horton, *For Country, Africa, and My People* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Univ. Press, 2004), 229.

⁸⁶ Howard W. French, *A Continent for the Taking; The Tragedy and Hope of Africa* (New York, Random House, 2004), 91.

⁸⁷ Republic of Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report* (Monrovia, Liberia, 2009), 109.

did not trust his superior officers, and so chose members of his own Krahn ethnic group to be a part of the putsch because a bond of trust already existed between them. According to Nyong'o, the interest of the army was not to change the old order but to force them to accept those who had been previously excluded.⁸⁸

Liberian political scientist Emmanuel Dolo argued that Tolbert's "lack of moral courage and constant vacillation" were contributing factors to the 1980 coup, and that Tolbert failed to comprehend "the new dynamics of organized protest politics."⁸⁹ The Tolbert regime was toppled when he was assassinated in the early morning hours of April 12, 1980. David Lamb claims that during the firefight with the few loyalist soldiers on duty at the Executive Mansion a stray bullet cut the telephone line, thus preventing Tolbert from summoning the army from the nearby barracks.⁹⁰ Whether cut or miraculously severed by a bullet; the army never came to his rescue.

As mentioned, when President Tolbert was assassinated he was the chairman of the OAU, the most prestigious office on the African continent.⁹¹ From this lofty post, he was ignominiously transferred to an impromptu mass grave in the form of a shallow trench in a corner of the Palm Grove Cemetery formerly used for dumping garbage.⁹² The 1980 coup effectively terminated more than one hundred and thirty years of TWP rule (the oldest and longest running political party on the African continent) and ended (briefly) the political domination of the TWP elites over the indigenous majority.

⁸⁸ Nyong'o, 230. Major William Jarbo was planning a coup and was trained as a Ranger in the U.S., but instead the lower-ranked NCOs learned of his plans and preemptively struck.

⁸⁹ Dolo, 43.

⁹⁰ Lamb, 127.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹² *ibid.*, 127.

This coup even had its own theme song. After Doe's faction had secured the ELBC radio station premises, the DJ on duty played the song "Who Owns Papa's Land?" by the Nigerian musician Sonny Okosun non-stop.⁹³ We will examine this song in detail in Chapter 4. As people wildly jubilated in the streets, indigenous musical groups such as Tejajlu quickly composed praise songs to the new military leaders. Market women memorialized the event with the song "Country Woman Born Soldier, Congo Woman Born Rogue."⁹⁴

In the coup's aftermath, within the realm of popular music, singer-songwriters such as Miatta Fahnbulleh attempted to redefine the social goals of the new political dispensation in her song "The Message of the Revolution" which received prominent airplay and spurred widespread debates. All of these phenomena will be examined in detail in Chapter 4.

After discarding his camouflage uniform, Doe initially encouraged "tribal dress," and a simpler manner of speech, but with the advent of newfound wealth soon abandoned indigenous clothing for Western three piece designer suits. Likewise, after the PRC came into power, Emmanuel Dolo accused former opposition leaders who joined their ranks of replacing their tie-dyed shirts and sandals made from used car tires (popularly known as "Tipoteh shoes") with designer suits, thus shedding the so-called "nationalistic garb."⁹⁵

Ten days after the coup, on April 22, 1980, thirteen prominent members of the former Tolbert cabinet were tried by a sham military tribunal and executed on the BTC beach. The proceedings, dubbed a "Liberian Beach Party" were filmed by TV crews and broadcast on

93 See also John Collins, "One Hundred Years of Censorship in Ghanaian Popular Music Performance" in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, ed. Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press 2006), 179. The notion of coups having their own theme songs is not without precedent in modern West African history. The coup by Colonel Acheampong in Ghana on Jan. 13th, 1971 was heralded by the highlife song "To Wo Bo Ase Edfidie Wura Beba" ("Be Careful the Owner Will Come") composed by Kofi Sammy Okukuseku. This song was played on the radio continuously on the day of the coup, and effectively became its slogan as well.

94 Kulah, 22. See also Kieh, 134. The term 'rogue' in Liberian English means thief.

⁹⁵ Dolo, 58.

national television. These images shocked the world, including other West African presidents and gained for Doe a brutal reputation. In response, foreign corporations suspended operations and withdrew \$40 million, or roughly one-third of deposits from the country's banking system.⁹⁶ Zack & Gebah were a duo who sang songs on the themes of forgiveness, peace and reconstruction in the wake of (and in response to) these public executions.

1980 and the formation of the People's Redemption Council Junta

Togba Nah Tipoteh pioneered the theory that the 1980 coup was in fact a pre-emptive strike to abort an impending social revolution, which in the final analysis represented a counter-revolution that led to the suppression of basic human rights.⁹⁷ I agree with this assessment since without the coup it is likely that change would have come about from the mobilization of opposition forces, and possibly non-violently through the ballot box. It is impossible to know what would have happened had the coup not taken place, but certainly the army hijacked the momentum that was building for revolution amongst the popular movements. According to musician Eddie Gibson, the April 12th, 1980 coup also “put a freeze on everything” in terms of nightlife.⁹⁸ A few days after the coup, thousands of workers and student members of MOJA demonstrated for a return to civilian rule and called for a National Constitutional Commission (NCC). This demonstration, in the midst of widespread jubilation was a harbinger of things to come. Within a year of the coup, however, these criticisms would come to the fore musically in songs such as “Human Rights” by Liberian jazz-rock ensemble Kapingbdi.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Levitt, 198. It was the rapid divestment from Liberia that led to a shortage of U.S. currency and prompted Doe to mint his own five dollar coins popularly called “Doe dollars” in 1982.

⁹⁷ Nyong'o, 227.

⁹⁸ Eddie Gibson, interview with author, June 1, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹⁹ Kapingbdi, *Hey Brother*, *Unsere Stimme* US-0069, Trikont LC 4270, p. 1980, 33rpm, side 1, track 2.

One of the first moves of the PRC was to abolish the hated hut tax, and to radically raise the salaries of civil servants and soldiers (measures that were later reversed). Shortly after the coup, Doe increased the size of the army by three thousand (mostly his ethnic kinsmen). As Doe warmed up to the Americans, he publicly repudiated the “social revolutionaries” and those like Thomas Quiwonkpa and his ilk that advocated a quick return to civilian rule. Doe used the perceived Libyan threat and the communist red herring to secure U.S. financial aid and subsequently to eliminate those he felt could someday mount a challenge to his authoritarian rule.¹⁰⁰ The American fear of Liberia “turning socialist” effectively granted Doe more aid in one year than ten times the total amount given to Liberia since 1911, which in turn virtually guaranteed his short term political survival.¹⁰¹ Economically, after the coup which was supposedly launched against the Americo-Liberian domination and the attendant entrenched corruption, Liberia ironically became even more dependent on the U.S. economically with American aid reaching \$75 million per year.¹⁰² Liberia’s oligarchic democracy was gradually replaced by a Krahn-based military oligarchy, and ultimately a Doe autocracy.¹⁰³ The 1980 coup simply brought about a relatively brief ethnic transformation of the Liberian body politic.

Tellingly, in March 1980, in compliance with Decree #2 of the PRC (which banned activities of all national political parties) MOJA suspended activities as some of its leaders briefly joined the PRC as cabinet ministers.¹⁰⁴ By 1980, 76% of the Liberian people earned around \$70 per year, while 24% earned \$3,000 per year, but by the mid-1980s, Liberia had

¹⁰⁰ For their part, the U.S. State Department Africa hands did not want to “lose” Liberia after the recent political “losses” of Iran and Afghanistan.

¹⁰¹ Nyong’o, 229.

¹⁰² Ungar, 110.

¹⁰³ Levitt, 203.

¹⁰⁴ Tipoteh, 4.

become one of the worst economic performers in Africa. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was put in place, which devastated the careers of musicians who worked at night, incomes fell by half, blackouts became common and unemployment levels rose to 50%. These rapidly deteriorating social conditions were chronicled in songs such as Gedeh Rooster's anthem "My Son in Monrovia" in which news of the so-called "good life" in Monrovia had been spreading throughout the neglected countryside, and internal migrants from the rural areas flooded into the capital city daily only to end up living in destitution.¹⁰⁵ We will be examining this song and its social context in Chapter 4.

1981; PRC leader Thomas Weh Syen Eliminated

Leftist and radical elements soon rallied around the figure of PRC member Thomas Weh Syen. Therefore Doe opportunistically accused him of plotting a counter-coup, and had Syen along with four other PRC members of his clique executed while in detention in August, 1981.¹⁰⁶ This infighting and paranoia within the PRC translated into a repressed atmosphere amongst the general population. By 1982, student leaders accused Doe's regime of sliding back into the old ways and betraying the revolution. In retaliation, Doe had five student leaders arrested, charged with treason and condemned to death, and only after "hanging head" (consultation) decided to pardon them at the last minute.

1983; the Split with Thomas Quiwonkpa

By 1983, all sixteen members of the original PRC had been removed or eliminated.¹⁰⁷ In October 1983, General Thomas Quiwonkpa (formerly Doe's close friend and fellow coup leader)

¹⁰⁵ Gedeh Rooster is the stage name of Joseph Brooks.

¹⁰⁶ PRC members Syen, and Quiwonkpa allegedly had wanted to initiate a "bourgeois-democratic revolution" characterized by universal adult suffrage, expansion of civil liberties, a more equitable share of the national wealth, and a more accountable government genuinely chosen by the electorate.

¹⁰⁷ Alao, Mackinlay and Olonisakin, 19.

was dismissed as commanding officer of the AFL. Doe demanded that government officials refrain from visiting the popular and widely respected Quiwonkpa. Once again the music group Kapingbdi commented on this new atmosphere of violent paranoia in their hit song “Don’t Escape” which threatened divine retribution for murderous actions.¹⁰⁸

In 1984 Doe disbanded the PRC in a move towards civilian rule, naming all remaining members to the new Interim National Assembly (INA). The build-up to the 1985 national elections saw an increase in “heart men” activities to provide human body parts for rituals for politicians seeking public office.¹⁰⁹ On August 1, 1984, contradicting his earlier position statements, Doe declared that he would run as a candidate for president in the upcoming 1985 elections, and created his own political party, the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL) for this purpose. In the wake of this announcement, and a lifting of the ban on political parties, a proliferation of new political parties emerged; ten in all. Importantly, according to observer Bill Berkeley, “Doe’s (fragile) legitimacy rested on his promise to relinquish power in 1985.”¹¹⁰

During the year-long run-up period to the elections Doe’s government put many obstacles in front of the opposition parties, including exorbitant fees and long procedural delays. The campaign itself was “marred by violence and intimidation.”¹¹¹ Unfortunately, the proposed grand coalition of parties (which never came to fruition) would have been the only practical strategy to defeat Doe at the polls. Just in time for the electoral season, the PRC passed Decree #88A which made it a crime to criticize any government official. The unrest unleashed after the arrest of

¹⁰⁸ Kapingbdi, *Don’t Escape*, *Unsere Stimme* US-0081, Trikont, p. 1981, 33rpm.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Moran, *Liberia; the Violence of Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 120.

¹¹⁰ Bill Berkeley, *Liberia, a Promise Betrayed: a Report on Human Rights* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 107.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Amos Sawyer led to a march of two thousand students in the streets, and army troops fired live ammunition into the crowd. It also entailed the invasion of the university campus by soldiers with orders to “move and remove” students, and the banning of the two largest and most popular political parties, the Liberian People’s Party (LPP) and the United People’s Party (UPP).

1985; the Rigged Elections

During the 1985 elections, the political climate was poisoned by the same notorious PRC Decree #88A which prohibited “rumors, lies and disinformation” and even though there were eleven political parties, only three were allowed to register.¹¹² Walking a fine line, the popular musical group Zack & Gebah put forward their own interpretation of the 1985 elections by releasing the wildly popular anthem “Sweet Liberia,” which urged peaceful participation in the elections as a way to enact future political changes instead of armed resistance (even though the two most popular parties of the Left had been banned from participating.)¹¹³ This patriotic twelve-minute-long song was ironically recorded in Onitsha, Nigeria, and will be examined in depth in Chapter 7.¹¹⁴

For the 1985 elections, a Special Electoral Commission (SECOM) was handpicked by Doe with the instructions that any oppositional political party had to pay U.S.\$150,000 in cash or securities and have 750 signatories from at least six counties in order to be properly registered.¹¹⁵ On October 15, 1985 the general elections were held, but on closer inspection they proved to be fraudulent; a sham election, or more accurately an electoral coup. The fifty hand-picked members of the vote counting committee were composed of Doe’s fellow Krahn and NDPL

¹¹² Alao, Mackinlay and Olonisakin, 19.

¹¹³ Zack & Gebah, *Sweet Liberia*, Z & G Productions, cassette, c. 1985.

¹¹⁴ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹¹⁵ Nyong’o, 238.

supporters, and ballots were found burning along the roadside in Margibi County. Furthermore, ballot boxes from an antagonistic Nimba County were diverted to NDPL offices. All of this led to the predictable outcome of the election results declared in favor of the NDPL with 50.9% of the vote. This election was deemed relatively free and fair by the Reagan State Department.¹¹⁶

The Failed Quiwonkpa Coup Attempt

Thomas Quiwonkpa was popular with the rank and file troops because he continued to live at the BTC, and drove his worn down Honda Civic around town instead of a BMW or one of the previous regimes' limousines. He had married popular singer Tarloh Quiwonkpa who had risen through the ranks at the National Cultural Troupe. On November 12, 1985, just two days after Charles Taylor had escaped from the Plymouth House of Corrections; a maximum-security Massachusetts jail and fled (eventually to Libya) Quiwonkpa led an abortive counter-coup launched from across the Liberian border with neighboring Sierra Leone.

The coup attempt lead by Thomas Quiwonkpa took place during the early morning hours of November 12, 1985. After seizing the television and radio station, he prematurely announced that the coup had been successful. Quiwonkpa's pre-recorded radio message stated "You shall have your self-respect and you shall have a free and fair election in a democratic society."¹¹⁷ Upon hearing the news there was an outbreak of widespread jubilation. Upon hearing of the coup, crowds tore down billboards featuring Doe's picture and crowds danced in the streets.¹¹⁸ However, the First Infantry Battalion (containing mostly Krahn and Lorma troops) remained

¹¹⁶ Byron Tarr, "Founding of the Liberian Action Party," *Liberian Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (1990): 13-15.

¹¹⁷ Bill Berkeley, *Liberia, a Promise Betrayed: a Report on Human Rights* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 20.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

loyal to President Doe and re-took the state radio station ELBC and the army barracks.

Quiwonkpa went into hiding for three days after the aborted coup attempt.

The unlucky Quiwonkpa was finally betrayed and captured by Krahn soldiers.¹¹⁹ He was then badly beaten, taken to the BTC Post Stockade, castrated, dismembered, and at least partially consumed by soldiers who believed that consuming body parts of a great warrior would bring them a modicum of protective spiritual strength.¹²⁰ Charles Gbenyon, Liberia's most prominent broadcaster and editor-in-chief of ELBS was also arrested and bayoneted to death by Doe's Executive Mansion Guards for the crime of documenting the coup attempt, interviewing Quiwonkpa, and airing a videotape that depicted ordinary citizens celebrating in the streets.¹²¹

In the wake of the coup attempt, members of Doe's army (AFL) searched for citizens from Nimba County, particularly citizens of Gio (Dahn) and Mano ethnicity for revenge attacks. Doe's government subsequently unleashed a reign of terror on the perceived supporters of Quiwonkpa. Mysterious disappearances, detentions without trial, and multiple gruesome deaths followed. After the 6pm curfew went into effect, the death squads carried out their bloody business, and the next morning dead bodies would be found in random locations around the city.¹²² Doe then took the opportunity to purge the army, ban public discourse, and detain political rivals within an atmosphere where repression appeared to be justified.¹²³ Meanwhile, truckloads of corpses were seen leaving the BTC barracks and the Executive mansion heading

¹¹⁹ It is unclear if he committed suicide rather than be taken alive, but this is likely since he was armed.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹²¹ Ibid., 60.

¹²² Kulah, 26.

¹²³ In the aftermath of the failed coup all of the prominent opposition leaders and journalists were rounded up and jailed, many for two months without charges. While in detention they were forced to sleep on concrete floors and endure one daily meal in addition to regular floggings.

for the beach where they were unceremoniously buried in mass graves. Estimates are that between 500-2000 people were killed in retaliation.¹²⁴

According to Bill Berkeley, a lawyer and observer, the worst spasm of summary executions occurred in the aftermath of the attempted Quiwonkpa coup. The exact figures are impossible to determine, since there was also a great deal of infighting between troops loyal to Quiwonkpa and those loyal to Doe at various military installations. Nevertheless, the total number of deaths was in the hundreds. Many civilians were abducted and murdered because they had been caught on film celebrating in the streets in the brief hours when it seemed like Quiwonkpa had been successful. There were also sweeps and mass detentions of opposition leaders wherein 400-900 people were detained including future president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who was charged with treason but never tried.¹²⁵ With the election certified by the U.S., and the grisly death of Quiwonkpa, Doe had effectively eliminated all of his internal political opponents and could continue to build his own patronage network unencumbered by dissent despite his unpopularity. Doe created a diversionary strategy and the instrumental use of ethnicity became Doe's primary new strategy of regime survival."¹²⁶

After the coup attempt, the supposedly democratically elected President Doe banned all political activities, declared strikes illegal, closed newspapers, imprisoned newspaper editors, opposition leaders, shook down businesses, and even banned student political organizations on the University of Liberia campus.¹²⁷ Doe's top General, Charles Julu led an attack on Nimba

¹²⁴ Berkeley, 21.

¹²⁵ Bill Berkeley, *Liberia, a Promise Betrayed: a Report on Human Rights* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 93.

¹²⁶ Kieh, 134-5.

¹²⁷ Sawyer, 294.

County following the 1985 attempted coup. The official death toll was 600, but the actual number was probably much higher, and closer to 1,500, according to the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights. The targeted “ethnocide” against Mano and Gio groups in Nimba County awoke ethnic divisions that had been dormant for over one hundred years.¹²⁸ It was this institutionalized and ethnically charged repression that eventually turned the bulk of the populace against Doe and encouraged young men to join rebel groups (including Charles Ghankay Taylor’s NPFL) in order to remove the Doe regime by force. The U.S. also largely turned its back on Doe after the termination of the Cold War when U.S. strategic interests had largely lost their usefulness.

In 1988, the popular duo Zack & Gebah released an important song on their cassette *Just for You* called “Toj Be Zidi.” This song was written and sung by Zack Roberts in the Bassa language, and can be translated; “War is Not Good.” The lyrics can be paraphrased as “people, call your children, let me advise them, God has spoken to me, and directed me to tell them that war is not good. When someone does violence to you, do not respond in kind, because war is not good.” Later after the Civil War began in the final days of 1989, Liberian music fans looked back to this particular song and viewed it as a prophetic warning.¹²⁹

Every Liberian president thus far seems to have had a popular song composed about them by the “grassroots people.” For example, when there were marches to the U.S. Embassy in Mamba Point by churches and human rights groups during the late 1980s, protesters would sing a song mocking Doe entitled “Monkey Come Down.” This song eventually became an anthem for the rebel insurgents of Taylor’s NPFL forces.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Levitt, 201.

¹²⁹ Stanley Ford, interview with author, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Bowier, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

Finally, surrounded by warring factions and abandoned by the Americans, Doe and his entourage left the Executive Mansion to meet the ECOMOG commander at Monrovia's Freeport on September 10, 1990. Unfortunately for him, in the process he was captured by the sociopathic warlord Prince Johnson. Subsequently, Doe's torturous demise while in captivity was "filmed in a herky-jerky cinema verite style" by a visiting Palestinian cameraman employed by Johnson.¹³¹ The grisly video entitled "The Capture of Samuel K. Doe by Field Marshal Prince Yeduo Johnson and his Gallant Men and Women of the Independent Patroitic (sic) Front of Liberia on Sunday, 9 Sept. 1990" also became one of the most popular videotapes amongst displaced Liberian communities during the early 1990s. Journalist Howard French considered it one of the "signal events of West African post-independence history."¹³² As Doe was meeting his fate, many Liberian musicians were also fleeing for their lives and being murdered because of their perceived ethnicity and political loyalties by various warring factions. We will explore this phenomenon in Chapter 7.

Conclusions

Upon concluding my research, I have come to several conclusions regarding the nature of the Liberian music industry during this volatile period. First, the most successful Liberian musicians during this period were the ones with strong international connections; those who eventually pursued their careers in exile. I am interested in exploring reasons why musical pioneers such as the singer-songwriter Morris Dorley, whose sound was so influential, and whose music highlights many of the themes I will be examining, died in poverty and despair, whereas the most financially successful Liberian groups such as the Soulful Dynamics and

¹³¹ French, 102.

¹³² Ibid.

Kapingbdi were those who emigrated to Europe (specifically to Germany) during the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas Dorley's case is not by any means unique, it still begs examination.

Secondly, the introduction to Liberia of new recordable audiocassette technology in the mid-1970s had major implications for Liberian musicians (including the resultant phenomenon of audiocassette piracy) which will be examined. Beginning in the 1970s with the little studied youth-oriented cultural revival and continuing through the 1980s decade of decline, Liberian popular musicians and their compositions provide historians with various insights into changing societal attitudes and desires. Oral histories played a central role in reconstructing this history and they demonstrate the agency of cultural actors in shaping the contours of national debates. On the other hand, my reliance on oral histories, song lyrics, and Liberian newspapers preserved on microfilm in the U.S. was also partially by necessity due to the fact that the Liberian national archives were ravaged during the fourteen year long civil conflict.¹³³ The collective visions and dreams of these musicians will be explored in the following chapters that are ordered chronologically from the 1970s to the final months of the 1980s and will be of utmost interest to those studying the history of modern Liberia in the years before the outbreak of Liberia's chaotic "uncivil war" which buried approximately one out of ten Liberians in their graves.

¹³³ I would like to thank Mr. Gabriel Miller at the Liberian National Archives on Ashmun Street for his assistance in procuring various Liberian newspapers for me and granting me an interview. Gabriel Miller, interview with author, June 13, 2008, National Archives, Monrovia, Liberia

CHAPTER 2-
MUSICIANS AT THE CROSSROADS DURING THE TURBULENT 1970S

The Ducor (Intercontinental) Hotel may think I am next to a monkey if I walk into their swank restaurant and call for a glass of palm wine or *tombo*. But the Russian vodka, the French *Cuvee Dom Perrignon*, the Spanish *Fundador*, (and) the British Johnny Walker are readily available.¹

–Augustine U. Uzoingwe

‘The Crab Song’ is a Liberian folk song (and) it’s been around for a long time. It probably came from down the river where the women go setting the basket to catch some crab to cook for their lovers; they believe you got to make the man feel good. It could come from anywhere from White Plains to Clay-Ashland (St. Paul River settlements).²

–Miatta Fahnbulleh

We want Mr. Tolbert to remember that all evil governments must fall so must the government of Liberia because it has outlived its usefulness since it refuses to change with the times. The government’s effectiveness in perpetuating the exclusion of the Liberian people from the mainstream of social, economic, and political activities of the country has rendered the existing administration decadent.³

–AWINA press release

Introduction

In this pivotal chapter, we will be examining the ways in which Liberia found itself at a political crossroads during the decade-long presidency of William R. Tolbert Jr. We will briefly examine the role played by the Liberian contingent at the pan-African cultural showcase FESTAC ’77, which represented the pinnacle of state support for the arts by the Liberian government. Next we will be examining as a case study, the career and musical productions of Yatta Zoe; “Queen of Folksongs.” I argue that the cultural revival that arose during this period

¹ Augustine U. Uzoingwe, “Promoting African Culture,” *Sunday Digest* (Monrovia), November 5, 1967.

² Gibson Jerue, “I Like Music! It’s A Universal Language; Interview with Miatta Fahnbulleh,” July 4, 2005, *The Analyst* (Monrovia), <http://www.analystliberia.com>.

³ “No Room for Totalitarian Practices in a Democracy (AWINA) 1974” in Fahnbulleh, H. Boima, ed. *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 15.

generated new musical styles including Liberian electric highlife which became a vehicle for social commentary and for the expression of pride in local musical patrimonies. To explore this emergent genre, we will examine in detail the Tejajlu musical collective and their political evolution.

President Tolbert at the Crossroads

The first quote above illustrates how during the post World War 2 decades, foreign commodities were ascribed added prestige value and privileged in Liberia to the detriment of locally produced goods. This ingrained reflex held true for nearly all consumer goods from the alcohol described above to imported cultural commodities such as music phonograms. During the late 1970s, these prevalent attitudes began to gradually change as illustrated by the second quote by the marlish singer-songwriter Miatta Fahnbulleh who gained fame for her reworking and modernizing various Liberian folksongs. These tactically engaged preoccupations were due to a convergence of factors that will be analyzed within this chapter.

The early 1970s represented a political crossroads in Liberia with the death of President-for-life William V. S. Tubman in 1971. Immediately after President Tubman's demise in July 1971, a veritable political opening was created which was pregnant with possibilities. This ushered in the administration of former Vice President William R. Tolbert whose promises and sloganeering couched in longwinded litanies increased widely held expectations for social change, including concrete improvements in living conditions, healthcare and education. Liberian musicians tapped into this zeitgeist and urged positive social change that reflected changing attitudes of the broader masses of citizenry of which they were organically a part.

This was the decade in which a new political and social consciousness developed within the ranks of the young generation of urbanized students, workers and culture producers such as musicians, buskers, dancers, thespians. This consciousness was represented in a novel musical

paradigm, which mirrored a reawakening by urbanized youth and students both at high schools and universities to a fuller appreciation of Liberia's artistic heritage. The musical aesthetic segment of this patrimony was defined more broadly to include not only Americo-Liberian cultural norms, sensitivities and modalities; but expanded to become inclusive of all national musical traditions. This cultural turn took place not only in Liberia, but across the West African subcontinent. Its public expression culminated in the month long FESTAC '77 showcase festival held in Lagos, Nigeria, which represented the apogee of this artistic movement.

There were distinct possibilities for a new Liberia that began with the new post-Tubman era "sea breeze of change" in the air. Newly inaugurated President Tolbert's rhetoric raised expectations amongst the younger generation (whom he patronizingly referred to as "my precious jewels") with his inclusive goal to "liberate a dedicated spirit of total involvement towards a wholesome functioning society."⁴

Many contemporary observers were convinced that a new tone was being set by "first citizen" Tolbert. The new president sported traditional country cloth outfits more frequently than his predecessor and during his first inaugural ceremony he introduced the dapper "swear-in suit" which was a short-sleeved safari-style suit that represented a stylistic and symbolic break with past practice.⁵ This was significant because the government was one of the largest employers in the country, and civil servants looked to the president to set the standards in formal business attire. This outward adoption of signifying clothing was very similar to the embracing of the *abacost* by his contemporary and close associate President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1973. The *abacost* was a modified suit which stood for "a

⁴ Dunn, 90.

⁵ Former President Tubman's choice of formal attire had harkened back to the days of Abraham Lincoln and the nineteenth century founding of the republic with top hats and long tail coats that were completely inappropriate for the tropical climate of sub-Saharan Africa.

bas le costume” in French, which could be translated as “down with the suit coat.”⁶ Both Tolbert’s swear-in suit and Mobutu’s *abacost* did away with the constrictive accompanying necktie, and both claimed to be more authentically African, in addition to being more practical for conducting business in the humid tropics.

President Tolbert furthermore attempted to bolster his connection to the Kpelle community, (the single largest ethnic group in Liberia at roughly 20% of the population), by claiming status as a bilingual diglot, and even proposing to make Kpelle the national language while simultaneously downplaying his Americo-Liberian heritage, even though his family was the de facto equivalent of Liberian royalty.⁷

President Tolbert was touting inspirational slogans such as “Higher heights,” “Mats to mattresses,” and “Rally Time!” in order to “Liberate a dedicated spirit of total involvement towards a wholesome functioning society.”⁸ The domestic correlate to Tolbert’s politically liberal “new international order” of greater equity and justice was, for the most part rhetorical claptrap.⁹ The official motto of the ruling True Whig Party (TWP) was “Deeds Not Words.” Unfortunately, for the future of the TWP, these were merely words.

The Tolbert administration was acutely aware of the need to build a more inclusive national polity, but lacked the requisite political will to do so. He was even accused by opposition groups as being a type of elitist nabob and was even satirized as the “Shah of

⁶ Bob W. White, 71.

⁷ For a discussion of this ruling class pedigree, see J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia; the Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca, NY; Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), 131-47.

⁸ Dunn, 90. “Rally Time” was actually a scheme to raise development funds that included making automatic involuntary deductions from salaries of civil servants.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

Liberia.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Liberian foreign policy had tilted towards the “African progressives” within the non-aligned bloc of the third world nations within the United Nations. These changes took place during the decade of African pride directly superseding the period of decolonization that took place amongst Liberia’s former colonial neighbors, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire; political changes that were assured to have localized impacts.

These newly independent nations momentarily made Liberia appear like an antiquated socio-political anachronism, with its official historical narrative that glorified the American “pioneers.” This narrative justified their continued prestigious place within the social structure at a time when many Liberians and their African neighbors viewed the Americo-Liberian ruling clique and their antecedents as essentially colonizers with brown skins.¹¹

The Liberian Contingent at FESTAC ’77

The following testimony demonstrates how Liberian music producers were at the heart of the African cultural revival that spawned the Second International Festival of African Culture (FESTAC ’77; popularly called the “Black Arts Festival”) which Andrew Apter described as a cultural showcase underwritten by Nigeria’s newfound oil wealth.¹² In 1977, Tokay Tomah travelled to Nigeria with the Liberian National Cultural Troupe (NCT) for the FESTAC showcase. There were twenty-five performers in the NCT.¹³ Tomah viewed it as an example of

¹⁰ “No Room for Totalitarian Practices in a Democracy (AWINA) 1974” in Fahnbulleh, H. Boima, ed. *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 18.

¹¹ See Ibrahim Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery 1914-1940* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).

¹² For an in-depth discussion of this festival, see Andrew H. Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 87-120.

¹³ All of the drummers were men, and the women were in the minority. There were six female dancers, ten male dancers, and about nine male drummers. This concert was a highlight of Tomah’s early career.

African culture performed on a “world stage”; a stage large enough for the entire world to see.¹⁴ Housing at the festival for the Liberian contingent was paid for by the Liberian government by order of President Tolbert, who visited the festival personally during the closing ceremonies and met with the troupe. This personal involvement by the Liberian head of state is demonstrative a rare instance of high level of institutional support on the part of the government for its artists, dancers and musicians who participated in this internationally prestigious showcase. This example of state support can be quite favorably compared to that which was virtually non-existent during the subsequent military regime of Samuel Doe.

Singer, percussionist and solo recording artist Yatta Zoe attended the mega-festival along with other Liberian popular musicians such as Princess Fatu Gayflor, Nimba Burr, Morris Dorley, and Zack Roberts.¹⁵ Zoe claims that “FESTAC ’77 was the first time African musicians really came together” thus representing a historically significant convergence.¹⁶ Clearly, the month-long petro-dollar financed African and African Diaspora cultural showcase was viewed by Zoe as a high watermark not only in the history of African popular music but also of the cultural heritage revivalist movement. Zoe showed me the scant documents that she had managed to save through the destruction of the Civil War, including a photograph taken in Amsterdam shortly after FESTAC ’77 of her holding a *saa-saa* gourd rattle, the instrument she is renowned for mastering.

¹⁴ Tokay Tomah-Kailie, interview with author, July 4, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁵ In 1977, Yatta Zoe released a live album entitled “Yatta Zoe at FESTAC” which was produced on King Sunny Ade’s label in Nigeria, but I have been unable to locate any copies of this record.

¹⁶ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

At this same festival Zack Roberts played percussion in the supporting band for singer-songwriter Miatta Fahnbulleh.¹⁷ Roberts recalls visiting the now defunct Hotel Bobby owned by the influential Nigerian highlife pioneer Bobby Benson (with its famous Caban Bamboo nightclub), which was a congregating place outside the festival grounds where networking took place which produced lasting friendships between African musicians from various nations and from the far-flung African Diaspora of the Western Hemisphere. Next we will examine in detail the career trajectory of Yatta Zoe.

Yatta Zoe “Queen of Folksongs”

Yatta Zoe was born in Bamabundi (Bomi County), in 1942. She was a contemporary associate and protégé of the late Miriam Makeba. She toured the U.S. with Makeba, and would have accompanied her on a second follow-up tour if she was not prevented from doing so by her husband.¹⁸ As a way of emphasizing her country roots, when she was asked what the most significant difference was between her and fellow singer-songwriter Miatta Fahnbulleh, she replied “Miatta is an ambassador’s daughter, I am from the country.”¹⁹ Zoe claimed that during the 1970s, she was on a constant mission to promote indigenous Liberian music and culture.²⁰ The majority of Zoe’s songs were either sung in Liberian English, the Gola language or a mixture of both. Zoe stated “I (typically) sing in my dialect.”²¹ In addition to Gola, Zoe also occasionally sang in other Liberian languages including Vai, Kpelle, Mende, and Gbandi. Zoe bitterly complained that “Liberians are to a great extent oriented to Western cultural values and

¹⁷ Zack Roberts was given a U.S. \$200-\$300 stipend to perform at the festival, while the meals were supplied courtesy of the host government of Nigeria.

¹⁸ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

music, while their own traditional folk songs have been relegated to the background. But at the advent of a greater cultural awareness, they will gradually come to realize that their salvation lies in appreciating their own values and going back to their roots.”²²

Zoe commented, “Most of my songs are folk songs; I take them and re-arrange them.”²³ During the 1970s Zoe was well known in Liberia for producing a string of hits which included “Young Girls,” “All the Pocket Pickers,” “You Took My Lappa,” “Don’t Lie,” “Mano River Union” and the encomium “Tolbert Yesi.”²⁴ Her repertoire of cultural contestations represents an important index for Liberian historians due to her focus on contemporary social ills and their suggested remedies. During the post-Civil War period, during interviews with local journalists, Zoe repeated themes and arguments of roughly thirty years previous which are encapsulated in the following quote; “we Liberians should appreciate our own thing, do our own music and leave other people(s) music alone.”²⁵ Zoe reiterated further; “We are Liberians so we should accept ourselves as Liberians, and act as such, live and behave as responsible people, in order to restore the dignity of our once cherished and respected country,” a philosophy synonymous with that of her exemplar mentor; Miriam Makeba.²⁶

Young Girls Stop Drinking Lysol

There are many folk songs that contain valuable information for scholars of Liberian history. One such historically significant song that Yatta Zoe composed is entitled “Young

²² “Liberian Musician Comes Live,” *New Liberian* (Monrovia), March 13, 1982.

²³ “Yatta Zoe,” *The News* (Monrovia) Sept. 10, 2004.

²⁴ Ibid. Tolbert Yesi meant “Tolbert Yes” and was a praise song and a campaign song for Tolbert.

²⁵ Bobby Tapson, “Let’s Be Liberians and Appreciate Our Music’-Yatta Zoe, Mother of Folk Music Urges,” *The News*, (Monrovia), Sept. 10, 2004.

²⁶ Ibid.

Girls.”²⁷ The social commentary contained within the song refers to a fatal phenomenon in which young women committed suicide by ingesting Lysol; largely due to unplanned extra-marital pregnancies with “sugar daddies” (“god-pa’s”) or boyfriends.²⁸ In one newspaper article, Lysol was described as a “disappointment cure.”²⁹ Lysol was the brand name for a liquid detergent that was sold in a small bottle with the warning “Poisonous! Do not drink!” on the label next to a graphic image of a skull with crossbones.³⁰

In this song, Zoe compares the teenage girl’s life to *bapleh*, a tiny, slender, bony fish that is sold by fishmongers. *Bapleh* was sold extremely cheap; hence the song’s message to the young women was “don’t throw your life away for nothing.”³¹ In light of this newspaper documentation, we can discern that Zoe was clearly appealing to the public through her song in an attempt to curtail this deadly trend. The lyrics plaintively pleaded...

Monrovia young girls stop drinking Lysol,
Monrovia young girls stop drinking Lysol,
For the sake of *bapleh*, stop drinking Lysol
For the sake of nothing stop drinking Lysol³²

²⁷ This song was popularly known for its refrain “Monrovia young girls stop drinking Lysol” and was originally recorded at ABC studios, then re-recorded in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1978.

²⁸ Fearful of facing a life of social ostracization, coupled with being dismissed from school and publicly humiliated, these young women decided that it was relatively less painful to commit suicide than to confront their parents and extended family with the veracity about their pregnancies.

²⁹ “Lysol a Disappointment Cure,” Daily Listener (Monrovia), November 16, 1950.

³⁰ Charles Neal III, interview with author. June 20, 2007, via telephone from Oklahoma City, OK.

³¹ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

³² “Men Drink Lysol Also,” Daily Listener (Monrovia), April 11, 1951. It seems that Lysol as a method for suicide was almost always gendered female since the overwhelming majority of the reported cases involved female victims.

Camp Bella Yalla Military Prison

Yatta Zoe's first hit was the song "All the Pocket Pickers (have gone to Bella Yalla)," recorded in Nigeria in 1971.³³ Camp Bella Yalla (a.k.a. Belle Yella or Belle Yallah) was Liberia's notorious maximum security military prison, a massive concrete slab located in an isolated section of a dense rainforest in Lofa County (now Gbarpolu County). Due to its secure, isolated location, this "dungeon of horrors" could be thought of as analogous to San Francisco Bay's infamous Alcatraz Island prison. Most prisoners never returned after being incarcerated there, so it also represented a de facto death sentence for most of the doomed convicts.³⁴ A fragment of the song lyrics are as follows.

When anyone steals,
They will send them to Bella Yalla,
They gave them twenty-five lashes,
They sent them to Bella Yalla.
Come and see your child
Before they send him to Bella Yalla

In this piece, Zoe was echoing calls in the local press from twenty-five years previous which called for these "hardened criminals to be sent to an outstation military camp where they will be put to work."³⁵ This particular xenophobic article decried the increase in pick-pocketing, and judged the practice to be "imported, (and) definitely not Liberian."³⁶ Zoe's popular tune mediated complex dialogues and was simultaneously a warning to parents against allowing their offspring to engage in street crime, couched within a wider social critique. Zoe wryly

³³ Isaac Thompson, "Interview with the Sensational Yatta Zoe- Her Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 18, 1982.

³⁴ Bella Yalla Prison has since been closed and converted into a museum by current Liberian president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

³⁵ "Pickpocketing is Increasing," *Daily Listener* (Monrovia), November 11, 1950.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

commented that paradoxically, “when a high class man steals they call it ‘embezzlement’ but when a lower class man does the same thing, they call it stealing.”³⁷

The Syncretic Character of Liberian Popular Music

According to Big Steve Worjloh, during the early 1970s, Liberian music was still searching for an identifiable sound of its own and was not yet solidly defined but instead was “criss-crossed” with other musical genres.³⁸ Worjloh compared Liberia’s musical heritage to that of another nation within the circum-Atlantic world; Jamaica, where multiple musical influences from Europe, continental North America and Africa were embraced and absorbed over time in a syncretic fashion.³⁹ For example, the massive influx of foreign influences on Liberian musical tastes during the 1980s was explicitly mentioned by O.J. Brown in his 1985 song “Music is the Feeling.” The lyrics of this hit song exclaimed that “samba, calypso, disco, Afro-rhythm got a hold on you...funky music, jazzy beat, rhythm music got a hold on me.”⁴⁰ Worjloh thus firmly locates Liberia within the circum-Atlantic musical world, and emphasized the prominent place of Caribbean musical traditions in this sonic melting pot.

Similarly, Liberian musician Donald Cooper describes his music as a syncretic “mix of everything that is black about music.” A sampling of his musical influences includes Franco (from Zaire), Bembeya Jazz National (from Guinea) and Victor Uwaifo (from Nigeria).⁴¹

The commonalities between Liberian electric highlife and various musical genres originating in the Caribbean is reaffirmed by the corpus of songs composed by Tecumsey

³⁷ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

³⁸ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁹ Ibid. Of course Jamaica is geographically considered part of North America.

⁴⁰ O.J. Brown, *O.J. Brown*, Studio 99/Soul Source, cassette, n.d.

⁴¹ Donald Cooper, interview with author, July 30, 2010, via phone from Baltimore, MD.

Roberts who described his original music as “Afro-lypso” (short for African-Calypso); a creative blending of African and Caribbean stylistic influences.⁴² Newspaper accounts confirmed this, as Robert’s music was described as “African roots; a blend of African highlife, calypso, and reggae music.”⁴³

Miatta Fahnbulleh also frequently emphasized the syncretic nature of her musical compositions. Afrodisc Productions described her single “Amo Sakee Sa/ Kokolioko” on the front of the record cover as part of the “new discolypso sound.”⁴⁴ In February 1988, Fahnbulleh left Liberia to record a new album entitled *Just 4 U* in nearby Accra, Ghana at Elephant Walk Studios.⁴⁵ She described this LP with a culinary metaphor; “if you take the distinctive sound of reggae, add the mellow flavor of rhythm and blues, drop in a dash of calypso and highlife, and stir in the spice of rich Liberian folk music, you come out with *Just 4 U*.”⁴⁶

Another Liberian musician who meshed and blended African melodies within the cosmopolitan dance-floor disco phenomenon was GQ. “GQ” (a.k.a. Dave Taye) acquired his stage name from the various talent shows he participated in, perhaps due to his penchant for sporting flashy clothes as found in the pages of the *American Gentlemen’s Quarterly* (GQ) magazine.⁴⁷ GQ’s music, which was self-described as “Afro-disco,” was hip, joyous party music

⁴² This was in many ways similar to other parallel developments in the Caribbean, such as the new sub-genre of “cadence-lypso” which emerged around 1974 from the island nation of Dominica.

See Jocelyne Guilbault, “Zouk and the Isles of the Caribees” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, eds. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006), 188.

⁴³ *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), August 14, 1980.

⁴⁴ Miatta Fahnbulleh, *Amo Sakee Sa/ Kokolioko*, Afrodisc Productions, Rokel Records SD-RK 02A, p. 1978, 45rpm.

⁴⁵ “Miatta on Tour,” *Footprints Today* (Monrovia), February 22, 1988.

⁴⁶ T-Max Teah, “Miatta’s new hit album in town!” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 23, 1984.

⁴⁷ Confusingly, Taye was known by three different names; Dave Taye, Dave Bosco, and his professional stage name “GQ.” In 1988, Taye altered his stage name from “GQ” to “GQ-88,” and in 1990 it was again appropriately updated

that combined African melodies and rhythms with a modern pop sound and a dance-floor sensibility.⁴⁸ Interestingly, even though his song content seemed to focus on puerile romantic ballads, Teye still couched his purpose within the rubric of promoting a national culture and self-consciously fashioning a modern Liberian sound. In a newspaper interview, Teye claimed that “music is a creative art, an indispensable ingredient of a national culture, and it is my God-given talent. Through it I try to communicate with the whole world for the purpose of promoting Liberian national culture.”⁴⁹ Disco clearly originated in New York, not Monrovia, but what Teye brought to the genre was thoroughly Liberian.

Afro-centricity and Liberian Popular Music

Miles Cleret states that “the emphasis on Africanism was strongly reinforced by the black youth of America and Europe who were looking to Africa for inspiration, rather than the other way around, as had occurred during the 1960s.”⁵⁰ During the mid-1970s there was an emerging consciousness that revolved around the concept of the “African personality.” During this same time period in Liberia, Africa Day was celebrated as a national holiday annually on May 25th by student marches in the streets, sporting *lappas* (African print skirts) and indigenous handmade

to “GQ-90.” After graduating from high school Teye went to live with his step-father’s family, and took his step-father’s surname which was “Bosco.”

⁴⁸ T-Max Teah, “GQ 88’ working on a new release,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), February 3, 1989. Tony Karbadeh produced GQ in his Cross-Atlantic Studios in 1988, and GQ’s first album to come from this local studio was called *Come on Africa* (1988). It sold 46,000 copies, making it one of the highest selling local records at the time.

⁴⁹ “I did not sign contract with International Music House-GQ clarifies,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), February 16, 1989.

⁵⁰ Various Artists, *Ghana Special: Modern Highlife, Afro-Sounds & Ghanaian Blues 1968-1981*, Sound Way Records SNDW CD016 liner notes. Cleret observes, however, that by the beginning of the 1980s in Ghana (after the J.J. Rawlings coup) much of this experimentation had dwindled, and there was an exodus of musicians fleeing to greener pastures overseas, following in the footsteps of the pioneering London-based group Osibisa which had gained international recognition by the 1970s.

clothing made of “country cloth.”⁵¹ Ironically, African-Americans searching for their roots in Africa (and joining the anti-apartheid solidarity movement) put new pressure on elite Liberians to similarly self-identify with their African heritage (something they had previously eschewed), instead of emphasizing their classic American cultural heritage to the detriment of local cultural practices.

In this sense, fashion can be regarded as an outward signifier of changing societal attitudes and new levels of openness towards the indigenous African forms of expressive culture in conformity with contemporaneous regional strains of African cultural nationalisms that blossomed in the wake of successful anti-colonial independence struggles of the 1960s and 1970s; Africa’s independence era. These diachronic changes are illustrated by the struggles of the singer-songwriter Hawa Daisy Moore when she was enrolled at Tubman High School in Sinkor (Monrovia) in 1972. This school was locally known as a hotbed of burgeoning cultural nationalism and this exposure would permanently alter the direction of her future career.⁵²

At Tubman High, Moore earned the derisive nickname “jungle girl” in response to her “Afro-centric” activism.⁵³ The following example illustrates the negative cultural connotations that surrounded indigenous clothing, and by extension all cultural products (including music). During the 1970s Tubman High had a tradition of a weekly “color day.” On Fridays the students did not have to wear their usual uniforms, but instead could wear their own choice of clothing as long as it fell within the parameters of “Western, formal attire.” During one of these color days, Moore was (in her view) unfairly sent home by the school principal for wearing “native clothes”

⁵¹ Africa Day was shorthand for African Liberation Day, which was declared by the founding delegates of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) in May, 1963.

⁵² Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, Sept. 13, 2008, via phone from Landsdowne, PA.

⁵³ Ibid.

(in this case, a woman's *lappa*, or wrap-around skirt). Moore organized a protest with her peers which eventually succeeded in changing the institution's dress code. This incident demonstrates the negative attitudes the Liberian professional class had towards the indigenous Liberian cultural heritage throughout the 1970s, and their unstated commitment to the social reproduction to the "Congo-country" divide (i.e. the divide between the cultural heritage of Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians).

Liberian Electric Highlife

The previously described cultural revival in Liberia, during the late-1970s gave birth to a new generation of popular musicians who were inspired to create new syncretic hybrid musical styles that can be lumped together underneath the umbrella term Liberian electric highlife.⁵⁴ As mentioned in the introductory chapter, highlife music originated with the Liberian sailors from the Kru coast who "Africanized" the thrumming styles on the Spanish guitar (using only thumb and forefinger) while synthesizing melodies and rhythms from the Iberian peninsula, sailor's sea shanties, and Trinidadian proto-calypso with musical traditions of the West African coastal littoral. The later-day variant of highlife music is, however, more commonly associated in the public mind with later electronic versions from Ghana and Nigeria since it was in those much larger countries (in terms of population statistics) that highlife really exploded in popularity from the late 1920s onwards.

The term "high life" was originally a catchall phrase for the way people talked about the music coming from the exclusive dance clubs in coastal urban centers Cape Coast, Sekondi, and

⁵⁴ According to ethnomusicologist John Collins; "the rhythms of highlife, in fact, are basically traditional rhythms although they are played on Western instruments with some percussion. So you might say that highlife has combined all the complexities of traditional music cross-rhythms with modern ideas and modern instruments." This quote is taken from an interview found within the documentary film *Listen to the Silence; Rhythm in African Music; a Film about African Cross-Rhythms as Seen through Ghanaian Music* directed by Peter Bischof & Loke Flm. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences. 2004.

Accra (in what was then the Gold Coast) during the 1920s. There were sweeping modifications within highlife music however; after 1945 many of the European-derived “stiffer elements” were replaced by African and Caribbean motifs.⁵⁵ Instrumentally, violins were replaced with guitars, bongos and maracas were added along with the calypso influence from Trinidad. Jazz and swing music progressively edged out the older foxtrots and waltzes, and trumpets and saxophones gained new prominence.⁵⁶

A second sub-genre of highlife music differentiated from the dance-oriented big band (or swing) variety was referred to as the “palm wine guitar style” in which modified sea shanties mixed with local African folk melodies. This acoustic music originally associated with Kru mariners, was produced by and for the working classes of the docklands, (sailors, dockhands, stevedores, fishermen, etc.) and was named after the palm wine bars and seaside shacks where it was performed.⁵⁷

The 1970s were considered the golden decade of electric highlife music in Ghana with several recording studios opening, amidst a virtual “musical revolution.” The lyrical output of guitar bands in Ghana of the 1970s dealt with “class issues, death, poetic laments, social commentary,” all sung in the local vernacular.⁵⁸ Paralleling the Liberian experience, the veritable

⁵⁵ In the Nigerian novel *Jagua Nana*, when confronted by a traditional dancer at the Tropicana Club in 1960s Lagos, the Uncle Taiwo character exclaims “(It) is all nonsense! We don’ come here to see dat. We come to hear *highlife* and jazz, das all! Give us music!” a man began arguing with him, telling him that jazz had its origins in that kind of fetish dancing, that this was a throwback to the birth-days of jazz. Uncle Taiwo yawned. ‘Music! Give us *real* music!’ This scene in the novel underscores the fact that highlife music was associated with modernity just like jazz and therefore it was perceived as the antithesis of traditional dancing. Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1961), 132.

⁵⁶ Various Artists, 2009. *Ghana Special: Modern Highlife, Afro-Sounds & Ghanaian Blues 1968-1981*. Soundway Records. Liner notes written by Miles Cleret.

⁵⁷ The guitar became associated with drunkenness in these venues, since the guitarist was frequently paid in palm wine for his services.

⁵⁸ Various Artists, *Ghana Special: Modern Highlife, Afro-Sounds & Ghanaian Blues 1968-1981*, Soundway Records SNDWCD016, compact disc, c. 2009. Liner notes written by Miles Cleret.

invasion of “copyright” music in Ghana during the late 1960s threatened to destroy the domestic market. Soul and pop music from abroad monopolized the airwaves, and big bands had to adjust their repertoire in order to cater to shifting audience tastes. During the early 1970s however, (similar to the observable pattern in Liberia) smaller bands began re-inventing themselves by performing new interpretations of Ghanaian folk music. Newly formed “Afro” culture groups (diametrically and ideologically opposed to so-called “colo” or colonial groups) were infusing elements of rock ‘n’ roll and soul into their syncretic mix.⁵⁹

Emergence of a Distinct Genre

One way to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the music scene as it emerged in at the end of the 1970s Liberia is to focus on the musical careers of individual singer-songwriters and Liberian guitar bands. Towards the end of the decade a transformation began and a new musical paradigm started to congeal which represented a radical departure in which musicians drew upon local musical traditions, ceasing to simply replicate foreign musical trends by performing exclusively “copyright music.” As previously demonstrated, this new popular music style that can be broadly described as Liberian electric highlife was a hybrid of influences, and celebrated Liberian musical roots in a novel way. Popular music singers such as Morris Dorley, Princess Fatu Gayflor, Caesar Gartor, Hawa Daisy Moore and O.J. Brown began composing original music, and singing in local languages such as Bassa, Vai, Gola, Kpelle and Kru (Klao) for the first time. This was a somewhat shocking evolutionary development within the

⁵⁹ This movement towards a more Afro-centric music also occurred in Nigeria (whose large population could afford to support it), and proliferated in other West African urban centers as well (including Accra, Freetown, and Monrovia, albeit a few years later). New labels began emerging to describe this musical phenomenon. The Nigerian musician Fred Fisher Atalobhor coined the term “Asolo-rock” to describe the music of his Ogiza Dance Band. His genre of Asolo-rock blended Afro-rock with 70s Soul melodies. Atalobhor was in good company, for Nigeria during the 1970s witnessed an explosion of Afro-rock ensembles including groups such as Ofege, Monomono, Segun Bucknall, and Blo. Nor was this move limited to West Africa. The Ngozi Family from Zambia (in Central Africa) produced their LP *45,000 Volts* in 1975. They were the first band to take on the label “Zam-rock” to describe their new sound.

consciousness of both musicians and fandom that reflects wider, societal trends towards an appreciation of local cultural traditions within urban Liberian society.⁶⁰

Morris Dorley, Leading Musical Innovator

Morris Dorley (a.k.a. Molly Dolly) was one of the most innovative and influential musicians within the new genre of Liberian electric highlife. Dorley recorded at least five compilation LPs with ABC Studios during the late-1970s in which he was the major contributor; including *Bilo Lolo*,⁶¹ *May Jee May Jee*,⁶² *Marry Woman*,⁶³ *The Sound of Liberia*,⁶⁴ and *Young Girl*.⁶⁵ Dorley released some of this finest music on ABC Records, including the catchy hit song “Voinjama,” an ode to the county seat of Lofa County.⁶⁶

Born in 1946, Morris Dorley was from the Gola ethnic group and commenced playing the giant hand piano (the *congoma*) at age sixteen until a visiting American bought him a guitar and

⁶⁰ This development presaged the later emergence (during the 1990s) of the new genres of “hip-co” rap music in Liberia and “hip-life” music in neighboring Anglophone Ghana. Hip-life, a youthful Ghanaian invention, combines hard-hitting hip-hop beats and delivery style with melodious highlife music. “Hip-co” on the other hand, is an abbreviation of the label “hip-colloquial” which is rap music that deploys Liberian Pidgin English peppered with street slang that is currently popular with the younger generation of urban teenagers. With the emergence of hip-life Ghanaian rap artists began code-switching from Brooklyn-inflected Black English street slang typically used by African-American hip-hop artists, to the deployment of parables and rhymes in Akan (Twi) and other southern Ghanaian languages such as Ga. The parallel between Liberian electric highlife music and the later rap genres of hip-life and hip-co is the emphasis on the local dialects and the code-switching from varieties of Ebonics that circulated across the black Atlantic network (as Paul Gilroy would frame it) to the embracing of African languages within a musical context.

⁶¹ Various Artists, *Bilo Lolo*, ABC Monrovia ABC 1, n.d., 33rpm. Hallowenger, a.k.a. Sonny Halawanga was more famously associated with the Music Makers group.

⁶² Various Artists, *May Jee May Jee*, ABC Monrovia ABC 6, n.d., 33rpm. Dorley appeared in the credits on all ABC records as “Morris Dolly.”

⁶³ Morris Dorley and ABC Group, *Marry Woman*, ABC Monrovia ABC 102, n.d., 33rpm.

⁶⁴ Various Artists, *The Sound of Liberia*, ABC Monrovia ABC 3, n.d., 33rpm.

⁶⁵ Various Artists, *Young Girl*, ABC Monrovia ABC 5, n.d., 33rpm. Unfortunately there are no release dates on these records, so it is not possible to date them precisely, but *Marry Woman* was most likely released in 1977, because the hit song “Who are You Baby” (from side A) won the best new song award at FESTAC ’77. Also, according to John Collins, Dorley made at least one recording with ABC Studios in 1979. See John Collins, *Highlife Time* (Accra, Ghana: Anansesem Press, 1996), 225.

⁶⁶ Various Artists, *Bilo Lolo*, ABC Monrovia ABC 1, n.d., 33rpm., side 2, track 2.

he learned to play palm-wine guitar highlife music, and later formed his first band; The Sunshine Boys.⁶⁷ Dorley and the Sunshine Boys first became popular in the late 1960s with songs such as “Grand Gedeh Oh! Oh!,” which was performed as a birthday present for President Tubman in 1969.⁶⁸ According to Liberian radio personality George Kiadii, Dorley had an innate talent for songwriting. Upon introduction, he could immediately form a coherent mental image from which he would spontaneously compose a song to accurately describe that person. This penchant for near instantaneous song composition was his unique talent.⁶⁹

On his ten separate cassette releases with Studio 99 during the early 1980s, including “Liberia is My Home” and “Alive and Well,” Dorley would typically record four songs for side A of the cassette, and five songs for the B side.⁷⁰ He was regularly paid by producer Faisal Helwani for his work, and at one point Dorley allegedly received an advance for U.S. \$17,000 in order to build a house.⁷¹ The crux of the matter concerns the nature of the recording contracts that Dorley signed, and if he did indeed receive all the royalties that were legally due to him.⁷²

Music producer Toniah Williams claimed that “ordinary people didn’t understand the music industry. They thought that the managers were only exploiting the musicians.”⁷³ Dorley never trusted or accepted management. He was not formally educated, and according to Williams, he did not understand the proper role of the manager; an industry insider who is

⁶⁷ Collins, 225.

⁶⁸ Bram Posthumus “Liberia, Music from the Ashes” in *The Rough Guide to World Music*, vol. 1, Africa & the Middle East, eds. Simon Broughton and others (London: Rough Guides, 2006), 189.

⁶⁹ George Kiadii, interview with author, June 23, 2008, Truth-FM, Monrovia, Liberia

⁷⁰ For example, Morris Dorley, *Alive and Well*, Studio 99/Soul Source FN 504, cassette, n.d.

⁷¹ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁷² Unfortunately I not yet been able to uncover this contractual information.

⁷³ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

typically retained to negotiate a better contract for the artist, and for promotional purposes.⁷⁴ Instead, counter-intuitively, Dorley would demand payment before appearing on a radio station for a live interview, even when the free publicity would have undoubtedly been beneficial to his career. Understandably, many radio personalities refused to acquiesce to these demands; to the ultimate detriment of Dorley's career.⁷⁵ For purely personal reasons Dorley chose not to retain a manager and subsequently typically received only \$50 for his concert performances. Hawa Moore recalls intervening and making sure he received \$1,500 on at least one occasion.⁷⁶ Dorley was allegedly paid \$1,000 for one full cassette-album of songs including his 1977 hit song "Who Are You Baby?"⁷⁷ Further arduous research would have to be done to ascertain the exact nature of his recording contracts. Obviously, there were money management issues that remained unaddressed.

Ironically, Dorley won a prize at the pan-African FESTAC '77 festival for his infectious highlife anthem "Who Are You Baby," but never seemed to be able to capitalize on this success or the widespread name recognition it brought him, in large part because he had no trustworthy management to negotiate fair and favorably commensurate contracts on his behalf. In retrospect, it appears that it would have been more beneficial to Dorley if he had retained competent and honest management, but as he had a deep mistrust of the managerial class in general, he could not comprehend how a manager could have potentially propelled his career to greater success, fearing instead that a manager would simply swindle him out of any forthcoming profits. At that time there was a generalized distrust on the part of illiterate and semiliterate Liberians of their

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, June 30, 2007, Landsdowne, PA.

⁷⁷ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, interview with author, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.

literate fellow citizens, often described as “book people.” In local parlance, to “know book” was to be educated, and the educated class had a longstanding negative reputation for taking advantage of those without formal education. This is a broad generalization, but one that accurately reflects widely held societal attitudes of the time. According to George Sikpa (a.k.a. Gee-Mann); “plenty of people used to come with sweet mouth” promising to help musicians profit from their craft, but then would take advantage of their ignorance of commercial contracts, and exploit them. Many middlemen would also ask musicians to do things without compensation.⁷⁸

Towards the end of his career, Dorley lived on Caldwell Road in Monrovia where he would reportedly sing a few songs in front of a corner shop, busking with his acoustic guitar for tips and then take the proceeds and buy “CJ” (cane juice, a local rum made from sugarcane.)⁷⁹ Music producer Charles Snetter candidly suggested that instead of spending his proceeds on alcohol, Dorley would have benefitted by cleaning himself up and going in search of some favorable music contracts.⁸⁰ Dorley sadly died of an alcoholism related illness a few years after he had stopped recording professionally in 1996, in an internally displaced person’s (IDP) camp called VOA Camp on the outskirts of Monrovia.⁸¹ The ultimately tragic life of Morris Dorley offers a prime example of serious economic exploitation, or in Marxist terms, exploitation by the owners of the means of production (the recording studios) of the cultural worker (the musicians) in which the enrichment of the former directly results in the impoverishment of the latter.

⁷⁸ George “Gee-Mann” Sikpa, interview with author, July 1, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁹ Charles Snetter, interview with author, June 23, 2008, ELBS headquarters, Paynesville, Liberia.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The IDP camp was called VOA Camp due to its location close to the old Voice of America junction where their broadcasting headquarters had been located before the outbreak of hostilities in 1989.

Because of that rough and tumble experience, his overall career is emblematic, and illustrates the myriad challenges that many early Liberian popular musicians faced.

The Tejajlu Phenomenon

Tejajlu deserves a prominent place in Liberian popular music history, because this dynamic musical collective popularized and modernized traditional Kru music, and transformed it into the archetypal cultural revivalist & protest music during the late 1970s. In the mid-1970s Tejajlu worked closely with the ethnographer and Assistant Minister for Culture, Bai T. Moore, who was very interested in their project of preserving and performing regional traditional songs from the commercially important Kru Coast, which had been effectively autonomous for a large portion of Liberia's existence.⁸² Tejajlu was significant in that they formed part of an avant-garde within the musical movement in search of an authentic yet modern Liberian sound. The original Tejajlu line-up contained six male musicians, and ten to fifteen female performers, who were engaged primarily as dancers, *saa-saa* (gourd rattle) players and back-up vocalists.⁸³ The group maintained widespread popularity from 1970-1989 as various members joined and retired which created ever-changing ensembles while retaining the group's name recognition.⁸⁴

In order to form a deeper understanding of this influential group's impact it is helpful to examine the career of the group's founder. Anthony "Experience" Nagbe was born in Sasstown,

⁸² Tejajlu would later garner enough clout to have the Ministry of Information, Tourism and Culture (MICAT) promote them by publicizing the dates of their upcoming concerts. One of the prominent original People's Redemption Council (PRC) members, Nicholas Podier, recommended founder Anthony "Tony" Nagbe for a civil service position at MICAT in 1981.

⁸³ Patrick Dunbar, interview with author, July 3, 2007, Trenton, NJ. The original line-up included Ambrose Blamo (chief drummer), Tanneh Dugbeh (back-up vocals), and Mark Gebo (solo drummer).

⁸⁴ Ibid. The majority of the band members were based in New Kru Town at the time of the April 1980 coup. Frequently, group members would only perform with the group for five to six years at the most. Dunbar's experience was typical of the fluid pattern of membership within Tejajlu. Dunbar was a student at the University of Liberia in 1978. Dunbar's studies only lasted a year and a half, before he severed his ties with the university in order to concentrate on his music career, and then eventually immigrated to the U.S. the following year.

Sinoe County, in the Kru ethnic heartland in 1942 and gained fame as a vocalist, composer, and footballer (soccer player).⁸⁵ In 1969 Nagbe founded Tejjajlu in Claratown, Monrovia.⁸⁶ The stage costumes for Tejjajlu included matching t-shirts with *lappas* for the women and jeans and matching shirts for the men.⁸⁷ The group participated in a milestone musical competition organized by the PRC in 1980, won the first place trophy and was eventually hired to perform in all sectors of the Monrovia metropolitan area in such venues as Providence Island, The E.J. Roye Center auditorium, and other large venues, inciting the irresistible urge to dance in enthusiastic capacity crowds.⁸⁸ As the band's fame spread, they received increasingly frequent requests to perform on weekends at wake-keepings, weddings, and even birthday parties. The overall philosophy of Tejjajlu was disinclined towards engaging in capitalist profit-making ventures via music sales; instead they produced cassettes for "the friendship thing" (to use as gifts) and later to further advance their cultural and political agenda.⁸⁹ Tejjajlu's impact will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Tejjajlu as a Musical Collective

Tejjajlu were certainly close to the corridors of power for fleeting instances. In 1970, the ensemble performed at President Tubman's ultimate birthday party celebration in Maryland County at Cape Palmas (Harper), and again at his opulent funeral the following year. This was politically significant, because Tejjajlu largely performed Kru folksongs sung in the Klao

⁸⁵ Anthony Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.

⁸⁶ Ibid. The original name of the group was "The Kru Kings," but later, an internal vote was held to change the name to Tejjajlu which means "a team of people" or "upcoming youth." in the Klao language. Actually, there are multiple translations of Tejjajlu, but all of these translations are in agreement that the name Tejjajlu constitutes a sense of renewed youth involvement. The group's name is also alternatively spelled "Tijajlu" and "Tejjajulu."

⁸⁷ Anthony "Experience" Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

language.⁹⁰ In this manner the group reflected the consistently solid political support voters on the southeastern Kru coast gave to Tubman over the years of his various administrations in exchange for a certain degree of autonomy with respect to internal self-rule.⁹¹

However, as the decade of the 1970s progressed, following the death of Tubman, Tejajlu's repertoire became increasingly politicized and critical of the status quo under Tubman's successor and former vice president William R. Tolbert as the latter's domestic policy became gradually more vapid and hackneyed. This shift mirrored changes within popular opinion as voters gradually became disillusioned with the corruption and nepotism within the Tolbert administration.

The florid repertoire of Tejajlu gradually expanded to include not only traditional Kru folksongs, but also songs of a revolutionary nature. By the late 1970s, the grandiose ensemble included scores of Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) members and/or sympathizers, and sometimes these grassroots activists would get on stage and "preach revolutionary politics" between sets.⁹² According to official MOJA propaganda, the group's objectives were "the mobilization of the African masses in the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism" while "on the road to attaining revolutionary consciousness and commitment."⁹³ Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf described MOJA as "both anti-colonial and pan-Africanist in its scope; MOJA played a pivotal role in radicalizing the urban and rural poor of Liberia, raising the issues

⁹⁰ In Liberia, indigenous African languages are routinely referred to as "dialects" which sounds a bit belittling to the outsider.

⁹¹ Here I am referring to the internal affairs within the original Kru-town community in Monrovia.

⁹² Togba Nah Tippeteh, interview with author, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia.

⁹³ Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson, *Which Way Africa? Notes on the Present Neo-Colonial Situation and Possibilities for Struggling Against It* (Syracuse, NY: Clearinghouse for Liberian Literature. n.d.), 17.

of government corruption.”⁹⁴ This was indeed a grassroots political movement that struck fear into the heart of the vacillating Tolbert administration, as MOJA spokesmen made statements such as “the traitors of Africa masquerading as our leaders will be summarily punished.”⁹⁵

Tejajlu originally sang “jolly songs” like “Shake Your Body-o” in the Klao language.⁹⁶ Gradually their lyrical content became more overtly emancipationist in its political formulations. A sample of Tejajlu’s early hit songs included “Thank You President Tolbert,” and “Higher Heights,” eulogies based on one of President Tolbert’s favorite motivational slogans. After Tolbert’s demise during the heady days just after the 1980 coup the group sang; “Thanks to the People’s Redemption Council, Our Savior, Our Redeemer”; which was homage to the group of compatriot coup-makers who murdered Tolbert.⁹⁷ *Prima facie* these productions seem to present a contradictory and paradoxical riddle. The similarities between the two honorifics are that both were designed to encourage the person or group in power receiving the praise to strive towards more socially pro-active policies, or perhaps (more cynically) to simply curry favor with the authorities.

Political songs throughout Liberian history have tended to praise the leader and confirm group loyalty, whereas protest songs rarely appear.⁹⁸ This is rings true throughout the West African subcontinent when a song contains overtly political critiques. The embedded message is

⁹⁴ Johnson-Sirleaf, 81.

⁹⁵ Mayson, 25.

⁹⁶ Togba Nah Tippeteh, interview with author, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia. Klao (or Kru/ Kroo) is a member of the Niger-Congo language family that is spoken primarily in Liberia, with a minority of speakers in coastal Sierra Leone as well. It is alternatively spelled Klaoh, or Klau.

⁹⁷ Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.

⁹⁸ For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Ruth Stone, *Music in West Africa; Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Christopher Alan Waterman, *Juju; a Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

usually not presented in an exclusively straightforward style, therefore leading to multiple potential interpretations.⁹⁹ For example, in November 1971, shortly after being sworn in to office, President Tolbert decided to hang a convicted criminal, and then a month later hang three more convicts on the same day underneath the “hang house.” There had not been any public hangings since 1944, and so these executions were fairly shocking. In response to these startling developments, Morris Dorley composed a song entitled “Everybody Know Yah, Tolbert is a Man.”¹⁰⁰ This song could be taken literally as a panegyric, but within the social context, it functioned as a thinly veiled critique of the president’s public demonstration of his masculinity vis-à-vis his hardliner exercise of the death penalty. However, the president was not bamboozled, and consequently, Dorley’s song was promptly banned from the airwaves by executive order.¹⁰¹

The National Cultural Center at Kendeja

One parallel development to the political evolution of Tejjalu was the creation and far-reaching multi-ethnic vision for the National Cultural Center (NCC) at Kendeja.¹⁰² The vision for the NCC was essentially a working model of ethnic pluralism.¹⁰³ By ethnic pluralism I am referring to the movement to de-center Americo-Liberian cultural dominance and establish a new paradigm in which all of the cultural patrimonies of indigenous Liberians would be equally

⁹⁹ See Sjaak van der Geest and Nimrod K. Asante-Darko, “The Political Meaning of Highlife Songs in Ghana,” *African Studies Review* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 27-35.

¹⁰⁰ Bowier, Emmanuel, interview by author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA. Gayflor, who lived on the NCC campus for several years, stated that one striking feature at Kendeja was the variegated indigenous housing construction. Model homes were built at Kendeja including houses in the Vai, Kpelle, Bassa and Mandingo architectural traditions, which are quite varied. Artisans such as leatherworkers, blacksmiths, and woodcarvers from each ethnic group inhabited these houses. It was important that the Mandingos also had a home at this location because many Liberians did not consider the Mandingo “tribe” to be true citizens (but “strangers” whose “real home” was located in neighboring Guinea) even after living several generations in Liberia.

¹⁰³ For photo-documentation for this time period at Kendeja, see Roger Dorsinville and Jean-Jacques Mandel, *L’homme Derriere L’arbe; un Haitien au Liberia* (Paris: L’Harmattan Press, 1991).

respected and celebrated. This model was not free from initial procedural glitches. At first certain parochial taboos had to be addressed and overcome, but eventually all of the troupe members were taught to dance and sing dances and songs from the entire country on the same stage.¹⁰⁴ The NCC project as originally conceived by patriotic ethnographers Bai T. Moore and Jangaba S. Johnson in the employ of the state should be regarded as a type of nation-building exercise above all else (in a sovereign state that never had an inclusive widespread sense of nationhood). Unfortunately, a comprehensive history of the NCC project falls outside of the scope of this study.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Jallah K. K. Kamara, interview with author, June 17, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰⁵ I had originally planned on including a history of the NCC at Kendeja as a component of this study, and did many interviews with leading participants in the various cultural troupes, including the Liberian National Cultural Troupe that took Kendeja for its headquarters. However, I soon realized that the topic deserved its own treatment, and its inclusion would have made this project too large and unwieldy.

CHAPTER 3
CHALLENGES AND PROFESSIONAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE 1970S

Songs represent a people's philosophy. What the society considers right and wrong is usually expressed in their songs of advice, ridicule, irony, sarcasm, which serve to install the values of a society.¹

–Agnes Nebo von Ballmoos

Artists have a rare sensitivity for seeing into the lives of people, with the instinct to identify the underlying causes of their problems, and suggest practical solutions. Liberia does not benefit much from this potential of her artists because artists are not given the needed support to develop their talents.²

–Wilton Gbakolo Sankawulo

Lack of interest in these forms may be explained by the widespread perception that they are not authentically African, but rather the diluted, bastardized, commercial stepchildren of Western cultural colonization. This perception is mistaken...first much of the Western popular music so influential in Africa has grown luxuriantly in the Americas from African roots. (These) modern urban forms are African because Africans have chosen to play them. They have composed and selected performance materials from diverse sources to express, celebrate, and comment on their experience, needs, and aspirations in a world of insecurity and change.³

–David Coplan

Introduction

In this chapter I will be focusing on the various challenges and discriminations faced by aspiring Liberian popular musicians during the 1970s. Specifically we will be examining social barriers found anchored in negative popular stereotypes of musicians, and the concomitant pervasive parental opposition displayed towards the pursuit of careers in the music industry. Then we will turn to an examination of the recording studios that surfaced in Monrovia during this decade and how they interacted with local musicians attempting to cut records in an

¹ Von Ballmoos, 41.

² Wilton G. Sankawulo, "The Civil War and Liberian Artists," *New Liberian*, January 11, 2008, <http://www.newliberian.com/?p=155>.

³ Coplan, 3.

equitable manner. Next we will examine two uses of the term “copyright.” First the term was used to describe popular musical hits covered by musical artists at the time, and secondly in a negative way to describe the way that local artists did not receive protection of their intellectual property rights. We will finish the chapter by examining how, perhaps counter-intuitively; local radio stations discriminated against locally produced music during this period.

The State of the Liberian Music Industry in 1971

Michael Real posits that “Interaction and cultural flow between West African music and North American music has been more or less continuous for several centuries.”⁴ Furthermore, he observed that there has been a certain tension between the international flow of popular music and questions of national cultural policy wherein the broadcaster of music for entertainment is also acting in the role of gatekeeper. In a more nuanced analysis, I would argue that in Liberia during the decades preceding the Civil War, there have been ebbs and flows during different periods in which one influence is dominant.

I am arguing that during the early 1970s in Liberia the American influence was dominant, but at some point around the middle of the decade (circa 1975) the tide began to shift, and more original Afro-centric popular music began to be performed parallel to “copyright music.” This trend increased over the next seven years or so, but by 1982 the tide had shifted back in the other direction, and imported music became dominant once again. By the late 1980s, local music was making a comeback in terms of popularity and sales, but that was all destroyed by the commencement of hostilities in 1989. Keeping this state of flux in mind, it is safe to claim that in general throughout this time period in Liberia, American popular music was privileged over local

⁴Michael Real, “Broadcast Music in Nigeria and Liberia” in *Mass Communication, Culture, and Society in West Africa*, ed. Frank Okwu Ugboajah (Munich, Germany: World Association for Christian Communication by Zell, 1985), 96.

music to an extreme degree to the detriment of the development of the latter, and these periods of local musical flowering were ephemeral yet crucial.

The general privileging of American music over locally produced music could almost be described as a form of cultural colonialism. Music writer Banning Eyre confirms this trend as he claims that “in many African countries, foreign music (either from the U.S., Europe, South Africa, or Congo) has occluded local talent.”⁵ Furthermore, Peter Manuel asserts that “Countries lacking any recording industries such as Rhodesia until the mid-1970s were subject to inundation by foreign music (in this case Congolese, Western, and South African).⁶ Liberia could be compared to Rhodesia (modern day Zimbabwe) in this respect in that it was also a relatively small African country with a few recording studios, but without record pressing facilities.

Lack of Musical Infrastructure

A key obstacle to the professional development of Liberian musicians was the lack of a supporting musical infrastructure, including very few music schools for instruction. This led to a situation where many popular musicians and singers got their start in churches and church choirs partially due to a lack of other alternatives. Where Liberia had none, Nigeria (with a much larger population) had twenty-four recording companies and record labels by the early 1970s. By the late 1970s, Liberia still had no record pressing facilities. Therefore, locally produced music had to be recorded on reel-to-reel magnetic tape, then exported to be mixed and pressed overseas, before the final product could be re-imported for distribution and (hopefully) airplay.

The principle hurdles facing those involved in the production of Liberian popular music during the late 1970s included a lack of a good management structure, the poor quality of the

⁵ Banning Eyre, *Playing with Fire: Fear and Self-Censorship in Zimbabwean Music* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Freemuse, 2001), 37.

⁶ Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 26.

bare bones recording studios that did exist (ABC Studios and Studio One), the lack of substantial airplay on Liberian radio stations, and the lack of an enforceable system for the payment of royalties to musical artists and composers. By 1975 there were still only six formally trained professional Liberian musicians in the country. Secondly, there was little access to affordable professional quality musical instruments which were manufactured exclusively in foreign countries and then imported at high costs.⁷ Before the previously examined Rice Riots of April 14, 1979 took place, there were several music shops located in downtown Monrovia. One such shop was called “Electro-Line” at the intersection of Broad and Randall Streets, and a second was Mr. Shafic’s Record Shop on the corner of Broad Street and Center Streets.⁸ Electro-Line sold musical instruments, vinyl records, cassette tapes, television sets, radios, and home stereo systems and was one of the many businesses that were looted during the uprising.⁹ These particular retail outlets never recovered and afterwards it was extremely difficult to procure essential music supplies in Monrovia, such as replacement guitar strings. This singular example illustrates some of the constraints faced by Liberian musical groups, especially after “April 14th” in terms of access to musical supplies necessary to pursue their craft.

The Church’s and Military’s Institutional Role as Music Educators

According to singer Lucretia Thomas, the first time the guitar was introduced into a church service was in 1949 by the Greenwood Singers. However, due to the widespread popular perception that the guitar was solely a secular instrument, the use of the guitar in religious

⁷ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Ministry of Finance, Monrovia.

⁸ John Collins, “Liberia,” in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume 6: Africa and the Middle East*, eds. John Sheperd, David Horn and Dave Laing (London: Continuum Press, 2005), 149.

⁹ Eddie Gibson, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

services did not last very long.¹⁰ Taken collectively, the Christian churches (of all denominations) had a long-lasting impact as institutions that supported musical education and training for purposes of religious praise and worship. Once raised in the musical incubator of the church, many aspiring musicians branched out into the field of secular music performance. For example, Miatta Fahnbulleh was taken to revivalist churches by her grandparents as a child. She proclaimed that “I loved the pure frenzy the music inspired in me.”¹¹ These lively worship services seemed to ground her personal style. As a child, Fahnbulleh demanded piano lessons from her parents, and her father, recognizing her creative temperament, finally relented.

In addition to churches, the national army’s AFL Marching Band also fulfilled an important role for aspiring Liberian musicians who could not afford to purchase their own instruments. Many musicians voluntarily joined the army because they wanted to gain access to the best collection of musical instruments in the country which belonged to the army marching band. Additionally, many struggling musicians would capitalize on their skills to gain employment with both the police and army bands in order to receive two paychecks so they could provide for their families. One such musician was Sonny Boy Stupa who played bass guitar for the group the Psychedelic Six. Stupa joined the police orchestra and was later killed by warlord Charles Ghankay Taylor’s rebels for the crime of wearing his police uniform after the hostilities had begun.¹² After Taylor’s 1989 Christmas Eve invasion (launched from Cote d’Ivoire), anyone found wearing any type of government uniform could be accused of “eating the government money” and targeted for extrajudicial execution. Therefore, this was a dangerous

¹⁰Von Ballmoos, 86.

¹¹ Stephanie C. Horton, “A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh”, *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 2004). <http://archives-one.liberiaseabreeze.com/miatta.html>.

¹² Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewerville, Liberia.

and potentially life-threatening position to find oneself in. For example, Gebah Swaray would regularly hide his army uniform when he wanted to practice with the Liberian Dream.¹³ To summarize, in lieu of formal music education, Liberian churches and the armed forces filled this role to a limited extent, becoming de facto incubators for future professional musicians during the period.

Liberian popular musicians who were actively pursuing musical careers during the 1970s and 1980s collectively faced many challenges and disadvantages. These impediments included a lack of intellectual property rights to their compositions, negative stereotypical attitudes towards musicians in general, parental resistance to pursuing careers in the music industry and general lack of access to the radio waves under circumstances where the state enjoyed a near monopoly over radio broadcasting. I will be examining each of these disadvantages in turn. Instead of bolstering the argument for Liberian exceptionalism, I argue that the challenging circumstances that Liberian musicians faced were quite commonplace amongst smaller resource poor states throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (and indeed across the “global south”) without large internal markets for cultural commodities that were not willing or able to protect local artist’s intellectual property rights. Regardless of the country setting, negative parental attitudes towards the music industry were nearly universal when chances for financial success seemed slim, with the possible exception of musicians that were born into families that already had a history of musical pursuits.

Popular Prejudices and “Grona Boys”

Yatta Zoe’s main regret regarding her career was encapsulated in the biblical verse she paraphrased; “a prophet has no honor in his own home town; Liberia don’t respect artists.”¹⁴

¹³ Zack Roberts, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁴ Matthew 13:53-58, Mark 6:1-6, and Luke 4:14-30 (King James Version).

This biblical reference refers her opinion that most Liberians did not have a high regard for Liberian artists or musicians.¹⁵ This may help to explain why Zoe decided to leave Liberia early on in her career, and move to Holland during the 1970s.

World class entertainer Tecumsey Roberts complained that Liberians “do not have the slightest respect for musicians.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the pop star lamented that “the first thing they will do is call you a ‘bandboy,’ not realizing the fact that you are a professional in your own orbit.”¹⁷

Singer John Sheriff echoed the previously elaborated claim that musicians during the mid-1970s in “Rocktown” (Monrovia) were decried as “band boys” and certainly not “serious-minded people” by the general public (including by Sheriff’s own father).¹⁸ Kandakai Duncan, former lead singer of the Moga Band, in a charge repeated by many other informants, stated that Liberian musicians (during the 1970s) were stereotyped as street ruffians constantly getting high (smoking marijuana) and referred to by the derogatory epithet “grona-boys.”¹⁹ According to “Big Steve” Worjlloh, Liberian musicians intensely resented the condescension that the term “grona boys” embodied.²⁰

Liberian English expert linguist John Singler helps to clarify the etymology of the “grona boy” terminology. In his Liberian English grammar textbook, Singler defines “grona pekin

¹⁵ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

¹⁶ Issac Thompson, “T.R. Here, Oh!” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 25, 1982.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John Sheriff, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. Monrovia was sometimes referred to as “Rocktown” because of it is situated on a rocky peninsula. Thus the term “Rocktown boys” referred to “city slickers.” John V. Singler, *An Introduction to Liberian English* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1981), 233.

¹⁹ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, interview with author, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.

²⁰ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjlloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

them” as “juvenile delinquents and street urchins.”²¹ He claims that “the terms ‘grona-boys’ and ‘grona-girls’ are derived from the Sierra Leonean Krio phrase ‘gro na trit;’ i.e. “grow in street” (“na” is a Krio preposition, and “trit” is the Krio word for street).²² Therefore, the epithet “grona boy” refers to an individual who has “grown up in the streets.” Singler continues to emphasize that “even though the “street”/“trit” part of the phrase is gone in the Liberian context, the connotation survives, i.e. ‘grona boys’ operate in the street. The term “grona” has a wide range of negative meanings in Liberia; ‘grona boys’ does imply irresponsibility, and it is more applied to boys and younger men rather than older adults. The adjective “grona” when applied to a woman most often has a sexual connotation, i.e. promiscuous or “frisky.” However; ‘grona’ can also connote someone who is disrespectful.²³ Being perceived as scallywags and “low-life’s,” these musicians were not accorded comparable status to other professionals. Through the deployment of this terminology musicians were effectively being equated with delinquent ruffians as opposed to those responsible, upright youth who were attending school; when in actuality many younger musicians were, in fact, also students. These widespread attitudes commonly translated into low (and non-uniform) wage scales for musicians since they were not held in high esteem by potential employers and had little effective collective bargaining power due to the intense competition between bands for the same limited number of jobs in a type of zero sum game.

Widespread Parental Opposition (Intergenerational Conflict)

The parental disapproval of highlife musicians has a long history in West Africa. Kwame Asare, the leader of Ghana’s premier palm-wine guitar group the Kumasi Trio (who made some

²¹ Singler, 233. The Liberian English term “pekin” most likely is derived from the older (17th Century) Portuguese term *pequeno* which has a diminutive form *pequenino* and in Liberia means “child” or “youth.” John Victor Singler, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2010.

²² John Victor Singler, e-mail message to author, March 30, 2010.

²³ Ibid.

of the first highlife recordings for the Zonophone label in 1928) had to run away from home in order to play guitar since his father “thought that only ruffians played guitar.”²⁴ According to informants, many middle class Liberian parents would not allow their offspring to perform on stage in any capacity. Instead, if these parents learned that their children were secretly performing with a musical group, they would send them to the U.S. for schooling.²⁵

The super-group Zack & Gebah became popular during the 1980s after the initial national shock (and euphoria) of the coup had subsided.²⁶ Examining events in the early life of Gebah Swaray illustrates many of the difficulties and barriers to advancement faced by Liberian musicians in general, especially the phenomenon of parental opposition. Swaray’s humble origins are common to many of Liberia’s most famous musicians. Swaray is from a Mandingo family, originally from a remote rural village in Sinoe County, and was sent to live with his grandparents in Douala, a suburb of Monrovia on Bushrod Island at a young age.²⁷ In sixth grade, Swaray started learning to play a homemade guitar made from a vegetable oil can and some fishing line, after seeing it in a completed form in a dream.²⁸ In a demonstration of their blatant displeasure with Swaray’s newfound pursuit, his parents repeatedly disposed of his homemade guitar into the trash heap (and he was constantly forced to retrieve it). His grandfather was skeptical that Swaray could make a living as a musician and became so actively hostile to the notion of Gebah playing the guitar that he banished him from the family compound.

²⁴ John Collins, “One Hundred Years of Censorship in Ghanaian Popular Music Performance” in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, ed. by Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (Burlington, VT, Ashgate Press, 2006), 176.

²⁵ Ajobar Duncan, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

²⁶ Gebah Swaray had played lead guitar while Zack Roberts was both a drummer and a vocalist for the dynamic duo. The pair had previously been involved in the previously examined group The Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band.

²⁷ Gebah and Maudeline Swaray, interview with author, April 21, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

According to journalist Andrew Hamilton, Miatta Fahnbulleh realized her desire to sing at the age of sixteen, which alienated her father, who had other plans for her career. Hamilton claims that Fahnbulleh once came in second in a talent contest that she was forbidden to attend by her domineering father. In this instance, the judges graded her performance by way of a smuggled cassette tape.²⁹

At the age of nineteen, Fahnbulleh left a junior college in Nairobi in order to return to Monrovia to become a radio personality and professional vocalist. At this stage her father was so disappointed that he allegedly took the drastic step of writing her out of his will.³⁰ However, in Fahnbulleh's exceptional case, the patron of the family, her grandfather ("old pa"), was supportive of her career choice as a musician. He told her that "artists are extraordinary, gifted people...you can't sell the gift, because it's priceless" and "most people in this country (Liberia) will never understand you, so don't worry about them."³¹ Fahnbulleh stated that these encouraging words formed the basis and foundational values behind her subsequent musical career. Musician T'kpan Nimely might be the sole exception to this rule that I am aware of (of parental disapproval) as he stated on his cassette cover: "Thanks to my late parents for promoting me, because this is how 'I EAT' (sic). It was always 'old man, if you want to do music, do it to your best'."³² What follows is an overview of the studios that existed in Liberia during the 1970's. These studios were a last resort for many musicians who could not afford to leave the

²⁹ Andrew Hamilton, Answers.com, "Miatta Fahnbulleh Biography," <http://www.answers.com/topic/miatta-fahnbulleh>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Stephanie C. Horton, "A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh", *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing*, vol. 1, issue 1, August 2004. www.liberiaseabreeze.com/archives.

³² T'kpan Nimely, n.d. *Kplenkenten Man of Africa*, cassette, Samgrob & Samgroe Productions.

country and record elsewhere. Informants held widely differing opinions regarding the degree of exploitation involved in the various studios described below.

Recording Studios in Liberia during the 1970s.

ABC Studio and record shop was the first recording studio to open its doors in Liberia. It was the concern of Lebanese migrant businessman Mohammed Choukair. ABC Studios was operational during the early to mid-1970s and was located in the Waterside market, (on historic Water Street); the largest open air market in the capital. The ABC group recorded artists such as The ABC Dance Band with Sonny Boy Hallowenger, Yatta Zoe and Morris Dorley.

ABC Studios

There were very few recording studios deserving of the name operating in Liberia by the mid-1970s.³³ Since this was the case, radio station ELBC used to record artists at their own studios on reel-to-reel tape. ABC Studios was located in the heart of the Waterside Market, the largest market in Monrovia at the time, opposite the Waterside General Market on the corner of Water Street and UN Drive, and had its own retail record store outlet attached.³⁴ Waterside market during the 1970s was described by Ophelia Lewis as “the busiest shopping area...comprised of many stores stocked with provisions of every kind on both sides of the street. Lebanese and Syrian businessmen own most of these establishments.”³⁵ Records on the ABC label pressed in Holland were shipped back to Liberia, such as the compilation *Bilo Lolo*.³⁶ At first, ABC Studios had only one microphone and one reel-to-reel tape recording device.

³³ Recording studios operative during the 1980s will be examined in Chapter 3.

³⁴ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

³⁵ Ophelia S.Lewis, *My Dear Liberia; Recollections, Poetic Memoirs from my Heart* (Pine Lake, GA: Village Tales Publishing, 2004), 14.

³⁶ Various Artists, *Bilo Lolo*, ABC Monrovia ABC 1, n.d., 33rpm.

Interestingly, many of these album covers depict bare-breasted young women in traditional beaded outfits, which seems an odd cover art choice for records containing modern highlife music! Apparently, the marketing strategy of ABC Records involved a combination of titillation and hyper-sexualized “authentic African” images to sell their product to both European and African consumers; similar in this respect to the *Lusotropicalismo* images gracing the covers of Angolan popular music LP’s during the same time period.³⁷ Perhaps the foregrounding of exotic images of teenaged African women also helped to mask the fact that the owners were of Lebanese (or “Syrian”) extraction.

The Lebanese community in Liberia (as well as in many urban centers of the West African coastal littoral) forms a sort of *petit bourgeoisie*, but they are also vulnerable to become political scapegoats in the popular imagination. This occurs even though they are disallowed from becoming citizens under Liberia’s racial constitutional clause which only allows people of African descent to acquire citizenship. For example, according to musician Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, resident Lebanese music merchants exploited Morris Dorley to amass large profits. Dorley’s cassettes were widely distributed, but sadly he had no legal rights to his own music because he had sold those rights, and consequently could earn no royalties.³⁸

According to Liberian musician Joe Woyee, ABC Studios would “record for \$5 and make \$5,000” in profits.³⁹ Whether this is an accurate account of their profit margin or vastly

³⁷ Marissa Moorman, *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio Univ. Press, 2008), 104 & 115-116.

³⁸ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, interview with author, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI. For example, Morris Dorley, *Sandemania: a Tribute to Late Bai T. Moore*, Sound Wave Productions, audiocassette, n.d. This cassette was dedicated to the memory of Bai T. Moore, who devoted his career to studying, promoting and preserving indigenous Liberian culture. Moore was a celebrated playwright and author who died in 1981. His novels such as *Murder in the Cassava Patch* and *The Money Doubler* were set in Liberia, with dialogue conducted in Liberian English. These novels (especially the first) were required reading for Liberian high school students during the 1970s and 1980s (refer to the bibliography section).

³⁹ Joe Woyee, interview with author, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

exaggerated is impossible to discern, however it reveals much about musician's attitudes towards the company. Yet in the eyes of its many detractors; "ABC Studios were actually just a glorified record shop with a two-track recording device at the back of the store."⁴⁰ ABC Studios allegedly only had a two track mixing board, and many Liberian musicians did not return after the first recording session because they gained a negative impression of the operation. Recording artists such as Sonny Boy Hallowenger and Morris Dorley, however, appear repeatedly on various ABC releases.

Studio One

The second recording studio to appear in Liberia was Studio One, which was the first relatively sophisticated studio in Liberia.⁴¹ This studio opened with the arrival of South Africans Hugh Masekela and Philemon Hou in 1977.⁴² Studio One was located at 105 Lynch Street in central Monrovia (on the ground floor of a four story residential building.)⁴³ This eight track recording studio was owned by a Jamaican man named Edgar S. Mitchell Sr.⁴⁴ Hawa Daisy Moore was the only artist according to her knowledge who had an album released (on both vinyl record and cassette) by Studio One, which was appropriately titled *Just Dazy*.⁴⁵ Other artists including Morris Dorley, Caesar Gator and John Dweh recorded at Studio One, but their music

⁴⁰ Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴¹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. Studio One was only operational for a two year time span; from 1980-1982.

⁴² Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. Masekela was travelling in West Africa, exiled from apartheid South Africa, looking for musical collaborators. The official name of the company owning Studio One was "Liberia Recording and Cable Television Inc." and the investors were attempting to get into the cable TV business in addition to the recording studio.

⁴³ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴⁴ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, Sept. 13, 2008, via phone from Landsdowne, PA.

⁴⁵ Hawa Daisy Moore, *Just Dazy*, LRCTV Production LRC-1002, c. 1977, 33rpm.

was never released.⁴⁶ Like its predecessor ABC Studios, the single room studio was still very basic compared to contemporary recording studios in other neighboring capitals such as Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria), or even Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire).

Limited Markets for Liberian Music

Prior to 1980, the vast majority of Liberians did not travel widely outside their national borders due to several factors, including widespread poverty, poor highway conditions and connections with neighboring countries. Additional factors included the fact that educational scholarships were virtually monopolized by the elites, and the language barrier with the Francophone countries that bordered Liberia to the east (Cote d'Ivoire) and north (Guinea). There was no Liberian Diaspora in existence in the “developed world” to buy records as it exists in the twenty-first century, which is a direct repercussion of the scattering effects of the Civil War. This phenomenon is reflected in the Tecumsey Roberts song “Coming Home” (1986). In this song, TR boasted about the places he had visited (because it was such a rare occurrence) simultaneously emphasizing that Liberia will always be his only true home.

Coming home, eh-yah, eh-yah, eh-yah,
I left my home and went to England
I've been around the world
From Zanzibar to California-oh
But Africa, Africa is my home
See the children smiling
I see the love that's in their eyes- yeah man!
Think about the things I'm missing
Like the sunset in the African skies⁴⁷

“Ameri-centric” Cultural Dependency

Commenting on late Tolbert-era urban Liberia, exiled South African musician Hugh Masekela commented, in contrast to Conakry (the capital of Guinea); “Monrovia never went to

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tecumsey Roberts, *Coming Home*. c. 1986, 33rpm. side A, track 1.

sleep.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, “Monrovia featured around the clock bars, a thriving international tourist trade, and American currency.”⁴⁹ Kijana Wiseman remembers Gurley Street in Central Monrovia as being the main hotspot for nightlife. The strip on Gurley Street (in downtown Monrovia) featured nightclubs with American names like “California” and “The Phoenix” that blared the music of Donna Summer and Diana Ross.⁵⁰ There were several booming nightclubs operational in the 1970s and she remembers Nina Simone visiting and doing a strip tease on the bar in one of the clubs. She thought it was really inappropriate; “where did she think she was?”⁵¹

Resident music fans seemed to be hooked on all things American at the expense of the local. According to culture beat journalist Isaac Thompson, “at the time Liberia was hooked on everything American.”⁵² In agreement, Gebah Swaray stated that during the time of the Liberian Dream “Liberians were into Western music and African music was not that popular.”⁵³ As previously mentioned, Liberia was frequently characterized as “little America” throughout West Africa at this time (mostly referring to the coastal urban areas). The Liberian flag was obviously modeled after the American flag, Liberian policemen in Monrovia wore secondhand New York City police uniforms, the mailboxes were imported directly from America, the currency was the U.S. Dollar, the Liberian House of Representatives sat on “Capitol Hill” and Monroviaans peppered their speech with current American slang (to name a few of the Americanisms in the public domain).

⁴⁸ Masekela and Cheers, 257.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁵⁰ Ungar, 102.

⁵¹ Kijana “The Griot” Wiseman, interview with author, Dec. 9, 2007, via phone from Houston, TX.

⁵² Isaac Nii Moi Thompson, interview with author, July 1, 2008, Accra, Ghana.

⁵³ Gebah and Maudeline Swaray unpublished interview with *Front Page Africa* editor-in-chief, Rodney Sieh, June 6, 2007.

Though an analysis of large chunks of recorded radio programming in 1976, Michael Real found that 67% of the music played in Liberia had North American origins, and only 33% had African origins.⁵⁴ Furthermore, his survey of music shop record racks in 1976 in Monrovia documented a predominance of American soul music followed by gospel and other religious music. Real concluded that the American client state of Liberia represented a classic case of “cultural dependency” and “neo-colonialism” during this period. In this aspect Liberia exemplifies the dependency that has plagued many of the less developed so-called “third world” nations.⁵⁵ Upon analyzing the Liberian situation in the mid-1970s, researcher Louise Bourgault claimed that “In a culture rich in musical tradition and modern economics, media are not supporting and rewarding indigenous musicians but are directing popular consciousness towards the Western world, particularly the United States.”⁵⁶

The Prevalence of “Copyright Music”

The Liberian guitar band Grand Faith performed exclusively copyright music, but in matching dashikis! One of their favorite songs to perform was “Do the Funky Chicken” (1970) by Rufus Thomas.⁵⁷ Liberia’s most renowned guitarists; Wicki Padmore, also played “copyright music”⁵⁸ In the same vein, the Afro-Safari Band was normally hired for high school dances, graduation dances, and other special events. The majority of the songs Afro-Safari performed were copyright. Typical examples of copyright music played by Liberian groups of the 1970s,

⁵⁴ Real, 96.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Louise M. Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 97.

⁵⁷ Henry Harmon, interview with author, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ.

⁵⁸ Gebah & Maudeline Swaray, interview with author, July 27, 2008, East Orange, NJ.

the Afro-Safari band played cover versions of hit songs by groups such as Earth, Wind & Fire, and the Commodores.⁵⁹

Tejajlu founder Anthony Nagbe recalls that during the 1970s and 1980s in Liberia, DJs played mostly American (and typically African-American) music in bars and nightclubs, such as soul, rhythm & blues, disco, and early rap. These discos were not really welcoming spaces for African music at that time. The Coconut Grove nightclub complex as it operated during the 1970s was a typical example of this phenomenon. This commercial venture was a bowling alley that boasted of having ten bowling lanes at the end of Randall Street in the Mamba Point residential neighborhood. Additionally, there was a tiny nightclub attached, where a resident disc jockey would spin the latest records. The crowd at the Coconut Grove complex was a mix of high school students, college students, and “big shots.” It was a trendy rendezvous point for “been-to’s,” which was the term for Liberians that had been to the West and had lived in either America or Europe for various periods of time. It was at social spaces such as this in which aspiring Liberian musicians met and formed social networks, and the soundtrack to these encounters was definitely American in origin.⁶⁰

A cultural group such as Tejajlu by contrast almost never performed in nightclubs because they were not typically propositioned to do so. Instead, they would usually perform in open-air venues such as the outdoor stages at the Ducor Palace Intercontinental Hotel, and Hotel Africa.⁶¹ Contemporary John Karweaye, a former chairman of the Progressive People’s Party (PPP)

⁵⁹ Zack Roberts, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁶⁰ Charles Neal III, interview with author, July 15, 2008, via phone from Oklahoma City, OK.

⁶¹ Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA

during its heyday in the late 1970s reflected that “during those days local West African culture was condemned.”⁶²

Liberian Musical Impersonators

Some Liberian singers were so adept at convincingly imitating the exact voice inflections of their overseas musical idols that they became well known for that specific skill and became identified with their idol in the popular imaginary. According to Maudeline Swaray, her former group Steam (or S-S-Steam) exclusively performed copyright music. For example, band member Wilhelmina Cummings’ voice was similar to that of superstar Donna Summers, so she would sing the Donna Summers’ numbers.⁶³ Because one of Sarah Hayes-Cooper’s teen idols was Aretha Franklin, and their voices were similar sounding, she earned the nickname “soul sister.”⁶⁴ This represents a noticeable pattern; those Liberian singers whose voices sounded similar to popular American singers would frequently cover their songs during live concerts.

In extreme cases the local artist even assumed the name of the original artist; becoming an impersonator. For example, there were several “Michael Jacksons” in West Africa during the 1980s, with at least two impersonators of the “boy-king” of pop in Monrovia alone.⁶⁵ On July 13, 1989 one of Liberia’s Michael Jacksons (Emmanuel Lewis) and Sierra Leone’s Michael Jackson (Stimie Wakie) met for a final showdown at the Shanana-the-Bronx nightclub dance floor (on Gurley Street) in front of a panel of judges as a climax of a week-long Michael Jackson

⁶² John Karweaye, interview with author, June 16, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁶³ Maudeline Swaray, interview with author, Jan. 12, 2008, via phone from East Orange, NJ.

⁶⁴ Sarah Hayes-Cooper, interview with author, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of Jackson’s near global appeal, see Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 21.

competition.⁶⁶ In another example, vocalist Richard Sirleaf imitated Otis Redding so accurately, that after Redding's death, Sirleaf was rechristened "The ghost of Otis Redding!" by fans.⁶⁷

The Copyright Phenomenon

"Rastaman" Stanley Ford claims that the popularity of the "American-fusion" music made it difficult for people to appreciate their own music, but there were always Liberian artists that were creating original popular music from Congresswoman Malinda Jackson Parker to Zack Roberts and Gebah Swaray with the group Afro-Safari. Before 1977 and after 1982 (roughly) copyright music was in more demand, and a talented rock-jazz ensemble like Kapingbdi had to be critically recognized outside of Liberia before Liberians paid much attention to them.⁶⁸

For our purposes, we can identify two distinct locally understood conceptions of copyright. First, when popular musicians of the 1970s and 1980s referred to "copyright" music, they were referring to international hit songs (mostly from North America, the Caribbean and Europe) that they attempted to "copy right" (i.e. cover competently in a live performance setting.) The faithful reproduction of these hit songs by African-American artists such as The Commodores, Donna Summer, Stevie Wonder, etc. was a gage of musical professionalism and a source of local pride. Secondly, there was a profound sense of ownership by the Liberian composers of original songs which were not protected by local laws, but nevertheless would have been if copyright laws had been legislated and rigorously enforced.

The first recording of a Liberian musician took place in 1929, when the German firm of West Woermann recorded the songs of a Vai woman singer named Zondogbo, and released the

⁶⁶ "Emmanuel Lewis, Stimie Wakie End Battle at Shanana Tonite," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), July 13, 1989.

⁶⁷ Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia.

⁶⁸ "Rastaman" Stanley Ford, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

record on a 78 rpm shellac disc.⁶⁹ Significantly, in a foreshadowing of a later unfortunate pattern, these early recordings of Liberian folk music were made without paying royalties to individual musicians or even giving them credit on the album sleeves or jackets. As Peter Manuel writes “In Africa as elsewhere, musicians often were paid paltry fees, copyright was non-existent, and vast profits were extracted from the continent. In the years 1979-1983 for example, the “big five” record companies (CBS, RCA, WEA, EMI, and Polygram) extracted more than one billion dollars worth of profits from Nigeria alone.”⁷⁰

University of Liberia music instructor and folksong archivist Agnes Nebo von Ballmoos wrote that while acknowledging the absence of a legal copyright system within indigenous Liberian life, there was still a proprietary feeling for songs composed by the author. She argued that “it is important that the identity of the song be preserved” and that the owner maintained through custom the sole right to sing the song.⁷¹ Von Ballmoos furthermore stated that many times individual songs were buried and forgotten when the composer passed away. Nevertheless, this right to sing a song could be granted to someone else by the original author, thus preserving what was referred to an unwritten (but de facto) traditional copyright system. Perhaps von Ballmoos was obliquely referring to the public quarrel she had with her former student Miatta Fahnbulleh, who had entered the public realm as a successful professional singer, and had recorded three cover versions of folksongs that von Ballmoos had already rearranged and popularized. These three songs were “Tuo Wah Lef” (Jungle Music), “Wah Gee Da Tebo”, and

⁶⁹ Von Ballmoos, 1.

⁷⁰ Manuel, 25.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

“Dey Blayon Wisseh” (a.k.a. “Lullabye”).⁷² Theoretically, no one owned these folk songs, but von Ballmoos acutely felt a proprietary ownership of these re-arrangements and threatened several times to take Fahnbulleh to court over the matter.⁷³ Concerning this dispute (or “confusion” in Liberian English) between the two women, a close observer remarked; “Miatta’s renditions of the three Liberian folk songs in question were actually the same as von Ballmoos’ arrangements of the particular songs.” The two versions were, in former university choir member Henry Harmon’s words “too close for comfort.”⁷⁴ Von Ballmoos felt that Fahnbulleh was stealing her arrangements of the song versions that she had composed and had made her famous. However, from a legal standpoint, these songs were in the public domain, since they were not original compositions, but rather folk songs. Even if von Ballmoos did not have a legal case, in the court of public opinion, she had a strong moral case, and from a commonly held viewpoint Fahnbulleh was guilty of transgressing certain unwritten taboos by “stealing her fire.”⁷⁵

South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela, who would occasionally visit Monrovia during the 1970s while in exile (he was given a Liberian passport by President Tolbert) wrote a song entitled “Market Day” that is based upon a song that “Big Steve” Worjloh wrote with an identical name and melody.⁷⁶ This song was performed several times by Masekela and Miriam Makeba at the Ducor Palace Hotel. Worjloh also composed a song called “Rekpete” that can be found on the Hugh Masekela LP entitled *Introducing Hedzoleh Soundz* (1973) that is based on a

⁷² Miatta Fahnbulleh, e-mail message to author, July 25, 2008. These songs can be found on the Miatta Fahnbulleh greatest hits compilation CD entitled *A Blast from the Past* (see discography).

⁷³ Ambassador Rudolf, P. von Ballmoos, interview with author. May 28, 2008, Liberian Embassy, Accra, Ghana.

⁷⁴ Henry Harmon, interview with author, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Masekela and Cheers, 256.

Liberian folk song arranged by the group.⁷⁷ This is evidence that the South Africans frequently borrowed or simply used Liberian songs without any acknowledgement regarding the source; a rather commonplace occurrence as we have witnessed.⁷⁸

There is also a tale of friendship and betrayal between T'kpan Nimely and "Big Steve" Worjloh which illustrates the perils of song authorship and ownership in the Liberian context, where there was no copyright enforcement. "I loved T'kpan, but he was so cunning" Worjloh bemoaned.⁷⁹ According to Worjloh, the song "Market Day" was an original composition, however, Nimely took the song and secretly sold the rights to Princess Fatu Gayflor so she could both perform it on stage and record it in the studio. After this episode, "Big Steve" composed the song "Spider" which is a song about greedy backstabbing behavior based on the famous "Anansi the spider" character in West African folklore. The lyrics are as follows.

Spider be spider (4Xs)
I say my people hear this story
There was spider and his buddy
Worked together to find something
Worked together to make a living
After everything is made
Spider take it back to his hut
After everybody go home
Spider take it back on the run
Spider be spider
Don't trust him⁸⁰

Copy It Right

The history of the omnipresent performance of copyright music in Liberia had serious repercussions for the delayed development of new innovative musical styles (including Liberian

⁷⁷ *Hugh Masekela Introducing Hedzoleh Soundz*, Chisa Records BTS 62, c. 1973, 33rpm.

⁷⁸ "Big Steve" Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* This section only recounts Worjloh's version of events since the inimitable T'kpan Nimely unfortunately passed away in Liberia during the summer of 2005.

⁸⁰ Big Steve, *Aay Africa*, Big Steve Productions 4458, compact disc, c. 2000, track 3.

electric highlife) that drew upon Liberian traditional folk songs for inspiration and cultural regeneration. As previously discussed “copyright” is the local Liberian term for top forty hit songs from overseas, typically from the U.S., England, and the Caribbean. Essentially, these were cover versions of international hit songs performed locally with burning zeal in a playacting gung-ho style. The primary goal of those performing “copyright” material was literally to “copy it right,” in other words to render a faithful rendition of the original song, or as close to the original as possible. The obvious irony of this terminology was that this material that was ostensibly protected by copyright was openly performed without permission or legal repercussions in Liberia. This activity took place within a context of rampant audiocassette piracy, wherein these foreign artists’ music was being illicitly duplicated and sold without any financial proceeds benefiting them. These copyright songs consisted mostly of top forty hit songs produced by the African Diaspora of North America and the Anglophone Caribbean, but also included contemporary hits from “British Invasion” groups (such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones).

Examples of a slow shift from the exclusive performance of copyright music towards the integration of original music as a counter-hegemonic strategy of musical poetics by Liberian musicians during this time period are multifold. As the resident band at Hotel Africa, the Sheikhs performed both copyright music and original compositions, appearing on stage wearing their signature matching white turbans made of long single strips of brilliant white cloth.⁸¹

During the early 1970s especially, the majority of quintessential Liberian concert-goers had particular musical preferences that favored imported music and desired to hear “copyright

⁸¹ John Sheriff, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. These turbans perhaps mimicked stereotypical exoticized version of the Orientalist’s Middle East; however, it was an effective costume gimmick that visually set them apart from other local musical groups.

music” performed live in commingling public spaces. Perceived as a local source of pride; this practice demonstrated the fact that Liberian musicians could faithfully replicate (and mediate) popular hits from the radio that had originated from urban centers of the African overseas diaspora. Instead of viewing these performances as simply another example of American cultural imperialism (which it may have been in some ways), it is more helpful to view them as the audience did; a source of pride in local musical talent and as public displays of competent professionalism.

Concurrently, this phenomenon also reflects local tastes for all things American at the expense of and to the detriment of local music compositions. Prior to the late-1970s the majority of Liberian musical groups almost exclusively performed copyright material in order to fulfill audience expectations. Former guitarist Bendukai Sherman says that at that time, “playing copyright was the game.”⁸² During the mid-1970s, at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium (Monrovia) a “battle of the bands” competition was held, and the Coga Band was heckled off the stage by irate audience members simply because they refused to perform copyright renditions but instead attempted to introduce their original musical compositions.⁸³ This oral history demonstrates that contemporary concert going crowds’ mentality and preferences were not receptive to original Liberian music, but this would soon begin to change by the late 1970s.

Both Grand Faith, and Sherman’s second group, the Fantastic Juniors, would play the copyright hits of African-American pop music artists such as Stevie Wonder and the Temptations. The Fantastic Juniors played locally at the Ducor Palace Hotel, and at the SAC Towers (Saturday Afternoon Club). The amateur group had no manager and they charged only

⁸² Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewerville, Liberia.

⁸³ John Sheriff, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

U.S. \$100 per performance, which was divided amongst the various band members. This illustrates a common theme in Liberian popular music history wherein guitar bands would typically become adept at playing their instruments by practicing copyright songs before commencing to compose their own original material. This trend underscores the lack of formal musical training available at the time in-country (and generally continent-wide) as they were mostly “learning by ear” by listening to copyright songs from records or from recorded radio broadcasts. According to local music promoter Charles Snetter, around 1977 there was a significant shift from performing copyright music to performing original compositions as exemplified by the musical compositions of T’kpan Nimely.⁸⁴ Aaron Lewis recounted that his group the Medusa Group (a.k.a. Aaron Lewis & the MG’s) would typically perform roughly 30% original material and 70% copyright material in order to simultaneously satisfy audience expectations and test original composition’s receptivity in a live concert setting.⁸⁵

The widespread audience taste for foreign music temporarily intervened to stifle local creativity and frustrated the generation of original musical compositions. However, this state of affairs was in flux. The bulk of the musical inspiration for concert fare for the Moga Band was coming from the Americas, either North American soul & funk, or from the Caribbean (especially Jamaica and Trinidad) in addition to a minor influence from artists of neighboring African countries such as Fela Anikulapo Kuti (from Nigeria) and the Afro-Nationals Band (from Sierra Leone). The Moga Band's repertoire would eventually include a ratio of roughly

⁸⁴ Charles Snetter, interview with author, June 23, 2008, Paynesville, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁸⁵ Aaron Lewis a.k.a. Motuba Dread, interview with author, June 8, 2010, via phone from Columbus, OH. Certainly T’kpan Nimely and others began to branch out from a strictly copyright format and explore the depths of their own cultural heritage for songwriting inspiration.

half copyright music, and half original songs, and both types of songs eventually became equally popular by the late 1970's.⁸⁶

A concurrent Liberian group was led by Sherman Brown called the Melody 8 Band. After the Melody 8 Band and Grand Faith disintegrated, many of the former members from these two groups formed the Gardeners, who played a different set of "copyright" songs which sonically demonstrated the shift in musical taste of their audiences. These standards included titles from many of the now classic rock groups including Carlos Santana and Jimi Hendrix.⁸⁷

Kandakai Duncan's most memorable moment was the Moga Band's fifth year anniversary celebration (in 1979) just before the 1980 coup.⁸⁸ Vocalist Maudeline Scere and the group S-S- Steam performed on this occasion with the Moga Band at the E.J. Roye Auditorium, a spacious, plushly decorated hall with sliding velvet curtains. The Saturday concert crowd formed at 3:00pm in order to purchase tickets (at U.S. \$5.00 each). The queue to get into the performance wrapped around the entire city block; which demonstrates the level of popularity the group had attained.⁸⁹ The concert began at 7:00pm and continued swinging until well past midnight. Members of the suave Moga Band appeared in matching green and gold suits. Instead of choosing an original composition, they opened their set with the song "I Wanna Be Your Lover" by Prince, which was his first number one hit from his second album *Prince* (1979).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ As previously discussed, this was common practice at the time, and Tecumsey Roberts is only one example of this phenomenon.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, interview with author, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

Poor Working Conditions

Founding member of the Soulful Dynamics, Benjamin “Ben” Mason, started his own group after he had retrieved some old drums donated from the Army band. His group, the Dynamics formed in 1967, but continued to evolve during the 1970’s.⁹¹ The group was born in the living room of Mason’s mother’s house because she possessed an old piano that they were able to utilize. They would mount the heavy piano on the rack of their small Volkswagen Variant to travel to distant gigs over dusty back roads. Typically, the determined group would have to make several trips with the small car to get all the equipment to the performance site and back again afterwards.⁹² This demonstrates the extreme measures the group was forced to deploy in order to perform.

These poor working conditions existed throughout West Africa during the time period, but conditions in Liberia were worse than many of its neighbors since most of the infrastructure was concentrated in the capital city. Furthermore, Liberia did not incur any side benefits from what is known as the “second colonial occupation” after World War 2 (since it was never a colony). It was said that Liberia was the country that lost more miles of paved road on a yearly basis than any other due to extremely high levels of rainfall, soil erosion, and lack of road maintenance! For example, the Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band’s musical instruments were damaged while they were transported in the back of a pickup truck that had a collision with a car en route to a concert, which underscores the poor working conditions, especially the dilapidated state of the national highway network that musicians were forced to contend with while touring. The Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band had a tour van with their name painted in bright bold lettering

⁹¹ Benjamin “Ben” Mason, interview with author, July 30, 2008, via phone from New York City.

⁹² Ibid.

on the side. According to band member Zack Roberts, the van is still rusting away somewhere in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, where it was abandoned after the 1980 coup in Liberia, and also serving in that mode as an apt metaphor for the fate of many of the Liberian guitar bands.⁹³

The Gardeners Band remained focused on pleasing their audiences by performing copyright music instead of creating original compositions.⁹⁴ They were also faced with high prices charged for imported musical instruments since no guitars or jazz drum kits were manufactured locally. Because of these limitations, including not having access to the airwaves (they did not have access to quality recording studios, therefore they did not have any recordings). Groups such as the Gardeners usually could not survive as professional musicians, and therefore broke up to pursue permanent employment opportunities or to seek further educational qualifications at the secondary or tertiary levels.⁹⁵ Viewed collectively, however, these guitar bands of the early 1970s were a highly unstable bunch. According to Sherman, “a band back then was like a football (soccer) team, if the goalkeeper leaves, then the band breaks up.”⁹⁶

Guitarist Jimmy Yhap stated that, in his opinion, those Liberian Afro-rock groups of the 1970s were not really part of a music industry in a strict sense. In his opinion, there really was no Liberian music industry at that time and the music scene was simply “something to do for bored teenagers,” but evolved into “a social scene that somehow ended up getting popular.”⁹⁷

⁹³ Zack Roberts, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹⁴ Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia.

⁹⁷ Jimmy Yhap, interview with author, Oct. 6, 2008, via phone from London.

Low Wages and “Shobu”

During the 1970s and 1980s, Liberian musicians used the term *shobu* to refer to a short term verbal contract job, or a solitary engagement.⁹⁸ When musicians said “give me my *shobu*!” they meant they wanted their payment for the night’s work. *Shobu* was essentially piecemeal labor for session musicians. Profits from *shobu* were insubstantial and *shobu* work was far below a living wage, and insufficient to provide for the musician’s family.⁹⁹ Over time, *shobu* became a derisive term used to critique the insultingly low wages that musicians received at the time for their (skilled) labor. Musicians in bands would make supplemental income by sharing the tips given from the audience after any given performance. The Gardeners Band had a roadie; an assistant to help transport and set up the band’s gear and instruments while they were touring, which was rare. This roadie apparently was not earning much profit in the touring business, because Sherman recalls paying him with food and alcohol in lieu of cash wages.¹⁰⁰ This situation illustrates the lack of financial resources in the popular music scene at the time.

Discrimination on the Radio

The “Mother of Liberian Folksongs” Yatta Zoe stated “In order to appreciate Liberian music, the local media, especially radio stations, must be at the vanguard in promoting Liberian efforts by providing more air time for them instead of foreign music.”¹⁰¹ Author Michael Real claims that in West Africa, radio is the most widespread mass medium. He argues that this is due

⁹⁸ Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewerville, Liberia.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bobby Tapson, “Let’s Be Liberians and Appreciate Our Music’-Yatta Zoe, Mother of Folk Music Urges,” *The News* (Monrovia), September 10, 2004.

to the high levels of illiteracy and the costliness of television sets coupled with lack of rural electrification in many regions.¹⁰²

From the introduction of radio during the first decades of the twentieth century, until mid-century, Liberian radio programs were exclusively directed at the largely coastal and urban English speaking population, ignoring the masses of indigenous, non-English speaking Liberians. In the 1970s there was a radio program on ELBC entitled “The Wilmot Stubblefield Experience” hosted by a radio personality of the same name during the afternoons from 3:00pm-5:00pm. Apparently this program was a very American experience for listeners since the show showcased mostly disco and soul music with a commercial orientation.¹⁰³ Radio personality Sarah Hayes-Cooper commenting on the time period of the 70s, stated “we were all pro-American, that was the in-thing at the time.”¹⁰⁴

Communications specialist Jerome Boikai states that “radio is even less political than the press. There is virtually no upward flow of information, but instead all information “emanates from above.”¹⁰⁵ This phenomenon was not unique to Liberia, but occurred in other relatively small African countries as well.¹⁰⁶ In the adjacent section we will provide an overview of the radio stations that were operational during the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁰² Real, 96.

¹⁰³ Sarah Hayes-Cooper, interview with author, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Along with American disco and soul hits, Hayes-Cooper would also play country-western songs and British rock ‘n roll icons such as the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

¹⁰⁵ Jerome Boikai, “The Media System in Liberia,” in *Mass Communication, Culture, and Society in West Africa*, ed. Frank Okwu Ugboajah (Munich, Germany: World Association for Christian Communication by Zell, 1985), 42.

¹⁰⁶ For example, reflecting over his childhood growing up under the regime of Daniel Arap Moi in Kenya, Hartley declared that; “Dictatorship smothered Kenya’s vitality. The Kenyan state-owned radio played very little African music and certainly nothing new. A year in, year out favorite of the state Broadcasting Corporation was the American country singer Dolly Parton.” Aidan Hartley, *The Zanzibar Chest* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 125.

State Radio Station ELBC

The first radio station in Liberia was started at the end of World War 2 as a hobby of an American doctor named Colonel John B. West in 1944. ELBC (Liberian Broadcasting Corporation) was established in 1959 and was government owned and operated. Its mission was to act as a branch of the Liberian Information Service (LINA) to promote national development projects, explain government policies, and function as an outlet for news and music. Sadly, their weak signal seldom reached far beyond the Monrovia metropolitan area. In practice, radio only became widespread and popular in Liberia during the 1960s.

Even though ELBC did have at least one program dedicated to indigenous African genres of music, in general, the programming on ELBC was in the words of radio programmer Doughba Caranda “heavily euro-centric” and “anglicized.”¹⁰⁷ The musical cross-section broadcasted by ELBC as documented by Michael Real in 1976 included American artists such as Barry White, Isaac Hayes, Gladys Knight & the Pips along with easy listening music such as instrumental selections performed by the Boston Pops. Only a small portion of Liberian and other African music was played.¹⁰⁸ He notes that certain “national integration” songs could be heard on ELBC, especially around Independence Day (July 26th). These included songs such as “Live, Liberia, Live Today” and “President Tolbert, You’re the Man This Country Needs Today.”¹⁰⁹ ELBC presented at least a small percentage of newscasts, audio dramas, and music in local languages such as Kpelle and Bassa, (two of the largest indigenous languages spoken in Liberia).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Doughba Caranda, interview with author, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA.

¹⁰⁸ This tiny percentage included West African highlife, Kenyan popular music, and African gospel.

¹⁰⁹ Real, 97. FM service was first introduced in 1979 for the 16th ordinary session of the OAU.

¹¹⁰ Von Ballmoos, 177.

Perhaps this had to do in part with advertising revenues, and this only began to slowly improve in the 1970s.

Foreign music dominated the airwaves, however; mostly imported music from the U.S. and Europe. Even though the program line-up on ELBC was altered to a limited extent between 1964 and 1965, however, the overall the picture remained the same. Most of these music programs dealt not with African music, but popular hits from the American charts, with an infusion of Western classical standards, waltz, and jazz music. For example, the 12:30pm “African Music Show” which aired from 12:30pm to 1:00pm in 1964 was replaced by “Highlife Highlights” at 12:45pm. There were many relatively short music programs (lasting thirty minutes or less).¹¹¹ The African music that ELBC would typically feature during those time slots was mostly from nearby Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Congo, and Kenya; Sub-Saharan African countries with local music industries that were more developed than what existed in Liberia.¹¹² According to Doughba Caranda, African music from other, often newly independent countries was very popular among the indigenous Liberian listening audience; whom he refers to as the “grassroots people.”¹¹³

Singer “Big Steve” Worjloh recalls that he loved listening to the radio as a youth, and his idols were American superstars Stevie Wonder and Sam Cooke.¹¹⁴ By 1982, music producer Faisal Helwani claimed that before he arrived all music played in Liberia (both in concerts and

¹¹¹ Gebah Swaray, interview with author, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ. During the 1970s, taxi drivers usually tuned into the program on their car radios. Civil servants would come home for lunch and listen to African music on the radio while eating the mid-day meal, and/or in the taxi cab on the return trip to the downtown office. The reason I am referring to the mid-1960s is due to the lack of documentary evidence for the 1970s.

¹¹² Interestingly, Kenyan music was popular during that period, and apparently got more airplay than local Liberian music, which is surprising considering the fact that almost no one in Liberia spoke Kiswahili, a language that originated on the Indian Ocean seaboard in East Africa thousands of miles away.

¹¹³ Doughba Caranda, interview with author, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA.

¹¹⁴ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

on the radio) was of foreign origin.¹¹⁵ While this is clearly an exaggeration, his point is well taken, as the majority of music that got airplay on ELBC was definitely of foreign origin, at least partially due to the fact that not that many Liberian musicians had gotten the opportunity to record their own material but also due to the biases of radio programmers who were enamored with the latest hit parade from America. According to visiting British journalist Blaine Harden, ELBC DJ Marcus Brown “presided over an afternoon radio program of up-tempo soul music that would not have sounded out of place blaring from an oversized radio on the shoulder of a teenager walking the streets of Harlem.”¹¹⁶

At that time Doughba Caranda was working as a programmer on ELBC and would try to promote both African and specifically Liberian music, for instance, he would play a song called “The Sound of the Wind” (which was sung in Vai) along with the music of Princess Hawa Daisy Moore.¹¹⁷ In Caranda’s opinion, the DJ needs to “leave the national airwaves” (and take with him that whole mindset in which foreign music and culture is privileged at the expense of Liberian national culture).¹¹⁸ Doughba Caranda did not consider himself a DJ, because his work on the radio was a fundamentally different approach than that of a typical Liberian DJ. Instead, he considered himself to be a “programmer.”¹¹⁹ From Caranda’s standpoint, a DJ is not “nationalistic,” in other words, does not put the interests of the nation paramount. From his perspective, the DJ plays commercial music and wants to commercialize everything, not consider

¹¹⁵ Bertha Setor Adom, “Faisal Helwani; a Study of His Contribution to the Music Business of Ghana” (PhD diss., University of Ghana, 1999), 57.

¹¹⁶ Blaine Harden, *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), 240.

¹¹⁷ Doughba Caranda, interview with author, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

the cultural implications of what he is playing. The ELBC employed DJ would frequently play American hit music from 3:00pm-5:00pm, a full two hours straight. Caranda found this scenario to be “backwards” and to be an outrageous abuse of the national airwaves. To make matters worse, many times house parties with dancing would simply play what was on the radio, therefore perpetuating this cycle, and entrenching this self-hating mentality. According to Caranda, Liberians tended to “appreciate everyone else’s things but their own” because “the (Americo-Liberian) settler culture was not too much into the arts.”¹²⁰

In 1982 George Kiadii was working as an outside producer and journalist for the Liberian Broadcast System (ELBS) and recalls hearing African folk songs being played on ELBC during the 1980s for between thirty minutes and one hour per day.¹²¹ Sometimes the African music program would be presented in the evening time when the farmers came home at dusk in order that farmers then could have some music to relax to that they could appreciate after a hard days’ work.¹²²

By 1984 Helwani made sure this condition had been at least partially ameliorated by initiating a daily, hour-long program entitled the “Studio 99 Radio Hour” in which local musicians who had recorded at Studio 99 were featured.¹²³

Once Miatta Fahnbulleh embarked on her career as a professional recording artist, she had to personally plead with radio station personnel to play her songs in the on-air rotation. One of Fahnbulleh’s most successful hit songs was “The Crab Song,” a re-arranged traditional

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ George Kiadii, interview with author, June 23, 2008, Truth-FM, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹²² Due to the fact that Liberia is located close to the equator and there is very little seasonal variation due to the country’s latitude the sunset occurs at the same time all year, by 6:30pm. This made it convenient for radio programmers who were broadcasting to those audiences who were operating both on clock time and daylight time.

¹²³ Sami Helwani, interview with author, July 28, 2010, via phone from Tema, Ghana.

folksong.¹²⁴ Fahnbulleh recalled, as did many other informants, that during President Tubman's tenure, only thirty minutes of African music was broadcast daily, and almost no Liberian music made its way onto the airwaves at ELBC. It was only after 1978, during the administration of Tubman's successor William R. Tolbert that some of Fahnbulleh's compositions were eventually played on the airwaves, especially the songs "Kokolioko" and "Amo Sake Sa." Unfortunately, even with the substantial airplay, Fahnbulleh never received any royalties from the radio stations, despite the fact that she had a positive working relationship with the radio station management and her family was well connected.¹²⁵

ELBC never bought their own records, instead the radio DJs would have to buy the records that they intended to play on the air with their own salaries.¹²⁶ The DJ's would normally transfer their 33 rpm vinyl records to reel-to-reel tape using the Ampex machine to preserve the music longer since vinyl discs tended to scratch easily or randomly go missing from the studio.¹²⁷

Radio Stations ELWA & ELNR

Radio station ELWA (Eternal Love Winning Africa) had the clearest, strongest signal in the region, broadcasting on shortwave frequencies and later on 94.5fm. Established in Paynesville, Monrovia, in 1954 by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), they broadcast in (an impressive) forty different languages across West and North Africa. Their musical fare featured gospel, hymnology and African traditional music (recorded in their studio) that was used for proselytizing. Bill Thompson is a retired missionary with SIM who worked in Liberia for several

¹²⁴ Miatta Fahnbulleh, *Blast from the Past*, E-Publishing, compact disc, c. 2000, track 4.

¹²⁵ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 2, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. ELBC was the site of her first position as a full-time broadcaster in 1967 shortly after she had just returned from Nairobi, Kenya.

¹²⁶ This explains why former DJ Sarah Hayes-Cooper still (in 2008) had a huge record collection.

¹²⁷ Sherman Brown, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia. Also perhaps local records were more expensive than imports (all records were in effect imports since no records were being pressed in Liberia, but records of local artists would typically have fewer pressings than international imports).

years and worked at the missionary-run radio station.¹²⁸ Thompson claimed that ELWA broadcasted in a greater range of Liberian languages than any other radio station, if only for the purpose of proselitization. This evangelical Christian radio station's motto was "to win more souls for Christ."¹²⁹

When Hawa Daisy Moore sang gospel music, her songs would be played on ELWA. However, later when she switched to singing mostly "secular music" her music was banned from ELWA. Apparently the programmers at ELWA thought she was a religious "backslider" for performing "secular" folk-pop fusion music. ELWA did not play secular Liberian pop music, because this was not within the purview of their stated mission.¹³⁰ Additionally, small private radio station ELNR (owned by LAMCO, and broadcasting from Yekepa) played lots of African music from Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, plus Western music, but little from Liberian artists.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Bill Thompson, interview with author, July 8, 2005, Wheaton, IL.

¹²⁹ Ibid. See also their website at <http://www.elwaministries.org>.

¹³⁰ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, July 2, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

¹³¹ Emmanuel Dolo, interview with author, July 26, 2006, via phone from Minneapolis, MN.

CHAPTER 4
LIBERIAN POPULAR MUSIC AS A HISTORICAL LENS TO VIEW CONTEMPORARY
EVENTS

Music is but a symbolic reflection of social and cultural systems.¹

–J. H. Nketia

Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self-understanding articulated by the musicians that have made it, the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers, and the social relations that have produced and reproduced the unique expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element.²

–Paul Gilroy

Oh the German submarine, eh-yah!
Oh they came to bomb-o Monrovia
Oh the German submarine
Oh they came to destroy the city, eh-yah!
It was in 1944
Oh they came to destroy the city, eh-yah!

–Liberian folksong from the 1940s

When they were coming they said they were freedom fighters
When they were coming they said they were liberators
But when they came that time
They changed their minds
What kind of people they dey so?
They are freedom fighters
Freedom fighter you raping our women
Freedom fighter you killing our children
Freedom fighter you destroying our country³

–Caesar Gartor

¹ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Ethnomusicology and African Music; Collected Papers, Vol. 1, Modes of Inquiry and Interpretation* (Accra, Ghana: Afram Publications, 2005), 235.

² Paul Gilroy, “Jewels Brought From Bondage’ Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, eds. Andy Bennett and others, (London: Routledge, 2006), 179.

³ Caesar Gartor, “Freedom Fighter” Zadeh-Yah, Gee-Mann Productions 884502408638, compact disc, c. 2010, track 3.

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that African popular music can (and should) be utilized by Africanist historians as a lens with which to view contemporary events. I argue that within popular periodization, the period before 1989 (with the outbreak of the Civil War) is widely construed as “normal times.” I will attempt to deconstruct this notion and show its hidden dangers for the historian. We will then explore ways in which local musicians interacted with political developments, using the case study of the song written by the Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band to celebrate the 1979 annual OAU Conference. Next we will examine transformations that were brought about by the milestone upheaval of the 1980 coup and its effects on the performing arts. We will then turn to the “theme song” of the coup and the accompanying social commentary by local musicians and dramatists. Finally, we will examine musical productions of Princess Fatu Gayflor and others that take on various subjects including the sexual division of labor in the markets, rural-to-urban migration, and the leisure pursuits of Monrovia youth.

Liberian Popular Music as a Historical Lens

In general, African popular music can be utilized by historians as a lens with which to examine past events and broad-based changes in societal attitudes and contemporary worldviews. As asserted by Ghanaian ethnomusicologist J. H. Nketia: “the songs of many African societies...often have both historical and literary intentions. They contain many names of historical personages and make allusions to events, but do not always present history in its elemental form as a coherent narrative.”⁴

⁴ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Ethnomusicology and African Music; Collected papers, vol. 1, Modes of Inquiry and Interpretation* (Accra, Ghana: Afram Publications, 2005), 231.

Commenting on the long and contentious career of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, record executive Randall Grass notes that “some musicians have, in certain times and places, become avatars of the collective spirit of a people, conveying their collective fear, rage, hope and determination.”⁵ In Liberia, popular musicians represented everyday urban life in Monrovia under changing regimes as they commented upon and engaged with many crucial issues during the turbulent decades that presaged the first Liberian Civil War (1989-1997).⁶ In this chapter, we shall analytically explore all of these developments, and demonstrate ways in which these novel musical trends mirrored new forms of political consciousness which contributed to the political crisis of 1979 Rice Riots, which in turn laid the groundwork for the implosion of the first Liberian Republic a year later. The musical voices spotlighted in this chapter spearheaded this sea-change in societal attitudes in Liberia which began in the mid-1970s and peaked around the time of the 1980 putsch (and re-emerged again in the late 1980s).

Just as the availability of local records corresponded with the heady days of independence in Jamaica in 1962, adding to the excitement in the air, the availability of local records in Liberia was a type of musical response to the Pan-African independence movements of their former colonial neighbors such as Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Gambia and Nigeria during the independence era.⁷

⁵ Randal Grass, *Great Spirits: Portraits of Life-Changing World Music Artists* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 63.

⁶ Many authors date what is termed the first Liberian Civil War from Charles Taylor’s invasion on December 24, 1989 to his eventual election as president of the republic in 1997. Correspondingly, the second Liberian Civil War could be framed within the years 2000 to 2003. In other words, the second conflict was waged by the twin rebel groups Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) in order to dislodge Charles Taylor from power, which was successfully accomplished with the help of substantial diplomatic pressure and an offer of asylum from Nigeria’s President Olusegun Obasanjo.

⁷ A similar phenomenon occurred at independence in 1960 in the Congo under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba. The Afro-Cuban rumba anthem “Independence Cha-Cha” performed by Grand Kalle became indelibly associated in the minds of ordinary Congolese with the zeitgeist of the age. Meanwhile, in neighboring Guinea under the dictatorship of President Ahmed Sekou Toure, musicians in bands such as Bembeya Jazz National were drafted into

“Normal Times” Defined

Emma Shaw’s recent Liberian novel *Redemption Road* (2008) which focuses on the attempts of ordinary Liberians to grapple with the after-effects of sexual brutality and mass murder during wartime frequently refers to the epoch before the armed conflict (i.e. before the invasion of Charles Taylor’s NPFL) as “normal times” or “normal days.”⁸ This phrase was repeated frequently by my informants and suggests a temporal rupture from peacetime normality as contrasted with the chaotic abnormality of a moral landscape virtually turned upside down during the horrors of Civil War. It is a phrase loaded with misleading nostalgia; for what followed these “normal times” was the outset of the armed conflict which led to fourteen years of generalized deadly mayhem from 1989-2003 with a relative respite from the shooting war during the years 1997-2003.⁹

Since then, it seems that the meaning of the emblematic phrase “normal time” within the Liberian English lexicon has been expanded to encompass not only the time within living memory before the conflict, but also to signify and delineate the time period after the 2005 presidential election of Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, which ushered in a new era of comparative rule of law (at least) within the realm of public consciousness.¹⁰ I am not

the civil service and directed to compose neo-traditional music that would further the aims of Guinea’s cultural revolution. For a further discussion of this topic, see Jay Straker, *Youth, Nationalism and the Guinean Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 96-102.

⁸ Elma Shaw, *Redemption Road; the Quest for Peace and Justice in Liberia* (Washington DC: Cotton Tree Press, 2008), 117.

⁹ One metaphorical narrative that was repeated *ad nauseum* in the public discourse about the abnormality of warfare was the story of two rebel soldiers arguing over the gender of an unborn fetus in the belly of a pregnant woman stopped at a rebel faction’s checkpoint during the civil war. In order to determine the winner of the wager between the two rebel combatants (usually depicted in popular narratives as drug-addicted teenaged child soldiers) one rebel would order the ill-fated woman out of the line and shoot her, then slice open the belly of the corpse and remove the unborn fetus. This anecdote was repeated frequently as a metaphor for the moral degeneracy that ran amok the tumult of wartime Liberia.

¹⁰ This election witnessed a woman elected to the highest office of the land, largely by mobilized women voters, for the first time anywhere on the African continent. For example, Beatrice Munah Sieh, the national chief of police

intentionally dividing the historical periodization into opposing Manichean eras of light and darkness; but within the realm of popular consciousness, Liberia's popular music development during the 1970s and 1980s occurred during "normal times."¹¹

"Normal Times" and its Relationship to Local Music

It was during these less than ideal "normal times" that singer-songwriter Hawa Daisy Moore leveled her own social critique of society in both explicit and veiled ways through her lyrical compositions. In her song "Papa" (here used as a metaphor for absentee fathers complete with messianic undertones) from the cassette album *Show Me You Love Me*, (circa 1977) Moore decried...

Papa, why did you leave me here?
Didn't you say you'd come back?

This world is filled with so much problem (sic)
Nuclear waste and hatred taking over¹²

Moore also interpreted and riffed upon well known Liberian folk songs to express distress at contemporary conditions in the country. In her version of the traditional Liberian folk song "A Yam Yam Saye," sung bilingually in both Vai and Liberian English, Moore lamented...

Congo, Congo River, Congo
Me no sabe-oh!
Water could carry me

appointed by Johnson-Sirleaf in 2006, echoed the term "normal time" to describe this new post-conflict political dispensation. Documented in the film *Iron Ladies of Liberia* is a police raid on the Center Street (Monrovia) graveyard to clear out squatters. After the police sweep was affected and the arrested young men were loaded into the backs of waiting police pick-up trucks, Police Chief Sieh demanded; "How will we do this thing now? You are not supposed to be to the graveyard. We can't continue this, that *normal times* this!" (my emphasis.) This example underscores the point that in wartime it may have been forgivable to inhabit a graveyard amongst the dead in sarcophaguses and between the tombstones, within the context of widespread population displacement, but during "normal times" the dead must be respected.

¹¹ With the advent of relative peace for several continuous years with the help of a large contingent of United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) peacekeeping troops from around the world, it seems safe to begin rehabilitating this term "normal times" and applying it to the present dispensation as well as the past.

¹² Hawa Daisy Moore, *Show Me You Love Me*, Hawa Daisy Moore Productions, cassette, n.d.

Congo, Congo
Me no sabe-oh!
Water could carry me¹³

In this context, the piece refers to the distant and legendary Congo River, implicitly declaring that since the singer cannot swim, the river could easily carry her to her death by drowning.¹⁴

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf recalls when the feared and widely despised Stephen Tolbert (President Tolbert's powerful brother) was killed in April, 1975 when his Cessna airplane crashed into the Atlantic shortly after taking off from Greenville in Sinoe County.¹⁵ There was a well-known children's playground ring song that commented on this event. The chorus declared "William in the mansion, Stephen in the ocean!" The original song was sung in the Kiswahili language, therefore listeners in Liberia could not have understood the original lyrics, so children substituted their own lyrics and sang these over the original song that was broadcast on the radio. Perhaps adults were too afraid to sing it openly, but children were not intimidated, and the unspeakable incident was gleefully commemorated in these playground songs.¹⁶

Another version of this cheeky ring song as remembered by Gebah Swaray proclaimed "Trouble in the mansion, Steven in the ocean" Inserting the word "trouble" instead of "William"

¹³ Hawa Daisy Moore, *A Yam Yam Sae, Traditional and Colonial Songs from Liberia*, On Tour Productions, Institute for Cultural Partnerships OTP-982, compact disc, c. 1998. This specific river (Africa's second longest) also happens to have the same name as the nickname for the Americo-Liberian settlers; the "Congos." It therefore resonates with profound metaphorical significance and deep cultural mooring. In other words, one implied meaning might be that if indigenous people were not careful, they could be easily swept away by, for instance by shady land dealings initiated by members of a more educated "Congo" class. These are the fears of the illiterate majority wary of being taken advantage of by those who "know book"; the literate minority.

¹⁴ The term "sabe" is an old Liberian pidgin English term that means "to know" and it is taken directly from the Portuguese verb *saber*.

¹⁵ Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 80.

¹⁶ These are called "ring songs" because typically the songs would form a part of children's games in which they would form a circle and hold hands thus forming a ring.

gave the song a more dramatic and prophetic twist, foreshadowing the upcoming downfall of the entire embezzling Tolbert clan. This derisive song of renunciation, which celebrated the death of one of the most prominent elites, reflected popular anger towards the corrupt practices of the Tolbert family. It was Frank Tolbert that sued the scrupulous populist pamphleteer Albert Porte for libel over his exposé entitled *Liberianization or Gobbling Business?* In this self-published and promptly banned pamphlet, produced on an old typewriter, the paradigmatic maverick Porte likened the Tolbert family to corrupt families in the Old Testament such as found in the story of Ahab's vineyard.¹⁷

OAU Welcome to Liberia!

President Tolbert ordered the Unity Conference Center to be built at a cost of \$33 million, adjacent to the multi-storied Hotel Africa and fifty-one beach villas (one for each visiting African head of state) for an additional \$36 million.¹⁸ Johnson-Sirleaf states that the OAU was not held in high esteem by ordinary Liberians, who instead conceptualized the organization as an all-male dictator's club dedicated to showcasing political power, demagoguery, and rubbing shoulders while attending cocktail parties, without positively impacting the local political environment in any appreciable way.¹⁹

The singular hit song produced by the Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band was the song "OAU, Welcome to Liberia" (1979). This piece was recorded at the Ambassador Studio in Kumasi, Ghana, as a prelude to Liberia's hosting of the 16th annual 1979 Organization of African

¹⁷ Albert Porte, *Liberianization or Gobbling Business?* (Crozierville, Liberia: Porte Publications, 1974), 5.

In this case, Porte quotes an Old Testament biblical story from I Kings 21:1-29 (King James Version). Porte deliberately chose biblical analogies for their effective impact within the majority Christian populace concentrated along the Liberian Atlantic coastal littoral.

¹⁸ Johnson-Sirleaf, 83-84. The estimated grand total spent on the conference was (U.S.) \$101 million.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

Unity (OAU) confab. These ostentatious “white elephant” construction projects were widely criticized at the time, making the Liberian Dream song about welcoming the OAU sound discordant with popular attitudes and instead resemble praise singing.²⁰ Actually, this song was initially a scheme to get patronage support from President Tolbert, but it proved to be a ploy that backfired. Toniah Williams penned the first version of “OAU Welcome to Liberia,” which was conceived as a panegyric to President Tolbert, with his portrait tentatively set to grace the album cover.²¹ The original chorus was “Do it, Tolbert Do it!” with all of the president’s catchy political slogans such as “Higher Heights,” “Mat to Mattress” and the awkward sounding “Wholesome Functioning Society,” interspersed between verses. With this praise song in hand; Williams sought assurances from the President to buy at least 5,000 copies in order to finance the project. Unfortunately, when the track was personally presented to Tolbert, he was unimpressed after giving it a perfunctory listen. The presidential office was willing to purchase a few personal copies, but not to invest in large quantities of the record.²² In reaction to this disappointing rejection, the whole concept of the single was drastically altered at Williams’ behest.

President Tolbert’s Vice President Daniel Warner requested that the band perform on a voluntary basis as a way of promoting the upcoming conference, but Williams had the pressing need to be financially compensated while at the same time maintaining his self-respect, so the group decided to re-record the song with alternative lyrics. In place of Tolbert’s slogans, the lyrics were altered to include dedications to all the Liberian counties and the scores of visiting

²⁰ Ibid. The OAU conference was usually followed up by the annual meeting of the African Development Bank (ADB), a meeting which usually brought investors and financiers into the host country. In this case, however the ADB meeting was scheduled to take place in Monrovia in May 1980, but was cancelled due to the April 12, 1980 coup and general instability that followed.

²¹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

²² Ibid.

African OAU member states. Thus, the final version of “OAU Welcome to Liberia” attempted to alter the constituency of the record’s appeal while re-imagining and redefining the underlying purpose of the OAU conference. Politically, the song situates Liberia firmly in the anti-apartheid camp and Liberia is symbolically placed on the frontlines of the anti-colonial struggle against white minority rule throughout Southern Africa.²³ Strategically, the song urged Pan-African solidarity and cooperation on a grass-roots level in the fight for human rights, not only in territories where minority-rule still prevailed in Southern Africa, but by implication in Liberia as well. The lyrics enthusiastically declared...

OAU, welcome to Liberia!
All my people
Welcome to you!

Organization of African Unity
Brings to us peace and security
But we must pull hand in hand together

‘Cause united we stand

And if we want to save this continent
We must first love our fellow man
Like our leaders working hard together
To keep alive African unity

As little as we are
And also neglected
We will stand for our rights

We must seek liberation of our brothers
If we must fight for their freedom too, Namibia
Azania, Zimbabwe, we invite you
Welcome to OAU
OAU we love you

Ivory Coast, we love you!
Sierra Leone, we love you!
Togo, Mali, Kenya, we love you!

²³ South Africa is even referred to in the song by the liberation movement name “Azania.”

Swaziland, we love you!
Nigeria, we love you!
Angola, we love you!
Ghana, we love you!²⁴

(The song continues through an exhaustive list of all the visiting OAU member states)

Events Surrounding the 1980 Coup

What effect did Doe's PRC military junta government have on the performance of popular music in Liberia? First of all, the PRC instituted a dusk-to-dawn curfew in order to solidify their hold on power. This measure quickly became extremely unpopular, as can be attested by the multitude of protest letters against the curfew published in local newspapers.²⁵ This curfew also predictably impeded live music performances, forcing many musicians to find alternate jobs in the meantime, such as hotel work. The Doe junta imposed two full years of selectively enforced curfews; however they gradually lifted the curfew in selected places the PRC members liked to frequent, such as the newly constructed Hotel Africa in the Monrovia suburb of Virginia. There the "big shots" within the PRC could amuse themselves while other sections of the capital remained under strict curfew.²⁶ Before the curfew was imposed, Monrovia was teeming with nightclubs, including Reflections Club (on Warren Street), Lips and Shanana the Bronx (on Carey Street). All of these clubs had been closed by executive order by 1982.²⁷

²⁴ Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band, *OAU, Welcome to Liberia*, Makossa International Records M2345, c. 1979, 33rpm.

²⁵ G. Diadeh Tarlue, "Lift the Curfew," *New Liberian* (Monrovia), October 24, 1980.

²⁶ Eddie Gibson, interview with author, June 1, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

²⁷ Toniah Williams managed "Studio 2000," the last nightclub to be shut down during military decree in 1982.

The first dusk-to-dawn curfew lasted six months.²⁸ During the original curfew (imposed during the first few months after the coup), businesses that normally thrived on evening time customers such as cinemas and nightclubs went into serious economic decline. The curfew crippled nightlife in Monrovia for some time, and this also seriously affected the earnings of Liberian musicians who had previously performed during the evening hours. In order to cope with this new restriction, some of the nightclubs were forced to turn into “day-clubs” that opened at two o’clock in the afternoon and served alcohol and entertainment until six o’clock when the sun began to set. For example, Monrovia’s Holiday Inn (no connection to the American hotel chain) began to host afternoon jams with live music during the curfew period.²⁹

The general breakdown of law and order, including the arbitrary nature of the soldier’s indiscriminate and unpredictable “jungle justice” also hurt the burgeoning music industry because in their quest to loot the nation’s resources, combating cassette piracy was simply not on the agenda of those in power (especially when those in power continued to receive bribes from the cassette bootleggers themselves.) These two critical historic junctures; the murderous final days of the Tolbert government in 1980, and the toppling of Doe’s military dictatorship a decade later in 1990 and the continued hostilities, were both major setbacks for the Liberian musicians and their cause of promoting local music both nationally and on the international stage.

Especially during the Doe regime, politicians would gravitate towards whichever musical heroes or cultural icons that the masses of ordinary citizens were attracted to (or “felt was fine” in Liberian parlance) and attempt to co-op them. Doe would typically invite popular electric highlife bands to play at the Executive Mansion, but paid them minimally, if at all. Usually, the

²⁸ At first the curfew was from 6pm, then later modified to 7pm until daybreak; essentially the classic dusk-to-dawn curfew.

²⁹ Isaac Nii Moi Thompson, interview with author, July 1, 2008, Accra, Ghana.

president's corrupt underlings, in charge of paying the musicians, pocketed the funds instead, cheating the musicians out of their wages. Furthermore, many groups would be afraid to ask for payment if overlooked by their erstwhile military government employers.³⁰ According to guitarist Eddie Gibson, Samuel Doe also never paid Zack & Gebah commensurately for their command performances, even though they were at the height of their popularity during the mid-to-late 1980s. However, being perceived as publicly supporting Zack & Gebah was politically expedient for the usurper Doe, because the group was popular with the "grassroots people," (the masses of ordinary Liberians). In the end, the super-group split just as the Civil War began in late 1989 when Gebah Swaray fled to the relative security of New York City.³¹

Another entrepreneuring musician whose career paralleled that of "Big Steve" Worjloh's was his childhood friend T'kpan Nimely.³² Nimely was an original artist who tried to give his listeners hope in difficult circumstances. He sang about Liberian social issues such as inter-ethnic dating, bureaucracy, and the difficulties of unemployment. He also sang about the moonlight dance; he would take Liberian folklore and turn it into contemporary song lyrics. He would sing in Bassa, Klao (Kru) in addition to English. His big hits were "Bezzon Rap (Bassa Rap)", "Fly was Living before Dog Ear Cut," and the children's song "Take Time in Life."³³ Both Nimely and Worjloh have Kru ancestry and eventually decided to enter into a musical collaboration and form a group called Segbadetee which means "togetherness" in the Klao

³⁰ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, interview with author, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.

³¹ Gebah and Maudeline Swaray, interview with author, April 21, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

³² The Musicians Union of Liberia (MULA) issued a press release concerning a memorial program in 2006 dedicated to the memory of the late T'kpan Nimely.

³³ Samuel Slewion, interview with author, Aug. 14, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

language.³⁴ Segbadetee was formed in 1976, and expanded to be composed of five women and five men in its heyday. A.B. Tolbert, the favored son and heir apparent to President Tolbert was especially enamored with the Segbadetee song “Liberia Our Darling” and decided to sponsor the group, by giving them financial support every weekend.³⁵

The 1980 Coup Revisited

The televised image of those thirteen men, their bloodied half-naked bodies dangling from a row of telephone poles on the beach outside the Barclay Training Center alarmed many Liberians who had initially welcomed the coup. They feared that a government born in so much blood would be hard pressed not to rule that way. Their fears turned out to be well-founded.³⁶

–Bill Berkeley

As previously discussed, the country’s future teetered on a precipice during the early morning hours of April 12, 1980, as President William R. Tolbert Jr. was assassinated just outside his bedroom on the top floor of the Executive Mansion. Tolbert’s corpse was then unceremoniously disposed of in a mass grave amidst an eruption of widespread jubilation. As the deposed former President’s loyal officials were arrested or desperately fled the country, soldiers and neighbors looted their homes and seized their government issued cars.³⁷ According to eyewitnesses, overjoyed revelers created a carnivalesque atmosphere as they waved fresh green

³⁴ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, July 2, 2007, Philadelphia, PA. They performed together for three years, from 1976 to 1979.

³⁵ Ibid. Even though Segbadetee was invited personally to visit the U.S. by then California Governor Jerry Brown, the 1980 coup torpedoed the band’s opportunity. Segbadetee then took a hiatus because of the newly imposed obnoxious curfew and the confusion generated by the abrupt change in power relations.

³⁶ Berkeley, 45.

³⁷ For a first hand account and description of this phenomenon see Helene C. Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach* (New York, Random House, 2007), 167.

palm fronds in a manifestation of solidarity with the coup-makers and danced in the streets shouting “at last we are free!”³⁸

As mentioned in Chapter 1, upon hearing the initial news of the coup, crowds of market women danced in the streets and were heard to be singing “Country woman born soja, Congo woman born rogue” which could be translated to signify that indigenous rural woman (Country women) were the mothers of soldiers, while Americo-Liberian women (Congo women) had given birth to “rogues” (thieves).³⁹ According to linguist John Singler “‘rogue’ is by far the most widely used term in Liberia for any type of thief: burglar, pickpocket or robber.”⁴⁰

The Liberian National Student Union (LINSU) issued a press release less than one month after the coup, thanking the “men and women of arms who bravely dismantled the 100-year-old club of tyrants.”⁴¹ Master Sergeant Doe was referred to metaphorically by fellow coup-maker Colonel Pennoh as “the leopard that killed the goat” which framed the takeover in violent symbolic imagery from the rural countryside.⁴² Since the still youthful Doe was the highest ranked of the seventeen coup plotters, he was declared the Commander-in-Chief of the newly formed Second Republic even though his close associate Thomas Quiwonkpa commanded the allegiance of many of the junta members and rank-and-file troops. The semiliterate Doe never had a temperament for “learning book” and had dropped out of high school to join the army at the age of eighteen to become a career soldier which (unsurprisingly) did nothing to endear him

³⁸ S. Henry Cordor, *Liberia Under Military Rule; Review and Analysis of Liberia Before and After the Military Coup* (Monrovia, Liberia: S.H. Cordor Publications, 1980), 45.

³⁹ For a concise summary of these events, see Ellis, 53-56.

⁴⁰ Singler, 141.

⁴¹ Press Release “Statement by the Liberian National Student Union,” May 6, 1980.

⁴² Youboty, 65. In this metaphor the leopard represents Doe and the goat represents Tolbert.

to the intelligencia.⁴³ These initial exaggerated expectations within the general populace in the wake of the coup and the widespread euphoria reflected in this song were echoed in the musical compositions by other Liberian electric highlife artists such as “The Message of the Revolution” by Miatta Fahnbulleh and “Sweet Liberia” by the musical duo Zack & Gebah. As previously emphasized, these songs (along with a plethora of others) became repositories for collective sentiments of the popular classes.

Significantly, the 1980 coup d'état took place just two days before the one year anniversary of the urban uprising commonly known as the Rice Riots. At that time, the revolt was referred to by many Liberians as “Black Saturday” or “Bloody Saturday” due to the deaths that resulted when internationally banned dum-dum bullets were fired by police and other security agents into crowds of unarmed civilians.⁴⁴ During this desperate popular uprising against the autocratic rule of the Tolbert clan, the skittish president effected Liberia’s newly signed mutual defense treaty with neighboring Guinea and relied upon Guinean troops to restore calm and to quell any potential mutiny within the Liberian army (AFL), after miserably underpaid locally stationed soldiers joined looters in ransacking the downtown Monrovia shopping district.

In two days after the Rice Riots took place, the imprisoned ‘ringleader agitators’ i.e. the outspoken leadership of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), were tentatively to be sentenced to death.⁴⁵ These executions never

⁴³ Givens and Doe, 5.

⁴⁴ University Spokesman, “Reflections on April 14: a Turning Point in Liberian History (Editorial),” in *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, ed. H. Boima Fahnbulleh (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 359-361. It is the viewpoint of the editor of this collection that the Liberian military eventually intervened to “stop the democratic momentum.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

took place. Instead, in the aftermath of the coup, these leaders of the “progressive forces” were released from jail to sounds of rapturous applause and many, such as MOJA leader Togba Na Tippeteh and PAL leader Gabriel Bacchus Matthews, were compelled to join the new People’s Redemption Council (PRC) junta government, which the new self-aggrandizing leaders heralded as the embodiment of the “April 12th Revolution.”

As MOJA spokesman Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson stated; “Our objective is to show that, within an appropriate political-economic framework, we have the resources to permit us to enjoy the benefits of economic development and social justice; to enjoy rice and rights. However, we cannot over-emphasize the fact that our strategy would neither be tried, nor could it succeed unless there were basic changes in the structure of the economy and in the nature and composition of the ruling class alliance.”⁴⁶ This turn of events inaugurated just such a long-awaited political opening, and the old TWP-affiliated settler class was symbolically deposed when thirteen of Tolbert’s loyal cabinet members were publicly executed on the Barclay Training Center (BTC) beach on April 22, 1980, (just ten days after the coup took place.) These brutal executions, which occurred during a supercharged post-coup atmosphere, were televised and dubbed a “Liberian beach party” by foreign observers within the news media since many of the soldiers on firing squad duty were drunk. This mass execution divided the country (especially Monrovia society) and was a pivotal event that unintentionally frightened and alienated most other African heads of state.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Mayson, 143-144.

⁴⁷ Howard W. French, *A Continent for the Taking; the Tragedy and Hope of Africa* (New York: Random House, 2004), 105-08. This represents just one excellent source among many.

Samuel Doe's initial few years in power were largely spent globetrotting in a desperate search of allies, legitimacy and respectability.⁴⁸ To achieve these goals Doe attempted to emulate his toppled predecessor (the pedantic Tolbert) who was a cosmopolitan "man of the world" with polished manners, well-honed oratory skills, and professionally crafted speeches. Doe's realpolitik response to his initial lack of acceptance on the global stage was to play upon the Cold War priorities and fears of the Reagan White House in order to dramatically boost levels of American foreign aid. Doe was given the high profile diplomatic treatment that he so desperately desired by the American president. He personally met with Reagan twice; during a state visit at the White House in 1982, and at the United Nations General Assembly (in New York) in 1983.

Doe then deployed those funds to underwrite an audacious expansion of the AFL coupled with intensified political repression against both his real and perceived political opponents. As recently documented by political scientist Elwood Dunn, in his recent expose; *Liberia and the United States During the Cold War*, Doe was very successful at this endeavor.⁴⁹

Doe realized the power of music and attempted to harness this medium in order to further own ends. Besides attempting to co-opt popular musicians to perform for him on occasions such as his birthday, Doe actually authorized a record to be produced at the Ambassador Studios in Ghana entitled "The Redeemer of New Liberia M/SGT Samuel K. Doe." This double sided single record incorporated dance music, Christmas music on the organ (on the B-Side), sounds of gunfire (for special effects) and shortened versions of two of his speeches, in order to commemorate the (first?) anniversary of the "revolution."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Dunn, 141-83.

⁵⁰ The Redeemer, MONO INR 1001, 33rpm. I am grateful to Dr. Wolfgang Bender for the little information that I have about this very rare release.

Sam Doe's Social Milieu

To more fully understand the nature of the 1980 military coup, we need to gain some insight into the social milieu of the coup plotters. Coup leader Master Sergeant Doe was a “country man” from the small village of Tuzon, in the remote and predominately rural Grand Gedeh County. Doe was a Krahn man, who when queried about his ethnicity in the heated aftermath of the coup, defensively and misleadingly asserted that he was “a Liberian” above all else.⁵¹ His actions would prove otherwise; with terrible long-term consequences. Doe did not actively promote local music or Liberian traditional culture, perhaps since institutions such as the NCT reminded him of his own ‘country’ roots. It was from these humble rural origins that Doe was desperately fleeing in the pursuit of infectious dreams of newfound affluence and the quest for total power. These desires were physically reflected within his fashion conscious public image, which included a stylish afro haircut, dark aviator sunglasses, and bellbottom pant-suits, that quickly followed the abandonment of his drab olive green army fatigues and utility belts (with the dangling hand grenades). As previously noted, the deposed President Tolbert was vastly more educated than his successor Doe and perhaps because of his extensive education, Tolbert recognized the intrinsic value of cultural production, and the far-sighted wisdom in preserving and celebrating the autochthonous Liberian cultural patrimony. Tolbert’s stance and mentality in this regard contrasted heavily to Doe, who apparently did not appreciate the inherent value of the national cultural troupe’s (NCT) theatrical pageantry and dance routines unless it was to give a rousing welcome to visiting foreign dignitaries on the tarmac of Paynesfield or Robertsfield International Airports. Even though the coup which installed an indigenous “native man” as leader of the republic for the first time theoretically should have focused a limelight on

⁵¹ This was largely rhetorical posturing, as the master sergeant-turned-General Doe quickly stocked the upper echelons of the army and the civil service with his own Krahn ethnic kinsmen from Grand Gedeh County.

all things homegrown, including mellifluous electric highlife music, in actual practice the coup temporarily crippled the burgeoning and vulnerable music industry on many levels. Under Doe's military regime the national budget for the Ministry of Culture (a subsection of MICAT) was eventually cut during a spate of self-imposed austerity measures at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This was the result of a conflict of prioritization, in which the desire to buy more weapons and increase the salaries of soldiers (in order to insure their continued loyalty) effectively trumped the Ministry of Culture's already slim budgetary allotments.⁵² Although the PRC's Jeffrey Gbatu did invite Ghana-based record producer Faisal Helwani to Liberia to initiate the construction of Studio 99, during the bedlam unleashed by the doomed Thomas Quiwonkpa coup attempt in 1985, the studio would be forced to cease production as it was ransacked and looted in a deeply upsetting episode by the very same disgruntled and protesting Liberian musicians the studio was supposed to benefit. As Liberian critic G. Henry Andrews observed, "The revolution of 1980 led to the neglect and deterioration of the nation's physical infrastructure, the collapse or degradation of its national and social institutions, a lowering of standards, the decline of excellence in all aspects of national life, the deifying of wealth and power, an insatiable greed for money, and an alarming disregard for human life."⁵³

The 1980 Coup; Effects on the Performing Arts

Let me also state that our reason for overthrowing the Tolbert regime was not to enrich ourselves at the expense of the poor. Rather, we were moved by the desire to establish a society free from oppression and suppression, where the majority will enjoy the wealth of the nation. As redeemers of the people we cannot afford to repeat the evil practices which we vowed to abolish. As soldiers, we should not get ourselves involved in expensive living for we have to return to the barracks.⁵⁴

⁵² Dunn, 153-54.

⁵³ Andrews, 76.

⁵⁴ Givens and Doe, 34.

–Samuel Doe

In the United States in 1776, in France in 1789, and in Czechoslovakia in 1989, there were revolutions. In Togo in 1967, in Zaire in 1965, and in Liberia in 1980 there were upheavals masquerading as revolutions...revolutionaries have a vision, a mental blueprint, a chartered course for the nation's future. Upheavalists have no master plan other than 'me, myself, and I,' modified by family, friends, and cronies.⁵⁵

–G. Henry Andrews

Just days after the coup took place, Samuel Doe suspended the constitution and the writ of *habeas corpus*, dissolved both the executive and legislative branches of the government, and declared martial law. Soon afterwards, Doe imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and banned all political activity.⁵⁶ Tokay Tomah-Kailie remembers the April 12, 1980 coup well. When the NCT (of which Tomah-Kailie was a member) learned about the overthrow and murder of President Tolbert, the troupe became extremely sad because they had viewed him as a sort of father figure. However, the troupe was compelled to collectively weep in secrecy, because they feared the consequences of mourning openly. By publicly displaying sadness, they could have been targeted for reprisals from the soldiers or national police; those who favored the junta and despised Tolbert for political reasons.⁵⁷

Who Owns Papa's Land

During the early morning hours of April 12, 1980, following a successful attack launched on the security forces of the Executive Mansion, the Tolbert administration was toppled by a handful of miserably paid soldiers from the lower ranks of the AFL, thereby ending one hundred and thirty-three years of TWP rule. On the day of the coup, DJ Wilber Stubblefield was on duty

⁵⁵ G. Henry Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!* (London: Vantage Press, 1993), 70.

⁵⁶ Bill Berkeley, *Liberia, a Promise Betrayed: a Report on Human Rights* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1986), 15.

⁵⁷ Tokay Tomah-Kailie, interview with author, July 4, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

in the ELBC broadcasting studio. During the following twenty-four hours Stubblefield repeatedly played the song “Who Owns Papa’s Land?” by the Nigerian singer Sonny Okosun, along with his entire *Fire in Soweto* album which represents a type of subaltern counter-discourse.⁵⁸ The tracks “Papa’s Land” and “Fire in Soweto” (both released in 1979) were predictably banned by the apartheid authorities in South Africa, but they became hits in Liberia, especially during the early days of the 1980 coup and as such represent crucial historical sonic artifacts.⁵⁹

The importance of the musical selection of this anthem is enormous. “Who Owns Papa’s Land” revolves around the longstanding contentious issue of land tenure that lies at the crux of the struggle between the ruling class (characterized as Americo-Liberian) and the indigenous underclass majority, as discussed in the introductory chapter. Paragraph 16 of the (1847) Liberian constitution stated; “From time to time our number has been increased by immigration from America and by accession from native tribes; and from time to time, as circumstances required it, we have extended our borders by the acquisition of land by honorable purchase from the natives of the country.” Furthermore, (again) from the Americo-Liberian settler point of view, Paragraph 23 of the constitution stated “No desire for territorial aggrandizement brought us to these shores; nor do we believe so sordid a motive entered into the high consideration of those who aided us in providing this asylum. Liberia is an asylum from the most grinding oppression.”

Since the ruling oligarchy had ostensibly just been toppled, the prickly question arose; who actually did own “papa’s land”? By broadcasting this track repeatedly, DJ Stubblefield was politically situating Liberia within a contemporary African liberation struggle, which explicitly

⁵⁸ Sonny Okosun, *Fire in Soweto/ Papa’s Land*, Radic Records 12RIC 105, c. 1979, 33rpm.

⁵⁹ Significantly, West African musicians felt the need to create new generic labels to describe the Afro-centric fusion music that they were producing. Okosun created his own style of music that fused highlife, Afro-funk, and reggae and christened it “Ozzidi” named after the Ozzidi Band which he founded in 1974.

envisioned a program of radical land reform and redistribution couched within an African idiom. Okosun's song commenced by posing the question of rightful property ownership, and ended twelve minutes later with the emotionally charged emphatic demand; "Give us our land!" The second verse implicitly constitutes an entreaty directed towards the newly-formed PRC to proactively address the controversial issue of land reform (predictably, this never happened). Similar to the trans-continental vision of the Victorian-era British arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, disenfranchised Africans are depicted in the song as desiring to rule the entire continent "from Cape to Cairo." Another embedded implication is that Liberia (although not specifically mentioned) is situated alongside other African territories such as Namibia and Zimbabwe that are struggling for majority rule with the help of "freedom fighters."⁶⁰ The strident lyrics boldly proclaim...

We want to know, want to know!
Who owns papa's land?
We want to who owns the land!

Will you free my people's lands?
We want to rule our papa's land
I say, will you free my brother's lands?
We want to rule our papa's land

Chinese are ruling the China-land
Japanese are ruling in their Japan
England is being governed by Englishmen
Americans are ruling America-oh
So, Africa must be ruled by Africans

Angola want to know who own the land!
Namibia want to know who own the land!
Zimbabwe want to know who own the land!
Freedom Fighters want to know who own the land!

⁶⁰ By virtue of playing the song repeatedly, the DJ was effectively communicating his view that the song was centrally relevant to the events that were unfolding.

Africa want to know who own the land!
Will you let my people go?
We want to rule from Cape to Cairo
Give us the land! My papa's land, Give us the land!⁶¹

At the historical juncture of the 1980 putsch these incendiary lyrics implicitly encouraged massive land redistribution to the spawn of indigenous Liberians from the descendents of the latecomer “pioneer” settlers.

“Redemption of the Liberian People” Dance Drama

In the Cause of the People, the Struggle Continues!

–PRC slogan found on government letterhead

Liberian actor (and later journalist) James Fasuekoi refers to the “Redemption of the Liberian People” as the Liberian Cultural Ambassador’s (LCA) “masterpiece.”⁶² The drama was written directly after the April 12, 1980 coup, and performed for over a year (close to two years) before it was discontinued in the interests of national reconciliation. Fasuekoi recalls a dramatic scene where the “Congo man” was being “toted in a hammock.”⁶³ During the 18th and early 19th century, it was compulsory for the “native” people to provide portage by palanquin for visiting elites from the coast. These porters were frequently recruited by force by the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF). This was just one painful historical memory that symbolized the humiliating subjugation that the majority of the “native” Liberians felt under Americo-Liberian rule.

In the dance drama Fasuekoi played the part of the late President Tolbert, because of his physical resemblance to Tolbert. Fasuekoi intensely disliked that role, because he was playing the role of the villain, and had to deliver Tolbert’s homilies about “Rally Time” and act out the

⁶¹ Sonny Okosun, *Fire in Soweto/ Papa's Land*, Radic Records 12RIC 105, c. 1979, 33rpm.

⁶² James Fasuekoi, interview with author, Jan. 27, 2008, via phone from Whitehall, PA

⁶³ Ibid.

“little corruptions” that took place. Near the end of the dance drama, Fasuekoi, playing President Tolbert, was sitting at his office desk in the Executive Mansion when the soldiers burst in and murdered him. Overall however, Fasuekoi loved the drama because of the subject matter of the script. It explored the historical trajectory of a small minority (figured at around 2.5% but never more than 5% of the population, depending on the source) and posed the question of how this minority group could subjugate, ill-treat, and exploit the vast majority of the Liberian people for over one hundred years, since independence in 1847.⁶⁴ Another reason Fasuekoi loved this particular ballet was because of the audience reaction. The people in the audience would regularly break down and cry during performances. Then the actors themselves would start crying. “Can you imagine?” he asked, “we all felt touched.”⁶⁵

Social Commentary on the 1980 Coup

Painfully, the widespread hopes of the military fulfilling a role as an altruistic neutral arbiter within Liberian society were dashed within the first few months after the haphazard and frenetic takeover. Liberian novelist Emma Shaw observed that after the 1980 coup “dreams of redemption were dashed to the ground... (and) brotherhood (was) betrayed.” She states “they (the coup makers) would *chakla* any plan that didn’t give them a chance to eat like the big men.”⁶⁶ Shaw furthermore claims that the self-described “revolution” of 1980 was simply a front for those outsiders formerly locked out of exclusive elite circles and concluded that “the road to

⁶⁴ *ibid.* How did the Americo-Liberian clique actually succeed in keeping the masses in subjugation for so long? This was always somewhat of a mystery to Fasuekoi, so it interested him to see this topic taken on by the playwright and by the troupe as a whole.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Shaw, 136. The verb *chakla* (or *chakala*) is Liberian English, and it means to destroy, to scatter, or to undermine.

redemption from the bottom of society to the pinnacle of power...had too many unseen side streets and dark alleyways.”⁶⁷

According to former Liberian Ambassador James B. Freeman, in the coup’s wake a “we thing” mentality soon spread, which was “the perception that the country and everything in it now belonged to the common people” as opposed to simply being the monopoly of the former elite class.⁶⁸ In his opinion, this contagious attitude resulted in a spate of unpredictable lawlessness which the junta, instead of addressing, actually reveled in.

At first the relatively young military rulers enacted a smattering of popular symbolic measures such as abolishing the Pioneer’s Day and Matilda Newport Day holidays that celebrated the military triumph of the Americo-Liberians over the “aboriginal” majority. On the “sidewalk radio” of public sentiment however, the ruling People’s Redemption Council (PRC) soon came to be popularly known as “People Repeating Corruption.” This widespread bitterness was intensified due to the high hopes the fledgling coup had initially raised. By examining records released by electric highlife groups and other recording artists of the time, we discover the focus on multilingualism which validates the cultural turn that in turn stressed the ideal of ethnic pluralism in Liberia. First, we will turn to the artistic response of the prolific recording artist and prominent singer-activist Miatta Fahnbulleh.

Miatta Fahnbulleh on the 1980 Coup

In an interview in *West Africa* magazine in which singer-songwriter Miatta Fahnbulleh apparently defended the 1980 coup, she provocatively declared that “My understanding is that if you treat a man like a dog, then you don’t expect him to act like anything else” and furthermore

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ James B. Freeman, *My Country ‘Tis of Thee; Memoirs, Reflections and Reminiscences of a Former Liberian Ambassador* (Baltimore, MD: American Literary Press, 2004), 210.

“to have thought that there could have been a change in Liberia without bloodshed would have been dreaming.”⁶⁹ Fahnbulleh asserted that “Maybe because (the soldiers) had arms, they decided to take action, but they were actually echoing the feeling of the masses.”⁷⁰ Fahnbulleh was praised in *The Redeemer* newspaper, in July 1980, for her apparent support of Doe’s military coup, defending it against (in her view) hypocritical Nigerian claims that the execution of thirteen of former president Tolbert’s ministers was “barbaric.”⁷¹ In response, a November 1980 speech was crafted by the IMF and U.S. Embassy personnel, in which Doe stated “the meaning of the revolution is still misunderstood after half a year. Some people are still dreaming of the impossible. They are thinking that the revolution means instant prosperity...they feel that this is a revolution of entitlement.”⁷² Fahnbulleh reflected “I think we were all disillusioned when we realized the (lack of) qualifications of the coup-makers and heard their pronouncements; (my song) ‘The Message’ was not in support of the coup, but a call to create a new society. The coup-makers and their supporters did not like the song, because it did not have the names of PRC members or praises dedicated to them.”⁷³

There was certainly a rupture between the idealistic, altruistic Fahnbulleh and the ruling junta which mirrored the rupture between the military rulers and the society at large.⁷⁴ Fahnbulleh described herself as occasionally “politically naïve” but likewise an eternal optimist,

⁶⁹ Nii Bentsi-Enchill, “Master-Sergeant Doe’s Coup is Defended,” *West Africa*, June 16, 1980, 1057-59.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Samuel Jackson, “Hats off to Miatta” *Redeemer* (Monrovia), July 8, 1980.

⁷² Dunn, 107.

⁷³ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁷⁴ During a televised live performance, Fahnbulleh dedicated “The Message of the Revolution” to “our children’s children.” She also claimed that the song received only two weeks of local airplay until it was dropped from regular rotation.

stating; “I’ve always felt the need to use the music to relay society’s message.”⁷⁵ In this sense her engagement with the burning issues of the day affords us insights into the creative responses of the “progressive forces” in Liberian society under the totalitarian military dictatorship.⁷⁶

Miatta Fahnbulleh and “Revolution”

One extremely significant song politically was the best-selling Miatta Fahnbulleh single “The Message of the Revolution” which was released just a few months after the 1980 coup. Subsequently, a half page advertisement was published in the *New Liberian* newspaper on October 6, 1981, which featured a photo of Fahnbulleh sporting a close cropped “natural” afro hairdo, underneath the (capitalized) heading “The Message Of The Revolution.” The earnest lyrics appeared beneath Fahnbulleh’s image in two columns.⁷⁷ Since most listeners would have familiarized themselves with the song aurally; based upon airplay and widespread cassette distribution, the newspaper ad was an explication aimed at the literate “movers and shakers” in post-coup Liberian society. The song acts as a personal political platform, as the activist Fahnbulleh appealed directly in print to the influential (literate) segment of Monrovia in a mood that oscillates between that of a plaintive lament and strident call for the birth of a new society altogether...

Let the old and the young
come together as one
as we start on this new road
to realize our goal
In a land where peace and justice
shall be the right of every man

⁷⁵ Stephanie C. Horton, “A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh”, *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing*, vol. 1, issue 1, August 2004. www.liberiaseabreeze.com/archives.

⁷⁶ This record of activism showcases Fahnbulleh’s penchant for championing human rights issues, in which she specifically targeted issues of women’s and children’s rights.

⁷⁷ “The Message of the Revolution,” *New Liberian* (Monrovia), October 6, 1981.

Let no tribe or tongue divide
our heritage is one
Let our aims and dreams unite
our destiny is one

Let's build a new society
with respect and unity
Let every man and woman
let the children of tomorrow
be ever ready to join hands
be ever ready to stand firm
In the name of true equality
to earn us true prosperity⁷⁸

The overt critique found within this intentionally edifying “message” makes it clear that the composer was actively attempting to influence the course of societal change (in what she would consider to be a “progressive” direction) within a potentially rejuvenated post-coup society. The forward-looking Fahnbulleh, among many others discussed in this study, idealistically envisioned a “post-revolutionary” Liberia as confronting a timely opportunity to metaphorically begin down a new path towards future social equality and growing prosperity.⁷⁹ It bears reiterating that, in my view, which is the majority viewpoint amongst my Liberian informants, unfortunately this proved to be a transformational vision of national unity and social justice that the autocratic military coup-makers focused on personal survival and self-aggrandizement did not share.

Isaac Thompson, the journalist who interviewed Roberts, urged TR’s Liberian fan base to prove their idol wrong by coming out to his concerts in a massive show of support during the three weeks he was to be in Liberia from mid-March to mid-April of 1982. By April of 1982 Roberts was performing at all the top venues in Monrovia; drawing large crowds with his

⁷⁸ Miatta Fahnbulleh, *Message of the Revolution*, Pan-African Records-London, p. 1981, 33rpm.

⁷⁹ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

electrifying stage presence at the E.J. Roye Auditorium, the “Club International” (on Broad Street), and Bacardi Disco (at Hotel Africa). This spate of concerts was dubbed the “T.R./N.B. Safari” by the *Daily Observer* due to the fact that Nimba Burr was the opening act, and together they “stormed Monrovia nightspots.”⁸⁰ Significantly, Thompson urged fans to prove to TR that “since the revolution we have changed many of our attitudes, including those towards musicians.”⁸¹ Unfortunately, there is no convincing evidence that these negative popular attitudes had indeed changed after 1980.

Miatta Fahnbulleh, First Lady of Song

Miatta Fahnbulleh often referred to as Liberia’s “First Lady of Song” is one of the most internationally recognized of all of the Liberian musicians, even though she never achieved financial success in American music charts.⁸² In 1981, the *New Liberian* stated “Miatta Fahnbulleh is Liberia’s best known international singer.”⁸³ The same article commented that the dynamic vocalist “uses traditional material as the springboard for contemporary songs” but was also “influenced by the sounds and the spirit of a new generation of West Africans.”⁸⁴ Fahnbulleh came from a more privileged background than the majority of musicians featured in this study. Fahnbulleh had well-connected and politically active parents, and undoubtedly could not have achieved the same level of success without her world class education and international connections. Her father was Henry Boima Fahnbulleh Sr., the Liberian ambassador to the former

⁸⁰ Isaac Thompson, “The T.R./N.B. Safari,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), April 8, 1982.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 2, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁸³ “Miattah Fahnbulleh: The Pride of Liberia,” *New Liberian* (Monrovia), June 12, 1981.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Fahnbulleh is more famous in England, Sierra Leone and Nigeria than in the U.S..

British East Africa.⁸⁵ Fahnbulleh was raised at various points in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and England due to her father's career postings. Subsequently, she adopted a cosmopolitan worldview at a relatively young age. She was thereby well traveled in an era when the vast majority of Liberians never left their homeland, and most young women of her age group were "confined to domesticity."⁸⁶

As previously stated, during the 1970s Fahnbulleh was one of the first female singers to record popular music in indigenous Liberian languages along with Yatta Zoe and Hawa Daisy Moore.⁸⁷ By 1984, Fahnbulleh was situated by the local press amongst Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Manu Dibango, Fela Ransome Kuti, Ray Ellis and Sonny Okosun, as one of the "seven contemporary African artists who have retained traditional characteristics and values in their musical careers."⁸⁸ Fahnbulleh toured with South African jazzman Hugh Masekela across the U.S. in 1974, and performed at the FESTAC '77 mega-fest against the wishes of the Liberian minister of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICAT) who thought she was "too Westernized."⁸⁹

In 1975, Miatta Fahnbulleh collaborated with sculptor R. Vanjah Richards and Kona Khasu (Emmanuel Roberts), to form the Blamadon Theatre Workshop in Monrovia, whose goals were to promote Liberian arts and culture through the training of local artists and educators in

⁸⁵ Which included Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

⁸⁶ Stephanie C. Horton, "A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh", *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing*, vol. 1, issue 1, August 2004. www.liberiaseabreeze.com/archives.

⁸⁷ Bennre "Benny" Johnson, interview with author, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁸⁸ Mlanju Reeves, "The Diaspora of Africa's Music," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), October 4, 1984.

⁸⁹ Stephanie C. Horton, "A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh", *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing*, vol. 1, issue 1, August 2004. www.liberiaseabreeze.com/archives.

order to facilitate “the integration of cultural studies into our educational curriculum.”⁹⁰ After many disappointments this project began to seem untenable, and in response, Fahnbulleh launched her solo recording career, convinced that “the most effective way that I could contribute to the development of (a sense of) cultural confidence in the younger generation of Liberians would be to set a personal example. It was this (realization) that led me to going professional.”⁹¹ Next we will examine the career of another female recording artist who got her start in the cultural troupe movement.

Princess Fatu Gayflor’s Beginnings

Born in the town of Kakata, to parents of both Vai and Loma extraction, Gayflor’s singing career started at the tender age of twelve, during traditional moonlight dances in northwestern Lofa County.⁹² Princess Fatu Gayflor, commonly referred to by the moniker “The Golden Voice of Liberia,” is a pivotal female figure within the field of Liberian performance arts who has played a large role in preserving her country’s musical traditions; both before and after launching her solo career.⁹³ Gayflor was part of a group of cultural nationalists that spearheaded a cultural revival movement by joining indigenous Liberian languages, melodies and traditional song themes with the modern sensibilities of Liberian electric highlife.⁹⁴ This new Liberian electric highlife genre emerging in the late 1970s was an amalgam that according to Cynthia Schmidt, blurred the distinctions between the modern and traditional, rural and urban largely due to the pervasive influence of the source material the artists drew upon for inspiration, combined with

⁹⁰ “Liberian Artists,” *Liberian Star* (Monrovia), June 17, 1975.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview by author, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Even if she never explicitly used this term to describe her music.

the modern electric instrumentation they chose to utilize.⁹⁵ This was largely a Monrovia-based movement that flourished during a period of rapid rural-to-urban migration that took the National Cultural Center (NCC) at Kendeja as an inspirational model. This group of cultural nationalists, which included Caesar Gator and O.J. Brown, made recordings at Studio 99 in the mid-1980s and had shared roots in the cultural troupe movement, especially their personal affiliations with the National Cultural Troupe (NCT).

There was also a Sande “bush school” near the village of Kenema, within walking distance of Kendeja, where prepubescent girls became initiated into womanhood and instructed in the ways of their elders (which included the memorization of specialized dances and songs).⁹⁶ As a young girl, Gayflor was initiated into the Sande society, where she first learned the traditional songs and dances of the Loma (Lorma) people that had been handed down through the ancestral generations from atavistic times. This initiation into the Poro and Sande “secret societies” was a widespread normative practice in rural Liberia (except in the southeast region of the country). Mastering special songs and dances was (and still is) a prerequisite for graduating from these initiation schools and these dances are routinely put on public display during the “breaking of the bush” graduation ceremonies. While a member of the NCT, Gayflor received a monthly salary from the government; the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism (MICAT), as did other members of the troupe.⁹⁷ From youth Gayflor began committing to memory and

⁹⁵ Cynthia Schmidt, “Liberianische Pop-Musik: Altes und Neues” in *Liberia; Leben wo der Pfeffer Wachst* (Bremen, Germany: Liberian Working Group, 1989).

⁹⁶ One of the prominent instructors there (whom I met and interviewed during the summer of 2008) was an older woman named Gbessay Kiazolu (a.k.a. “Ma Gbessie”). Sande initiation schools are typically associated with sacred groves in rural areas in the northern and western counties of Liberia, not with metropolitan areas surrounding and including Monrovia. After she left the NCT, Gayflor founded her own cultural troupe called “the Daughters of King N’Jola” who were active from 1985-1990.

⁹⁷ Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA. Additionally there were other amenities such as an elementary school, high school, dormitory, clinic, and cafeteria on the campus.

performing traditional songs and dances from all parts of the country. The term “cultural ambassador” could describe those Liberian artistic pedagogues in exile (predominantly in the U.S.) who have continued to promote the complimentary and intertwined expressive traditions of dance, song, and drumming.⁹⁸ Gayflor is exemplary of this category.

Liberian music connoisseurs remember Gayflor’s first hit song called “Market Day” that addressed the social realities of Liberian market women and will be examined in detail later in this chapter.⁹⁹ This feminist anthem draws attention to the plight of market women who must work and raise children and at the same time, and was intended to spark debate. “E-Beh-Kiya-Ekooneh,” her number one hit song, earned Gayflor the enviable title of “Princess of Liberian folk songs.” She was appropriately honored and crowned in an impressive ceremony this year in Monrovia.¹⁰⁰

Princess Fatu Gayflor’s Career

Next we will examine the influential career of Princess Fatu Gayflor. In 1977, at age twelve, Gayflor joined the NCT and soon became a central fixture within the troupe, where she was showcased for her crowd-pulling singing and dancing talents. As a teenager, Gayflor initiated her innovative stylistic explorations by experimenting with recording traditional folk tunes set to modern instruments such as electric guitars, bass guitars, and keyboards. In addition to singing and dancing, Gayflor also mastered the *saa-saa* (a gourd rattle traditionally played by women). She also attempted to consistently infuse her music with positive and universalist

⁹⁸ The “Liberian Cultural Ambassadors” is the name of a specific dance group formed in 1978 that has performed over the years in exile and has (largely) educated a younger generations of pupils in Liberian dance, drumming, and folksong traditions.

⁹⁹ George Kiadii, interview with author, June 23, 2008, Truth-FM, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted by Teddy O. Richards on the back side of the album cover; Princess Fatu Gayflor, *The Golden Voice of Liberia*, Studio 99/102, c. 1984, 33rpm.

messages of peace, love, and unity.¹⁰¹ Gayflor was featured prominently as the NCT toured internationally in the late 1970s' and early 1980's; winning awards at various international festivals, including the 1985 World's Fair in New Orleans, for their performances of dance dramas, drumming and songs from the deep wellspring of Liberia's cultural patrimony.¹⁰² Gayflor stated at the time of her record release with Studio 99, "Liberian folk songs grow on me; music is my life, and every day I live it. I sing to spread the joy in Liberian folk songs throughout the world, and I will continue to do this all my earthly days."¹⁰³ By 1985 Gayflor could boldly claim "Surely Liberian culture, folk songs and dance, like the Phoenix, has risen from the ashes."¹⁰⁴

Princess Fatu Gayflor & the Market Women of Rally Time

Just before the 1985 national elections, a popular song released on cassette by Studio 99 addressed gender issues in "post-revolutionary" Liberia, particularly the living and working conditions of Liberian market women.¹⁰⁵ This insightful song, entitled "Market Day" was noted at the time for its social significance (and impact) by visiting ethno-musicologist Cynthia Schmidt. It was composed by "Big Steve" Worjloh and T'kpan Nimely, and was dedicated to Worjloh's mother who was a vendor in the marketplace. After getting permission from the composers, Princess Fatu Gayflor recorded the track and the cassette release became an instant

¹⁰¹ Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, August 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Quoted by Teddy O. Richards on the reverse side of the album cover; Princess Fatu Gayflor, *The Golden Voice of Liberia*, Studio 99/102, c. 1984, 33rpm.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Doe's wife, Nancy Doe had been a market vendor, selling produce at the Rally Time Market across the road from the BTC army barracks before being abruptly propelled into the role of First Lady. Therefore this issue struck at the heart of Liberian and especially Monrovia society.

hit, sparking a nationwide debate on gender roles.¹⁰⁶ From the remake version recorded later by “Big Steve” Worjloh we can reconstruct the lyrics.¹⁰⁷

Soon morning as ko-ko crows
The women dem know that it’s the day, now!
Early morning five o’clock
The women dem long time on their way ah!

Early morning mama wakes me up
For the market ground oh!
Mama na call me by my name and say
Oh Sargee Brown-oh!

Mama dey go to Rally Time Market
Every morning
Just to make me at least have some *kalla*
Just for living

Mama na try to educate me
For a better Liberia
Mama working hard
While me Papa gone downtown Monrovia

Market Day Oh!
Market Day!
Market Day Oh!
Market Day!

How much for your pepper? pepper!
How much for your poor Joe? poor Joe!¹⁰⁸
How much for your *bapleh*? *bapleh*!
How much for your lappa? lappa!
How much for your *kittely*?
How much for your fufu? fufu!
How much for your slipper? slipper!

¹⁰⁶ Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, July 31, 2010, via phone from Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁰⁷ Big Steve, *Aay Africa*, Big Steve Productions 4458, compact disc, c. 2000, track 4.

¹⁰⁸ “Poor Joe” and *bapleh* are two types of inexpensive fish consumed in soups or with rice. Kittely is also called “bitterball,” which is a miniature eggplant-type vegetable that is mashed to make the popular Liberian dish called *torborgee*.

How much for your t-shirt? t-shirt!¹⁰⁹

In the version of the song sung by Princess Fatu Gayflor (as recalled by her), the line “while me Papa gone downtown Monrovia” was originally; “Mama sleeping tired while me Papa in dey liquor shop.” The song, as originally envisioned therefore, was written from the perspective of a child, and depicts a hard-working mother and an emotionally distant, alcoholic father. The mother works hard every day, rising at the break of dawn to go sell at the Rally Time Market (in downtown Monrovia) in order to provide nourishment and an education for the child so that Liberia might have a brighter future.¹¹⁰ Therefore, listening to the song was designed to spark gender debates about the sexual division of labor.¹¹¹

A Gedeh Rooster in the Big City of Lights

The modern-day minstrel Gedeh Rooster (Joseph Brooks) was known locally for his euphonious song “My Son in Monrovia” released circa 1988. His moniker identifies him as being a citizen from Grand Gedeh County in underdeveloped rural southeast Liberia. This single from the margins of sedimentary society described rampant urban migration and familial disintegration of the period.¹¹²

Liberian musician Samuel Payne Cooper remembers a similar topical antecedent; the comical song “Lattey, You Burn You Nunu” which described a truck called “Kolahun” that caught fire with a woman named Lattey inside. This older song was a social commentary on the

¹⁰⁹ The song gives the listener a sense of the commodities for sale in the Rally Time market and a sense of the vibrant commercial atmosphere. Of the items mentioned in the song, the majority (five) are food products, and the remaining (three) are items of clothing.

¹¹⁰ The foodstuffs mentioned specifically in the original version of the song are popular street foods that would be typically found in the market; *kalla* is a deep-fried bean cake ball served with pepper sauce. These fried snacks (along with fufu) consist of relatively filling carbohydrates to stave off hunger.

¹¹¹ I am still unsure exactly who Sargee Brown is. That specific name was inserted by Big Steve Worjloh. The version sung by Princess Fatu Gayflor had the name “Fatu girl” inserted; an obvious self-reference.

¹¹² Gedeh Rooster, *My Son in Monrovia*, Vol. 3, Cross Atlantic Studios Productions, audiocassette, n.d.

mad rush of rural-to-urban migration in the post-World War II era, since the actual Kolahun is a rural backwater town close to the Sierra Leonean border.¹¹³

By the mid-1970s, MOJA spokesman Dew Tuah-Wleh Mayson observed that “the great majority (over 70%) of our people in the rural areas are drowning in poverty, barely making it on an income of no more than \$70 per year. Unemployment is rampant, particularly for young people in the cities. In 1974, the Ministry of Planning estimated that in Monrovia alone at least 15,000 persons were in search of work but could not find it.”¹¹⁴ Political scientist William Reno, remarked that at the time this song was penned the population of the Monrovia metropolitan area had virtually exploded in a relatively short time span. According to official census statistics, in 1970 the population of Liberia was 1,196,000, and it had doubled (in only fourteen years) to 2,116,000 by 1984. This population explosion continued throughout the decade of the 1980s, with the nation’s population rising to 2,494,000 by 1989.¹¹⁵

Throughout the 1980s, furthermore, Samuel Doe inherited a post-coup youthful population that expected more from the central government (in terms of jobs), coupled with massive rural-to-urban migration (predominately to Monrovia, but also to other urban conglomerations such as Buchanan, Ganta and Yekepa) which doubled the population of the capital city to 400,000 during the period from 1963 to 1972.¹¹⁶ In a speech to legislators, Doe publicly elaborated on the government’s efforts to “decentralize industrial and economic development” in order to “create more jobs and slow down migration to Monrovia.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Samuel Payne Cooper, Aug. 4, 2008, via phone from Philadelphia, PA.

¹¹⁴ Mayson, 136.

¹¹⁵ *World Book Encyclopedia*, Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation. 1970, 1984 & 1989.

¹¹⁶ William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 83.

¹¹⁷ Givens and Doe, 92.

In Gedeh Rooster's comical (yet ultimately tragic) song, a wayward son who has migrated to the capital disingenuously writes to his parents concerning all of the employment opportunities he has discovered. His father, however, experiences a rude awakening when he visits Monrovia and encounters his son in a homeless state and doing odd jobs in order to survive. The son untruthfully writes that he has found employment alternately as a policeman, a doctor, a vendor, and even as a minister. But when his father arrives, the prodigal son is variously doing manual labor, has turned into a criminal engaged in petty theft, or is even physically and/or spiritually dead. The piece concludes with a moral exhortation from father to son to return to the bucolic rural homestead for the time being. The future might hold some promise in the big city, but clearly the prodigal son is not prepared for urban habitation yet, since he has no marketable skills and no useful social connections. Gedeh Rooster was allegedly physically threatened for writing this song by the "barrow boys" (those young men who sold advanced items out of wheelbarrows in the streets of Monrovia) who resented the lyrics that represented them as "forever lost" to the city.¹¹⁸ The song foregrounds urban decline in Doe's Liberia. The lyrics are from the perspective of the wayward son's set of worried parents.

My son in Monrovia (8Xs)
Every day (he says) papa don't cry
Every day my son can write me
And say papa I be minister
Every day my son can write me
And say papa I be policeman
Every day my son can write me
And say mama I be doctor
Every day my son can write me
And say papa I be *yannah* boy (small goods vendor)
Every day my son can write me
And say mama, I can make business

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Bowier, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

And when I went to see my son in Monrovia
He not get nowhere to sleep!
He not get nowhere to stay!
He not get no food to eat!
He not get no clothes to wear!
He not get no job to do!

When I went to see my son up and down Monrovia
When I went to see my son up and down Broad Street
When I went to see my son up and down Gurley Street
When I went to see my son, I had to go to Waterside (market)
When I went to see my son, up and down to West Point (congested slum area)

When I went to see my son, (he was) doing kitchen work
When I went to see my son, he was riding wheelbarrow
When I went to see my son, he was six feet underground!
When I went to see my son, he was (a) pick-pocket

Wetin you go do so my *pikin*? (What thing are you doing my child?)
Wetin you go do so my *pikin*?
When (there is) no way for you, go home-o
One day, one day, better will come for you¹¹⁹

Through the skillful deployment of humor, this mellifluous tune is a vessel for a stinging social critique of contemporary urban migration in Monrovia sung in Pidgin English that was quite accessible to the average Liberian listener. The moral lessons regarding urban migration contained within the song are abundantly clear.

Youth Concerts and Variety Shows

Liberian girl, you know that you came and you changed my world
I wait for the day, when you have to say 'I do'
and I'll smile and say it too
and forever we'll be true
I love you Liberian girl¹²⁰

–Michael Jackson

¹¹⁹ Gedeh Rooster, *My Son in Monrovia*, vol. 3, side A, track 1.

¹²⁰ Michael Jackson, "Liberian Girl" *Bad*, LP. 1987.

Michael Jackson's album *Thriller* (1982) has proved to be the best-selling albums of all time with upwards of 110 million copies sold globally. During the height of the subsequent global Michael Jackson hysteria there was a Liberian performer named Valentine Brown who took on the mantle of "The Liberian Michael Jackson."¹²¹ He would perform "flash dancing" which was a derivative of both disco and break-dancing that included spectacular dance moves popularized by the "king of pop." There was even a contest at the Sha-Na-Na the Bronx nightclub in which the Sierra Leonean Michael Jackson engaged in a dance competition with the Liberian Michael Jackson (and predictably lost).¹²²

The following oral testimony represents the manner in which American music obsessed Liberian teenagers as well, and tended to dominate teen-oriented variety shows of the period. On one occasion when former junior high school student Debra Doeway was living adjacent to the Monrovia City Hall, she snuck into the E.J. Roye building auditorium when a high school talent show was in progress with a few of her siblings.¹²³ The high school talent show raged on with students performing Michael Jackson hits such as "Wanna be Startin' Somethin'" and the title track to his global hit LP *Thriller*. High school age youth were performing Jackson's signature "moonwalk" dance across the stage. Others mounted the stage to sing versions of Donna Summer, Diane Warwick or Gladys Knight & the Pips songs. It was a night that Doeway would remember with clarity some twenty years later, and it epitomized not only the Liberian obsession

¹²¹ Mary Brown, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. Valentine Brown was not the only Michael Jackson impersonator, but just one of the more prominent ones. Mary Brown was a member of the group the "Flash Dancers." The group was most certainly named after the popular American film "Flashdance" (1983). Brown's heroes and favorite singers at the time of her involvement with the Flash Dancers, were Michael Jackson and Donna Summers. The Carlton Disco on Broad Street was their favorite performance space. The Sha-Na-Na the Bronx Disco on Gurley Street was another favorite haunt.

¹²² T-Max Teah, "Rap Dance' at Shanana," *Daily Observer*, (Monrovia), May 18, 1989.

¹²³ Debra Doeway, interview with author, Sept. 1, 2008, Norfolk, VA. Doeway's uncle had sent them off to see a performance at the nearby Providence Island, but the youngsters were afraid of the large crowds that were "too plenty" milling around on the congested island.

with American pop stars and their music, but also the excitement that live performances generated.

One final example of this phenomenon should suffice. After leaving the Moga Band, guitarist John Sheriff joined an outfit called the Sheikhs. The Sheikhs won a year-long contract to be the house band at (the then brand new) luxurious Hotel Africa (located in Virginia, Liberia, about ten miles northwest of downtown Monrovia) in late 1979. Thereafter, a fiercely contested annual competition was held to determine which group would win the lucrative contract.¹²⁴ Sheriff recalls that one of the judges at the time was the visiting Robert “Kool” Bell from the influential American crossover jazz/funk/disco group “Kool & the Gang.”¹²⁵ This demonstrates concretely who the musical idols of these groups were; top African-American chart-busting talents. Concretely, in this example we have American agents literally sitting in judgment over local popular music groups and their offerings.

¹²⁴ “Sheikhs Awarded Contract at Hotel Africa,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), January 15, 1987.

¹²⁵ John Sheriff, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

CHAPTER 5
RECORDING STUDIOS AND CASSETTE PIRATERS IN THE 1980S

How can broadcasting be used to unite us in the interest of the Liberian masses when ELBC sounds like an American radio station?¹

–Togba Nah Tippeteh

I don't see how an African music today can be about what doesn't affect our lives now. Our music should not be about love, it should be about reality and what we are up to now...Afrobeat is an occasion for politics because that is the occasion we are in now, people suffering.²

–Fela Anikulapo Kuti

There is a white way, there is a black way, and then there is the Liberian way!³

–Toniah Williams

NO MONEY, NO FRIEND

–Liberian Taxi Slogan

Introduction

Within the first section of this chapter we will be examining the case studies of two major recording studios in Monrovia during the 1980s: Hotline Studios and Studio 99. The first studio was owned by a Liberian, and the second by a foreign interloper. I argue that both studios represent experiments that flourished briefly before ultimately ending in tragedy under wildly different circumstances. I argue that we can gain many insights into the debates that were raging within the musical community by studying the example of Studio 99 and its demise. I also argue that this was the production site of the best examples of the emergent Liberian electric highlife genre. Records that were produced at Studio 99 exemplify the flowering of the movement. In the

¹ Togba-Nah Tippeteh, "Down with Sectionalism, Up with Unity in the Interest of the Liberian Masses," in *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, ed. H. Boima Fahnbulleh (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 84.

² John Collins, *Fela; Kalakuta Notes* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2009), 135.

³ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

middle section we will examine ways in which musicians struggled against various forms of exploitation, namely by the formation of a labor union (MULA). I will discuss various positions articulated concerning both the successes and failures of this effort. In the final, third section of this chapter, we will examine how the introduction of cassette technology into a corrupt political environment led to the rampant practice of organized cassette piracy cartels.

Recording Studios and Musicians

During the 1980s, Liberian musicians encountered firsthand economic exploitation at the hands of employers and recording studio owners. They resisted against these crippling conditions by deploying various strategies and exercising new forms of solidarity as demonstrated by the formation of a musicians union (MULA) and as illustrated by the musician's protest march that forcibly shut down the operations of Studio 99. Many of the relatively well-known Liberian recording artists refused to record in Liberia due to poor sound quality and in order to avoid potentially exploitative scenarios. For example, Miatta Fahnbulleh never recorded at any of the Liberian studios; instead she recorded material at the EMI studios in Lagos, Nigeria, in addition to studios in England.⁴ The dynamic duo Zack & Gebah recorded almost exclusively in Nigeria. The all female group Flamma Sherman recorded in both Nigeria and England during the late 1960s. Both the Soulful Dynamics and Kapingbdi recorded in West Germany, and there are many more possible examples. Other Liberian musicians and singers, however, decided to use the recording services that were available within the country, and for that reason, we will be examining the studio options that were available during the 1980s presently.

I chose to write about only the most influential singers and popular musical groups during the 1970s and 1980s based upon their overall prominence in terms of name recognition and

⁴ Miatta Fahnbulleh, e-mail message to author, Sept. 24, 2006.

musical output during those decades. Some individuals, such as Miatta Fahnbulleh, Yatta Zoe and the duo Zack & Gebah, I was fortunate enough to interview personally. Other important artists such as Morris Dorley, T’kpan Nimely, Robert Toe and Tecumsey Roberts had sadly passed away before I began my research in 2005, while their hit songs and music recorded on cassette have survived to various degrees.⁵

Hotline Studios

Hotline Studios, the brainchild of producer and Liberian Dream manager Toniah Williams, had a short and active lifespan, but was destroyed by the intrusion of the Civil War in 1990. Williams returned to Liberia with U.S. \$65,000 worth of equipment and opened Hotline Recording Studio in 1984 in the Logantown neighborhood (of Monrovia) on Bushrod Island. Williams produced many Liberian musicians under the label “WET Productions” with partner and pioneering gospel singer Reverend Timothy Thomas. Hotline Studios followed after the demise of Faisal Helwani’s Studio 99 in 1985, and attempted to fill the gap in the local recording industry left by their departure.

Hotline Studios was managed on a different and more equitable business model altogether. Unlike ABC Studios and Studio 99, Hotline was owned by a Liberian who was in direct competition with the Lebanese interests within the music industry. According to Williams, Studio 99 owner Faisal Helwani did not have the interests of the Liberian artists at heart, and only came to Liberia in order to exploit them; but it must be kept in mind that Helwani was his commercial competitor.⁶ Hotline Studios was originally an eight track studio and cassette manufacturing factory. The quality and capability was boosted to sixteen tracks from 1984 to

⁵ There are a few musicians of the time period that I am still attempting to interview such as Caesar Gator, Charles Alake Williams and Solomon Gow. These will have to wait until this study is ready to be published in book form. Gator currently resides in Liberia.

⁶ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

1989 as Williams was continually attempting to improve his production capacity. The standard recording contracts at William's studio were three years in length and based upon contracts Williams had observed during his brief residence in Nashville, Tennessee in the late 1970s. When Williams organized live concerts, he negotiated a contract wherein the artist was allocated 60% of the proceeds, while he retained 40%. In the studio, the arrangement was that the studio retained 65% of the royalties, while the recording artist retained 35%.⁷ Certain artists were able to successfully increase their royalties through negotiation with Williams on the basis of increased name recognition and product sales. For example, Zack Roberts had managed to negotiate his royalty percentage upwards to 50% from the initial 35% for his studio productions over time because of his increasing fame and sales totals.⁸

WET Productions would then package the cassettes, shrink-wrap them and ship them to the two distributors in business at the time; Super Sounds (owned by Tulsi Halwani) and Sweet Sounds. Professional distributors would then buy cassettes wholesale and distribute them to small businesses all over the country. During the mid-1980s these retailers would sell the cassettes for U.S. \$3.50 each, making a \$1.50 in profit on each cassette.⁹

Williams had travelled to the U.S. and purchased huge amounts of state-of-the-art recording equipment, and returned to launch the new remodeled and revamped Hotline Studios at Ducor Palace Intercontinental Hotel on December 23, 1989; exactly one day before warlord Charles Taylor launched his devastating invasion from Cote d'Ivoire, which was the opening offensive of the Liberian Civil War. Williams still possesses a printed program from the

⁷ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. This arrangement included transport, promotion, wardrobe changes for the artist, as well as other miscellaneous expenses.

⁸ Ibid. See Zack (Roberts), *Jammin Africa*, Zack (1) Productions Z03, c. 1989, 33rpm.

⁹ At that time, the U.S. dollar was legal tender since Liberia did not have its own currency until the introduction of a dual currency system under the Doe regime during the mid-1980s.

launching of the new and improved Hotline Studios that lists all of the artists that he had hoped to record.¹⁰ With the benefit of hindsight, to state that this launch was dismally timed would be a massive understatement. In the following year, (1990) after the Civil War had reached Monrovia, Hotline Studio was raided and ransacked by warlord Prince Yormie Johnson and his INPFL rebel faction (calling themselves “freedom fighters”).¹¹ These undisciplined forces looted William’s sound equipment and transported it to Prince Johnson’s base on Caldwell Road where it was incinerated in a conflagration which was the direct result of a battle between the INPFL and ECOMOG.

Record Producer Faisal Helwani

One central character in the history of recording studios in Liberia is Faisal Helwani.¹² Helwani was born in 1946 in Sekondi, Ghana and started promoting music while he was still in secondary school at age eighteen in 1964.¹³ He began making his mark in the Ghanaian music scene in the early 60s by organizing showcase nights that broke up the monotony of one band playing for six hours with fashion shows and competitions involving student acts. As an adult entrepreneur, Helwani invested in a fleet of taxicabs, and sold electronics & musical instruments which allowed him to amass enough capital to open his own nightclub, concert hall, casino and recording studio complex called the Napoleon Club in the cosmopolitan neighborhood of Osu,

¹⁰The launching program reads as follows; “albums and artists to be released (in 1990) by Hotline Studios include Hawa Daisy Moore, Lady Shangabusa (Rebecca Grant from Sierra Leone), The Kamara Brothers,

Tom O’Reilly (from Sierra Leone), Richard Walker (formerly of Morris Dorley’s band), New “G’ Crew (Liberian rap artists), and finally, The Sheikhs LP “Diamonds Can Cry.”

¹¹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹² Unfortunately Faisal Helwani passed away in 2008, and I spoke to him briefly, but was not able to conduct a full interview with him before he died in a hospital in Beirut, Lebanon. I was however, able to interview his son, Sami Helwani who, even though relatively young at the time, was a trained sound engineer actively involved in the Studio 99 project.

¹³ Adom, 1.

Accra, in 1971.¹⁴ In many ways the Napoleon Club was the Ghanaian counterpart to Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Shrine in Ikeja, Lagos.¹⁵ The nightclub complex staged as many as three bands per night, including legends such as his friend and associate Fela Kuti when on tour, but was forced to close in 1981 due to the military-imposed curfew in Ghana, which lasted five years.¹⁶

By 1983, the music business in Ghana was struggling because of the stifling curfew. Helwani was subsequently invited to "revolutionary" Liberia along with a team of Ghanaian session musicians by a friend after he had produced the group Voice of Liberia at his Studio One in Accra for his production company Bibini Music.¹⁷ The PRC's Jeffrey Gbatu invited Helwani to Liberia through a mutual acquaintance to produce more Liberian traditional music, and allegedly welcomed Helwani personally at the airport.¹⁸ Helwani's decision to relocate to Liberia in 1983 was influenced by the fact that there were no professional recording studios operating at that time in the Mano River Union (MRU) region either in neighboring Guinea or Sierra Leone.¹⁹ The state owned newspaper, the *New Liberian* claimed that "unlike the past when Liberian musicians were given 'chicken change' for their creative efforts by greedy businessmen, Studio 99 offers royalty contracts to those musicians it signs on."²⁰ Voice of Liberia was the first group to record in the new premises.²¹

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Collins, *Fela; Kalakuta Notes*, 28.

¹⁶ G. Pascal Zachary, "Loving the Highlife," *In These Times*, April 16, 2001.

¹⁷ The resulting "Voice of Liberia" cassette had become an instant hit in Liberia.

¹⁸ Adom, 57.

¹⁹ John Collins, "Livening-Up Liberia's Music Scene," *New African* (Monrovia), May 1985.

²⁰ "Liberian Music Makes a Comeback," *New Liberian* (Monrovia), May 1, 1984.

²¹ "Monrovia Gets Recording Studio," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), August 4, 1983.

While in based in Monrovia, Helwani's production company, "F Productions" recorded both traditional and popular music.²² During the time that Helwani was based in Liberia (from 1983 to 1985) he regularly returned to visit his family in Ghana to bring them rice, sugar, soap, and other necessities that were in short supply.

The Introduction of Studio 99

When Ghana-based musicologist John Collins was working as a music professor and author researching upcoming his book *Highlife Time* he flew to Monrovia (from Accra) for a week-long visit and interviewed musicians that were recording at Faisal Helwani's new eight track Studio 99.²³ According to Collins, his colleague Helwani was horrified with the situation he met in Liberia when he arrived; notably the lack of royalties for the artists. The situation in Liberia was much worse than the situation in Ghana during the 1970s and early 1980s in terms of recording studios.²⁴ Studio 99 was operational in Liberia for two frantically productive years; from 1983 to 1985. Studio 99 is remembered for the high quality of records that were released by cultural nationalists such as Princess Fatu Gayflor and Caesar Gartor, as well as its spectacular demise, when musicians marched on the premises and confiscated all the equipment during a dispute over royalties.

Production and Conflict at Studio 99

After a brief stint at the Holiday Inn, Helwani eventually chose a location for his venture in the Sinkor residential neighborhood.²⁵ In turn, Samuel Doe allegedly directed all of the musicians to go see him if they desired to make a recording. Additionally, ELBS was directed to

²² Adom, 45.

²³ John Collins, *Highlife Time* (Accra, Ghana: Anansesem Press, 1996), 225.

²⁴ John Collins, interview with author, May 22, 2008, University of Ghana at East Legon, Ghana.

²⁵ "Monrovia Gets Recording Studio," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), August 4, 1983.

play his “F Productions” recordings exclusively.²⁶ Studio 99 was located in a medium sized, single story, three bedroom rented house with a dilapidated fence at the end of 5th Street in Sinkor, near the Atlantic Ocean beachfront.²⁷ It was a superb location, importantly located close to the Executive Mansion, conveniently only fifteen minutes away from downtown Broad Street by taxicab, and only two blocks from the main thoroughfare: Tubman Boulevard.

Helwani was originally going to name his new studio; Studio One, which was the same name as his recording studio in Accra, attached to his Napoleon Nightclub, however, when he got to Monrovia he discovered that there was already a studio named Studio One in operation, therefore he decided to call his operation Studio 99, alluding to the notion that his recording business was the last word in the music industry.²⁸

Helwani felt it necessary to bring along an entourage of five Ghanaian session musicians because of the lack of trained musicians in Monrovia at the time, since there were plenty of singer-songwriters, but a shortage of guitarists, drummers, and multi-instrumentalists.²⁹ The living room of this house was transformed into the actual sound studio. This room was packed with instruments, including a piano, snare drums, a pair of congas, electric lead and bass guitars; in sum, all of the instruments and microphones needed to record a full-sized band. Adjoining the living room, Roger Brisson constructed a control room for the sound engineers which housed the main console.³⁰

²⁶ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John Collins, interview with author, May 26, 2008, University of Ghana at East Legon, Ghana. In actuality, as noted, Studio One did not last long after he arrived, and therefore offered little competition.

²⁹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

³⁰ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

Studio 99's resident sound engineer, Roger Brisson, is central to the history of the studio.³¹ Brisson was born in Accra in 1946. "Uncle Roger" first came to Liberia from Ghana in 1983 with Helwani in order to establish the recording studio. They were invited to Liberia by Speaker of the House of Representatives, Jeffrey Gbatu.³² Together with Helwani, Brisson and the team at Studio 99 eventually produced a total of twenty-four albums of Liberian popular music on cassette. Brisson transported the reel-to-reel master tapes from Studio 99 to London, where they were mixed, and pressed into vinyl records, similar to the practice of the former ABC Studios (whose records were pressed in Amsterdam).

According to Brisson, only one of these cassettes "went international" selling multiple copies outside of Liberia; the self titled cassette of singer-songwriter O.J. Brown. In the case of Princess Fatu Gayflor and Caesar Gartor, 10,000 records of each artist were pressed and both sets of vinyl records completely sold out.³³ Studio 99 may have been relatively basic, even by later Liberian standards, but it represented a monopoly in recording services for a few years during the mid-1980s.

The following is the story of the sad demise of Studio 99, an event that is clouded in confusion about which eyewitnesses are still reluctant to testify. There was a huge rift between Faisal Helwani and Roger Brisson after the ransacking of Studio 99. Helwani was convinced that Brisson had "connived with the Liberian musicians to steal everything."³⁴ Helwani felt so sickened after this incident in which he "lost everything" that he never returned to Liberia. In his

³¹ Ibid.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Adom, 33.

own words, “the experience was like being burned alive” by the “ungrateful” musicians, and constituted the “worst experience” in his entire career in the music industry.³⁵

When Studio 99 ceased operations, the recording equipment was being held in the basement of promoter Fred Deshield’s house.³⁶ While Helwani was visiting his family in Ghana, a group of angry musicians accused him of selling large numbers of copies of Morris Dorley’s cassette in Liberia, under-reporting the proceeds from sales, and withholding the royalty profits. This group of musicians also accused Helwani of selling Liberian cassettes in other parts of West Africa without their knowledge, and without dispensing the agreed upon royalties. The protest was led by folk musician T’kpan Nimely, who arrived at the DeShield house with a police warrant, authorizing them to seize all of Helwani’s musical equipment in lieu of payment of the alleged missing royalties. The group also allegedly seized the master tapes to twenty-eight albums.³⁷ According to Charles Snetter, Helwani exploited African artists and was not completely honest with them.³⁸ Snetter further asserts that the problem with most Liberian recording artists at the time was “no exposure and no trust.”³⁹ According to Ghanaian researcher Bertha Adom, one of Helwani’s biggest character flaws was that “he finds it hard to tolerate opposing views” and one major repeated criticism made by musicians was that Helwani “could not see their problems, and would not sit down with them and discuss issues.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Unfortunately, Fred Deshield has since passed away, so I was not able to interview him for this study.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 45.

³⁸ Charles Snetter, interview with author, June 23, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia. In one instance, Helwani got into trouble with Pat Thomas, a top musician from Ghana who accused him of cassette piracy. They later settled out of court after Thomas angrily sought him out in Liberia.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Adom, 58.

According to “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, however, artists like Nimely didn’t fully understand the nature of the contracts that they signed, and when the royalties didn’t materialize in the amounts anticipated, they became upset.⁴¹ It was just before this event when singer-songwriter “Big Steve” Worjloh met Helwani who offered Worjloh a recording deal for his band Segbadetee. Worjloh refused the offer due to the conviction that it would have been an inequitable relationship. According to Worjloh, Studio 99 did not pay the entirety of royalties due to the artists; instead, they insisted that the artists sign contracts that were not financially beneficial to them in the long term.⁴² Furthermore, according to Williams, Helwani’s working strategy was to try to impress the “big shots” of the inner political circles, instead of focusing on artist development. In consequence, the musicians lodged many lawsuits against him.⁴³

While according to newspaper accounts, the recording studio situation in Liberia improved somewhat with the construction of Studio 99, exploitation of Liberian recording artists was still the norm. According to Worjloh, Helwani made large profits from Liberian artists, and then fled to Ghana with these proceeds.⁴⁴ However, in all fairness, there would have been no reason for Helwani to return to Liberia from Ghana once all his studio equipment had been looted and the rented studio space destroyed.⁴⁵

⁴¹ “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

⁴² Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴³ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Ministry of Finance, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴⁴ According to Dr. Wolfgang Bender, another rumor that had spread amongst local musicians was that Helwani had fled overnight with all of their profits (in cash). Dr. Wolfgang Bender, interview with author, Sept. 24, 2010, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

⁴⁵ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.

During the years following the launching of Studio 99 the Liberian music industry was economically in dire straits largely due to economic looting on a national scale coupled with dreadful mismanagement of the national economy by the PRC regime.⁴⁶

On the other hand, according to “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, Studio 99 attempted to resurrect the careers of Hawa Daisy Moore, Morris Dorley, and Robert Toe who had been left in the lurch with the closing of ABC Studios.⁴⁷ Faisal Helwani gave these important Liberian musicians a golden opportunity to get their music recorded without having to leave Monrovia. In turn, this led to a wider exposure for these artists as well as limited airplay for their songs, some of which became hits such as Princess Fatu Gayflor’s “E Bey Kiyah Kooney”, “Tikeh Leywey,” and “Namufi Lehleh Nee” by O.J. Brown. Many of the musicians mentioned above would most likely never become recording artists if it was not for the initiative of Helwani and Studio 99. Stated differently, if not for Helwani’s intervention, fans and future historians would not have quality recordings of these culturally significant musicians from this economically and politically difficult period in Liberian history such as the albums *The Golden Voice of Liberia* by Princess Fatu Gayflor and *The Bassa King of Liberia* by Caesar Gator.⁴⁸

Donald Cooper Comments on Studio 99

After graduating from high school, Donald Cooper returned to Monrovia with T’kpan Nimely and formed the group The Monrovia Brothers. Cooper chose the name Monrovia Brothers because they were both born in Monrovia. He had decided not to record with ABC Studios because he “saw the light when it came to rip-offs” and had decided that the owner of

⁴⁶ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴⁷ “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

⁴⁸ Princess Fatu Gayflor, *The Golden Voice of Liberia*, Studio 99/102, c. 1984, 33rpm and Caesar Gator, *The Bassa King of Liberia*, Studio 99/101, c. 1984, 33rpm.

ABC was less interested in the music and instead was more of a “hardcore capitalist” in nature.⁴⁹ The creation of the group was in response to the coming of Studio 99 to Sinkor, Monrovia in 1983 at the behest of PRC Col. Jeffrey Gbatu, who was from Nimba County and wanted to have some of the great folk musicians and modern electric highlife groups from his home county recorded in a professional studio setting.⁵⁰

Cooper was excited about the prospect of Faisal Helwani bringing Studio 99 to Liberia since Cooper was eager to record his own musical compositions, stating; “I wanted somebody to hear something that was me.”⁵¹ Cooper joined the studio session band primarily as a keyboard player, was active in the “modern Liberian music revolution” at Studio 99 alongside Ciaffa Barclay, the Music Makers, Caesar Gator, and others. According to Cooper this “revolution of new Liberian music” in which Studio 99 was the “torch-bearer” had caught the attention of the Liberian people by using beats they were familiar with and addressing them in the vernacular. At least part of his dream came true when he recorded his first cassette release entitled *Alive and Well* at Studio 99 and promptly gave copies to Leo Sarkisian, radio show host of the “Music Time in Africa” program at the Voice of America (VOA) shortwave radio station for airplay.⁵²

According to Cooper, the demise of Studio 99 was intimately connected to the political upheaval caused by the attempted coup of Thomas Quiwonkpa on November 14, 1985. After the stolen elections and rumors of ensuing chaos, Helwani along with his teenage son Sami and his assistant Roger Brisson and decided the safest move would be to “pack up and run” back to

⁴⁹ Donald Cooper, interview with author, July 30, 2010, via phone from Baltimore, MD.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Ghana.⁵³ During this chaotic aftermath of the coup attempt, intimidating soldiers visited the studio and began walking away with various instruments, such as guitars. Later, T'kpan Nimely, who was under the impression that Helwani had exploited him personally (and owed him royalties), led a group of musicians to the studio and requisitioned what was left including the master tapes and the console.⁵⁴ Next we will examine the social position of musicians in relation to their powerful patrons.

Close to Power, Yet Relatively Powerless

Musicians could be physically close to powerful members of the ruling class, while simultaneously having very little power or influence themselves. Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba were guests in Liberia briefly during the late 1970s, and while in retrospect they were vaguely critical of glaring social inequalities, they were nevertheless profitably used by President Tolbert to raise funds for his notoriously corrupt “Higher Heights” campaign in a set of fundraisers at the E.J. Roye auditorium and at the national stadium. Masekela recalled that “at the end of our stay President Tolbert gave a farewell dinner for us at his official residence, where he awarded me full citizenship and a passport from the government of Liberia.”⁵⁵ The international stars Makeba and Masekela, however, were well rewarded for their collaboration, which was quite valuable to the Tolbert regime, not just in financial terms but in terms of image management and the attempt to bridge his noticeable credibility gap (in the same way that in which Guinean President Sekou Toure used Makeba as his cultural ambassador).⁵⁶

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Unfortunately for Cooper, his group, the Monrovia Brothers had nearly completed the master tapes for a second cassette release, and these were looted as well, so the cassette was never released.

⁵⁵ Masekela and Cheers, 260.

⁵⁶ Miriam Makeba and Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba, the Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg, South Africa: STE Publishers, 2004).

In another example of this phenomenon; “Oh Happy Day” (a popular gospel song frequently covered) was one of A.B. Tolbert’s favorite tunes, and he liked to jump on stage and sing the number as part of a duet with Hawa Moore.⁵⁷ “AB” was not only President Tolbert’s son, but also his assumed successor to the presidency. The repeated physical closeness on stage did not translate into any noticeable benefits for Moore.

I inquired of Princess Fatu Gayflor if she had ever personally meet President Tolbert, who was a patron of the NCC at Kendeja, (and held the official title of “visitor.”)⁵⁸ Gayflor replied; “I was part of a select group of cultural troupe members who were invited to dine at the President’s table in 1979 when Liberia hosted the annual meeting of the continent-wide Organization of African Unity at the OAU Village and conference center. As members of the national cultural troupe, we were frequently close to the corridors of power but *never real insiders* (my emphasis).”⁵⁹ Reflecting on her period as a lead singer for the Kendeja All-Stars, Nimba Burr reminisced; “Musicians were like national trophies in a sense. There was no sense of self-glorification (like there is today). We enjoyed not so much the money, but the way the crowd used to respond to us when we would perform at (places like) the E.J. Roye (auditorium).”⁶⁰

Furthermore, popular musicians and groups such as Morris Dorley, Flamma Sherman, and the Sheikhs, were regularly hired to sing praise songs at presidential birthday parties. They dutifully complied, but were never compensated in terms of influence or prestige, only monetarily, and sometimes they did not even receive the compensation promised. On one occasion, (during the mid-1970s) the Coga Band performed at the Harbel Recreation Center on

⁵⁷ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, June 30, 2007, Landsdowne, PA.

⁵⁸ Princess Fatu Gayflor, interview with author, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Nimba Burr, interview with author, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ.

the Firestone Plantation. On this occasion, they were hired by a senator's wife to provide entertainment for the function. Coga performed, and afterwards the band spent the entire night sleeping in their bus waiting for their compensation. Scandalously, they were never paid, and felt cheated but at the same time powerless to rectify the situation. Since they were hired by a "big shot" senator, there was no one in a position of power that they could effectively appeal to.⁶¹

Command Performances under a Military Dictatorship

The following incident demonstrates the abuses Liberian musicians had to contend with under the military dictatorship. During the "lumpen-militariat" regime of Doe, (circa 1984), Hawa Daisy Moore heard a frightening radio announcement on the state-owned radio station which proclaimed: "The following group of musicians will report to the offices of the NDPL at a specific time; Big Steve Worjloh, Hawa Daisy Moore, Miatta Fahnbulleh, T'kpan Nimely, Lady Shangabusa (a.k.a. Rebecca Grant), and soldier-musician Arancy Island from the AFL Army Band."⁶² According to Moore, all of the musicians named were worried about their personal safety; in part perhaps due to a (most likely apocryphal) circulating rumor that Doe kept a cage of lions in the basement of the executive mansion in order to literally feed his enemies to the lions.⁶³ After reporting to the NDPL offices at the requested time, Doe's demand was clarified; he wanted the musicians to perform at an upcoming state function in a command performance. The PRC junta would choose which musical group each vocalist would perform with for the occasion. The PRC would usually not remunerate any of these performers, and it was considered

⁶¹ Joe Woyee, interview with author, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

⁶² Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, June 30, 2007, Landsdowne, PA.

⁶³ Ibid.

unwise to ask for compensation. The musicians were encouraged to conceptualize these command performances as a “service to the nation.”⁶⁴

These unpaid performances reinforced the notion that the ruling clique (whether they claimed to be “revolutionaries” or otherwise) had the right to demand the services of popular musicians at will without any compensation (or even any acknowledgement of their contributions). In this particular instance, Doe was campaigning for president in the upcoming 1985 elections and simply decided to draft these musicians into his service in a desperate bid for legitimacy, regardless of the musicians own political affiliations or other professional commitments. It was an example of autocratic governance by presidential fiat, which demonstrated a complete disrespect for Liberian musicians and their civil rights.

The Musician’s Union of Liberia (MULA)

During the Doe regime, guitar bands were typically being paid about U.S. \$50 per performance.⁶⁵ After the proceeds were split between band members, they scarcely added up to a living wage, and certainly not enough to invest in expensive imported musical instruments. Yet, according to Bendukai Sherman, a member of various Liberian popular music groups of the 1970s, there was a high degree of camaraderie amongst fellow musicians. For example, musicians would use slang terms to address each other calling each other “eh-bra,” “colleagues,” and “pick,” all of which were synonyms for comrade.⁶⁶

Some musicians, however, still demonstrated their agency by resisting these exploitative abuses. Due to widespread mistreatment, a variety of responses were deployed by musicians in the face of the challenges that they faced. One option was to organize themselves into a

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Zack Roberts, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁶⁶ Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewerville, Liberia.

musicians union to advance their collective interests as culture workers in the entertainment industry, and to promote favorable legislation that would, at least theoretically, enforce the protection of the copyright laws.

In response to this state of affairs, Donald Cooper became involved in creating a lobbying group, the Musician's Interest Group (MIG) which eventually morphed into the Musician's Union of Liberia (MULA). Their aim was to determine what was the just and proper compensation due to local musicians based upon sales and airplay in line with current policy prescriptions of contemporary international intellectual property rights organizations. This endeavor was supported by Wisseh McClean within the government, and USAID. Ultimately, according to Cooper, it was political upheaval that eventually stymied the project.

MULA was formed at the "Palaver Hut" on the campus of the University of Liberia.⁶⁷ Ernest Bruce was the first president from 1981-1982, and Toniah Williams was the first vice-president.⁶⁸ It was while working at the University of Liberia that Bruce became involved with the national musicians union, and along with Henry Cooper, drafted Liberia's first copyright legislation.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, this was during the regime of President Doe, who did not seem to comprehend the importance of intellectual property rights law (nor did he show any interest). According to Bruce, Doe was bribed by the cassette bootleggers, and turned a blind eye to their illicit commerce.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Doughba Caranda and Sarah Hayes-Cooper were the first directors of the musicians union, which operated under the umbrella of the Liberian Artists Union.

⁶⁸ Ernest Bruce, interview with author, Sept. 23, 2008, via phone from Camden, NJ.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Their successor was Fred DeShield, and during his presidency MULA held many symposia and were invited to visit Nigeria in 1988.

⁷⁰ Ernest Bruce, interview with author, Sept. 23, 2008, via phone from Camden, NJ.

In an opposing point of view, Miatta Fahnbulleh provocatively asserted that MULA did not really accomplish anything of substance before the Civil War commenced in 1989. Fahnbulleh noted that MULA has never had the clout to get the musicians royalties from local FM radio stations that broadcast their songs, and furthermore MULA has never been able to arrest or even to any appreciable degree inhibit the practice of rampant cassette piracy. Fahnbulleh's insider critique was that MULA should have evolved into an organization that did more than generate salaries for their officers from membership dues.⁷¹ In her opinion, the union should have been representing true musicians (that is instrumentalists not vocalists), addressing such workplace issues such as uniform standards of pay, intellectual property rights, and attempting to secure job contracts. Fahnbulleh stated that since she employs musicians, she is technically an employer (not an employee) and therefore, she can support, but not personally join the musicians union, since that would constitute a conflict of interest. In her point of view, vocalists are self-employed employers and not musicians in the strict sense. Fahnbulleh stated "when I suggested actions that we can take as recording artists, such as picketing the local radio stations to force them to pay us royalties, a musician's strike (or any form of industrial action) they thought it was too radical."⁷² In a similar vein that concurs with Fahnbulleh's critique, according to "Rastaman" Stanley Ford, ultimately MULA was not effective because they were not able to protect the intellectual property rights of Liberian musicians.⁷³

⁷¹ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "Rastaman" Stanley Ford, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

Audiocassette Technology

The invention of silicon chips and integrated circuits led to the development of cassette technology by the Phillips Corporation during the mid-1960s.⁷⁴ By 1970, inexpensive compact, portable cassette players were coming into widespread use within the highly industrialized Western nations, and they became readily available in Liberia by 1975. The introduction of audiocassette technology had serious repercussions for the Liberian music industry, including the possibility of substantially greater exposure of locally recorded music, but synchronically ushered in the advent of the cassette piracy trade and its accompanying negative effects. This new technology had many outright advantages over the older vinyl record format. Being a dexterous two-way medium, cassettes had the capacity to both record and play, unlike vinyl records. Cassette players were more affordable, more portable and more durable than phonographs and records. By virtue of being battery operated; they could be used in rural areas that remained disconnected from the electrical power grid.⁷⁵ Peter Manuel claims that “cassette technology has been conducive to the decentralization, diversification and marked expansion of recording industries worldwide.”⁷⁶ Of paramount significance was the fact that mass production of cassette tapes was much more economical than pressing records which afforded lower income groups (and ethnic minorities) the possibility of mass consumption of their own recorded music.

Cassette technology was a fairly ephemeral, even if stubbornly dominant format produced with an intrinsically planned obsolescence. Radio station programmers would invariably complain about the poor recording quality of the cassettes and often used this excuse as a pretext

⁷⁴ Manuel, 29.

⁷⁵ In this respect they were eerily similar to the old wind-up gramophone record players of a previous era that were extremely portable because they were not dependant upon the electrical power grid. Practically this meant that they could be used in remote African villages without current, whereas the electricity powered record players could not.

⁷⁶ Manuel, 29.

to stop playing a certain song after the novelty of a song had worn thin.⁷⁷ Audiocassettes were never designed by the Phillips Corporation (or Sony, Maxell, etc.) to last indefinitely, especially in the tropical heat and high humidity of equatorial Liberia. Due to their re-recordable nature, musical content featured on the original cassettes could be easily effaced and recorded over (with the original content lost forever).⁷⁸ Original songs were often replaced by more exciting, newer music until the well-worn cassette became unlistenable. The sound quality would invariably diminish with repeat recordings and play over time, and tapes would eventually become brittle and snap (or become “eaten”) by the cassette player. In summation, cassette tapes did not generally have a long lifespan when contrasted to a well cared for long-playing vinyl record, and this fact had definite historical repercussions.

In 1977 vinyl records sold for between U.S. \$12-\$25 each in Monrovia. The price dramatically rose to \$30 in Yekepa; a town located roughly forty miles northeast of the capital. The further removed from Monrovia, the higher the purchase price was for vinyl records.⁷⁹ Due to the relatively high price of vinyl records therefore, the new audiocassette technology represented a major breakthrough for Liberian music consumers (similar to the effects of the spread of cassette technology in northern India as documented by Peter Manuel).⁸⁰ This relatively inexpensive magnetic tape technology succeeded in spreading the music further than circumscribed Liberian radio could do independently, but as previously mentioned, it introduced the possibility of rampant piracy due to its recordable nature.

⁷⁷ Joe Woyee, interview with author, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

⁷⁸ In practice, this was similar to the phenomenon common in neighboring Nigeria during the 1970s wherein during times of material shortages, old vinyl records were melted down and new records pressed from the vinyl. See the liner notes by Damian Iwuagwu of the compilation *Lagos Disco Inferno*, Ivory Music Nigeria, Academy LPs ACD-004, compact disc, n.d.

⁷⁹ Emmanuel Bowier, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁸⁰ Manuel, 29.

From 1970 to 1989, the musical collective Tejajlu released more than twenty full-length cassettes, including at least one recording at Hotline Studios in Paynesville (a suburb of Monrovia) in 1984.⁸¹ The original self-titled cassette sold briskly in New Kru Town, and was especially popular amongst the urbanite Kru population (as would be expected since much of the lyrical content was sung in the Klao language). However, Tejajlu never released a vinyl record and it proved extremely difficult to obtain their music on cassette during my dual research trips to Liberia in 2005 and 2008.⁸² Tejajlu never profited from cassette sales, instead, they made financial gains almost exclusively from live performances. In addition to bootleg recordings made by audience members via newly introduced battery-operated portable cassette recorders, the sound engineer dubbed master cassette recordings by patching a cassette recorder into the main sound console during a concert, and recording the live performance.⁸³ Using this inexpensive method, which obviated the need to pay studio fees, Tejajlu made scores of original recordings, but most of their cassettes were eventually lent to associates and comrades upon request, and inevitably went missing.⁸⁴ Additionally, many cassette tapes were destroyed by being exposed to the elements during the Civil War, leaving precious few (if any) copies in the possession of the band members themselves.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Toniah Williams, interview with author, June 5, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

These cassette tapes would have had the recording capacity of either 45 or 90 minutes of total playing time.

⁸² Only with the generous assistance of former opposition leader and MOJA front man Dr. Togba Nah Tippoteh was I able to obtain a second-hand copy.

⁸³ Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA. This “live” recording however, would not include the audience reaction of most live recordings, since it was made through the mixing board.

⁸⁴ Predictably, fans also occasionally made unauthorized, “undercover” bootleg recordings of these live concerts.

⁸⁵ Liberia’s humid and rain-drenched tropical climate have had brutalizing effects on cassettes that are exposed to the elements. On the other hand, it is incredulous that, after all these years, and so many tapes produced of various performances, Anthony Nagbe, the founder of Tejajlu, does not have even one cassette of any of the concerts they performed over a twenty year period!

Commenting on the “endemic spread of cassette piracy” Manuel stated that “African countries have been hit particularly hard, especially since their governments have been largely unable or in some cases unwilling, to enforce copyright laws.”⁸⁶ For example, cassette piracy was largely credited for being a major factor in the collapse of the Ghanaian recording industry in the early 1980s, prompting multinationals record labels such as HMV and Decca to divest from the country. The following touching anecdote illustrates one of the pivotal institutional barriers that Liberian popular music groups faced while attempting to become financially viable within a ruinous environment of flourishing illicit cassette piracy.

Tejajlu founder Anthony Nagbe recalled a painfully disheartening memory of encountering a merchant on Center Street, selling Tejajlu cassettes with a photo of his visage prominently featured on the glossy cover. Nagbe recalled becoming furious, but instead of physically confronting the vendor, he lodged a formal complaint with the Ministry of Commerce. Unfortunately, within this unpropitious legal climate the Ministry of Commerce refused to take his complaint seriously and neither launched an investigation into the matter, nor took any type of punitive action against the vendor.⁸⁷ It was precisely when cassette technology was at its zenith, before the introduction of the digital compact disk (CD) technology of the 1990s, when most Liberian popular music was being distributed and sold in this fundamentally ephemeral format that the destructive Civil War erupted in late 1989 with the premeditated incursion of the rebel forces under the command of the insatiable warlord Charles “Ghankay” Taylor; with grave consequences. This combination of man-made destruction coupled with a technology based upon

⁸⁶ Manuel, 30.

⁸⁷ Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.

planned obsolescence conspired to remove vast amounts of physical evidence in the format of music recorded on audiocassettes from the extant historical record.

Cassette piracy in Liberia

A large number of these cassettes are found on the Monrovia market. On the main streets of Monrovia music booths are found blaring away with music from these counterfeit recordings which are sold for three or four dollars. Music recordings or piracy offer high profits for low investment.⁸⁸

–Emmanuel Bowier, Information Minister

I call it music prostitution; the practice whereby an unscrupulous businessman buys one record at say \$15 and out of that one record makes thousands of recorded cassettes and puts them on the market at such fantastic prices as between \$5 and \$9 each!⁸⁹

–Issac Thompson

You're dealing with the people who are listening to the music's dreams, you're dealing with the people who are making the music's dreams, and in between there are a bunch of bastards who don't even dream. Who just think of it like dog food...the biggest scumbags you are ever going to meet are in the music business.⁹⁰

–Shane MacGowan

As vinyl records began to become obsolete in Liberia during the late 1970s and early 1980s to be replaced by cassettes, an inner circle of unscrupulous cassette pirates with connections to influential members of the government gained prominence behind the scenes. These profiteers would typically purchase one copy of each popular record in the U.S.; largely African-American artists such as Barry White, or the OJ's, and then purchase a container's worth of blank cassettes cheaply in Nigeria in order to flood the market with illicit copies. One of the biggest culprits in this illicit business was the distributor Super Sounds. In the early 1980s,

⁸⁸ *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), Sept. 3, 1987.

⁸⁹ *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), June 17, 1982.

⁹⁰ Shane MacGowan, and Victoria Mary Clarke, *A Drink with Shane MacGowan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 300. MacGowan was the lead singer of the Irish rock revival group, the Pogues, and was commenting specifically on the British music industry.

musician Donald Cooper of the group the Monrovia Brothers recalled thinking to himself; “this could happen to me in the future.”⁹¹

The following biographical sketch centering on the activities of one individual represents something of an origin story with regards to the phenomenon of rampant audiocassette piracy in Liberia as described in the above two quotations. Hassan Choukair came to Liberia from Lebanon in 1971 with his uncle Mohammed Choukair, who owned and managed ABC Studios; Liberia’s first recording studio.⁹² Choukair remarked that the Liberian music market was (and remains) much smaller than markets in Ghana and Nigeria. In 1970, the total population of Liberia was only 1.4 million, compared to 8.5 million for Ghana and 49.3 million for Nigeria.⁹³ The larger scale of the Ghanaian and especially the Nigerian market suggests that Liberian musicians faced an uphill battle when attempting to promote music sales to audiences beyond Liberia’s borders.

Martin Lowenkopf, writing in 1976, noted that the approximately 4,700 Lebanese who reside in Liberia dominated retail trade. He observed that “a reputation for sharp business practices cultural separateness, and monopolization of trade even in the most remote hinterland villages have won the Lebanese little affection in Liberia.”⁹⁴ Stated otherwise, these intermediary Lebanese merchants were systematically stereotyped as being opportunistic exploitative loan sharks that typically lived in their own worlds, socially segregated from ordinary Liberians.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Donald Cooper, interview with author, July 30, 2010, via phone from Baltimore, MD.

⁹² Hassan Choukair, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Waterside Market, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “International Data Base (IDB),” <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/>.

⁹⁴ Lowenkopf, 7.

⁹⁵ Many times these Lebanese merchants were referred to in Liberia as “Syrians” and historically Lebanon had been part of Syria during various periods before French colonial rule.

According to Hassan Choukair, with any given album, there would have been a maximum of only 10,000 cassettes sold during this period in Liberia.⁹⁶ One example of this piracy phenomenon comes from the career of Yatta Zoe. Zoe claimed that it was illicit recordings that ultimately led to the deportation of Mohammed Choukair from Liberia.⁹⁷ Zoe had been warned that he was “juking people” (which in Liberian English could be translated as taking advantage of someone, or exploiting them economically) even though outwardly he had a friendly demeanor. The bootleggers were not entirely invulnerable to prosecution but the musician had to marshal significant financial resources including legal aid to effectively wage combat with them, but no firm pattern emerged, and the vast majority of musicians who were effectively robbed in this manner were never able to effectively seek justice or compensation.⁹⁸

There were several methods employed by local recording studios and cassette manufacturers to guarantee the authenticity of their product. For example, on each paper cassette cover produced at Studio 99, a representative from the studio autographed each copy personally. This innovative method to actively counter cassette piracy was allegedly Roger Brisson’s invention.⁹⁹ Later studio owner Faisal Helwani allowed his son and protégé Sami Helwani take over those responsibilities and Sami rubber stamped each cover and then autographed them in Arabic script.¹⁰⁰ However, when the elder Helwani would do a random spot check in the music

⁹⁶ Hassan Choukair, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Waterside Market, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹⁷ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

⁹⁸ Isaac Thompson, “Interview with the Sensational Yatta Zoe- Her Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 18, 1982. On these records, her name is appears as ‘Yata Zoe.’ Together they recorded two of Zoe’s hit songs; “Young Girl Stop Drinking Lysol” and “Dangetie.” Before the record was released Choukair allegedly paid Zoe a few thousand (U.S.) dollars and then afterwards she was supposed to receive U.S. \$1 in royalties for each record sold; but in actual practice received much less.

⁹⁹ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰⁰ Sami Helwani, interview with author, July 28, 2010, via phone from Tema, Ghana.

outlets, the proprietors would keep the legitimate cassette tapes on display, while the pirate copies would be hidden beneath the counter. Therefore, it was difficult to catch the salesmen selling the pirate copies unless one sent in a reconnaissance team of undercover “mystery shoppers.”¹⁰¹ In the advent that any cassettes were discovered being sold on the streets or markets that did not contain the original autograph, or simply contained a photocopied or counterfeited version of the signature, then Faisal Helwani could, and occasionally did, take the vendor to court. This low-cost anti-piracy device was ultimately only partially successful.¹⁰²

Tulsi Halwani, Pirate Extraordinaire

HEAVEN GATE, NO BRIBE

–Liberian Taxi Slogan

The following biographical sketch is a fascinating narrative adduced from several key interviews with informants, some of whom knew the subject personally. Admittedly, this dramatic narrative has the ring of an “urban legend” and surely the murky truth is more complex than this modern-day Horatio Alger tale. The largest organized dealer in pirated cassettes during the 1980s was the mendacious Tulsi Halwani and his previously mentioned company Super Sounds.¹⁰³ According to acquaintance Gebah Swaray, Halwani immigrated to Liberia from India as a youth and began his career as a shop assistant in a Lebanese-owned grocery store on Carey Street (downtown Monrovia).¹⁰⁴ While employed in that capacity, Halwani saved his meager wages until he made a crucial life-changing investment; his first cassette duplication machine.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Obviously, this took place well before the advent of the hologram technology of the late 1990s.

¹⁰³ A businessman of East Indian descent also referred to by informants as “Toshi Kalwani.” Unfortunately, I have not been able to contact this individual in part due to the commonality of his name.

¹⁰⁴ Gebah & Maudeline Swaray, interview with author, July 27, 2008, East Orange, NJ.

Halwani eventually opened Super Sounds store on Randall Street.¹⁰⁵ Halwani then allegedly ordered cassettes duplicated in Singapore, and imported them into West Africa (possibly via Dubai) shortly after the original albums were released internationally.¹⁰⁶ According to Roger Brisson, at the time of his visit, corporate lawyer Peter Crawford intercepted a ship carrying illegal cassettes en route from the Persian Gulf to Monrovia with a court order from the international police agency Interpol ordering that the ship be seized, and ordered six containers of pirated cassettes to be dumped directly into the sea.¹⁰⁷

From his Super Sounds storefront headquarters, Halwani gradually became a major businessman and the largest cassette bootlegger regionally. Allegedly, the Liberian government at the time never realized the international scope of Halwani's operations, in which Liberia functioned as a regional hub for the distribution of illegally pirated music throughout the West African subcontinent.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps this was partially due to his consciously crafted low-key public persona of a small shopkeeper.¹⁰⁹

Halwani would regularly pay off the Executive Mansion with \$10,000-\$20,000 in protection money in lieu of taxes. During the mid-1980s Liberian senators would allegedly visit the shop occasionally and threaten to investigate. Gebah Swaray personally witnessed the

¹⁰⁵ Gebah Swaray, interview with author, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ.

¹⁰⁶ Halwani reportedly had a brother and business partner in Singapore who would mass produce the covers for the pirated cassettes and ship blank cassettes to Monrovia at a minimal cost of only (U.S.) fifteen cents each. After recording the pirated cassettes, Halwani would then sell them for \$5.00 Liberian dollars each. This took place at a time when the Liberian dollar was on par with the U.S. dollar. This official exchange rate virtually invited a criminal class searching for opportunities to engage in money laundering.

¹⁰⁷ Roger Brisson, interview with author, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰⁸ Distributors from Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Guinea purportedly arrived with large trucks and purchased (on consignment or otherwise) tons of illegal pirated cassettes to sell in their respective countries.

¹⁰⁹ Gebah Swaray, interview with author, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ. According to the oral testimony of Swaray, Halwani rented an apartment across from his store, and walked to work every day. He did not drive a flashy sports car, nor wear designer clothing; instead, he made an attempt to blend in, wearing inexpensive sandals and only a small gold chain around his neck.

senators leaving the store with handsome payoffs in the form of bags of \$5 Liberian coins which were introduced in 1982 during the Doe administration's first major economic crisis.¹¹⁰ The parasitic Doe administration never investigated Halwani's operation for fear of "killing the goose that laid the golden eggs."¹¹¹

Cassette Piracy Cartels

Former MULA President Ernest Bruce mentioned the powerful Halwani Brothers (with Tulsu Halwani based in Monrovia) in connection to the international trade in pirated cassettes, who were active during the 1980s.¹¹² These three brothers were informally referred to as "the triumvirate." In sum, the allegations claim that this cartel effectively turned Monrovia into a regional hub of cassette piracy, which in turn flooded much of West Africa with cheap imitation cassettes. When Tulsu Halwani would allegedly sell two hundred cassettes, and report to the musician that he had only sold ten, the musician lost a great deal of potential income from royalties. According to Swaray, the only positive action Halwani took locally was to create jobs for the "barrow boys" who were the young lads that hawked wheelbarrows full of cassettes in the streets and in the markets, and were allowed to retain a small percentage of the profits.¹¹³

Cassette Piracy and the Radio

Another challenge that Liberian musicians faced during the 1980s was that amateur cassette pirates engaged in the practice of casually recording songs from the radio onto cassettes

¹¹⁰ Willie A. Givens and Samuel K. Doe, *Liberia: the Road to Democracy Under the Leadership of Samuel Kanyon Doe: the Policies and Public Statements of Dr. Samuel Kanyon Doe* (Bourne End, England: Kensal Press, 1986), 184.

¹¹¹ Gebah Swaray, interview with author, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ.

¹¹² Ernest Bruce, interview with author, Sept. 23, 2008, via phone from Camden, NJ. I have not been able to independently corroborate their role vis-à-vis the print media, which is unsurprising due to the necessarily clandestine nature of illegal cassette piracy operations. However, many Liberian informants referred to this cartel and their testimonies are not contradictory.

¹¹³ Gebah Swaray interview with author, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ.

for sale in the marketplace.¹¹⁴ Both musicians and MULA typically perceived themselves to be powerless to eradicate this type of behavior because the national police were uninterested in pursuing these types of criminal underworld cases, possibly in part due to bribes secretly paid to authorities by the bootleggers. Furthermore, the pirates always seemed to outnumber the musicians. Liberian musicians were never quite able to form a collective united front to effectively combat this undermining practice which undercut the marketability of legitimate original cassettes.¹¹⁵ Rampant illicit cassette duplication prompted MULA to urge local radio DJ's to talk over the music more frequently in order to disrupt this heinous practice. In a surreal turn of events, at one point MULA complained that the DJ's would talk more over imported music than over locally produced music!¹¹⁶

In a humorous and instructive counter-normative example, Miatta Fahnbulleh demonstrated her considerable aplomb and sangfroid when she noted that, unlike numerous other musicians, she never had issues (“palavers”) with local Liberian cassette pirates bootlegging her music. She attributed this mutual understanding to the fact that she announced on the radio that if she caught anyone pirating her music, she would calmly walk over to the person’s house with a gallon of petrol and set their residence on fire. Apparently this quite dramatic yet rather preposterous threat was effective because her releases were not bootlegged in Liberia.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, it was most likely at least partially due to her well-connected family that Fahnbulleh could successfully make these types of unveiled threats. Overall, as we have seen, musicians were not able to halt this practice in any meaningful way.

¹¹⁴ Tony Karbadeh, interview with author, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹¹⁵ Zack Roberts, interview with author, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹¹⁶ Tony Kabardeh, interview with author, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹¹⁷ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

CHAPTER 6
PEACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS; RALLYING CRIES OF THE 1980S

Music is a powerful tool through which radical ideas have been expressed since time immemorial...from its roots in the blues to Elvis' waggling hips, rock n' roll has sent a thousand cinema seats through the screen of middle-class complacency. It has been about rebellion, rejection, and revolution, a big sod off to the grey people who make our world into a battlefield and who see us as toy soldiers with which to enact their terrifying war plans.¹

–Penny Rimbaud

I think my music can kind of create the consciousness of a peaceful solution, because I don't believe in a mash-it-up solution; I like to have people analyze the problem and try to find another way of solving the problem than a civil war.²

–Alpha Blondy

The song 'One Banana Tree' emphasizes the need to remain united as Liberians. It is a song that is appropriate for the Independence Day season because it is a song that unifies and eschews tribalism and sectionalism. We are one people: so we need to come together and build this nation. It is our promised land.³

–Wiki Padmore

Introduction

First, we will examine the worldwide phenomenon of the youthful popularity of psychedelic rock music, which took a local detour in Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria. This genre also caught on like wildfire simultaneously in such globally diverse far-flung cosmopolitan locales as Lima, Peru and Phnom Penn, Cambodia. The period of the early 1970s in Liberia inspired the creation of many new electric guitar bands, mostly by young secondary or college aged students in what would later come to be described in the North American hardcore punk rock subculture

¹ George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 232-33. Penny Rimbaud (founder of the anarcho-punk rock band Crass), in a press statement from January 12, 1983.

² Chris Potash, "Alpha Blondy's Message is Dead Serious," *The Miami News*, Feb. 11, 1988.

³ *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), July 20, 1989.

of the early 1980s as the DIY (“Do It Yourself”) spirit or ethic. In the middle section of this chapter we will examine how visions of peace found within musical productions draw attention to the political turmoil within a society in ferment. Finally, in the last third of the chapter we will examine various prominent women musicians and how they dealt with male chauvinism within the music industry.

Afro-rock and Reggae

According to ethnomusicologist John Lovering “musical taste and creativity defies any deterministic theory...new musical spaces are being born, crossing territories, (and) transgressing organization all the time.”⁴ Liberian musicians of the 1970s and 1980s became avid fans of, and elaborated upon two musical styles originating in the countercultures of North America and the Caribbean; namely Afro-rock and reggae in order to celebrate sounds that expressed the ethos of their generation and to promote a socially conscious vision of an alternative future.

International rock ‘n’ roll has a long history of both anti-war, pro-peace themes coupled with themes of sexual liberation. The 1970s were an exciting time to join a band in Liberia. According to the Gardeners founder Bendukai Sherman “We were very lucky to grow up with what became a big change in the music at that time with lots of great black and white artists blowing our minds. At this time it was a kind of magic to meet each other (future band-mates) and when the opportunity came for us, we were like taking a train that we cannot miss.”⁵

⁴ John Lovering, “The Global Music Industry; Contradictions in the Commodification of the Sublime,” in *The Place of Music*, eds. Andrew Leyshon and others (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 50.

⁵ Alphonso Blamo, e-mail message to author, Sept. 9, 2008.

Purple Haze

Rock ‘n’ roll is a genre that is usually conceived of today as being the province of the Western and therefore, by implication, the “white” musical world. This is highly misleading and more than slightly ironic, since in the early days of rock ‘n’ roll, musicians with the most influence (Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddly, Fats Domino, to name a few) arose from the ranks of the least privileged ethnic group in the U.S. at that time; African-Americans.⁶

According to music researcher Charlie Gillett, the term “rock” refers to post-1964 variations of the original rock ‘n’ roll genre, and Afro-rock was surely fits this definition.⁷ Music historian Laura Egendorf claims that during the 1950s; “many (white American) adults considered rock ‘n’ roll to be a threat because of its origins in African-American (rhythm & blues) music.”⁸ The racialized generic label “Afro-rock” therefore should be suspect since in the minds of the Africans performing it, this was simply rock ‘n’ roll without any racialized or spatially bounded prefixes attached. For our purposes we will define Afro-rock as the supple music produced by African guitar bands that mostly performed rock ‘n’ roll standards and original compositions with a local flair. The performance of Afro-rock is an overlooked chapter in Liberian music history since it was later superseded by popular genres more closely associated with North American black culture such as Afro-soul and Afro-disco.

There were a plethora of Liberian rock bands during the early 1970s that have since been largely forgotten in the post-war dispensation. One example is the Liberian Afro-rock group Purple Haze. The concept of the group was based on the psychedelic riffing of superstar rock

⁶ Laura Egendorf, *Rock and Roll; Examining Pop Culture* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ Charlie Gillett, “The Influence of Black Music on Rock and Roll” in Laura Egendorf (ed.), *Rock and Roll; Examining Pop Culture* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

icon Jimi Hendrix, and the band's very name was an ode to one of his biggest chartbusters. The locally famous guitar virtuoso Wicki Padmore faithfully paid tribute to the rollicking thrumming style of Hendrix. For this channeling effect he was referred to as "the Liberian Jimi Hendrix."⁹ Purple Haze was also influenced by the rock standards of Carlos Santana, and Eric Clapton.¹⁰

Some additional Liberian guitar bands that also embraced Afro-rock included the Psychedelic Six, the Superb Seven, and Moby Dick. By investigating the careers of these groups we can identify emergent patterns and timelines within this distinctive African youth culture. For example, the Gardeners garnered a large, loyal fan base during their apogee in the early 1970s, the heyday of psychedelic rock, and performed at venues all over Liberia.¹¹ The Gardeners even had a bevy of dedicated "groupies" that would follow them while they were on tour; an activity which was frowned upon and energetically discouraged by most parents, who for the most part were of the mindset that if "you follow band, you mean nothing, and no benefit will come from what you are doing."¹² Band leader Bendukai Sherman admitted at that particular stage in his life, he was not really "chasing after money," but instead "played for popularity." Sherman declared frankly "we did it for the chicks and we did it for the fame."¹³

⁹ Eddie Gibson, interview with author, June 1, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁰ Ibid. This fact points to the rather curious reciprocity of global musical influences and is ironic since neither Santana nor Clapton were black, but instead heavily borrowed from the music of lesser-known African-American musicians.

¹¹ In the Monrovia metropolitan area they performed at the E.J. Roye Building, Gabriel Cinema, and the National Cultural Center.

¹² Bendukai Sherman, interview with author, June 15, 2008, Brewerville, Liberia.

¹³ Ibid. Sheriff emphasized that there was an evolutionary transfer of band members from the following cannon of groups in which he participated; the Coga Band, Moga Band, Aaron Lewis & the MG's, the Sheikhs, and the Music Messiahs.

The Sheikhs band member John Sheriff nostalgically recalled that "at that time ordinary people could afford to hire live bands to play for special events."¹⁴ Outside of the Monrovia metropolitan area (which is more or less synonymous with Montserrado County), the Sheikhs performed for the workers at the Liberian American Mining Company (LAMCO), and at Bong Mines in Yekepa (both iron ore mines hosting large worker housing compounds).¹⁵

Reggae's Popularity in West Africa

During the 1980s, a new genre of politicized music emerged from the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora which became increasingly popular in Liberia, namely reggae music originating from the Anglophone island nation of Jamaica, which was initially popularized by the iconic trinity of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Jimmy Cliff. Reggae quickly mutated on African soil and adopted an African character since it resonated so poignantly amongst local listeners. Regionally across West Africa reggae music was embraced by many musicians including the Nigerian superstar Sonny Okosun, and the Ivorian Alpha Blondy.¹⁶ A multitude of Liberian reggae bands eventually coalesced in the early 1980s. During the 1980s anti-war and anti-violence themes were reiterated and re-worked within reggae music.¹⁷

Visiting Ghanaian journalist Isaac Thompson's weekly "Arts and Culture" column in the *Daily Observer* newspaper helped to popularize reggae in Liberia in the eight year period between Bob Marley's historic and riotously sublime Independence Day celebrations in Harare,

¹⁴ John Sheriff, interview with author, June 9, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reggae music was embraced in Africa, but significantly, *not* the Rastafarian religion as it was by convert-prophet Bob Marley. Perhaps was due to the fact that Africans had a hard time believing that the monarch of Ethiopia was divine. See Chris Potash, ed. *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution; Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997).

¹⁷ These messages were not limited to reggae, but included Liberian electric highlife, Afro-rock and Afro-soul. Having given this disclaimer, it does seem that overall, reggae is the most overtly politicized of all of the above musical genres in terms of lyrical content.

Zimbabwe on April 17-18, 1980, and the gigantic “Reggae Sunsplash” concert in Monrovia in 1988. Reggae became popular in other West African nations such as Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ghana before it gained a widespread fandom in Liberia.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Liberian musicians eventually embraced the genre during the early 1980s as a vehicle to articulate topical social critiques and generally attempt to raise levels of political consciousness. For example, the B-side of the 1984 record *Let’s Save the Children* by Liberian musician Saku Sillah featured a more “Africanized” cover version (replete with a West African hand drum solo) of the reggae hit “Now That We’ve Found Love” popularized by the Jamaican reggae ensemble Third World from their 1978 *Journey to Addis* album.¹⁹

Furthermore, Cecil Griffith’s musical career gives us some insight into the impact of reggae in Liberia.²⁰ Griffiths was inspired to form his own reggae band by the Reggae Sunsplash mega-concert at SKD Stadium in 1988.²¹ Griffiths and his cohorts formed their own reggae band called the Stable Stars, and in 1989, they recorded a six song demo tape at Cross-Atlantic Studios entitled *African Reggae*.²² Reggae icons that informed his style of African roots reggae included Jamaican pioneers Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, as well as the groups Culture, Burning Spear, and fellow African musician Alpha Blondy.²³

¹⁸ Isaac “Nii Moi” Thompson, interview with author, July 1, 2008, Accra, Ghana. Tellingly, during this period, when Thompson invested money into buying a taxicab, his taxi was dubbed “Rasta Ike,” which eventually also became Thompson’s sobriquet.

¹⁹ Third World, *Journey to Addis*, Island Records ILPS 9554, c. 1978, 33rpm; Saku, *Let’s Save the Children*, Carthage Records CGS 11, c. 1984, 33rpm.

²⁰ Griffiths trained at the National Police Academy, and studied piano in the afternoons and evenings at the University of Liberia.

²¹ Cecil Griffiths, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

The song list of *African Reggae* illuminates the band's topical concerns. These tracks are loaded with political fare couched in indigenous idioms including themes on Pan-African unity ("Africans Unite"), celebrated political prisoner Nelson Mandela ("Black Moses"), and the hazards of nuclear waste ("Nuclear Waste Dumpers"). Another example is the reggae ensemble Other Race, which was a splinter group from Kabassa Music.²⁴ Later, in 1987, Ajubar Dunbar helped to form the group Wadada and was organized with the help of the remnants of other Monrovia reggae groups in anticipation of and preparation for the Reggae Sunsplash concert of 1988.²⁵

Reggae Arrives on Liberian Shores

Rastafarian imagery is not just some bizarre 'otherness' to be appropriated by white youth and capitalist record companies. It is a historically sanctioned language that skillfully unmasks the internal contradictions and historical sins of Western colonialism and racism. As a heavily coded subculture it is not easily translated into direct political action, but for precisely that reason, it retains a freedom of action that enables it to insinuate its message in the discourse of its enemies.²⁶

The resistance to authority and the affirmation of moral force central to Rastafarianism offer an appealing voice to audiences with similar if not identical grievances.²⁷

—George Lipsitz

"Rastaman" Stanley Ford sang for the Music Messiah's Band, the premier musical combo in the 1980s that backed artists such as Aicha Kone and Tecumsey Roberts. May 11, 1983 marked the second anniversary of the death of the "immortalized reggae lord" Bob Marley, perhaps the first international pop music superstar from an impoverished, "third world" nation in

²⁴ Other Race was fronted by Ajubar Dunbar and similar in sound to the London-based Steel Pulse.

²⁵ Ajubar Dunbar, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

²⁶ George Lipsitz, "London Calling: Pop Reggae and the Atlantic World" in *Dangerous Crossroads; Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994), 111.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

recent times.²⁸ Ford claims that reggae music only became popular after the death of founder Bob Marley in 1981.²⁹ To mark that anniversary and to locally celebrate Marley's legacy, Liberian popular musicians followed the lead of London's predominantly West Indian neighborhood of Brixton in organizing a tribute concert to their fallen hero who had tragically succumbed to melanoma in 1981. The memorial concert in Monrovia held on May 14, 1983, featured Tecumsey Roberts, backed by the Music Messiahs, Marley's widow Rita Marley, Ade Jones, and Anglo-Jamaican hit-makers Musical Youth.³⁰ In Liberian newspapers, a photo of the dreadlocked Marley was situated beside a photo of the gaunt framed grinning "crowd-puller" Tecumsey Roberts and his thick shoulder-length braids which closely resembled dreadlocks.³¹

By 1984, even though Roberts was temporarily living in self-imposed exile in northern California, he was being described in the local press as "Liberia's top singer/percussionist" with his "charismatic and electrifying stage presence."³² Roberts was the first prominent personality within the entertainment industry to wear "dreadlocks," which were actually braids (with beads occasionally woven into the braids). This hairstyle attributed to Roberts the sobriquet "the Rastafarian godfather" (even though he never converted to the Rastafarian religion), a nickname which later evolved into "the godfather of contemporary Liberian music."³³

²⁸ "Remembering Bob Marley: Two Years After" *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), May 12, 1983.

²⁹ "Rastaman" Stanley Ford, interview with author, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Tecumsey Roberts To Release New Album," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), October 18, 1984.

TR was also gaining prominence internationally, with concert dates in London, Amsterdam, Paris, Brussels, and even Tunis, Tunisia.

³³ Ibid.

Roberts was also the first prominent gender-bending Liberian personality to wear a diamond-shaped earring in his left ear. Traditionally, Poro-affiliated *Zoes* would wear earrings, but this was understood to be a mark of privilege and status.³⁴ The act of a sartorial male performer sporting an earring therefore may have been viewed as a threat in a society where earrings were usually reserved for the exclusive use of women. Partly because of his earring and braids many observers became convinced that he was gay (or derisively a “fag” in local parlance.) This homophobic terminology carries extremely negative derogatory connotations in both Liberian Pidgin and Standard English and may well have contributed to his tragic, untimely death.³⁵ According to historian Dr. Saye Guannu, the social behavior of Tecumsey Roberts is what killed him.³⁶

The Reggae Sunsplash '88 Mega-Concert

Keith Wilson, was a Liberian music promoter brought the Reggae Sunsplash '88 concert to Liberia as a part of a larger continental tour which included Ghana, Nigeria, and Zaire.³⁷ Wilson had been inspired by previous similar concerts he had personally attended in Jamaica, and thought it would be a profitable venture to bring contemporary world class reggae acts to an eager and receptive African fan base. In doing so, he added incendiary fuel to the reggae craze in

³⁴ J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia; the Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 47. Political Scientist Liebenow defines *Zoes* as paid ritual specialists in Liberia (usually an inherited position). Essentially they were (and still are) the leaders of various branches of the secret societies.

³⁵ I heard this contention regarding TR's perceived sexuality by informants explicitly using this derogatory terminology countless times in the course of conducting interviews. Ironically, there is no solid evidence that TR was in fact a practicing homosexual (or even a bisexual). Instead TR was known by his close friends as a “Casanova” and was know for having a charismatic personality with a wide ranging social network. For one account of TR's murder allegedly at the hands of INPFL rebel commander Samuel Varney see James Youboty, *A Nation in Terror; the True Story of the Liberian Civil War* (Philadelphia, PA: Parkside Impressions Enterprises, 2004), 289-90.

³⁶ Dr. Saye Guannu, interview with author, June 7, 2008, IBB Graduate School of Political Science, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia. In my opinion this is a classic “blame-the-victim” mentality.

³⁷ Winston Tubman, interview with author, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

late 1980s Liberia. The Reggae Sunsplash '88 concert was a massive extravaganza that was held during the dry season in the Samuel Kanyon Doe (SKD) Sports Stadium that brought Afro-Caribbean and continental African musicians together on stage for the first time in Liberia. As previously mentioned, the twenty-four hour long concert featured Peter Tosh, Burning Spear, Yellowman, and other well-known roots and dancehall reggae artists flown in from Jamaica. John Sheriff recalls being inspired by the Reggae Sunsplash concert, where top Nigerian musical acts such as Fe1a Anikulapo Kuti & Afrika 80, and *juju* music pioneer King Sunny Ade appeared alongside their Jamaican counterparts.

For example, the musical synthesis of Aaron Lewis & the MGs (the Medusa Group) was described in contemporary newspaper accounts as “Afro-dance and reggae.” The group was hailed as “the confident custodians of reggae in the Liberian music industry.”³⁸ In 1981, Aaron Lewis & the MG’s staged their first annual “music carnival.”³⁹ Eight years later, by 1989, Lewis had just returned from a North American tour, and the MG’s were considered “the best musical band in town, especially for reggae fans.”⁴⁰ These concerts were referred to in local newspapers as “the best reggae concerts ever to be staged live in Liberia after the Reggae Sunsplash '88 concert.”⁴¹

Shared Visions of Peace

Liberian musicians elaborated on a common lyrical theme in their productions during the 1980s, specifically a broadly defined vision of peace for their country. This reoccurring theme

³⁸ Isaac Awuku, “Aaron Lewis & the MG’s Reggae Showbiz,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), July 17, 1989.

³⁹ T-Max Teah, “Peace Concert at the Relda July 9,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), June 29, 1989.

⁴⁰ Isaac Awuku, “Aaron Lewis & the MG’s Reggae Showbiz,” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), July 17, 1989.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

nearly universal aspiration has been completely overshadowed by the bloody fratricidal conflict that followed during the decade of the 1990s.

For example, Liberian writer Stephanie Horton describes Miatta Fahnbulleh as a “cultural custodian,” “social justice activist” and an “anti-war crusader.”⁴² Perhaps one of the most prophetic of Fahnbulleh’s explicitly political messages is found in the eloquent “A Cheeka Laka Laka.”⁴³ In this strain, even the forces of nature, in the form of songbirds, are crying out to the Liberian citizenry to strive for peace in order to avoid potential future bloodshed. The pepper bird referenced in the lyric is the national bird of Liberia and thereby a metaphorical stand-in for the nation. The presence of the rice bird calls to mind the national staple without which the entire country would go hungry in short order. In this melodious solo Fahnbulleh implores the listener to pro-actively...

Hear the sound of the pepper bird, calling for freedom
Hear the sound of the rice bird, calling for justice
All the birds are singing to the people

People love one another, brothers help one another
Sisters, oh stand by your brothers-oh!

A Cheeka Laka Laka (4X’s)

A black bird is calling for justice
The white bird is calling for peace
All of the birds are singing to the people, of respect and harmony

Oh, won’t you listen?
Won’t you hear me?
Won’t you listen?
Oh, the birds are singing

⁴² Stephanie C. Horton, “A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh”, *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 2004). <http://archives-one.liberiaseabreeze.com/miatta.html>.

⁴³ This track can be found on the album Miatta Fahnbulleh, *Miatta*, EMI Records EMC 3294/ YAX 5584, c. 1979, 33rpm. This song was also performed and recorded with the assistance of the Sierra Leonean supporting band Baranta on Hugh Masekela’s album; *Hugh Masekela Presents the Chisa Years; 1965-1975 (Rare and Unreleased)*, BBE Records BBE069, compact disc, c. 2006.

Won't you listen?
Won't you listen to the birds in the trees?

In a similar vein, while temporarily residing in California, Louiza "Lady Nefertiti" Flamma-Sherman composed a song in 1979 entitled "Africa, Don't Make War, Make Love" which contained a chorus with five different languages, including Yoruba, Kiswahili, Ga (from southern Ghana), French and English. This song was smuggled back to Liberia and actively played in regular radio rotation by DJ's on ELBC and was covered by many local musical groups.⁴⁴ During this period many musicians also addressed gender issues from a feminist perspective. Concurrently, younger women at Kendeja (the NCC) started to refuse to date older, powerful men. This was seen as a scandalous change in mentality; of male hegemony turned on its head.⁴⁵ According to Liberian sociologist Emmanuel Dolo, "In many ways men played a secondary role to activist women in this period. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and similar women were doing things in the political realm that mirrored what performers like Miatta Fahnbulleh were doing in the cultural scene."⁴⁶

"No Peace, No Love" and the Anti-War Message

In 1985, just after the stolen Liberian national elections were scandalously certified by Chester Crocker and the Reagan White House, Zack & Gebah's first full-length album *For the Love of Money* was released. The hit single from this LP was called "No Peace, No Love," and was featured in regular rotation on radio station ELBC.⁴⁷ This song acted as a catalyst to further Zack & Gebah's overtly anti-war reputation. The lyrics caution the listener...

⁴⁴ Louiza "Lady Nefertiti" Sherman, interview with author, July 7, 2009, via phone from Fort Worth, TX.

⁴⁵ Tarloh Quiwonkpa, interview with author, July 19, 2008, via phone from St. Paul, MN.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Dolo, interview with author, July, 26, 2006, via phone from Minneapolis, MN.

⁴⁷ Zack & Gebah, *For the Love of Money*, Tabansi Records 7217, cassette, p. 1988.

Don't be a fool, my dear friends
Have you learned your lesson?
We've been destroyed by men who want
To take our land into their hands

So let's come together Africa
Let there be no more war
I want to stop all this fighting
Lord, there's no denying
I beg, you stop all your troubles
We don't want no more crying

Together we stay, the better we'll be
Together we stay, "what's gonna be, gonna be"
I want to stop all this violence
Lord, nobody like it
beg you, stop all your trouble
For we don't want no more crying

(chorus)

If there is no peace, there will never be love
United we stand, but divided we fall
I'd rather be love, than there be hate
And don't you forget, we are all, by God,
children of the universe
Let there be no more war,
'cause it hurts too much⁴⁸

This same pacifist theme was further developed by Zack & Gebah, taking on prophetic overtones in the polyphonic second track; "Let's Unite" from the *Just For You* album released later in 1988.⁴⁹ The song is explicit in its didactic warning to avoid armed conflict (specifically both in Africa writ large and in Liberia); presumably at all costs. The difference between the two songs (released only months apart) is that in this track Zack and Gebah specifically identified the issue of "tribalism" as the root cause that could potentially lead to national destruction. The song

⁴⁸ Ibid. This song was the first track on side A of the cassette.

⁴⁹ Zack & Gebah, *Just For You*, Tabansi Records POLP 180, c. 1988, 33rpm. This album was first released on vinyl record and then later on cassette tape. The cassette version contained six tracks (three on each side). The last song on side B is the previously alluded to anti-war anthem sung in the Bassa language entitled "Toj Be Zidi."

also specifically appealed to regional hegemon Nigeria (and by proxy to the peacekeeping forces of ECOMOG) to “help put out this fire...before it’s too late.” Below is a segment of the imploring lyrics...

Calling out to Africa
Lift your hands and get together
Stop the fighting, stop the bloodshed
Let unity be the answer
Forget about tribalism
It only leads to destruction
Tell me, when will you see what is going on?

Now is the time, we gotta stand up as one
Before it’s too late!

Africa, yeah, yeah, let’s unite
Africa, let’s unite right now!

What do you think will happen to the land
If you don’t make it right?
Soon everybody will be running away to America
Where you gonna run, where you gonna hide as an African man?

Yeah man! We got to tell it to Africa
Calling out Nigeria, help the people put out this fire
What’s the matter Liberia? Can’t you see the children (are) divided?
Unity is the best solution for the problem to be solved
When will you see what is going on?
Now is the time, we gotta stand up as one...⁵⁰

The seemingly prophetic nature of the song is in part due to the fact that Nigeria did intercede militarily in the Liberian conflict two years later (in 1990) in the form of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) monitoring group (ECOMOG). This was a

⁵⁰ Zack & Gebah, *Just For You*, Tabansi Records POLP 180, cassette, c. 1988, side A, track 2.

coalition of military forces from various West African nations which was dominated by Nigerian military personnel (with Ghana also contributing significantly).⁵¹

One of the aims of this study is to elucidate and preserve the memory and vision of artists such as Tecumsey Roberts who lost their lives during the conflict. Teetering on the brink of the Civil War, on April 28, 1989, Tecumsey Roberts, supported by the Music Messiahs Band, formally launched his new cassette entitled *Masusu* at Baccardi's Disco in Hotel Africa. The *Masusu* album contained the aesthete's characteristically heartfelt messages of peace and compassion delivered in an emotional plea to the Liberian people to avoid intersectional conflict by any means necessary.⁵² Tragically, his fan base could not have known that this series of concerts (including those at Lajoy International Entertainment Center) would be among TR's last. Within a few months (in early 1990) the beloved singer at the apex of his career would be abducted and murdered by members of a warring rebel faction (the INPFL), as the country rapidly descended further into the chaos of Civil War.

Another influential political anthem that condemned militarism and warned against the violence of war was entitled "We Want Peace Not in Pieces" by the self-described "African rock-jazz" ensemble Kapingbdi. The tone of the song is desperately urgent. The lyrics, delivered in accessible Liberian English, are as follows...

We want peace
Not in pieces!
If you don't know this
You better get around
We talking about justice
We want peace...

⁵¹ For a further discussion of this development see Mark Huband, *The Liberian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), 198.

⁵² T-Max Teah, "Tecumsey is Back- New Record Out Soon," *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), February 16, 1989.

Everybody doing
What they feel like doing
Whether it's right or wrong
It's going on
You destroy the creatures of the world
In your act of no reason
The trees and the birds (that) fly in the sky
You know what you are doing
We want peace...

What you are doing is not good
Don't make me cry
Don't beat my mother and father
Don't do that!⁵³

You better get down
With some freedom and understanding
Peace and loving kindness
You know, you know
Some human rights now!⁵⁴

This piece along with the song “Human Rights” from Kapingbdi’s album *Hey Brother*, (1980) reflect the growing public concern with the gross human rights violations and general impunity conferred upon military personnel during the Doe regime.⁵⁵ Within this track, Kojo Samuels, founder, songwriter and lead singer of Kapingbdi explicitly employs military imagery while urging his listeners to fight on the metaphorical battlefield in the cause of human rights. One specific human right singled out in the lyrics is the right to receive a fair wage for a day’s labor.

⁵³ The final two verses are translations of the Bassa language lyrics into English.

⁵⁴ Kapingbdi, *Don't Escape*, Trikont, Unsere Stimme US-0081, c. 1981, 33rpm, side 1, track 4.

⁵⁵ Kapingbdi, *Hey Brother*, Trikont LC 4270, Unsere Stimme US-0069, p. 1980, 33rpm.

A catalog of these human rights abuses, including the armed invasion of the University of Liberia campus on August 22, 1984, is well documented in Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately, Dictatorship in Liberia 1980-1986: a Personal Perspective* (Bremen, Germany: Liberia Working Group, 1987), 11.

The track also conceptually linked the struggle for human rights in apartheid South Africa with a parallel struggle in Liberia.⁵⁶ The lyrics proclaim...

When he works
He got no time to seek his rights,
Human rights!
When he works
You don't want to pay him
You got no reason
'Cause he did the job

Day-oh, Day-oh, Day-oh!
That's the cry of the suppressed man

You push him right
You push him left
You dance on his head
And say he's a fool
That's what you do all the time
When he cries, you ask him why
When he talks, you don't understand
Then he stands on his Mother's land⁵⁷
Seeking his rights...

But he can never seem to get a hold of it
Oh brother, oh sister, everybody!
What are you going to do for the rights?

Keep fightin'
Oh fighting, fighting long and hard
We've been seeking peace and understanding
For a long, long time!
Put hands together
One in one, all in all
We're goin' to the battlefield

(the sounds of military commands)

⁵⁶ To Liberian students recently "politicized" there were painfully obvious parallels between the caste-like privileges and political repression unleashed by the old guard TWP oligarchy and the white supremacist nature of the apartheid system in South Africa. Students at the University of Liberia went on to produce and stage plays that dramatized racial oppression in South Africa under apartheid which were interpreted by many observers as a not so subtle critique of contemporary Liberia under the rule of the Tolbert oligarchy.

⁵⁷ In speeches and official statements, the opposition group MOJA constantly referred to the African continent as "The Motherland."

First battalion! Eyes Right! Present Arms!

Human Rights! (4Xs)
Something to fight for
Something to die for...⁵⁸

Aaron Lewis and the Medusa Group

The following account of the career of the pop reggae group Aaron Lewis & the MGs constitutes further evidence to support the claim that Liberian musicians were part of the groundswell of public opinion against the descent into violent conflict during the decade of the 1980s. When most of the Moga Band members left Liberia and immigrated to America, Aaron Lewis & the MG's filled the vacuum they left behind with their mishmash pop reggae style.⁵⁹

Formed in 1979, the band's name seems to mimic and perhaps pay homage to the successful American soul act on the highly influential Stax Records label (based in Memphis, Tennessee) named Booker T. & the MG's.⁶⁰ Two of the group's hit songs got significant airplay on radio station ELBC; the title track of their appropriately titled *We Want Peace* record single and the B-side track "Work." The financial success the band enjoyed in terms of album and cassette sales in addition to concert ticket proceeds, as commented upon in contemporary newspaper accounts, demonstrates that the group's overtly pacifist message resonated deeply within the ranks of the Liberian music fans.

Both at the National Cultural Center in Kendeja in 1985 (around the time of the elections) and at the Relda Theatre in 1989, on the brink of the Civil War, the group organized a series of

⁵⁸ Kapingbdi, *Hey Brother*, Trikont LC 4270, Unsere Stimme US-0069, p. 1980, 33rpm, side 1, track 2.

⁵⁹ Aaron Lewis (a.k.a. Motuba Dread), interview with author, June 8, 2010, via phone from Columbus, OH.

⁶⁰ In the case of Lewis' band however, the "MG's" stood for "Medusa Group" instead of the MG sports car as was the case in the American soul act's name. See the liner notes written by Steve Greenberg to *The Very Best of Booker T. & the MG's*, Rhino Records R2 71738, compact disc, c. (1964) 1994.

“peace concerts” sponsored by locally brewed Club Beer.⁶¹ The 1989 concert especially was well attended in the wake of the biggest hit song of the group’s career, featured on the 1984 album *We Want Peace*.⁶² The last of these large scale concerts of the 1980s featuring a wide range of top Liberian musical acts was dubbed “Bands in the Sand” and was held on the beach at Hotel Africa (during the dry season of 1989) within weeks of the incursion of Taylor’s rebels.⁶³ This large, inclusive concert featured Tecumsey Roberts, Aaron Lewis & the MGs, T’kpan Nimely, Zack Roberts, Wiki Padmore, GQ (Dave Taye), The Vampees and Hayes & Harvey, among others. The seaside concert was sponsored by Hotel Africa and Club Beer and the beach was overwhelmed by music fans and supporters.⁶⁴ Later during that same year, Aaron Lewis & the Medusa Group members were forced to flee to safety as the terrifying booming sounds of the big guns drew ever closer to the outskirts of Monrovia.

Saku Sillah’s Contribution

Shortly after the kleptomaniac Samuel Doe brazenly stole the 1985 Liberian national elections (as described in Chapter 1) Liberian singer-songwriter and former Gardeners Band member Saku Sillah produced a two track vinyl record entitled *Let’s Save the Children* (1984).⁶⁵ This record echoed and summarized many of the frustrations felt by Liberians who had not been able to join the emigrant exodus from their country during the instability and political repression unleashed during the Doe regime. Featured on Side A of this record is the title track “Let’s Save the Children.” The title of the song encapsulates the thrust of the humanistic, anti-war message.

⁶¹ Club Beer (aka Come Let Us Booze) is the de facto national beer since it is the only beer brewed in Liberia and distributed nationally. It was miraculously spared destruction for the duration of the Civil War.

⁶² Aaron Lewis, interview with author, June 8, 2010, via phone from Columbus, OH.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Saku (Sillah), *Let’s Save the Children*, Carthage Records CGS 11, c. 1984, 33rpm.

Sillah buttressed the notion that the children represent the future of Liberia (and also of the world, generally) and actively encourages listeners to bolster their future by protecting and investing in the well-being of the most vulnerable children, instead of in the weapons of war.⁶⁶

The lyrics are in the form of a heartfelt plea ...

(sounds of children playing in background)

Ooh, yeah, let's save the children!
Oh the children are dying all around the world
Everybody knows why they are dying
We need some protection, Lord, to save all the children
We've got to give them the hope
For living through the hour

Ooh, yeah, let's save the children! (chorus)

So the investments you make today
They're gonna pay off tomorrow
You owe it to yourself, to save all the children
Their success in this world really depends on you
The twenty that you give today
That's what they are gonna live with
You see the children of today (are) the leaders of tomorrow
The children of today (are) the teachers of tomorrow

I'll say it, and say it again
Ooh, yeah, let's save the children!

(sounds of laughter and children playing again)

(spoken word segment)

Listen to these kids
What's gonna happen to these kids quote, the day after, unquote?⁶⁷
With all this nuclear warfare going on
With all our children, absolute safety in this un-peaceful world that we live in

⁶⁶ We must keep in mind that the funds raised to support the attempted Quiwonkpa coup in 1985 were largely raised in the U.S. where Quiwonkpa had been living in temporary retirement, even though the physical invasion came from bordering Sierra Leone.

⁶⁷ This is a reference to the anti-war film "The Day After" (1983) which imagined what the world would look like the day after a thermo-nuclear war between the superpowers in small town Lawrence, Kansas. This disturbing and terrifying film was broadcast on national television in the U.S. during prime time.

So let's save the children everybody!

Mothers of the world- let's save the children!
I said Fathers of the world- let's save the children!
Our fallen sisters of the world- let's save the children!
Say the brothers of the world- let's save the children!

Everybody, you can do it with a helping hand
And a living love
Pay some attention, yeah!
Oh my people! We can make it better!
Can you help me now?
Isn't peace good my people?

This particular phrase “my people” is commonplace in Liberian English, and it refers to the Liberian people as a holistic inclusive social unit. Liberian English specialist John Singler describes the exclamation “oh my people!” as a common cry of distress.⁶⁸ By employing this particular phrase, Sillah situates himself within that social polity, even though at a crucial juncture he actively joined the ranks of the U.S.-based Liberian Diaspora. Sillah's record represented one more voice added to the chorus of vocalists, musicians, and other performance artists in favor of a de-escalation of political tension and conflict during the mid-1980s in Liberia within the wider context of the Cold War and its accompanying threat of a pending nuclear holocaust. Even if many of these voices were ultimately drowned out by the explosions of mortars, we need to keep in mind that recording artists such as Saku Sillah were representative of a large segment of popular opinion at the time.

Liberian Women Musicians and Male Chauvinism

We will presently turn to the topic of female musicians and evidence of the male chauvinism they faced within the music industry. Liberian women musicians and singers within the popular music scene experienced various manifestations of sexism, and were discriminated

⁶⁸ Singler, 175.

against in particular ways based upon their gender. In general, female singers' reputations and sexualities were under much more public scrutiny than were men's. This double standard has been documented in other African social contexts by other writers such as Marc Chade-Poulsen and Marissa Moorman during the same time periods in Algeria and Angola.⁶⁹

Real dangers of sexual assault existed for female singers that did not exist for male singers. The all-female group S-S-Steam used to perform regularly at the ritzy Ducor Palace Intercontinental Hotel, which paid them well.⁷⁰ On these occasions, when they collaborated with the Moga Band, they called themselves "S-S-Steamoga."⁷¹ However, it was much easier and less risky to perform as an all-female group in a five-star hotel such as the Ducor alongside male performers than in less exclusive premises.

In many African countries, and indeed in many locales across the globe, there was (and still is) a serious stigma attached to being a professional female musician. Zimbabwean musician Chiwoniso Maraire stated (in 1992) "there is still a very serious stigma attached to women in the (music) industry...it is disturbing, and lots of girls (come to me) and say, 'I want to do this, but my parents will kick me out if I do.'"⁷² Ethnomusicologist Angela Impey, also writing about Zimbabwe, claims that women musicians were marginalized within society because of their professional commitments to their creative talents.⁷³ Impey described how the image of the

⁶⁹ Marc Chade-Poulsen, *Men and Popular Music in Algeria: the Social Significance of Rai* (Austin, TX; Univ. of Texas Press, 1999), 133-34; Marissa Moorman, *Intonations: a Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 101-109.

⁷⁰ Kijana "The Griot" Wiseman, Dec. 9, 2007, via phone from Houston, TX. Wiseman was not only the lead singer, but also the acting manager because of her numerous contacts and business acumen.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, This was referred to as a "J.V." (joint venture). The three S's referred to the three members of the group Steam.

⁷² Eyre, 41.

⁷³ Angela M. Impey, "They Want Us with Salt and Onions: Women in the Zimbabwean Music Industry" (Ph.D diss., Indiana University, 1992), 126.

public woman in Zimbabwean society was labeled as “exhibitionist” and “prostitute” in part due to the nature of the entertainment industry as a largely nocturnal venture which gave women a degree of financial independence.⁷⁴ She generalized that for female popular musicians across the continent it is frequently difficult to maintain both a career in music and a marriage unless married to a fellow musician who is also frequently on tour.⁷⁵

This marginalization of female musicians also happened to a lesser extent in Liberia, and in some cases became a contributing “push factor” leading to emigration. For example, Zimbabwean vocalist and mbira player Stella Chiwesche only achieved significant degrees of financial success when she moved to Germany and began touring in Europe.⁷⁶ This personal history parallels the experiences of major Liberian female artists such as Yatta Zoe and Nimba Burr.

Hawa Daisy Moore’s Story

Hawa Daisy Moore is a significant iconoclastic female figure within the history of Liberian popular music. When powerful politicians would attend her performances, Moore was known to chide them from the stage. She commented that in this respect “singing is like freedom of speech.”⁷⁷ Moore serves as a prime example of a singer-songwriter who championed the indigenous Liberian musical heritage against the profound influence of what some have described as American cultural imperialism. Moore’s hitherto under-appreciated contributions

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁷⁶ ibid., 134.

⁷⁷ Michael, Jennifer. “Singing is Like Freedom of Speech; Artist Profile of Hawa Moore, Liberian Performing Artist,” *Works in Progress* (Philadelphia Folklore Project), vol. 9/3-10/1, Fall/Winter 1996, p.12.

will be examined in this semi-biographical section.⁷⁸ Moore was raised in a musically active family. Her father played tenor saxophone and piano with the nationally renowned ensemble: the Greenwood Singers, during the 1950s. The contrast between her father's generation of musicians and her own could not have been more dramatic, since Moore's generation initiated a shift away from American musical icons and towards the Liberian hinterland for their musical inspiration, and expressed themselves not exclusively in English, but embraced several local African languages. Moore's paternal grandfather was a traditional clan chief, and a descendent of King Sao Bosso (King Boatswain) and Moore actively embraced this familial heritage.⁷⁹ Likewise, a contemporary Liberian musician, and close associate of Moore's, Caesar Gartor, claimed the title of "Bassa King of Liberia" on his album (of the same title) in 1984.⁸⁰

During Moore's childhood, Christian mission schools would not enroll children with "native" (indigenous African) names. In the classroom Moore was compelled to take the name "Daisy," which she found onerous. Therefore, after she left school she reclaimed her original Vai name Hawa as her first name.⁸¹ This coercive practice attests to the psychological oppression that young indigenous students faced in both the public and private educational sectors. The suppression of autochthonous appellations coupled with the banning of African languages in the classroom was reminiscent of the treatment meted out to Sioux Indian children on reservations of

⁷⁸ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, June 30, 2007, Landsdowne, PA. Moore was born in Negbahn village, in Nimba County in 1955 and her ancestry encompasses both Mano and Vai ethnicities.

⁷⁹ Moore is proud of her royal familial connections and her use of the title "Princess" is a reflection of this embraced identity.

⁸⁰ Caesar Gartor, *Bassa King of Liberia*, Soul Source/ Studio 99 101, c. 1984, 33rpm. This act of publicly reclaiming African royal heritage was fairly common during the 1970s even though Liberia lagged behind former British West African colonies such as Nigeria and Ghana in this respect.

⁸¹ Hawa is a common Muslim name, used since the bulk of the Vai population converted to Islam.

the American West during the 19th century.⁸² Yet this practice had a long history in Liberia and in mission school practices in general throughout sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial period. In mission administered boarding schools in 19th century Liberia regularly assigned Christian names to all students prior to baptism. In many cases the student would be assigned the first name of the person who paid for their scholarship.⁸³ This was one pernicious aspect of the so-called “civilizing mission” that was practiced since the American Colonization Society (ACS) era between 1822 and 1847. This demeaning policy taught Liberian children to scorn a central facet of their own cultural heritage while socially reproducing an Americo-Liberian worldview. As MOJA leader Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson stated “The process of integrating the two communities has also been proceeding for a long time, but on what basis? Let us admit it; in the main, the integration process in our country has proceeded on the basis that the indigenous people acquire the values, attitudes and ‘education’ of the Western world, or the settlers’ interpretation of this world. So...it has been a one-sided process. One should in fact describe it as an assimilation process.”⁸⁴ Other examples of this practice that survived into the 1970s (and beyond) included referring to Poro society sacred groves as the “man’s devil bush” and masked spirit dancers such as the Vai *Zobah* as “country devils” or “bush devils.”⁸⁵

⁸² This practice of systematically removing children from one targeted ethnic group and putting them under the care of a dominant group falls within the parameters of the definition of “cultural genocide” under the UN definition of that term. See the UN “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the crime of Genocide” adopted by the UN General Assembly, Dec. 9, 1948.

⁸³ For a discussion of this practice, see Joseph Jeffrey Walters, *Guanya Pau; A Story of an African Princess*, eds. Gareth Griffiths and John V. Singler (Peterborough, Canada; Broadview Press, 2004), 43.

⁸⁴ Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson, *Which Way Africa? Notes on the Present Neo-Colonial Situation and Possibilities for Struggling Against It* (Syracuse, NY: Clearinghouse for Liberian Literature, n.d.), 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35 & 160. Clearly labeling these masquerading spirits as “devils” is derogatory and represents terminology and cultural baggage from the early missionary era in which indigenous traditions were denigrated.

Hawa Daisy Moore's Career

Working as a recording artist has never been a cakewalk for Hawa Daisy Moore. When she began her career, Moore reminisces, many Liberians still thought it was “improper” for a woman to sing and dance publicly. Furthermore, her former husband forcibly stopped her from touring.⁸⁶ One of the many perils that regularly confronted well-known Liberian female vocalists was that they became objectified as prestigious “trophy girlfriends” for the elite “big shots” and powerful male politicians. For example, during the mid-1980s President Doe sent for Moore and requested that she should meet him during the evening hours at the Executive mansion.⁸⁷

Hawa Daisy Moore was also the first female recording artist to perform on stage and on television while pregnant. Moore regularly performed at the NCC at Kendeja and on stage at Cooper's Beach (south of Monrovia) where she frequently brought her children with her. Before Moore broke this unspoken taboo, this simply was not done. In her defense, Moore emphatically demanded to know “why should I be ashamed of my own children?”⁸⁸ Moore recalled that “As an artist, people would tell you, you shouldn't let anyone know you have children, and I told them that was foolish.”⁸⁹ Moore claims that many popular musicians actually hid their biological children or sent them to be raised by relatives in distant rural villages.⁹⁰ This narrative shines a spotlight on both Moore's rebellious, iconoclastic personality, but also illustrates changing

⁸⁶ Jennifer Michael, “Singing is Like Freedom of Speech; Artist Profile of Hawa Moore, Liberian Performing Artist,” *Works in Progress (Philadelphia Folklore Project)* 9/3-10/1 (Fall/Winter 1996): 11.

⁸⁷ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, Sept. 13, 2008, via phone from Landsdowne, PA. Moore soon became convinced that this was a ploy to entice her to become one of his concubines, since the Executive mansion was normally only open to the public during normal business hours, from 9am-5pm. Even though she refused his advances, Doe would repeatedly send for her, but when his soldiers arrived to collect her, Moore would feign illness because she was afraid that Doe harbored designs to take sexual advantage of her.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ ibid.

⁹⁰ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, Aug. 25, 2010, via phone from Landsdowne, PA.

societal attitudes during the 1970s regarding the public perceptions about female music artists and what constituted the norms of acceptable behavior.

There was a contentious issue with the corrupt and morally indefensible practice of younger women from the NCT being lent out (or “dashed out”) to prominent government ministers in search of under-aged juvenile girlfriends. These politicians would then assume the role of “sugar daddies” or “god-pa’s” to these young girls. Moore claims that on weekends powerful high ranking men in government employed young girls to perform domestic work in their houses. In this manner they could engage in covert sexual relations with them in exchange for a bribe to their families in the form of cash or bags of rice (the national staple).⁹¹ Some poor families apparently did not object to this arrangement, however, moral questions immediately arise concerning the supposed consensual nature of these relationships in situations where there are huge disparities in power, wealth, age and experience.⁹²

Miatta Fahnbulleh’s Experience

According to Liberian musician “Coco” James Chea, during the 1970s and 1980s Miatta Fahnbulleh was a “revolutionary” female vocalist heavily influenced by Miriam Makeba.⁹³ Fahnbulleh was part of the forging of what could be described as “cultures of tolerance.” At the very least, Fahnbulleh was a veritable trendsetter; singing songs in Vai, Kru, and English, including her early period hit song “Wah Gee Da Tebo.”

However, Fahnbulleh never achieved success in the North American consumer market. Music writer Andrew Hamilton attributes Fahnbulleh’s failure to break through to American

⁹¹ Hawa Daisy Moore, interview with author, Sept. 13, 2008, via phone from Landsdowne, PA.

⁹² Additionally, in a relatively small country such as Liberia, it is extremely difficult to keep these illicit and vastly unequal sexual relationships secret.

⁹³ “Coco” James Chea, interview with author, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.

audiences to “bad advice, bad luck, and the paranoia that everyone wanted sexual favors in return for helping her career.”⁹⁴ While the first half of his analysis may be accurate, Hamilton overlooks that fact that at that time her career was overshadowed by South African superstar Miriam Makeba, and that perhaps American audiences simply were not willing to purchase a record by an African singer with an “exotic” name, whose difficult to categorize, highly syncretic music represented a fusion of Caribbean, North American, and West African popular styles.

Upon her arrival in New York, Fahnbulleh was pressured by promoters to change her stage name to a more accessible one. Even if changing her stage name may have been beneficial to her career, she refused to comply with what would have constituted (in her mind), a betrayal of her Liberian and familial heritage.⁹⁵ Fahnbulleh is therefore credited for “retaining a healthy commitment to truth of form” and “speaking to the world about...her ancestry” instead of compromising her personal style.⁹⁶ Since, as we have witnessed, indigenous culture was previously downplayed and delegitimized within the realm of national popular culture, this artistic choice was quite laudable. Even though her vocal delivery style was frequently compared to Miriam Makeba, Fahnbulleh was, in her own right, a trendsetter for other Liberian female musicians and vocalists such as the younger NCT protégé Nimba Burr.

Additionally, Fahnbulleh represented a strong women’s rights tradition within Liberian music history. This strand of activism would eventually assist in electing the first female

⁹⁴ Andrew Hamilton, Answers.com, “Miatta Fahnbulleh Biography,” <http://www.answers.com/topic/miatta-fahnbulleh>.

⁹⁵ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 2, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹⁶ Stephanie C. Horton, “A Lyrical History: Miatta Fahnbulleh”, *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 2004). <http://archives-one.liberiaseabreeze.com/miatta.html>.

president in Liberia and the first woman to be elected as head of state on the African continent with the candidacy of Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

In 1984 Fahnbulleh moved to Nigeria, and only returned in 1985 to perform for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's Liberian Action Party (LAP) fundraiser, at which she altered the lyrics of her most popular hit song "Kokolioko" to become a LAP campaign anthem (as mentioned in Chapter 1). Even though she was concerned by all of the vote rigging engaged in by various parties, she stated "I, like almost everyone else, wanted to see an end to the Doe regime."⁹⁷ In a recent validation of Fahnbulleh's contributions over the years, newly-elected President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf danced to a song specially composed and performed by Fahnbulleh entitled "Obaa, This Is Our Time" (Obaa means woman in the Twi language) at her inauguration ceremony in January 2006 which was conceived as an artistic contribution to the disarmament process, as well as an anthem that championed women's rights.⁹⁸

Nimba Burr Begs us to Remember

This semi-biographical segment will illuminate further the common path taken by Liberian musicians who were involved in this cultural nationalism project. Similar to the experience of Princess Fatu Gayflor, Nimba Burr's career illustrates the lines of affiliation and role of the NCC and the NCT in fostering young musical talent during the 1970s.

Burr (whose full name is Burr Gonkatee) was born in the town of Display, Nimba County in 1963.⁹⁹ The vivacious Burr was recruited by her uncle, the well-known ethnographer, George W. Tahmen, along with her sister, to become a member of the NCT in 1971 and at age eight

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Miatta Fahnbulleh, interview with author, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁹⁹ Nimba Burr, interview with author, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ. Burr was given the name Nimba Burr by Director Khona Khasu (Emmanuel Roberts) because she was originally from Nimba County. Many Liberians are under the impression that her name is "Nimba Bird," which is an understandable misunderstanding.

moved to the NCC campus at Kendeja. Burr's family contained many musicians (both her mother and grandmother were accomplished singers) and they were very supportive of her theatrical ambitions. Burr enjoyed an illustrious career as a child prodigy with the NCT, remaining active within the troupe for ten years from 1971-1981.¹⁰⁰ According to the raconteur Burr, her favorite international tour with the NCT was in the U.S. for the 1976 bicentennial celebrations in Washington DC and Philadelphia. This was Burr's first visit to America, and she was one of the up-and-coming young stars of the troupe at age thirteen. Burr also performed with the American superstar Stevie Wonder and Calypso Rose at the FESTAC '77 festival.¹⁰¹ After conducting an interview with Burr, A.B. Dolley wrote; "Born in Nimba County where the crickets crick at night, birds sing in melody in the morning and people gather to sing when the moon shines; it is this great harmony that she wanted to share."¹⁰²

Although Burr's solo recording career blossomed in the 1990s (while based in the U.S.) with the release of such albums as *Nimba Tablet* (1992), *We Want to Come Home* (1999) and her most recent production *The Legend/ Afro Rhythm* (2008); the roots of her formative period remain securely at the NCC campus at Kendeja.¹⁰³ The unique (almost spiritual) place that Kendeja holds for her is memorialized in her recent melodic, upbeat track "Remember Me." The three performance locations mentioned in the song; Kendeja Cultural Center, E.J. Roye

¹⁰⁰ Burr was primarily a dancer and singer at Kendeja and at one point became a lead vocalist for the Kendeja All-Stars which was the electric highlife house band of the NCC. According to Burr, the lead singers of the Kendeja All-Stars (the house band of the NCC) were; herself, Tarloh Quiwonkpa, Zaire (a man), Zack Musgrove (band leader), and later; Fatu Gayflor.

¹⁰¹ Nimba Burr, interview with author, July 26 2008, East Orange, NJ.

¹⁰² A.B. Dolley, "Exclusive Interview: Nimba Burr Triumphs," *The African Star Online*, April 15, 2008. www.africanstarz.com/050news.htm.

¹⁰³ Nimba Burr, *Nimba Tablet*, Nimba Burr's Productions, cassette, p. 1992; Nimba Burr, *We Want to Come Home*, Nimba Burr's Production, compact disc, c. 1999, and Nimba Burr, *The Legend/ Afro Rhythm*, Nimbur Productions HSV 35062, compact disc, c. 2008.

Auditorium, and Providence Island were all popular places for the NCT to perform during their heyday in the 1970s. The nostalgic lyrics of the song are as follows...

Hello, do you remember me?
I'm sure you remember me
I'm the Nimba Bird
From the top of the Nimba Mountain

I sing for you little boys
I sing for you little girls
I sing for everybody
And I sing for Liberia

Do you remember me?
Come to Kendeja
If you come to Kendeja
You will see Nimba Burr

Come to E.J. Roye
If you come to E.J. Roye
You will see Nimba Burr

Come to Providence Island
If you come to Providence Island
You will see Nimba Burr...¹⁰⁴

The significance of this song is that Burr situates her musical career within an entire group of cultural nationalists (for the lack of a better term) who were trained in stagecraft at the NCC campus at Kendeja before launching their solo careers later in their lives. For artists such as Nimba Burr, Caesar Gartor, Tarloh Quiwonkpa, Princess Fatu Gayflor, and actor Kekura Kamara (to name only a few), Kendeja represents a type of spiritual home and talent incubator. To remember the central place that Kendeja has occupied in Liberian music history is crucial and timely within the context of the recent complete destruction (with bulldozers) of the Kendeja campus under the presidency of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (in 2007) in order to pave the way for the

¹⁰⁴ Nimba Burr, *The Legend/Afro Rhythm*, Nimbur Productions HSV 35062, compact disc, c. 2008, track 1.

construction of a tourist-oriented four-star luxury hotel named RJI Kendeja Resort & Villas which opened to serve a very exclusive clientele in 2009.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ RJI Kendeja Resort & Villas, <http://www.rjlkendejaresort.com>.

CHAPTER 7
ETHNIC PLURALISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE 1980S

The differences between Liberia and most other African states are fundamental. Liberia has never had a foreign colonial ruler. It has not experienced a populist movement aimed at driving out foreign colonizers and stripping away an alien culture. Nor did its independence come at a time when socialist and egalitarian ideologies were considered to be the appropriate motor forces moving new nations. Indeed, Liberian leaders have sought to preserve their historical political system rather than to uproot or transform it.¹

–Martin Lowenkopf

The present strategy for economic development is based upon ‘bad economics’ but it is also based on ‘bad politics;’ because, faced with the situation of increasing inequalities of income and wealth, the government is alienating a vast majority of the population who tend to dismiss government’s development programs as yet another attempt by the ‘big shots’ to dupe them...meanwhile, the problems of poverty and underdevelopment continue to stare us in the face.²

–Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson

Like it or not, we will have to come to grips with our past. We will have to exorcise the ghosts of the eighties as well as those of this war. People must know what really happened in all the bloody incidents that have blighted our land in the last dozen years. We must wash our dirty linen in public.³

–G. Henry Andrews

The Ideal of Ethnic Pluralism

Liberian commentator G. Henry Andrews sadly observed “(by) December 1989 our socioeconomic development was characterized by insufficient, inefficient, and abysmally poor healthcare and educational systems, declining agricultural production, decrepit and decaying public utilities infrastructure, corruption-plagued public services, an alien-dominated economy, and moral values seriously compromised by greed, licentiousness...and amorality.”⁴ Under the

¹ Lowenkopf, 1.

² Mayson, 139.

³ G. Henry Andrews, *Cry, Liberia, Cry!* (London: Vantage Press, 1993), 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

Doe regime, the generalized perception was that the bulk of government largesse and jobs (especially in the army) went to his Krahn kinsmen from Grand Gedeh County at the expense of the Gio and Mano PPP supporters, the majority of whom hailed from neighboring Nimba County.⁵ This grim assessment is sobering. However, as we have seen, an alternative to conflict was circulated widely by the above set of popular musicians; a vision that many of their fans and supporters largely shared. The ideal of ethnic pluralism as championed by the new generation of Liberian electric highlife musicians became even more pertinent during the 1980s. This was largely due to the escalating process of ethnic balkanization (as outlined in Chapter 1), during the highly unstable military regime of the megalomaniacal yet increasingly paranoid Samuel Doe.

As we have discussed, the decade of the 1980s began with the first ever successful military coup in Liberia, which propelled an indigenous Liberian non-commissioned officer into the heady role of Commander-in-Chief. This military intervention undermined the shaky democratic process. Elections had been scheduled for 1983, but were not held again until 1985 after Doe had become firmly entrenched. Military rule in Liberia sparked a gradual decline in the overall quality of life through governmental neglect and subsequent slow-motion collapse of national institutions and infrastructure.⁶

The task to be undertaken in this penultimate chapter is two-fold. First, we will revisit the events surrounding the 1980 coup. I will use this watershed moment as a historical backdrop to help explain why the ideal of ethnic pluralism became even more relevant and therefore prominently manifested within the musical productions of Liberian musicians. Secondly, I will identify reasons why the issues of peace and sectional reconciliation became more crucial within

⁵ Sanford J. Ungar, *Africa: the People and Politics of an Emerging Continent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 115.

⁶ Berkeley, 31-45.

the musical productions of the same group of musicians after the stolen national elections of 1985 and the subsequent failed coup attempt by estranged General Thomas Quiwonkpa a few days later. We will be revisiting these two pivotal events; the 1980 coup and the national elections of 1985 and demonstrate how the deeply-felt significance of these two events was reflected, debated, and reacted to within the body of Liberian popular music produced at the time.

It remains germane that whereas there exists a large corpus of songs written in support of the twin notions of ethnic pluralism and peaceful intersectional coexistence, I was not able to locate a single composition that urged the contrary position. No compositions that I encountered during my research argued in favor of ethnic balkanization and/or urged renewed inter-sectional confrontation.

As one extreme counter-example, the hate-mongering racist propaganda and “patriotic airs” of radio station *Radio Television Libre de Mille Collines* (RTL) and Radio Rwanda broadcasts in the events leading up to the Rwandan genocide of April-June 1994 utilized musical productions that encouraged ethnic hatred against the Tutsis. In that episode, Jean Hatzfeld observed that “In the broadcast studios of popular radio stations...Tutsis were referred to as cockroaches. Announcers used humorous sketches and *songs* (my emphasis) to openly call for the destruction of the Tutsis.”⁷ These radio broadcasts which included music alongside pre-recorded speeches and skits played a crucial part in the politically motivated genocide. This ethnic cleansing campaign transformed rural countryside into killing fields and sections the capital city Kigali into a virtual necropolis.⁸ In the period of escalating ethnic tensions in Liberia

⁷ Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: the Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Picador, 2003), 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13, 55, & 90. There are a host of excellent sources on the topic of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and this is just one title among many.

during the late 1980s this could easily have occurred but did not. This was perhaps in part due to the fact that Liberian musicians were promoting an agenda of peace and reconciliation, not conflict. The first Rwanda-like genocidal massacre to take place in Liberia was when almost six hundred mostly Gio and Mano civilians were killed by the Krahn-dominated AFL while seeking sanctuary in the St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Sinkor, Monrovia at the outset of the Civil War in 1990.

The Cause of Sectional Equality

Liberian musicians of the 1970s and 1980s championed a unified vision of sectional equality. For example Liberian musician “Big Steve” Worjloh stated that “my objective is to promote an atmosphere for equal opportunity, fair play, and justice for all mankind through music. (At the same time) I also want to popularize our rich and diverse musical heritage.”⁹ It is this irrepressible topic that we will address next through a deeper examination of the musical evolution of the Kru revivalist group Tejajlu.

Even though Tejajlu began as a strictly Kru revivalist ensemble, over time the collective grew to represent the epitome of the ethnic pluralism ethos. Tejajlu formed at the funeral of a man named Jallahteh Nyankum in Claratown. Anthony Nagbe and his Kru compatriots arrived at the “wake-keeping” carrying instruments to accompany the songs they would sing throughout the night; mostly percussive instrumentation, such as *samgba* drums, cylindrical bass drums, and various idiophones (such as empty glass bottles struck with iron rods). Before long, the ensemble's fame spread, and the group broadened their constituency with the animated performance of traditional Kru songs at weddings and annual Grand Kru County meetings in

⁹ From the press release “Autobiography: Stephen S. Worjloh” (2007) courtesy of the artist.

New Kru Town on Bushrod Island.¹⁰ Tejjalu eventually expanded into a musical collective of roughly twenty-five people, and at the peak of the band's popularity, there was an equal ratio of drummers to dancers. While the growing percussion section of Tejjalu propelled the melodies forward with an accompaniment of hypnotic pulsating Kru rhythms, newer members who joined the musical collective were of Bassa, Vai, and Krahn ethnicities. Group founder Tony "Experience" Nagbe revealed "we could really never turn anyone away who wanted to join us, we never did say no to anyone."¹¹

There are numerous examples of musicians with ethnically mixed parentage and this mutual formative experience surely set the stage for the embracing of the concept of ethnic pluralism in both theory and praxis. This phenomenon of intermarriage across "tribal" or "sectional" boundaries was commonplace in both rural but especially urban Liberia. Liberia is geographically only the size of the U.S. state of Indiana at 69,202 sq. miles (111,370 sq. kilometers), but supported a population of just under 1.5 million in 1970.¹²

In a second example, Kandakai Duncan's first national television appearance (on ELTV) was on Sherman Brown's program in 1973. On that broadcast he covered the copyright hit song "Black and White" by the pop rock group Three Dog Night, which was a musical plea for racial harmony. Why would this song resonate with television audiences in Liberia, where there were

¹⁰ Bushrod Island is located just across the Johnson Bridge (a continuation of Johnson Street) to the north of the Central Business District (CBD) of Monrovia.

¹¹ Patrick Dunbar, interview with author, July 3, 2007, Trenton, NJ. The indigenous languages that correspond to these various ethnicities form a subsection of the expansive Niger-Congo branch of Bantu languages, and are similar enough to be mutually intelligible, which was an important consideration when the need arose compose songs that the entire group could comprehend, learn, and sing together.

¹² For example, both T'kpan Nimely and "Big Steve" Worjloh have Kru ancestry. Nimely sang in both the Bassa language and the Klao (Kru) language, since he was raised in a bilingual household. Worjloh was also born into two separate cultural traditions; one of his parents was Americo-Liberian and the other was Kru.

very few resident white people?¹³ I believe that it was because the “Congo-country divide” functioned in many ways like a non-racial caste hierarchy and one that needed to be overcome in order to decisively break with deep historical moorings and construct a new, inclusive sense of national unity.

During the 1980s there was a dynamic and observable switch from desirability of a “Congo” identity to a self-fashioned “African” identity during the immediate post-coup period when clinging to a “Congo” identity could unnecessarily subject one to be targeted by unruly lascivious soldiers looking for vengeance, scapegoats, and loot.¹⁴ During this period therefore, one witnessed a widespread adoption of “struggle names.” MOJA leader Rudolf Roberts changed his name to Togba Nah Tippoteh, and Emmanuel Roberts changed his name to Khona Khasu, to mention only two prominent examples. Demonstrating a parallel and related phenomenon, by the late 1970s, Liberian singer Louiza Flamma-Sherman had launched her solo music and acting career, in exile in Hollywood, California, adopting the stage name “Lady Nefertiti,” in homage to the legendary queen of ancient Pharaonic Egypt (“Kemet”). Flamma-Sherman had adopted the name Nefertiti in 1970, because she was convinced that Louiza was too much of a “slave name.”¹⁵ In all of these individual cases Liberians rejected family names that sounded too Western and not “African” enough for a variety of reasons ranging from a renewed sense of pride in their African heritage to fear of reprisals during the heady early years of the “indigenized” Doe regime.

¹³ Due to Liberia’s exclusive constitutional racial clause, only those with demonstrable African heritage can legally become citizens of the republic.

¹⁴ Keep in mind that the term “Congo” became a quasi-derogatory label for Americo-Liberians over time.

¹⁵ Interview with Louiza “Lady Nefertiti” Sherman, July 7, 2009, via phone from Fort Worth, TX.

The following section provides further evidence that musicians were in the forefront of the groundswell of public opinion against the descent into violent conflict.¹⁶ For readily apparent reasons, Liberian musicians championed notions of peace and human rights even more vigorously after the stolen 1985 elections. This was a political, ideological and strategic response to the state-sponsored repression that was unleashed on the civilian population during the second half of the Doe regime from 1985 to 1990.¹⁷ After the rebel incursion on Christmas Eve 1989 by the largely mercenary forces under the command of the ruthless warlord Charles Taylor, these hopes were dashed as local Gio (Dahn) and Mano youth of Nimba county especially, flocked to join Taylor's paramilitary force; the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Reasons for joining varied from forced conscription to taking advantage of the opportunity to both protect one's extended family and to extract revenge against Doe's Krahn dominated army and their Muslim Mandingo allies.

It was shortly after this incursion was launched that singer-songwriter Tecumsey Roberts was murdered while under the "protection" of the INPFL faction rebel leader Prince Yormie Johnson on his Caldwell base on Bushrod Island.¹⁸ It was during this period of "wartime," the dialogical opposite of "normal time," in which the vision for a gradually improving Liberia suffered a prolonged and painful death, and was replaced largely by a certain fatalistic hopelessness. This generalized despair was compounded by grief as family members were swept up in the ethnically charged armed struggle for land and resources, and thousands were

¹⁶ An in-depth analysis of the root causes of the civil war unfortunately lies outside the scope of this study, but these have been examined by various other historians and participant-observers, including: Ellis, 31-65; Huband, 14-44 and Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 22-101. For a fascinating Krahn-centric account see James Youboty, *A Nation in Terror; the True Story of the Liberian Civil War* (Philadelphia, PA: Parkside Impressions Enterprises, 2004), 9-104.

¹⁷ Berkeley, 25-29.

¹⁸ The then murderous sociopath (currently a senator representing Nimba County) Prince Yormie Johnson was the leader of the breakaway Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL).

murdered, maimed and/or displaced as refugees after the fighting began in earnest during the early months of 1990.¹⁹ It should suffice to summarize that by 1990, the exact moment when former Cold War allegiances were crumbling and cheap weapons from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe flooded the international arms market, Doe had created so much enmity amongst various ethnic minorities including the Gio (Dahn), Mano, and the Americo-Liberian minority, that bombastic, shrewd and crassly opportunistic warlords like Taylor, Kromah, Boley and Johnson with overseas financial backing had plenty of intensely felt resentment to draw upon and effectively mobilize armies of disillusioned and disadvantaged youth with famously disastrous results.

Zack and Gebah's "Sweet Liberia"

The singular song that propelled the dynamic duo of Zack & Gebah to stardom which became a grassroots unofficial national anthem was the twelve-minute-long track "Sweet Liberia."²⁰ This nationally popular anthem was a significant milestone that articulated a clarion call for national unity in the mid-1980s. The syncretic musical style found in the song is a carnivalesque mélange of Afro-reggae and Afro-disco. It was jointly composed by Zack Roberts and Gebah Swaray on the eve of the disastrous 1985 Liberian national elections stolen by Doe's party, the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL).²¹ The preface is so crucial as a foundational statement that frames the socio-political context of the song that it is spoken instead

¹⁹ An estimated 250,000 Liberians lost their lives during the conflict, and another estimated 1 million were forced to flee into exile- largely to neighboring countries such as Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Senegal. In Ghana the UN-constructed Budumburam refugee camp was reputed to have had upwards of 45,000 Liberian refugee-residents at its peak.

²⁰ Zack & Gebah, *Sweet Liberia*, Z & G Productions, cassette, p. 1985. Ironically, this track was not recorded in Liberia, but instead was recorded in Onitsha, Nigeria, in the aftermath of the demise of Studio 99, yet before Toniah William's Hotline Studios had been formally launched.

²¹ The NDPL was neither national in its constituency nor democratic in any sense, but rather a vehicle specifically created to perpetuate the rule of Samuel Doe.

of sung in order that the audience can clearly understand each word. In this prefatory introduction, Zack and Gebah enthusiastically encouraged the citizenry to peacefully and vigorously participate in the democratic process by exercising their hard-won franchise at the ballot box...

Ladies and gentlemen;
Zack and Gebah will now dedicate this song to the Liberian people!
After a period of one hundred and thirty-three years of a one party system,
it is time that the Liberian people will vote and choose their own leader.
So let us all celebrate a peaceful election for unity and prosperity, yeah!²²

As referenced in the remarks above, these elections were theoretically multi-party in nature, but as emphasized by Liberian political scientist Amos Sawyer and J. Gus Liebenow amongst others, the two major parties on the Left were banned outright, and the final electoral results were fabricated after Doe unashamedly changed his date of birth to be eligible to stand as a candidate.²³ Social critic Albert Porte, describing the Liberian political system had warned as early as the late 1970s wrote that “(If you) pull the dual party system out of the practical life of a system called democratic by name and you have nothing left but a skeletal shell of stifling, veiled, sugar-coated authoritarianism.”²⁴

Zack & Gebah’s introduction explicitly references the end of the True Whig Party (TWP) monopoly on political power, and celebrates the emergence of multi-party democracy in which the “native man” and “native woman” could participate, and even get elected to public office legitimately by garnering a statistical majority of the electorate’s votes. After the spoken

²² Zack & Gebah, *Sweet Liberia*, Z & G Productions, cassette, p. 1985, side A, track 1.

²³ Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), 23. According to the new Liberian Draft Constitution a candidate had to be at least 35 years of age. On May 6, 1981 Doe had publicly celebrated his 30th birthday. Therefore he was actually 34 years old in 1985, having been born in 1951. See also J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia; the Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 280-96.

²⁴ Albert Porte, “A Return to Democratic Principles,” by in *Voices of Protest; Liberia on the Edge 1974-1980*, ed. H. Boima Fahnbulleh (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2005), 64.

introduction, this patriotic anthem continued with its anti-war message, invoking cosmological spiritual and humanistic justifications...

This world wasn't made for war
God made all of us to be together
Black, white, brown, red, blue, yellow, green
So we don't need this trouble
We don't need this fighting...

We don't want no trouble
We don't want no confusion
We don't want no bazooka
The joy is to sing together²⁵

Code Switching and “Africaneity”

Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf recalls an event in the early 1970s that made an indelible impression. Sirleaf was at the University of Liberia's graduation ceremony when the choir sang a song in a local Liberian language. Sirleaf recalls that “everyone in the audience had applauded with great warmth and pride.”²⁶ Johnson-Sirleaf also recalled that at the time local languages were not taught at the university, and therefore she considered one number sung in a local language to be “window dressing at best.”²⁷ Writing in 1975, Agnes Nebo von Ballmoos concluded that “the performance of foreign music and song still dominates over the performance of Liberian folksongs in towns and cities,” yet she was ultimately optimistic, observing that “a change in attitude in favor of indigenous songs and dances is now evident.”²⁸

²⁵ Zack & Gebah, *Sweet Liberia*, Z & G Productions, audiocassette, p. 1985, side A, track 1.

²⁶ Johnson-Sirleaf, 70. This was clearly the result of the influence of choir director Agnes Nebo von Ballmoos who encouraged this radically new direction for the UL choir.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Von Ballmoos, 182. In this case von Ballmoos was commenting on a process that was still in its infancy.

Malawala Balawala on National Television

One of “Big Steve” Worjloh’s most successful compositions was the theme song for the wildly popular television drama series “Malawala Balawala” in which references to episodes from the entire series had been embedded.²⁹ The significance of this serialized drama is that it was the first major attempt at a locally produced televised comedy, complete with talented local actors speaking in Liberian English, aimed at largely illiterate audiences and (mostly) filmed on the historically significant Providence Island.³⁰ The plots contained in Malawala Balawala episodes were not complicated, nor did they dwell on foreign themes unlike the continuous broadcast of foreign media cultures that were the standard televised fare. Instead, they employed situational comedy, parody, and slapstick humor that ordinary viewers found hilarious while disseminating senses of everyday life. These humorous episodes had recurrent appeal and long lasting resonance in the minds of viewers, and they remembered them long after the TV show’s demise. This development paralleled the projects of socially conscious musicians such as Princess Fatu Gayflor and Caesar Gartor. There was an overlap of personnel furthermore, between the Malawala Balawala actors and musical artists who had been groomed in the NCT.

Liberian Palaver Hut at the 1985 World’s Fair

In the meantime, within this maelstrom of events of the mid-1980s, the NCT at Kendeja was left to languish. The official production and promotion of state-sponsored cultural affairs was simply not a priority of the avaricious Doe regime. The NCT did actively participate

²⁹ This song appeared as “Who Owns Lala” on the album; Big Steve, *Aay Africa*, Big Steve Productions 4458, compact disc, c. 2000. “Lala” was the code name for the female seductress “Garmeh” in the serialized dramatic comedy series.

³⁰ Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, interview with author, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA. In the most famous episode of “Malawala Balawala” the main character (Balawala) returned to Lala’s house to retrieve the cutlass (machete) he had left behind during his tryst with her when Lala’s husband unexpectedly appeared. Balawala was then trapped in Lala’s bedroom and was forced to hide in a cassava sack, while her cuckolded husband poked and prodded the lumpy burlap bag with his cutlass. This prompted Lala to scream; “Don’t kill my cassava!”

however, in the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans. A promotional brochure for the event stated "At the Liberian Pavilion you will be greeted by six musicians and a two-story high stilt-walker. A cultural troupe will perform folk operas hourly while ongoing films inform you about Liberia's cultural and touristic aspects."³¹

According to star performer Nimely Nabla, in an unofficial policy of "benign neglect" President Doe decided against attending the opening festivities, even though the World's Fair would eventually draw a total of seven million visitors, many of them stopping by the Liberian Palaver Hut (which was part of the larger International Pavilion) on the Mississippi riverfront promenade.³² Unfortunately, in what must have been a rude awakening, the NCT members were hamstrung and ultimately stranded in New Orleans when Doe abruptly stopped payments on the bills accumulated by the performers housed in the Liberian Pavilion.³³ Consequently, at the end of that venture many troupe members defected, refusing to return to Liberia, instead wagering on a brighter future in the U.S., settling in locales such as Oakland, California and Minneapolis, Minnesota.³⁴

Doughba Caranda's Career

Another important Afro-centric activist or cultural nationalist musical artist and dedicated radio programmer was Doughba Caranda. Caranda was active during the 1970s and 1980s and was firmly situated at the center of the cultural revivalist movement.³⁵ In 1981 he formed a

³¹ "The Republic of Liberia Pavilion" in *The Official World's Fair Preview & Vacation Planner: World's Fair '84*, New Orleans, ed. Linda C. Delery (New Orleans, LA: Michael L. Osborne Publications, 1983).

³² Nimely Nabla, interview with author, May 29, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

³³ Peter Ballah, interview with author, June 6, 2008, Flomo Theatre office, Monrovia, Liberia.

³⁴ Nimely Nabla, interview with author, May 29, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

³⁵ Doughba Caranda, interview with author, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA. Caranda was born in Montserrado County in 1950 and his parents were originally from Lower Lofa County; therefore he was raised with strong familial ties in both urban and rural communities.

musical ensemble called Kabasa Music with like-minded individuals who were interested in reviving Liberian music and began performing regularly at Hotel Africa.³⁶ Caranda was an important figure involved in the promotion of Liberian music as a radio programmer for ELBC, as well as promoting the cultural revival scene on Providence Island.³⁷ Caranda also hosted his own television show on ELTV entitled “Cultural Heritage” that showcased local artists; further demonstrating the crossover of trained personnel within the local music, television, and radio entertainment and communications sectors.

Tejajlu and the Struggle for Social Justice

In addition to the widespread themes of peace and reconciliation, Liberian musicians of this period elaborated upon visions of a socially and politically progressive future for their country which explicitly included sensitivity to both women’s rights and the rights of children underneath the larger conceptual umbrella of human rights.

Over time, Tejajlu songs came to be thematically centered on social issues such as freedom, justice, and unity. Eventually even the Kru rhythm that Tejajlu popularized became associated in people’s minds with protest music. One anthem that Tejajlu wrote was an appropriation based upon the common proverb; “monkey work, baboon draw.”³⁸ This was a potent metaphor for one conniving class of exploiters (i.e. the “baboons”) who profited from the

³⁶ Doughba Caranda, interview with author, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA. Due to the seriousness of his mission, as band leader Caranda imposed a strict code of conduct on individual members, which included no smoking, and no public drunkenness. Kabasa Music eventually was composed of three different line-ups, which corresponded to three different generations of musicians.

³⁷ After working for MICAT, from 1980 to 1990, Caranda worked for the Liberian Broadcasting System (ELBS), at radio station ELBC. Some of the artists he “coordinated” were Yatta Zoe and Morris Dorley. From 1975 to 1980, Caranda worked as a research officer for the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICAT). One key facet of his employment was to promote the NCC at Kendeja nationally as a locus for cultural tourism.

³⁸ In this metaphor the baboon may be viewed through a class lens to signify a capitalist exploiter of any racial or ethnic background. In Liberia, there are no baboons, but the chimpanzee, which is widely perceived to be more intelligent than other primates, is commonly referred to as a “baboon.”

labor of the hard-working proletarian “monkeys.” Dr. Tippeteh interpreted the proverb “monkey work, baboon draw” an allegory for the symptomatic “growth without development coupled with mass poverty” that took place in Liberia in the three decades that followed World War 2.³⁹ When a team of economists from Northwestern University was dispatched to Liberia to investigate the shortfalls and leakages of the economy, the team of auditors ultimately left in frustration. Upon arrival back home in Illinois, the team published a blistering report entitled *Growth Without Development* in which they argued the dire need for more governmental transparency in its financial dealings as a conditionality for the furtherance of U.S. aid.⁴⁰

Former MOJA leader John Karweaye recounted watching Tejjalu perform on multiple occasions. The ensemble gained popularity during the 1970s partially because of the concerts they staged on the University of Liberia campus.⁴¹ These concerts commenced when they were invited to perform for the student election campaign rallies of the Student Unity Party (SUP) which was very powerful during the mid-1970s, not only in student government party politics, but within national politics as well, by virtue of being well-connected and quite outspoken.⁴² The Liberian National Student Union (LINSU) was revitalized in 1979 and published a list of those arrested in the aftermath of the Rice Riots of April 14, 1979 on their mimeograph machine in order to help facilitate their release from prison.⁴³ Tejjalu thereby maintained multiple social

³⁹ Togba Na Tippeteh, interview with author, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Clower, *Growth Without Development: an Economic Survey of Liberia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966). Unsurprisingly, these recommendations were never implemented by the Tubman administration.

⁴¹ John Karweaye, interview with author, June 16, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁴² Ibid. For example, Karweaye stated that, at that time, the student newspaper was the only media outlet that spoke out critically against the government of President Tolbert.

⁴³ Ibid.

connections with the politically charged university-based student movement of the 1970s and early 1980s.

After an initial stage of producing both dance-oriented party songs and eulogies, Tejjalu's lyrical content evolved to include original political songs designed to educate the "grass-roots people" about the group's Pan-African heroes. One song in this panegyric genre was entitled "Dr. Kwame Nkrumah"; a homage to independent Ghana's first president. Another was entitled "Amilcar Cabral" about the assassinated independence-era leader who masterminded the independence struggle in neighboring Guinea-Bissau. Tejjalu lyrics also included honorifics to the following African independence era leaders; Sekou Toure (Guinea), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Sam Njoma (Namibia), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), and even their own patron, Togba Nah Tippoteh.⁴⁴

The chorus of one such paean entitled "Africa Must Unite!" enthusiastically gave accolades to the following canon of popular heroes...

Kwame Nkrumah says...
Africa Must Unite!
Julius Nyerere says...
Africa Must Unite!
Amical Cabral says...
Africa Must Unite!
Togba Na Tippoteh says...
Africa Must Unite!

In this manner, Tejjalu attempted to raise the level of political awareness of their mainly student audience by sparking interest and pride in the lives and ideas of these Pan-Africanist leaders.⁴⁵ Tippoteh was a founding member of MOJA, an outspoken political commentator, and

⁴⁴ A third Tejjalu song was entitled "Soweto Uprising" sung in solidarity with the contemporary South African anti-apartheid uprising of 1976 instigated by black African school children.

⁴⁵ Keep in mind that the vast majority of students at the University of Liberia were of indigenous origin, since many of the wealthier Americo-Liberian families tended to send their children abroad for college.

a major sponsor of Tejajlu.⁴⁶ By repeating the Pan-African themes of freedom (“Uhuru”) and unity (“Umoja”), and placing Liberia within a wider transcontinental context, they were drawing attention to and raising awareness about longstanding desperate living conditions in Liberia.⁴⁷

Tejajlu concerts performed at government functions during the early days of the PRC (in the early 1980s) were all arranged by Tippeteh. According to him, Tejajlu’s line-up eventually all became members of the left-leaning Liberian People’s Party (LPP) and MOJA. Interestingly, “The Time of the People Has Come” was one of the Progressive People’s Party (PPP) slogans found on a banner hung over the street on the day following the April 12, 1980 coup.⁴⁸ In other words, Tejajlu assisted to raise grassroots popular consciousness concerning the need for widespread societal change and the potential to realize these ambitious goals.

Apart from cheerleading panegyrics to Pan-African icons, the later period Tejajlu material (after 1980) included pieces that were essentially contemporary social critiques that laid bare their working class origins. One Tejajlu song entitled “My People, I am Suffering” accurately described the downward economic spiral during the incubus-like Doe regime and the corresponding widely held perception that societal values were being subverted in a way that privileged the quest for quick and easy profits over values of friendship and loyalty. This song, sung in the Kru (Klao) language, described a nightmarish socio-economic reality in which difficult to access financial resources were prerequisites for a tenuous sort of bilateral amity. The translated lyrics are as follows...

My people, I am suffering
I don’t have (any) money
That’s why I don’t have (any) friends

⁴⁶ Togba Na Tippeteh, interview with author, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia.

⁴⁷ These are Kiswahili terms from East Africa popularized by the Pan-Africanists; President Nyerere, etc.

⁴⁸ Johnson-Sirleaf, 87.

So now my death is coming closer
I am (just) waiting for “God’s Time” (my demise)
I don’t have money, that’s why I don’t have friends
I don’t have money, that’s why I don’t have friends
So now my death is coming closer
I’m waiting for “God’s Time”⁴⁹

In this rather morbid dystopian scenario, the subject’s friends have all but deserted him. On the brink of starvation, the protagonist has abandoned all hope and is simply waiting for the final moment of mortality.

Tejajlu on the National Stage

Anthony “Experience” Nagbe of Tejajlu recalls performing in Greenville, Sinoe County circa 1987. The night before the show, Tejajlu voluntarily performed in a small local nightclub in order to promote the concert planned for the following evening. Surprisingly, when they began singing their Kru songs, the crowd began singing along in the local vernacular; knowing every song by heart.⁵⁰ This is evidence of the group’s widespread popularity at the time. Tejajlu became a headlining act during the mid-1980s, and comparable groups like the nationally popular Moga Band regularly opened for them. They would also regularly perform on the main stage at the “cradle of the nation” Providence Island on national holidays such as Independence Day (July 26th) and Flag Day (August 24th). By the late 1980s however, many (perhaps even a majority of) Tejajlu members had fled into the safety of exile.

Showman Tecumsey Roberts

Tecumsey Roberts was widely described in Liberian newspapers as a “real showman” due to his engaging stage presence.⁵¹ According to veteran musician Pa Chancey, Roberts was

⁴⁹ Togba Nah Tippeteh, interview with author, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia.

⁵⁰ Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, interview with author, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.

⁵¹ Rasta Ike, “The T.R. Concert-A Grand Experience It Was!” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 29, 1982.

renowned for his showmanship.⁵² As a consummate performer his showmanship was the cornerstone of his professional reputation. During a 1982 concert Roberts opened by rendering cover versions of three relatively recent Bob Marley reggae anthems; “War” (1976) “Waiting in Vain” (1977) and “Coming in from the Cold” (1980).⁵³ The opening song “War” was derived almost word for word from a speech given by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to the United Nations General Assembly in 1963.⁵⁴ Significantly, in this particular instance the Liberian newspapers changed the title of the song “War” to “No More War” which may have represented a type of “Freudian slip,” with its implied peace-loving political message (yet another small signal from the popular culture front that the rapacious Doe regime completely ignored.)⁵⁵

Importantly, at the E.J. Roye Auditorium the back-to-back weekend concerts of Tecumseh Roberts and Nimba Burr (March 26-28, 1982) were prefaced by a screening of a documentary film entitled *The Life and Death of Kwame Nkrumah* on the life of Pan-Africanist, and first president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. This was followed by a second film entitled *FESTAC '77* which documented in a celebratory fashion the Pan-African festival of music and culture held in Nigeria five years previous. This apposite choice of documentaries was indicative of the political message of the performance.⁵⁶ Doe’s erstwhile top ranking General and chief patron of the concert, Thomas Quiwonkpa, was recognized in the audience by an embrace given by

⁵² Pa Chancey, e-mail message to author, Aug. 5, 2006.

⁵³ Rasta Ike, “The T.R. Concert- A Grand Experience It Was!” *Daily Observer*, (Monrovia), March 29, 1982.

⁵⁴ Emperor Selassie, who was worshiped by the Rastafarians as a divine monarch, was drawing upon the Ethiopian national experience of having been invaded and occupied militarily by (fellow League of Nations member) Italy in October of 1935 under the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini. This invasion is also somewhat misleadingly referred to as the “Second Italo-Abyssinian (or Ethiopian) War.”

⁵⁵ Rasta Ike, “The T.R. Concert-A Grand Experience It Was!” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 29, 1982.

⁵⁶ Isaac Thompson, “T.R. Here, Oh!” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 25, 1982. On this occasion, the opening act for Roberts was the previously examined “revolutionary” group Tejajlu, along with the leading musical group Music Messiahs backing TR’s brother; Sandy Roberts.

Roberts. The symbolic political message signified to the audience was clear. Roberts was promoting this Pan-African vision, represented by the political philosophy of African Socialism as espoused by Nkrumah, and concretely represented culturally by the FESTAC '77 festival.⁵⁷ Ironically, in a relatively short but turbulent three year period, General Thomas Quiwonkpa, who was honored that night for his “contributions to the Liberian Revolution” would be publicly dragged through the streets (of Monrovia) castrated and dismembered by loyal soldiers after his unsuccessful coup attempt against his former ally and close associate, Samuel Doe after he led an attempted coup aimed at unseating Doe.⁵⁸

Tecumsey Roberts; Career and Tragic Demise

By examining the under-reported career of the extroverted charismatic performer Tecumsey Roberts (or “TR” as he was commonly called) we can further suggest that the typical Liberian musician’s aspirations were of a peaceful, multi-ethnic national polity before the widespread outbreak of hostilities. This is because of TR’s message of national unity and his spellbinding manner of convivially bringing together ethnically diverse urban African audiences, while simultaneously providing a political platform for the propagation of then in vogue pan-African ideologies. In this sense, collectively, this class of musicians represents a type of cultural vanguard, and Roberts is a quintessential example of this phenomenon.

Tecumsey Roberts was born on Oct. 22, 1950. According to his younger brother and protégé Sandy Roberts, TR attended high school at Methodist College of West Africa (CWA); one of the best secondary schools in Monrovia.⁵⁹ Roberts launched his memorable professional

⁵⁷ At the time of this concert it was likely that Roberts was hoping that Quiwonkpa would also be inspired by this same vision to mold Liberia into a post-coup “revolutionary” progressive state.

⁵⁸ Stephen Ellis, *Mask of Anarchy: the Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 59-60.

⁵⁹ Sandy Roberts, interview with author, June 11, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

musical career in 1969 when he was prominently featured in a series of live concerts at the Gabriel Cinema in Sinkor, Monrovia. In a newspaper interview TR reminisced that it was due to the “encouragement of the Liberian public that I went full blast into the show business.”⁶⁰ TR’s compatriot “Rastaman” Stanley Ford claims that Roberts was the best overall entertainer that Liberia ever produced. He had the best stage presence and could work an audience into a frenzy.⁶¹ Unlike other soloists, Roberts was not only a talented singer-songwriter; he was also a versatile instrumentalist. TR frequently played syncopated rhythms on the conga drums and the large hand-held calabash shaker (similar to a *saa-saa* gourde rattle).⁶²

Robert’s song content evolved in a similar trajectory to his more famous contemporary fellow West African, the brilliant Nigerian gadfly Fela Anikulapo Kuti; from the apolitical to the explicitly political. In Robert’s case however, we find a stronger stylistic influence from the wide-ranging musical traditions of the Caribbean instead of African-American produced avant-garde jazz and the rhythms of Yoruba-land.⁶³ Liberian singer Naser Danyuah claims that at that time Fela Kuti was perceived in Liberia to be “too angry,” and too openly critical of authority.⁶⁴ TR was careful to maintain an upbeat, positive message throughout his stage career, instead of directly confronting (and haranguing) various civilian and military authorities and incurring their

⁶⁰ T-Max Teah, “Tecumsey is Back...New Record Coming Out Soon” *Daily Observer*, (Monrovia), February 16, 1989.

⁶¹ “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, interview with author, May 15, 2010, via phone from Eden Park, MN.

⁶² Sandy Roberts, interview with author, June 11, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁶³ Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music! Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), chapters 2-4.

⁶⁴ Naser Danyuah, interview with author, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.

wrath as the highly provocative Kuti was prone to do. As evidence of this trend are the lyrics to TR's hit song "Hello Africa" from the 1989 *Ma Susu* cassette...⁶⁵

Africa, they broke your heart
Way from the very, very first start
Now I want to rub my fingers through the sand
On the beach of my native land
With the sunrise on the hills
happy children playing in the sunshine

I envision freedom for my people
Yes, I said freedom for all my people
Africans, stop the tribalism!
Forget about nepotism!
Now is the time for emancipation!
Yeah, total emancipation!
Wake up, wake up, wake up Africa!

(In a second version of the song "Coming Home," which appears on the same cassette, the composer continues in a similar vein...)

Left my home and went to England
New York was filled with opportunities
California gave me a zinger
But Liberia will always be my home

Nimba, Grand Gedeh, I'm coming
Cape Palmas, Cape Mount, Bassa, I'm coming
Montserrado, Sinoe, Lofa, we're coming⁶⁶
Dakar, Abidjan, Freetown, Lagos, Accra, Conakry⁶⁷
Mama-mama-eh-yah!⁶⁸

By specifically naming all of the counties that constituted Liberia at that time, Roberts was claiming the entire country as the irreplaceable object of his homesickness, while roving abroad in temporary self-imposed exile. TR furthermore situated himself as a self-defined patriotic

⁶⁵ Tecumsey Roberts, *Masusu*, cassette, c. 1989, side B, track 3.

⁶⁶ These are the names of the majority of Liberian counties.

⁶⁷ These are names of the most populous and prominent of the West African capital cities.

⁶⁸ Tecumsey Roberts, *Masusu*, audiocassette, c. 1989, side B, track 2.

citizen (and “roaming ambassador”) within the geographical and socio-cultural context of the West African subcontinent by the conscious act of specifically naming six other regional capital cities that acted as bustling cultural Mecca’s.⁶⁹ TR was rhetorically reminding his Liberian audience and fans that instead of being the 51st state of the U.S., they in fact constituted a section of the broader West African community and encouraged them to strike out for the same freedoms that their neighbors were simultaneously struggling for.

The Moga Band and Afro-disco

The hard-working Moga Band released their solitary hit single "Let's Do It" in 1983.⁷⁰ This song, recorded in a self-described Afro-disco style, takes its lyrical cue from the global figure Bob Marley’s hit reggae track “Waiting in Vain” taken from the 1977 international blockbuster LP *Exodus*. I argue that this song should be read as a homage to the recently deceased Marley (who had passed away in 1981) since the first two lines are taken directly from that song. The well-known original Marley verse declared “from the very first time I blessed my eyes on you girl, my heart says follow through...” In the nearly identical first two lines of the first verse of the Moga Band song the lyrics implore...

The first time I saw you
My eyes said follow through
And I am sure it’s you and only you
Can make me feel the way I do

Let’s be like birds of a feather
Let’s get in love
Closer and closer together
Like a hand in a glove

⁶⁹ Lagos and Abidjan were (and still are) de facto “economic capitals” in addition to historically being the sites of former political capitals.

⁷⁰ Moga Band, *Let’s Do It /Remember Me*, MIB Records VI2105AS, p. 1983, 33rpm, side A, track 1.

This portentous love song, while not explicitly political, placed within the Liberian social context implicitly encourages polyglot romantic liaisons across “tribal,” ethnic, and “sectional” societal divisions.⁷¹

In a similar vein, by 1982 Yatta Zoe’s ninth album, released in 1982 was entitled *Gbindu*.⁷² On that record, Zoe sang in a vernacular style in the Gola, Yoruba, and Mende languages, in addition to colloquial English, thereby demonstrating her commitment to multilingualism and implicitly to ethnic pluralism. Though currently incredibly difficult to locate, when the LP was originally released, *Gbindu* was a hot commodity produced in the Afro-rock style, and the album sold briskly across West Africa; especially in the Nigerian market.⁷³

The musical productions that championed peaceful cooperation between various ethnic blocs became even more crucially relevant both during the time period of the Liberian national elections of 1985, and the subsequent failed Thomas Quiwonkpa coup attempt. Quiwonkpa hailed from northern Nimba County and had a huge loyal following within the AFL. He had been one of Doe’s closest associates, and had planned and taken part in the successful 1980 coup alongside Doe. This time around Quiwonkpa would again risk all, and pay for that gamble with his life.

Tragically, as we have learned, these 1985 national elections witnessed the blatant travesty of ballot boxes set on fire on the roadside by military henchmen, as the incumbent Doe claimed a highly improbable and clearly fraudulent “victory” with 50.9% of the popular vote.⁷⁴ Even

⁷¹ Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.

⁷² Isaac Thompson, “Interview with the Sensational Yatta Zoe- Her Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow” *Daily Observer* (Monrovia), March 18, 1982.

⁷³ Yatta Zoe, interview with author, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.

⁷⁴ Yekutiel Gershoni, *Liberia 1980-85: Derailing the Democratization Process* (Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004), 23; “Liberia: Doe Makes

before the election day arrived however, Doe's collaborator Colonel Harrison Pennoh threatened on ELBC that if Doe's party (the NDPL) did not win, the army would take over (again).⁷⁵

Pennoh need not have worried since the venal Special Electoral Commission (SECOM) was securely in Doe's pocket, as they were activists within his political party and on his bankroll. As Liberian writer Binitie Austin observed, echoing widely held perceptions; "late President Tolbert had his corruption under the table, but Doe put his (corruption) on top of the table."⁷⁶

Kapingbdi and "Don't Escape"

Throughout the 1980s Liberian musicians and groups including Kapingbdi, Zack & Gebah, Saku Sillah, Jones Dupoe and Tecumsey Roberts angrily commented on the breakdown of law and order and the seemingly broken collective moral compass under Doe's regime; which paralleled the widening ethnic divide that accompanied the purging of the army of (northern) Mano and Gio (Dahn) soldiers by the (southeastern) Krahn leadership as Doe disproportionately promoted his ethnic kinsmen to top positions within the AFL.⁷⁷ In 1981, musical history unfolded as Afro-jazz-rock ensemble Kapingbdi's bandleader and chief songwriter Ebenezer Kojo Samuels authored and orchestrated the song "Don't Escape" which openly criticized the bloodshed attributable to the PRC military regime.⁷⁸ This unambiguous song represents a laudatory reactive response to the political repression that was unleashed especially on the Gio

History," *West Africa*, 2296, Nov. 4, 1985; William O'Neill, "Liberia: An Avoidable Tragedy," *Current History*, May 1993, 214. Many observers believed that Jackson Fiah Doe of the Liberian Action Party (LAP) (no relation to Samuel Doe) had in reality garnered the majority of votes nationally.

⁷⁵ Gershoni, 21.

⁷⁶ Austin O. Binitie, *Blood and Bones in Liberia* (Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire: Editions Souvenirs, 1998), 33. The implication of this quote was that, at least according to widespread popular perceptions, President Tolbert was more corrupt than his mentor, former President Tubman and furthermore the usurper Doe was likewise more corrupt than his predecessor, Tolbert.

⁷⁷ For political commentary on this phenomenon, see Berkeley, 35.

⁷⁸ Kapingbdi, *Don't Escape*, Trikont, *Unsere Stimme* US-0081, p. 1981, 33rpm. side A, track 1.

(Dahn) and Mano civilian population during the last half of the NDPL regime (from 1985 to 1990).

Samuels rhetorically and passionately argued that no one can escape the eyes of God or “his ultimate divine judgment;” a message that was bound to resonate strongly with religious-minded Liberian audiences; Christians, Muslims and adherents of traditional African religions (so-called “animists”). The lyrical composition posed the following ethical question; could individuals who came to power in Liberia by violent methods successfully evade divine retribution for their “wicked” transgressions either in the earthly realm or in the afterlife? Instead of lionizing those in power (by singing their praises) the song’s embittered author envisioned a future day of reckoning that awaited those who abused their positions of power within a kinship metaphor.⁷⁹

The lyrics passionately pose the question...

Yeah, where are you running to?
Where are you running to?
You’ve done all these evil things in this world
You wicked man

You have power
You’ve made the gun
You’ve killed your own brother
You killed my sister
You killed my mama
You killed my papa

Oh, what a man you are
Where you running to?
You can’t escape
You got to live like I got to do
We all want to live brother

⁷⁹ i.e. as a metaphorical framework of the nation as a highly distraught extended family engaged in devastating fratricidal warfare.

Never mind how big you are up there
You can't run from it
You have to live with it
And try to make it better

Don't escape (4Xs)
From the wickedness
You nasty brother
You cheat your brother
You just use the world
Because you think you're smart
Don't you escape
You made it so
It's going to come back on you...

The tone of this song is one of bitter disillusionment filled with accusations of incestuous murder and other criminal abuses of power. The above song along with the song "Human Rights" from Kapingbdi's second album *Hey Brother* (1980) acted as springboards to reflect the growing concern of the general public with the arrant gross human rights violations and general impunity conferred to the Krahn-dominated military during the Doe regime.⁸⁰

Lost Career Opportunities Due to Civil War

Regarding their discography, the Sheikhs released one album (on cassette) with six tracks entitled *Leh We Go* ("Let's go!" in Liberian English) in 1989, just before the war began. This album was recorded at Cross-Atlantic Studios in Paynesville and produced by Tony Karbadeh. Toniah William's production company (WET) had bought the rights to the Sheikhs' cassette and were about to re-release it when the war erupted. The master tapes of that album were destroyed

⁸⁰ Kapingbdi, *Hey Brother*, Trikont LC 4270, Unserer Stimme US-0069, p. 1980, 33rpm. side 1, track 2.

A catalog of these human rights abuses, including the armed invasion of the University of Liberia campus on August 22, 1984, is well documented in Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately, Dictatorship in Liberia 1980-1986: a Personal Perspective* (Bremen, Germany: Liberia Working Group, 1987), 11.

during the (un)civil conflict. Speaking of the demise of the Sheikhs band, Sheriff stated "the war divided us."⁸¹

After Princess Fatu Gayflor released *The Golden Voice of Liberia* recorded at Studio 99 in 1984, she was forced to flee into exile in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire.⁸² The next full length album she would release (*Awoya*) would not be until thirteen years later. The liner notes of *Awoya* describe her music in the following manner; "with guitars chattering, rumbling bass, irrepressible rhythms and witty narrative, Fatu delivers her message." The title *Awoya* is a Vai word that means "my sympathies."⁸³ The core message of the album involves Gayflor sending out her sympathies to all the mothers in Liberia who lost sons during the Civil War (as she did). Gayflor and many others in her position lost not only loved ones but untold countless career opportunities as well since they were forced to flee into the relative safety of exile.

Dave Taye (a.k.a. "GQ") sadly represents a final prime example of a local recording artist whose career was on the ascent, but was destroyed by the outbreak of the Civil War.⁸⁴ Fortunately, Taye escaped to Germany instead of being killed during the hostilities like so many other promising fellow musicians, including Tecumsey Roberts, Robert Toe, and Chris Doe.⁸⁵ Taye was recording in Cross-Atlantic Studio when he heard gunshots fired nearby, and promptly fled in the direction of Freetown (Sierra Leone).⁸⁶ Taye was justifiably fearful because he was a

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Princess Fatu Gayflor, *The Golden Voice of Liberia*, Studio 99/102, c. 1984, 33rpm.

⁸³ Princess Fatu Gayflor, *Awoya*, Princess Fatu Gayflor Productions, PFGP 001, compact disc, p. 1998.

⁸⁴ GQ-88, *Dave*, GQ-88 Productions 1281, cassette, p. 1988.

⁸⁵ George "Gee-Mann" Sikpa, interview with author, July 1, 2007, Philadelphia, PA. and Scholastica Doe, interview with author, June 26, 2008, MICAT headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia.

⁸⁶ Tony Karbadeh, interview with author, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.

Krahn men, and Taylor's rebels (the NPFL) had the well-earned reputation of murdering all the Krahn men they crossed paths with.

CHAPTER 8
REPRISE; A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

–Liberian taxi slogan

On Remembrance and the Act of Forgetting

In February 2004 at a multiplex movie theatre in Gainesville, Florida I was party to a remarkable exchange. Along with a couple of African studies graduate student friends, my wife Debra Doeway and I had just watched the U.S. premiere of the first Hollywood film to tackle the subject of the 1994 Rwandan genocide; *Hotel Rwanda*.¹ Upon joining surging crowd of mostly young, American moviegoers exiting the cinema, I somewhat naively turned to Debra, and asked her what she had thought about the feature film. Although I wasn't thinking about it at the time I posed the question, I knew that she had personally survived certain horrors during the Liberian Civil War which had forced her into a panicked exodus along with other family members. It was a headlong flight into transitory exile in both Sierra Leone and to the Budumburam Refugee Camp (on the outskirts of Accra, Ghana) before relocating to the U.S.. Her forthright response will forever be indelibly imprinted in my memory because I almost instantly felt foolish and regretted asking the offhand, seemingly innocent question. With a stern, yet resigned look on her face she calmly sighed, and responded "that movie reminded me of all the things that I am trying hard to forget."

Later, upon reflection, the question arose in my historian's mind; will Liberians attempt to expunge and purge all of the painful memories from the bleak years of bloodshed from their collective consciousness in a fit of self-imposed historical amnesia? In the future, will Liberians

¹ Even though the Rwandan genocide took place in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa almost 3,000 miles to the East of Liberia, it occurred concurrently with the vicious fighting of the first phase of the Liberian civil war which lasted from 1989 to 1997.

glorify a whitewashed, sanitized version of the “normal times” before the war?² If so, will they remember and even some day memorialize those artists and performers (such as those musician informants featured here like Miatta Fahnbulleh, Zack Roberts, E. Kojo Samuels, and Tecumsey Roberts to name only a few) who took a moral stand amidst a period of grave social instability, speaking out against disunity, ethnically-charged antipathy and renouncing militarism? This is the same soul-searching question was posed to me by the indefatigable Gebah Swaray as we sat immobilized in a traffic jam on the New Jersey turnpike; “Why are those warlords such as Prince Johnson and Alhaji Kromah viewed as heroes by certain Liberians?” Aren’t all of the brutish warlord hardliners during the Civil War guilty of ordering repugnant mass murders and responsible for gross human rights violations? When push came to shove, instead of picking up guns, these courageous and conscientious musicians picked up microphones.

Music History as Labor History

This study has been a multilayered exploration of the labor of culture workers within an emerging local industry. Furthermore, since the music industry in Liberia was centered in Monrovia; a torrid, gritty port city, this is largely an urban history. As the population boomed, so did the opportunities for leisure pursuits. This study has represented an epic struggle between competing visions in a city that remained socially divided and gradually became economically depressed. As we have seen, this musical history also unfolded against the backdrop of a highly unstable political climate. I have attempted to elucidate on an individual basis various strategies of adaptation and survival which taken collectively form distinct, identifiable patterns. This research raises crucial questions about leisure and capitalism in a quasi-industrial, neo-colonial African society on the road to totalitarianism. How did musical artists engage with and respond

² i.e. the period covered in this study; before 1990.

to a corrupt civilian regime and a brutal ethnocentric military dictatorship? What were the aesthetic methodologies of survival and defiance?

Contained within the myriad interviews that were conducted during my fieldwork and then utilized in this study are voices omitted from standard political histories, marginalized, and dismissed, (surprisingly) even by ethnomusicologists conducting research in Liberia at the time. This diachronical study has chronicled the contributions of these artists, although indexing audience reaction and long-term impact is admittedly harder to gauge. I am confident, however, that the reader has been able to form a deeper understanding of the hurdles that musicians typically faced in a small scale African nation inundated with a deluge of foreign music and operating in an arena without any copyright protection against rampant illegal music piracy.³

I suggest with confidence that the central strength of this study lies within the one hundred and twenty-five oral history interviews that were personally conducted with Liberian musicians and others involved in the budding music industry during the two decades in question, coupled with the over one hundred Liberian music-related newspaper articles and songs that were uncovered, transcribed and incorporated. The integration of these bodies of historical evidence (in one location for the first time) set against the backdrop of the political history of the two decades is what makes this study a portentous and unique contribution to the existing literature. Heavily relying on oral texts (testimonies), extant newspaper articles, and recorded song lyrics, I have assembled a pastiche record of these two decades, as viewed through the eyes and heard through the voices of these under-appreciated working musicians. It is a history from both the political elite and the grassroots perspectives that raises issues of the artist's contribution to the direction of the larger society. I have argued that even though the peaceful, tolerant ideal that

³ As can be ascertained from the study, the volume of foreign imported vinyl records in the record shops of Monrovia always dwarfed the number of available records by local musicians.

they espoused was ultimately undermined with the outbreak of hostilities in 1990, it remains even more crucially important to remember because these musical productions (and protestations) represented widely held convictions within the broader society. It is frequently nonchalantly stated that “history is written by the victors,” but in this case I have attempted to turn that cliché on its head. While Liberia is currently linked in the popular imagination with the brutalities of the Civil War, during the 1970s and 1980s local musicians, far from conforming to the stereotypes of vagabonds or “grona boys,” instead articulated a vision widely circulating amongst the broader population of a peaceful, multicultural, and progressive future for their national polity.

Section One (Chapters 1-3)

Within the first half of Chapter 1, I introduced my foundational arguments, and laid the groundwork for the history of the popular music renaissance. These arguments can be summarized as follows. The 1970s represented a political crossroads in Liberia. This decade represented an intense period of political, social and cultural change in Liberia. The death of president-for-life William V.S. Tubman (the only president that most Liberians had ever known) initiated the dawning a new political era, various new “openings” and “closings” unfolded. Artistically, this decade witnessed a fervent cultural revival that produced a new generation of popular musicians that celebrated Liberian grassroots musical traditions while reflecting current events. Reflecting the zeitgeist of the age, popular musicians developed a new sound that I have labeled “Liberian electric highlife” as a vehicle for social messages of African pride, peace and ethnic pluralism.⁴

⁴ In doing so they were unconsciously connecting to an important historical antecedent. The palm wine sub-genre of highlife music had originally been developed by the Kru mariners of southeast Liberia, but their musical contribution had petered out as the coastal shipping industry declined after the Second World War.

In the second half of Chapter 1, I outlined the political developments of the turbulent 1970s and 1980s which witnessed Liberia's first ever broad-based popular grassroots movement develop only to be preempted and overtaken by the first ever successful military coup. Without desiring to outline a simplistic and overtly linear narrative, I have argued that the events surrounding the hijacked 1985 national elections set the stage for the invasion of Charles Taylor's rebels which launched the fourteen year long Civil War (which was, in actuality two separate wars), since it became abundantly clear that it would be all but impossible to remove Doe from power via the ballot box when he exercised almost complete control over the electoral process through the mobilization of state power.⁵

In Chapter 2, we examined the political crossroads of the 1970s, including the rise of the Afro-centric turn with the flowering of Liberian electric highlife. This "cultural turn" was not unique to Liberia, but swept across West Africa culminating in the international showcase FESTAC '77 in which Liberian musicians and the NCT enthusiastically participated. I examined in detail the case of cultural revivalists Tejjalu among others. The emergence of new audiocassette technology brought about both important benefits and unforeseen perils for local musicians. This new, comparatively affordable, lightweight, portable format allowed Liberian musicians and groups to reach wider audiences. It also opened the market to cassette pirates such as the parasitic capitalist Tulsi Halwani, however, who set about making vast illicit fortunes virtually unabated. Over time, the cassette pirates' illegal activities seriously undermined any financial gain that could have potentially accrued to the musicians themselves.

⁵ The first civil war which had for its objective the toppling of the Doe government by force lasted from Christmas Eve, 1989 until the election of Charles Taylor to the presidency in 1997. The second civil war was launched by rebel groups with the aim of overthrowing the Taylor government, and lasted from 2000 until Taylor was forced to into exile in 2003.

In Chapter 3, we have witnessed how local popular musicians faced many hurdles to success including a lack of any meaningful music infrastructure that could have helped to advance their careers. These circumstances were not at all unique to Liberia, but shared with much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa at the time. Musicians operated in a national environment marked by a definite lack of institutional support in contrast to some of their neighbors such as Guinea and to a certain extent Nigeria. North American music, mostly by African-American artists and groups, was routinely and overwhelmingly privileged over local music on the airwaves, in performance venues and in downtown Monrovia nightclubs. Negative stereotypes plagued the profession of popular musicians in Liberia, and engendered parental disapproval (as was the case in many other African and non-African nations). Frequently, younger musicians had to defy the wishes of their own parents in order to pursue a career in the music industry. Vocalists and musicians struggled to stamp out the derogatory epithet of “grona-boys.” Early recording studios were basic and exploitative. Royalties were seldom paid. Instead recording artists typically sold the rights to their songs for a flat fee. This period was characterized by a complete absence of copyright protection for intellectual property rights. Liberian musicians, furthermore, faced an uphill battle for public recognition, respect, and a living wage. When they did manage to record an album they faced an additional uphill battle to get that record played on the airwaves and access the benefits of the age of mass communication. Ironically, state owned radio station ELBC regularly discriminated against local music in favor of international recording artists (in a seemingly counter-productive unofficial policy). When musicians were hired for live performances, the “shobo” remuneration was frequently well below a living wage.

Section Two (Chapters 4-6)

In Chapter 4, we focused on the potential for popular music to be used as a lens by historians investigating the Liberian past to examine diachronic changes at the heart of the

society. Due to the highly destructive Civil War, this antebellum period has been characterized by many as “normal times” but I have demonstrated that “normalcy” was not all rose-tinted and tranquil during the unpredictable and turbulent Liberia of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the concept of normalcy is a relative imaginary construct that systematically overlooks the basic social inequalities that set the stage for the fratricidal warfare and mass graves of the early 1990s. I examined the musicians as historical actors in their own right, as they attempted to forge novel African-rooted identities that struck a balance between pan-ethnic ideals and a celebration of local artistic patrimonies. Collectively, they deployed humor and code-switching to articulate commentaries on the rapidly changing times they lived through. The revitalized genre of Liberian electric highlife challenged previous practice of strictly performing “copyright music” and therefore upended the practice that was then described as American cultural imperialism before debates about globalization (and “glocalization”) became in vogue.

In Chapter 5, I examined the role of recording studios during the two decades. I have argued that many musicians faced exploitative practices in these early rudimentary recording studios such as ABC Studios despite the potential marketability of their productions. Many musicians reacted to these anomalous circumstances by forming unions such as MULA, even if they were ultimately not effective at securing the rights and protections that the union members desperately sought. The studios that operated in Liberia were in large part owned by foreign businessmen, and I examined the example of Studio 99 in detail. In this propitious climate an industry-standard recording studio was established on Liberian soil and local musicians were invited to come and record. Many, such as Princess Fatu Gayflor, O.J. Brown and Caesar Gartor did so, and received proper royalties on negotiated terms for the first time, producing a bounty of cassettes and a handful of vinyl records which celebrated the indigenous Liberian heritage in new

and compelling ways. Other musicians such as “Big Steve” Worjloh and T’kpan Nimely were hesitant and distrustful. Ultimately, the political turmoil unleashed around the time of the stolen 1985 elections and subsequent coup attempt by former General Thomas Quiwonkpa prompted the owner of Studio 99, Faisal Helwani, to flee the country. As described, disgruntled musicians then sacked the studio in lieu of missing royalties. Thus, the Studio 99 experiment came to an inglorious end.

In Chapter 6, I demonstrated how the countercultural genres of rock music and reggae were embraced in Liberia during the 1970s and 1980s. Alongside electric highlife, these genres were used as vehicles to convey messages of peace, human rights, women’s rights, and ethnic pluralism. I argued that these pacifist messages embedded within these musical productions were a challenging response to the fact that Liberia was rapidly becoming a militarized nation in the midst of social ferment. Musicians uniformly spoke out against the rising tide of militarism they witnessed around them. Musicians like the feminist activist Miatta Fahnbulleh wanted the so-called “revolution” of 1980 to bring about meaningful consequences for social justice vis-à-vis ordinary citizens. Fahnbulleh and others articulated their desires for government policies that would elevate the living standards of the masses of impoverished citizens, not curtail their projected life expectancy rates even further. With the gradual increase in public virulence and unaccountability, these observers felt betrayed and that sense of betrayal in communicated in the songs they wrote and performed.

Section Three (Chapters 7-8)

In the penultimate chapter, we explored how the concept of ethnic pluralism became even more crucial after 1980. Popular musicians celebrated the diverse musical heritage of rural Liberia within an urban setting bloated by internal immigration. They commented on how they envisioned a future progressive society, and what it would take to implement that vision with

local idioms. This idealized pan-ethnic aesthetic was on display during the 1985 World's Fair in New Orleans by members of the NCT, on historic Providence Island (the symbolic ground zero of the 19th century ACS colonial experiment), and in front of roaring crowds on the stage of the grandiose E.J. Roye auditorium almost every weekend. I closely examined the Zack & Gebah song "Sweet Liberia" that became a de facto alternative national anthem (that foregrounded a sense of national unity and pride) by enjoining the audience to re-imagine the self-fashioned parameters of their patriotism during a period when the official national anthem, motto, seal and American-modeled Lone Star flag had come under increasing scrutiny as contentious and divisive symbols.⁶

My underlying contention is that within the realm of popular culture there are various tools historians can use to track diachronic changes within a society in times of turbulent flux. I have chosen to embrace a grassroots perspective by entering into a two-way dialogue with a musical community of African performers. Their musical renditions constituted their platform, and every time they mounted a stage or entered the recording studio, they took advantage of the opportunity to communicate to their fan base their convictions, misgivings, dreams, hopes and fears. Through their performances, musicians conveyed thoughts and sentiments that validated personal convictions and reflected the worldviews of their consumer fan base. In their musical transcripts and translations we have a historical record of these desires and dreams. Liberian electric highlife was amplified, using overwhelmingly modern instruments, and recorded (when practical) for mass consumer sales. Additionally, they were, due to economic necessity and the desire for professional advancement, also desiring to sell records and cassettes within a capitalist

⁶ There were numerous failed efforts to change Liberian national symbols to be more inclusive, since they so obviously refer exclusively to the experiences of the Americo-Liberian founding "pioneers." For example, there was an effort to change the national motto from "the love of liberty brought us here" to the more inclusive "the love of liberty brought us together," and to change the national flag to one which was not a small scale version of the American flag. For various reasons, these attempts never succeeded.

system, and therefore crafted their messages to a certain extent to conform to certain narratives that consumers wanted to hear.

To reiterate, major barriers to the flourishing of success in the Liberian music industry included limited access to quality recording studios, and the exploitative practices of early studio owners. By way of contrast, professional quality recording studios such as Faisal Helwani's Studio 99 and Toniah Williams' Hotline Studios both had short-lived productive heydays before falling victim to political unrest. In the case of Hotline Studios, the premises caught fire and were incinerated during the early days of faction fighting of the Civil War in 1990. These attempts were valiant, but ultimately doomed to destruction due to periodic political violence of the era.

The Evolution of Musical Taste in Liberia

The evolution of Liberians' musical tastes is also documented within the pages of this dissertation. By the end of the 1960s, both younger and older generations in Monrovia were obsessed with hit records from the corpus of African-American musical productions. For example, the Sherman sisters formed the group Flamma-Sherman and released "Bassa Love" which was one of the first popular music songs in Liberia to utilize (at least in the chorus) indigenous languages (in this case counting numbers in the Bassa language).⁷

The Afro-rock was the next wave that swept sub-Saharan Africa during the early to mid-1970s. It had been a largely forgotten (until now) chapter of West African musical history. The Afro-rock phenomenon was similar to what would be labeled psychedelic rock "garage bands" in 1960s America. These were initially amateurish guitar bands that were formed by working class and middle class teenage students in their leisure time as a pleasurable pastime. As we have seen, some of these groups such as Moga Band and the Gardeners garnered a fan base and even

⁷ However, in terms of their fashion choices, the sisters still dressed like a miniature version of Diana Ross and the Supremes.

became commercially viable (due to audience demand for their live performances) without making any studio recordings. Other Afro-rock outfits such as the Shades and Soulful Dynamics decided to go into exile and pursue their careers in an immensely more prosperous Western Europe.⁸ As a genre, Afro-rock was relatively colorblind, with local bands covering songs by both black, white and Latino artists largely from the Americas and Europe without distinction or preference. Wilson Pickett and Chubby Checker were covered simultaneously alongside the international hits of Tom Jones and the Beatles.

Next came the experimental era of Afro-Soul. From the rhythm and blues of James Brown which later morphed into soul and big band funk, came a new artistic paradigm that inspired many musicians in West Africa (including Liberia), where Brown visited on tour in 1971. Brown's music of the 1970s celebrated the "black and proud" ethic and represented a political transition towards racial pride within the context of the global and especially circum-Atlantic African Diaspora.⁹

From the experimentation of Afro-Soul came the next (apparently logical) step: to tap into the indigenous Liberian musical and linguistic heritage expressed within the emergent genre of Liberian electric highlife as pioneered by Morris Dorley and T'kpan Nimely. Other musicians such as Yatta Zoe, Hawa Daisy Moore and Miatta Fahnbulleh re-arranged, reinterpreted and translated traditional Liberian folk music for a new generation. By deploying creative re-interpretations, they modernized folk music by performing it within a popular music format with electric amplified instrumentation. It is this new "cultural turn" that we have focused on within the study.

⁸ Germany was a favored destination for various reasons. The Soulful Dynamics and Kapingbdi settled in Hamburg, while the Shades toured the hotel circuit across Europe.

⁹ James Brown also inspired the Sierra Leonean musician Geraldo Pino (Gerald Pine), who quite successfully imitated Brown's sound, politics and stage presence. Pino, in turn also inspired Fela Kuti.

Apart from the miniscule rap music scene in Monrovia in the late 1980s (with the group Hayes & Harvey, New G-Crew and others), the last major genre of popular music to sweep Liberia during this time period that resonated deeply with youthful music fans was roots reggae as inspired by the charismatic, larger-than-life figure of Bob Marley. The gargantuan Reggae Sunsplash concert held in 1988 in the SKD stadium (on the outskirts of Monrovia) was the apex of the public expression of this genre in Liberia and inspired the formation of scores of new local reggae acts such as Wadada and Aaron Lewis & the MGs. As an expression of a sort of African Diaspora bohemianism with Afro-centric religious underpinnings, reggae appeared to be the near perfect vehicle to articulate the message of peace and anti-militarism while critiquing the societal superstructure as neo-colonial or as otherwise stated by the Rastafarians, part of the Old Testament metaphor of “Babylon.” Viewed holistically, musical developments over this twenty year period represent an overarching Afro-centric trend or “cultural turn” which included marginal subaltern counter-discourses from the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora.

Language Choice Matters

During these decades, the advent of “code-switching” within popular music represented a new and important change. By code-switching I am referring to the purposeful switch from singing exclusively in English (as was the case in the 1960s and early 1970s; especially with copyright music) to singing in local African languages or in a mixture of local African languages (usually referred to as “dialects” in Liberia) with either Standard or Pidgin English. This change signaled an important shift in orientation to a new, indigenous local audience for which English was not necessarily a first language (or “mother tongue”). Whereas the majority of the indigenous Liberian population was multilingual (at least bilingual if not trilingual) speaking several African languages in addition to English (depending on the level of schooling), the ruling elite which was heavily drawn from certain urban Americo-Liberian families were more

Westernized, and much less likely to speak any African idioms. The code-switching phenomenon celebrated the beauty of local “dialects” while rendering the social messages, love songs, folk tales, and proverb loaded speech more accessible to audiences who were less comfortable with Standard English due to a lack of extensive formal education.

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, some Liberian popular music recording artists during the mid-1970s to mid-1980s such as Miatta Fahnbulleh and Tecumsey Roberts began interspersing local language phrases into their still predominantly English language songs, while other artists such as Caesar Gartor (“The Bassa King of Liberia”) Princess Fatu Gayflor and Hawa Daisy Moore began composing entire songs and indeed full-length albums in local languages. This group, many of which clustered around (and recorded in) Studio 99, could be characterized as folklore revivalists that used the new sound of Liberian electric highlife as a vehicle for their sonic deliveries.

During this same time period in Nigeria, Fela Anikulapo Kuti famously chose to code switch from the Yoruba language to Pidgin English in his lyrical compositions in order to broaden his audience base to all of Anglophone West Africa. Similarly, on a smaller scale in comparatively tiny Liberia (which is the size of the state of Tennessee and had only a small fraction of the enormous population of Nigeria); the choice of language deployed could either welcome or alienate different sections of the population of approximately 1.5 million inhabitants (in 1970). Tecumsey Roberts displayed a vision of a Liberia in which all traditions were celebrated and respected; a Liberia where everyone could “get down and boogie” on the dance floor at the same time. What I would like to emphasize is that these sensible linguistic and commercial choices were being made for the first time ever within the realm of Liberian popular music.

Three Political Openings

In retrospect, it seems abundantly clear that three major political opportunities or “openings” to transform the old social order presented themselves during this two decade period (from 1970-1990). All three were huge disappointments to the majority of Liberians. First was the accession to the presidency of William R. Tolbert Jr. With his idealistic sounding slogans, and more relaxed personal style in contrast to his predecessor, Tolbert initially raised the hopes of large segments of the Liberian population that suffered from widespread poverty, a desperate housing crisis, inadequate educational opportunities, rampant unemployment and lack of access to any form of organized healthcare. Tolbert referred to the “wholesome functioning society” that he wanted to build with Rally Time (national fund drive) proceeds (but without fiscal transparency). He talked about transforming ordinary people’s living conditions by helping them make the transition “from mats to mattresses.” He referred to the country’s youth as “my precious jewels.” All of these pronouncements raised levels of generalized expectation, only to have them cruelly dashed on the rocks of nepotism and policies that furthered the status quo as established under former President Tubman. The April 14, 1979 an urban uprising in Monrovia known as the Rice Riots represented a culmination of popular anger unleashed when the government proposed to raise the price of a fifty pound bag of rice (the national staple) to levels so high and unaffordable that many ordinary citizens would have gone hungry, while the Tolbert family which controlled the sales of imported rice would have stood to accumulate obscene profits.

The second political opening occurred on April 12, 1980 with the successful military coup against the decadent TWP regime of President Tolbert. The man who emerged as the next Commander in Chief, Samuel Doe was a “man of the soil,” an indigenous non-commissioned officer who was previously unknown. Since his persona was a mystery, the force of what he

represented became paramount in the popular consciousness. The camouflaged figure of Doe thus initially represented the overthrow of the Americo-Liberian oligarchy and the instillation of indigenous rule. The working classes wildly celebrated in the streets for days and largely forgave the initial excesses of the rank-and-file soldiers.

When Samuel Doe seized power he was a skinny young man in his mid-twenties. A few years later his physicality had dramatically changed, and he had seemingly doubled in weight. He was “eating” and literally growing obese from access to government largess. Instead of combating corruption as promised (which was the stated onus for the takeover in the first place), he turned a blind eye to it as long as his clique received their portion. Regarding Doe’s physical transformation, Blaine Harden observed that “his cheeks got chubby and his waistline went the way of his financial and moral discipline.”¹⁰

Next, Doe bolstered the army with his ethnic Krahn kinsmen, and therefore strained relations with the other ethnicities who felt under the weight of a new Krahn minority domination. As documented, Doe’s chief concern quickly became regime survival via the assistance of U.S. aid. He assumed the rhetoric of anti-communism during the height of the Cold War, expelling the Russians and Libyans while simultaneously re-establishing friendly relations with the state of Israel. Israeli soldiers trained his brutal Executive Mansion Guards who were later accused of many gross human rights violations, including the ritual consumption of human body parts.

Doe’s marauding troops even staged an armed invasion of the University of Liberia campus in 1983, which included widespread looting, physical assaults and rapes of students. UL

¹⁰ Harden, 243.

was one of the institutions that the indigenous population had wagered on. They had sent their sons and daughters to study there in droves with the hope that with a college education would come economic advancement. Under the Doe regime these hopes were painfully dashed.

The third and final political opening during these two decades was the promise of free and fair elections with an accompanying transition to civilian rule by 1985. As we have seen, instead of this scenario materializing, Doe brazenly abrogated his promise to step down from the presidency and return to the newly refurbished army barracks. Instead, he blatantly (and illegally) changed his birth date, and created a new Krahn-centered political party, the NDPL, coercing all government civil servants to join. Doe then barred the two most popular left-wing political parties from participating in the elections, and harassed opposition politicians mercilessly. When the Reagan White House certified this sham election in which ballot boxes from oppositional strongholds were seen burning on the roadside and the announced results declared Doe the winner by a highly suspicious 51% of the vote, the citizenry once again became embittered.

These three major political openings thereby quickly closed, and the Liberian populace became widely despondent. They longed for a new country where all ethnicities would be respected and the military option rejected. As we have demonstrated, these hopes were brilliantly mirrored and echoed in the musical productions of the time period.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEWS FOR DISSERTATION

Number/ Name of Informant/ Date/ Place

- I-1. Miatta Fahnbulleh, July 4, 2005, The Analyst-Online.
- I-2. Miatta Fahnbulleh, Sept. 24, 2006, by email; Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-3. Peter Ballah, Sept. 16, 2006, by email-Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-4. Pa Chancey, Aug. 5, 2006, by email-Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-5. Princess Fatu Gayflor, Aug. 11, 2006, ACANA, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-6. Gebah and Maudeline Swaray, June 6, 2007, Front Page Africa-Online.
- I-7. Gebah Swaray, June 25, 2007, East Orange, NJ.
- I-8. Emmanuel Dolo, July, 26, 2006, phone from Minneapolis, MN.
- I-9. Kormassa Shareff Bobo, Aug. 13, 2006, Darby, PA.
- I-10. Samuel Slewion, Aug. 14, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-11. Princess Fatu Gayflor, Aug. 11, 2006, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-12. Khata Soribah, May 28, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.
- I-13. Leo Sarkisian, July 9, 2007, phone from Washington DC.
- I-14. Nimely Nabla, May 29, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.
- I-15. Tarloh Quiwonkpa, May 31, 2007, phone from St. Paul, MN.
- I-16. Albert Gibson, June 1, 2007, Brooklyn Park, MN.
- I-17. Yomo Payne, June 1, 2007, phone from Minneapolis, MN.
- I-18. Victoria Tweh, June 1, 2007, Brooklyn Park, MN.
- I-19. Joe Woyee, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.
- I-20. Naser Danyuah, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Center, MN.
- I-21. Isabella Fofana, June 2, 2007, Brooklyn Park, MN.
- I-22. Korto Gbelemah Marshall, June 11, 2007, Chicago, IL.
- I-23. Victoria Tweh, May 30, 2007, Brookdale, MN.
- I-24. Alphonso Kandakai Duncan, June 16, 2007, Providence, RI.
- I-25. Moses Saygbe, June 17, 2007, Cranston, RI.
- I-26. Charles Neal III, June 20, 2007, phone from Oklahoma City, OK.
- I-27. James Eesiah, June 23, 2007, New York City.
- I-28. Alicia Elizabeth Kallon, June 24, 2007, East Orange, NJ.

- I-29. Tokay Tomah-Kailie, July 4, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-30. Martha Verra Moses-Sungbeh, July 4, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-31. Gebah and Maudeline Swaray, April 21, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-32. Hawa Daisy Moore, June 30, 2007, Landsdowne, PA.
- I-33. Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, June 26, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-34. Hawa Daisy Moore, July 2, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-35. George Garsua “Gee-Mann” Sikpa, July 1, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-36. Patrick Dunbar, July 3, 2007, Trenton, NJ.
- I-37. Stephen “Big Steve” Worjloh, July 2, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-38. DJ Jaak Norman, July 15, 2007, phone from Trenton, NJ.
- I-39. Marcus Susay, July 4, 2007, Philadelphia, PA.
- I-40. Cleopatra Dweh, June 11, 2007, Chicago, IL.
- I-41. Maxwell “Devoted” Jacobs, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-42. “Coco” James Chea, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-43. Bennre “Benny” Johnson, June 22, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-44. Yatta Zoe, Sept. 10, 2004, The News-Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-45. Bill Thompson, July 8, 2005, Wheaton, IL.
- I-46. Anthony “Experience” Nagbe, Aug. 5, 2007, Decatur, GA.
- I-47. Doughba Caranda II, Aug. 6, 2007, Decatur, GA.
- I-48. Meka Suz, Aug. 6, 2007, phone from Marietta, GA.
- I-49. Madison Harris, June 28, 2005, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-50. Hawa Daisy Moore, Nov. 10, 2007, phone from Philadelphia, PA.
- I-51. Dr. Robin Poynor, Dec. 14, 2007, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.
- I-52. Kijana “The Griot” Wiseman, Dec. 9, 2007, phone from Houston, TX.
- I-53. Kijana “The Griot” Wiseman (2nd), Jan. 1, 2008, phone from Houston, TX.
- I-54. Maudeline Swaray (3rd), Jan. 12, 2008, phone from East Orange, NJ.
- I-55. James Fasuekoi, Jan. 27, 2008, phone from Whitehall, PA.
- I-56. Tarloh Quiwonkpa, Feb. 20, 2008, phone from St. Paul, MN.
- I-57. Tarloh Quiwonkpa (2nd), April 23, 2008, phone from St. Paul, MN.
- I-58. John Collins, May 22, 2008, University of Ghana at Legon, Ghana.
- I-59. Amb. Rudolf P. Von Ballmoos, May 28, 2008, Liberian Embassy, Accra, Ghana.

- I-60. John Collins (2nd), May 26, 2008, University of Ghana at East Legon, Ghana.
- I-61. Eddie Gibson, June 1, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-62. Miatta Fahnbulleh (3rd), June 2, 2008, Mamba Point, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-63. Flomo Theatre Group, June 3, 2008, Snapper Hill, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-64. Roger Brisson, June 4, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-65. Mary Brown, June 4, 2008, St. Teresa's Convent, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-66. E. Toniah Williams, June 5, 2008, Ministry of Finance, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-67. Peter Ballah, June 6, 2008, Flomo Theatre office, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-68. Saye Guannu, June 7, 2008, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-69. Zack Roberts, June 8, 2008, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-70. Eddie Gibson (2nd), June 8, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-71. John Sheriff, June 9, 2008, UNMIL Annex, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-72. Hassan Choukair, June 9, 2008, Sonia Store, Waterside Market, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-73. Kekura M. Kamara, June 10, 2008, Rivoli Cinema, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-74. Sarah Hayes-Cooper, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-75. Tony Karbadeh, June 10, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-76. Sandy Roberts, June 11, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-77. Sando Moore, June 12, 2008, Daily Observer Newspaper Office, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-78. Gabriel Miller, June 13, 2008, National Archives, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-79. Pay Mee Weah, June 13, 2008, National Museum, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-80. Ma Gbessie Kiazolu, June 14, 2008, Kenema, Liberia.
- I-81. E. Toniah Williams (2nd), June 14, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-82. Momodu K. Passawe, June 15, 2008, Providence Island, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-83. Bendukai Sherman, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia.
- I-84. Sherman Brown, June 15, 2008, Brewersville, Liberia.
- I-85. Jallah K. K. Kamara, June 17, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-86. Yatta Zoe, June 18, 2008, Maher, Bomi County, Liberia.
- I-87. John Karweaye, June 16, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-88. Sanoh Suliaman, June 21, 2008, Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, Liberia.
- I-89. George Kiadii, June 23, 2008, Truth-FM, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-90. Charles A. Snetter, June 23, 2008, ELBS, Paynesville, Monrovia, Liberia.

- I-91. Joe Watson, June 23, 2008, ELBS, Paynesville, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-92. Miatta Fahnbulleh (4th), June 24, 2008, Obass Girls School, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-93. Ajubar Duncan, June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-94. Jean Gondy, June 24, 2008, MICAT, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-95. Sarah Hayes-Cooper (2nd), June 24, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-96. Emmanuel Bowier, June 25, 2008, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-97. Winston Tubman, June 25, 2008, NDPL Office, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-98. Cecil Griffiths, June 25, 2008, MULIB Office, Sinkor, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-99. Jean Gondy (2nd), June 26, 2008, MICAT office, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-100. Scholastica Doe, June 26, 2008, MICAT office, Monrovia, Liberia.
- I-101. Dr. Togba Na Tippeteh, June 26, 2008, Lower Virginia, Liberia.
- I-102. Isaac “Nii Moi” Thompson, July 1, 2008, Accra, Ghana.
- I-103. Charles Neal III, July 15, 2008, phone from Oklahoma City, OK.
- I-104. Princess Fatu Gayflor (3rd), April 15, 2008, phone from Philadelphia, PA.
- I-105. Tarloh Quiwonkpa (3rd), July 19, 2008, phone from St. Paul, MN.
- I-106. Nimba Burr, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ.
- I-107. Henry Harmon, July 26, 2008, East Orange, NJ.
- I-108. Gebah & Maudeline Swaray, July 27, 2008, East Orange, NJ.
- I-109. Benjamin “Ben” Mason, July 30, 2008, phone from New York City.
- I-110. Samuel Payne Cooper, Aug. 4, 2008, phone from Philadelphia, PA.
- I-111. Hawa Daisy Moore, Sept. 13, 2008, phone from East Landsdowne, PA.
- I-112. Ernest “Ernie” Bruce, Sept. 23, 2008, phone from Camden, NJ.
- I-113. Stephen “Big Steve” Worjlloh, Sept. 29, 2008, phone from Philadelphia, PA.
- I-114. Jimmy Yhap, Oct. 6, 2008, phone from London.
- I-115. Alphonso Blamo, Sept. 9, 2008, email from Paris.
- I-116. “Rastaman” Stanley Ford, May 15, 2010, phone from Eden Park, MN.
- I-117. George Sherman, July 2, 2009, phone from Denver, CO.
- I-118. Louiza “Lady Nefertiti” Sherman, July 7, 2009, phone from Fort Worth, TX.
- I-119. Aaron Lewis a.k.a. Motuba Dread, June 8, 2010, phone from Columbus, OH.
- I-120. Sami Helwani, July 28, 2010, phone from Tema, Ghana.
- I-121. Donald Cooper, July 30, 2010, phone from Baltimore, MD.

- I-122. Princess Fatu Gayflor, July 31, 2010, phone from Philadelphia, PA.
- I-123. Ophelia S. Lewis, Aug. 7, 2010, phone from Stone Mountain, GA.
- I-124. Aaron Lewis (a.k.a. Motuba Dread), Aug. 16, 2010, phone from Columbus, OH.
- I-125. Hawa Daisy Moore, Aug. 25, 2010, phone from Landsdowne, PA.

APPENDIX B
A SEARCH LIST OF LIBERIAN RECORDING ARTISTS

Liberian Popular Musicians/Singers and Musical Groups

of the time period 1970-89 (confirmed).

(appearing in alphabetical order)

(* = have confirmed studio recordings from the time period 1970-89)

(+ = I currently have recorded music by the artist)

ABC Dance Band*+

Ade Jones (vocalist)

Afarika Band (with Joe Woyee)

Africa J.B.'s

Africanas Band*+

Afrodels

Aaron Lewis & the MGs (Medusa Group)

Alfred Kollie & the Kalafadaya Band

Alphonso Blamo (Marvin Scott) (vocalist)

Armed Forces of Liberia Band (a.k.a The Army Orchestra)

Arthur Tulay (vocalist)

Beatrice Barclay (vocalist)

Big Steve (a.k.a. Steve Worjloh)*+

Bindu Karmaa (vocalist)

Black Invaders

Bromo Bloh

Cesar Gator ("Caesar Gator")*+

Cecil Griffiths (vocalist)

Cecilia Sheabeh (vocalist)

Charles Martin (vocalist)

Ciaffa Barclay

Coga Band

Chris & the Africanas (a.k.a. Chris & the Afrikaners) (part South African)

Dave Garnett (vocalist)

Dymus Band

(The) Dynamics (later "Soulful Dynamics")

Eddie Johns (vocalist)

(The) Emotions

(The) Expertise Band

Family of Man

(The) Fantastic Four

Fimba ("Big Thing" in Vai)

Flamma Sherman (a.k.a. The Sherman Sisters)+

(The) Gardeners Band

GQ (a.k.a. GQ-88, Dave Taye, Dave Bosco)*+

Gedeh Rooster*+ (Joseph Brooks)

Gee-Mann (a.k.a. George Garsua Sikpa)*+
 Grand Faith
 Granville Striker
 (The) Groovers
 Harry Konah *+
 Hawa Daisy Moore (a.k.a. Princess Hawa Moore)*+
 Hayes and Harvey
 Henry Crusoe (vocalist)
 Humble Rebels Band
 (The) Intruders
 James “Coco” Chea (vocalist)
 Jepoyannoh
 Jimmy Diggs & the Lofa Zoes Band
 John Dweh & the Aces (a.k.a. John Dwehn)
 John Haines (a.k.a. Rastaman John Hayes, “The Gbokojilo Man”)
 John Sheriff (vocalist)
 Jones Dopoe + (a.k.a. Professor Jones Dopoe)
 Jump Up
 K.C. Connection
 Kabassa (a.k.a. Kabasa, Kabassa Music)
 Kapingbdi (with E. Kojo Samuels)*+
 (The) Kendeja All-Stars (a.k.a. The Kendeja Stars)
 Liberian Dream Afro-Disco Band*+
 Liberian Gold Jazz Orchestra
 Les Ambassadeurs Band (Ducor Hotel house band)
 Lone Star
 Malinda Jackson Parker (Congresswoman) +
 Maudeline Scere (later became Maudeline Swaray) (vocalist)
 Miatta Fahnbulleh*+
 Michael Dunbar
 Moby Dick
 Moga Band (a.k.a. Moga Dance Band) *+
 (The) Monrovia Brothers
 Morris Dorley & the Sunset Boys (a.k.a. Molly Dolly)*+
 Morris Sackor
 Music Makers (formerly “The Smith Dimension”)*+
 Music Messiahs Band
 Nimba Burr (a.k.a. Nimba Bird, Burr Gonkatee)+
 Ngoma Sassa Band (with Maisha El-Shabu)
 Nymakala
 O.J. Brown (vocalist)*+
 Other Race
 Oxy-gen (a.k.a. Oxygen)
 Princess Fatu Gayflor *+
 (The) Peace Makers
 Pro-Satellite Band

Purple Haze
 Psychedelic Six
 “Rastaman” Arinzee Allen
 “Rastaman” Stanley Ford
 “Rastaman” Papito (vocalist)
 Rebecca “Becky” Grant (a.k.a. Lady Shangabusa)
 Richard Sirleaf (vocalist)
 Robert Toe *+
 (The) Roots Orchestra
 S-S-Steam
 Sonny Boy Hallowenger *+
 Saku Sillah (a.k.a. Sekou Sylla)*+
 Sarah Hayes (later Sarah Hayes-Cooper) (vocalist)
 Saygbedaytee (a.k.a. Segbadetee, Saygbetete, Suhgbaydaytee)
 (The) Samaps
 (The) Shades
 (The) Sharkens
 Sheikhs Band (a.k.a. The Sheiks)
 Soulful Dynamics (formerly The Dynamics) *+
 Sound Blasters Orchestra
 Sponge Moss
 Stable Stars
 (The) Super Seven (a.k.a. The Superb Seven)
 Susan Hayes & the Sisters (a.k.a. Lady Suzie) (vocalist)
 (The) Swingers
 Sylvester Thomas
 Tarloh Quiwonkpa (a.k.a. Tarloh Quiwokpah)+
 Tecumsey Roberts (a.k.a. “T.R.”, Tecumsay Roberts)*+
 Tejajlu (a.k.a. Tijajulu, Tejajulu, Tee-Jajulu)*+
 T’kpan Nimely *+
 Valentine Brown (vocalist)
 Varney Francis Kanneh *+
 Voices of Liberia
 Wadada (Jazz Band) (a.k.a. New Waddada)
 Wait and See
 Waunda Band
 (The) West Africans
 Wicki Padmore (“Wiki” or “Wicky” Padmore)
 Willie Dee (William Dorsla)
 Zack & Gebah (Zack Roberts and Gebah Swaray) *+
 Zack “Zanga” Roberts (solo career) *+

Liberian Folk Musicians

Of the time period 1970-89 (confirmed)

Eric Passawe (of the LNCT)

Emmanuel “Kruboy” Kofa (“Darze” music)
Maima Sackey (vocalist with Kendeja All-Stars)
Nkador George Kaagou (from Nimba County)
Pa Willie L. Tokpah (from Nimba County) +
Paye Mee Weah
Sangrai Gobah + (Gbandi traditional music)
Tokay Tomah +
Won Ldy-Paye
Yatta Zoe (“Queen of Folk Music”)*+
Zaye Tete (a.k.a. Zia Titi, Saye Tetee) +

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Timothy Dwight Nevin was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in June of 1967 to Paul and Carol Ashby Nevin. Timothy attended elementary and middle school at Wheaton Christian Grammar School in Wheaton, Illinois. Timothy then attended secondary school at Community High School District 94 in West Chicago, Illinois. Timothy travelled extensively in Latin America before returning to college at Austin Community College in Austin, Texas in 1992. Timothy eventually earned his Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1997. In 2000 Timothy earned his Master of Arts degree at the same institution. Timothy then moved to West Africa, living in Senegal and Ghana for three years where he worked in the U.S. resettlement family reunification program with refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone. It was there that his love for Africa and fascination with African history deepened. Timothy then returned to the U.S. to attend graduate school at the University of Florida in 2003. Timothy was granted a FLAS fellowship to study the Wolof language for two years and one summer. Timothy completed his graduate coursework and eventually passed his qualifying exams in November of 2006, and defended his dissertation on October 6, 2010 Timothy plans to pursue a teaching career both in the U.S. and on the African continent.