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Afropop.org

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Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews

Afropop.org. Website.

As we approach the third decade of the Web 2.0 era—roughly coterminous with the new millennium—the internet in all its dimensions becomes an ever more vast resource for ethnomusicological research (as well as an object of study in itself). The digital era has also given new scope and life to the audio program combining music and commentary, a format that has traditionally enjoyed a somewhat secondary prominence and status as a medium and resource for scholarship. Audio programs, until they could be archived and streamed online, were mostly ephemeral entities produced for radio broadcast and then generally inaccessible and often lost. For their part, institutional scholars have seldom felt motivated to produce audio programs, which the academe has undervalued in considerations of tenure and promotion. Even consumption modes often relegate audio programs to the level of a secondary activity performed while exercising, driving, or cooking. Nevertheless, the internet has allowed audio programs to be archived in websites and streamed at the listener's convenience, and a few such programs have achieved such levels of sophistication and richness that they should be known to all scholars in our field.

Particularly outstanding is the website of *Afropop Worldwide* (*afropop.org*), an organization now approaching its thirtieth year of operation. *Afropop* is dedicated primarily to producing audio programs about music of Africa and the African diaspora. New programs are broadcast on various radio stations and are posted on iTunes, SoundCloud, and Stitcher. Several hundred old and new programs, together with other features, are available on the website, which has recently been revamped for easier searching and smartphone and tablet usage. In this review I seek to call attention to this site, offer some guidance in navigating it, and suggest how scholars and students in our field might productively use it.

Afropop is the collaborative creation of Sean Barlow and Banning Eyre, with Barlow, the founder and executive producer, handling most of the management and fund-raising, as well as some production, and Eyre serving as senior producer and editor for the shows and website. Many of the shows are hosted by Cameroonian George Collinet. Eyre is, among other things, the author of four

books, most notably *Lion Songs: Thomas Mapfumo and the Music That Made Zimbabwe*, which won the Kwabena Nketia Book Prize from SEM's African Music Section in 2016, and *In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali*, an engaging account of his musical adventures in Mali. As a guitarist, he has also performed and collaborated extensively with many African artists over the last three decades. Barlow produced all of the early shows, as well as many recent ones; his Hip Deep productions on the role of music in bringing down South African apartheid were particularly compelling. For his part, Collinet is a veteran Voice of America broadcaster who introduced listeners all over Africa to both American and African music in the 1960s and 1970s and is beloved by generations of especially Francophone Africans. Many of the programs are produced by a team of cognoscenti, including Ned Sublette, Morgan Greenstreet, Marlon Bishop, Elodie Maillot, Simon Rentner, Ian Coss, Sam Backer, Sebastian Bouknight, Ben Richmond, Alejandro Van Zandt-Escobar, and others. Many involve collaborations with institutional academics such as Gregory Melchor-Barz, Lucy Duran, and the late Juan Flores. A conscious effort is made to incorporate the input of younger producers who may be particularly attuned to contemporary developments. Most programs tend to focus on contemporary popular music, though many are devoted to traditional genres, albeit with attention to recent changes in status and style. The African focus incorporates the diverse diasporas, including such genres as funk, salsa, and *vallenato*, and music of the Indo-African Sidis (in "African Sounds of the Indian Subcontinent").

Much of the website's content, such as album reviews, is more journalistic than academic in orientation, and several of the programs, such as Sublette's "Music in a Changing Cuba" (2016), consist primarily of commercial tunes framed by brief spoken remarks. Several, such as those generated by Eyre and Barlow's 2014 trip to Madagascar and Sublette's recent fieldwork in Angola, seek to present lively introductions to otherwise understudied regions. A great number of the programs explore cherished themes of ethnomusicologists, including relations of music to sociopolitical events, diasporic dynamics, globalization, questions of national identity, and Western influence. Like the best print scholarship, they foreground diverse local voices, whether of scholars, activists, musicians, or representative consumers. In their artful combination of such voices, together with musical excerpts and pithy narrative comments by the producers, these productions illustrate how the audio program, like the documentary video, can constitute just as "scholarly" a medium as the print publication. (Several programs have links to supplementary videos.) Accordingly, it need scarcely be pointed out that such programs, together with the publications of "independent" scholars such as Eyre and Sublette, illustrate how much erudition and productivity can be found outside the hallowed halls of the academy. At the same time, the audience for such shows is not limited

to academics or cosmopolitan world-beat flaneurs. Eyre relates that on various occasions he has found himself in a New York City taxi driven by an African tuned in to an Afropop broadcast on the radio (specifically, Radio New York, which plays archival Afropop programs twice daily).

If album reviews may be generated from the armchair or computer terminal, many of the programs are the products of in situ field trips, which have typically involved extensive preparation, networking, and fund-raising. Representative in this sense is Eyre and Barlow's 2017 trip to Nigeria, which generated seven remarkable programs exploring diverse aspects of the contemporary music and sociocultural scene. (Aside from English, Eyre's French and Sublette's Spanish and Portuguese carry them through much of Africa and the diaspora.)

As Eyre has told me, the general orientation of programs has shifted a bit over the decades, especially as today's cosmopolitan audiences can be assumed to have greater familiarity and knowledge than did earlier listeners. Accordingly, recent shows reflect somewhat less emphasis on introducing artists and more on exploring particular themes in depth. Several programs, responding both to arts funding priorities and to general interest, highlight music's relations to themes of social justice, such as "Kizito Mihigo and the Politics of Music in Post-Genocide Rwanda," regarding the imprisonment of a singer-songwriter. However, the perspectives of Eyre and other producers are refreshingly—or, perhaps, discouragingly—sober, nuanced, and evenhanded rather than naive and starry-eyed; representative is "Salaam, Amani, Peace: Festivals in Goma, DR Congo," which outlines the good intentions, as well as the contradictions, pretensions, and opportunism, involved in a high-profile "music for peace" festival.

The Afropop website divides content into "articles" and audio programs. The former, under various subheadings, consist mostly of photo essays, reviews of albums and artists, links to pdf items from the now-defunct *Beat* magazine, and profiles of and interviews with scholars and performers, such as "Carmen McCain [a scholar of Hausa culture]: The Culture of Kannywood" and "Remembering Louis Sarno," regarding the music enthusiast who lived with and recorded the Bayaka Pygmies for thirty years.

Audio programs comprise the larger category of content. Aside from further reviews (with embedded music), these programs fall under the headings "Afropop Classic," "Hip Deep," and "Closeup," which can vary slightly in general focus. Of these, "Afropop Classic" programs are a thematic, music-centered miscellany. Some are fairly straightforward overviews, such as "Fania Records at 50," "The (New) Sound of Afro Paris," and "A Brief History of Funk." Others are more conceptual: "Accounting for Taste" (produced by Sam Backer) is an insightful study of the popularity and influence enjoyed by diverse Western musicians in Africa, including country singer Jim Reeves in West Africa and Dire Straits guitarist Mark Knopfler among Tuareg musicians. "Hip Deep" programs, now numbering over 110, are subsidized by the National Endowment for

the Humanities and are more ambitious in their production values, fieldwork, and engagement with scholars and scholarly issues. Particularly compelling for this author was “Seize the Dance: The BaAka of Central Africa,” foregrounding Michelle Kisliuk; the accompanying “Feature” program, “The BaAka of Central Africa: Exclusive Singing Lesson Video & Much More!” could well be used for guiding a music-making exercise in a world music class. Similarly engaging is “Ancient Text Messages: Batá Drums in a Changing World,” produced by Ned Sublette with ethnomusicologists Ken Schweitzer and Amanda Villepastour. Also in “Hip Deep” are four programs of reportage by Ned Sublette based on his 2012 trip to Angola; like so many Afropop programs, these present up-to-date material and insights that simply cannot be found elsewhere.

The third category is “Closeup,” consisting of podcasts focusing on broader cultural and sociopolitical issues, presented more via interviews and narration than through music per se. Of these, “Biafra at 50: A Wound That Does Not Heal” manages to pithily convey the complexities and contradictions in this ongoing conflict. “Rushin’ to Bacchanal” surveys a tempest in a teapot involving music and national identity generated by the Bahamian government’s 2014 decision to promote a glitzy Trinidadian-style carnival at the expense of the rustic local junk-anoo fest. “An Island Divided,” featuring Paul Austerlitz, surveys some musical dimensions of the complex relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Yet another timely program is “Shackled Love: LGBT Asylum Seekers in the U.K.”

Ethnomusicologists have no doubt been finding their own uses for Afropop programs. The programs can be especially useful for course preparation regarding either African or African diasporic musics or more general themes of music and politics, social activism, globalization, urbanization, or gender studies. I would think that anyone seeking to publish on these topics would do well to be familiar with Afropop’s relevant offerings. Indeed, I would recommend such programs to ethnomusicologists of any specializations simply as resources for contemporary sociomusical developments and perspectives. One would wish that more comparable websites existed regarding other world music regions, but even Afropop, lacking academic affiliation and support, is dependent on private donations and grants from institutions such as the NEH, whose vitality is perpetually vulnerable in the current political climate.

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