

# BOOK REVIEW

**John Collins. *Highlife Time 3*.** Accra: DAKpabli & Associates, 2018. 631 pp. Photographs. References. Bibliography. \$34.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-9988-2-7619-5.

Over the last decade, ethnomusicologists and connoisseurs of popular music from Africa have welcomed a growing number of monographs devoted to highlife music, or books engaging contemporary offshoots such as hiplife. A foundational text to any study of Ghanaian popular music is without doubt Collins's seminal work *Highlife Time* (1994), now released in its third edition by the publishing outfit DAKpabli & Associates. Despite the importance of *Highlife Time*, it is unfortunate that there appear to be no reviews of the first two editions in any scholarly journal.

The story of highlife in Ghana is almost a century and a half old. Throughout this period, highlife has not only been a dynamic form of artistic expression and entertainment for performers and patrons but also a compelling prism through which to view important social, political, economic, and historical transformations in the Gold Coast and Ghana. While *Highlife Time 3* has the same "feel" as earlier editions—fifty-plus chapters organized by multiple sections, text interwoven with transcribed interviews, presentation of thematic sections largely through seemingly self-contained chapters, a journalistic narrative punctuated by moments of profound insight, and emphasis on primary materials—this latest edition presents significant revisions and updates. On a more personal level, *Highlife Time 3* reads as Collins's *magnum opus* in that it is the culmination of his fifty-plus years of living in Ghana as a researcher, performer, archivist, journalist, professor, producer, and fan of Ghanaian popular music.

At 631 pages, this book covers a lot of ground. Following a 52-page prologue divided into three parts and a 17-page introductory chapter, Collins organizes his narrative into ten sections made up of 64 chapters, concluding with a coda. Better editorial attention could have helped clear up the cumbersome organization of materials, some typo and formatting issues, and one instance where ten pages of text from chapter 56 repeats verbatim in chapter 57.

The prologue updates readers on popular music's development in Ghana since the mid-1990s, establishes the musical styles informing recent developments ("musical pots" as Collins describes them), and gives an account of "millennial highlife" and how highlife's resurgence after the bleak period of the 1980s and 1990s is grounded in the concept of the "highlife imagination." This concept ultimately describes the musical parameters at the heart of compositional and performance norms found all over

southern Ghana and built into the structure of highlife—emphasis on syncopation, offbeat timing, polyphony, polyrhythm, etc. For Collins, the “highlife imagination” is akin to a musical grammar that has found expression in the many foreign- or locally-influenced permutations and offshoots that have developed since the emergence of the earliest proto-highlife styles in the late nineteenth century.

The introductory chapter presents an account of highlife’s development in Ghana beginning from the 1880s to the present. Here Collins reveals the book’s ambitious rationale, which is not only to unpack highlife in a nuanced way, but also to cover its “cousins” in places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Collins asserts that highlife’s interconnectedness to styles such as maringa, juju, or makossa and its impact across many parts of West Africa should compel enthusiasts to consider it an “ECOWAS music.” (78)

The subsequent ten sections are the heart of the book, engaging highlife’s evolution over the last 140 years. Collins builds the first seven sections chronologically, with the last three focusing on important topics informing readers of highlife’s broader implications in Ghana and West Africa. In order these sections are:

- i. Palmwine Highlife, Guitar Bands and Concert Parties
- ii. Ghanaian Highlife Dance Bands and their Musicians
- iii. Interactions between Highlife and New Traditional Music
- iv. Back to Roots
- v. Outside Influences—1950s to Present & Resulting Fusions
- vi. Highlife, Folkloric Groups & Afro-Fusion since the 1990s
- vii. The Gospel Explosion and Women on Stage
- viii. Nigerian Highlife, Juju Music, Fela’s Afrobeat and Other Nigerian Popular Music Styles
- ix. The Popular Music of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Francophone West Africa
- x. The African Music Business and Afterthoughts

*Highlife Time 3* represents an important contribution to the study of popular music in Africa for several reasons. First, Collins unearths the critical factors leading to the decimation of Ghana’s popular music industry by the neoliberal period of the 1980s. These include political turmoil and subsequent economic collapse, two years of night curfews and drought, mass expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria, imposition of import taxes on instruments, removal of music from the school curriculum, embrace of disco and technologies such as drum machines and synthesizers, mass exodus of Ghanaian musicians abroad, and the collapse of recording and pressing activities. Second, he updates his historical framework to include developments since the 1990s where economic liberalization, stable democratic rule, growth in tourism, growing interest in “world music,” and the emergence of new technologies led to a revitalization of Ghanaian popular music. Third, he contributes to scholarly understanding of the cyclical nature of musical and cultural flows between Africa and the African Diaspora,

beginning with the repatriation of Jamaican maroons to Sierra Leone in the early 1800s. Fourth, Collins elucidates the factors leading to the emergence of women onto the Ghanaian popular music scene. These include policies under Nkrumah encouraging female artists to join state-sponsored groups, female pop sensations abroad influencing female artists in Ghana, concert party's shift from the village compound house to the television stage, highlife's artistic move toward traditional idioms where female representation is strong, and the emergence of gospel highlife that cleared additional pathways for female artists.

Among the most interesting moments in *Highlife Time 3* occur when Collins's narrative switches from the perspective of journalist/archivist to that of ethnographer, allowing readers insight into his artistic and personal experiences over the past half century. One compelling instance of this is his recounting of his time touring with Victor Uwaifo in southeastern Nigeria (part of the "highlife zone") during the mid-1970s. Here Collins talks about seeing destroyed tanks and aircraft left over from the civil war during their travels and describes the sense of familiarity he felt with the experience as a highlife performer in both Ghana and this region of Nigeria (466). The tension between these two voices may simply be inevitable since Collins spent a significant amount of time working as a journalist and in pursuit of constructing the history of one of Ghana's most important cultural exports. Nevertheless, *Highlife Time 3* is a necessary read for anyone interested in the history, development, and current trends in Ghanaian popular music.

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### For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Sarpong, Kwame. 2004. "Ghana's Highlife Music: A Digital Repertoire of Recordings and Pop Art at the Gramophone Records Museum." *History in Africa* 31: 455–61. doi:10.1017/S0361541300003612.
- van der Geest, Sjaak, and Nimrod K. Asante-Darko. 1982. "The Political Meaning of Highlife Songs in Ghana." *African Studies Review* 25 (1): 27–35. doi:10.2307/523990.