

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa which this week has a distinctly Ghanaian flavour. Well I have three guests in the studio with me. The first is Jean Jenkins, an English ethnological musicologist of great experience, particularly of Africa where she has travelled for over 14 years. Felix Cobbson, the Ghanaian who is best known as the teacher of African music and dance at Steward School, Harlow, Essex, the founder and director of the Aklowa School in Takely, Essex. Then thirdly of course, I have with me, Ivan Annan who is better known as a freelance film maker, and occasionally as a musical hustler (as he describes himself) a broadcaster, record producer etc., etc. Now Ivan has just had an exhibition of his photographs here in London entitled 'Moods of Ghana'. Jean, you selected three of those photographs, first tell us why you selected these particular three.

JEAN JENKINS

Well, this is based not only on the fact that I have been around Ghana but because I have been around Africa a good deal and it seems to me that these three photographs which I would like to describe very briefly, show something of the real moods. It's not a question of the Golden Stools or the odd piece of very beautiful art work but there are three pictures here that I think are superb pictures. One of them, it is in black and white, shows dancers but the dancer is so intent, the movement is so fast there is the blurring that you get because you cannot possibly photograph fast enough to show the rhythm of that dance. That's one thing. There is another on which as a photograph is the most beautiful work of art I think. A man high, high up in the air, balanced. That is something which I have seen in Ghana and I think once you have seen that, not only in Ghana, but if you see the photograph of that, you can't help realise that this is a real work of art. And the third photograph that I like is of drummers. The hand upraised, one up, one slightly down and the tension of the drummers face and the muscles of his arm all poised ready to strike, you can hear the music behind the photographs. That's why I've chosen those.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Ivan you are best known as a film maker. Can you tell us the difference between film making which I think involves some many people and the art of the photographer which is rather lonely.

IVAN ANNAN

I normally take photographs for the screen but when it comes to editing occasionally, I pick up several movements which I have blown up into stills. Now this once I was fortunate to have a present made to me of a very good camera and the only thing I could do was to go around. At this particular time there was so many moods, things that hadn't happened before and things that I have not been told, exist and new things, new developments and cultural patterns.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Felix let's come to you now. You heard the comments made by Jean, the three photographs she has selected, do you agree with Jean's description of the photographs?

FELIX COBBSON

Oh, yes definitely. When I saw this exhibition first at the Ghana High Commission, I fell in love with the photographs because for the first time, here are photographs which really depict the true life of my people in the country, in colour, in black and white and I stood there for about an hour just admiring and I felt I was part and parcel of the photographs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We have heard Felix Cobbson making comments on your photography, now it's your turn to make comments on his activity and before we come to him we would like to have a spot of music.

TAPE

MUSIC BY AKLOWA DRUMMERS AND DANCERS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Felix, describe to us what that piece of music is.

FELIX COBBSON

Oh that was Achiagbekor the most exciting bands of the Ghanaians. In fact it is by the Ewe People. They are the those who perform Achiagbekor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And where did you record this?

FELIX COBBSON

This is by the Aklowa drummers and dancers. We recorded this in a studio in London a few months ago. But lots of people have asked us about our music so we thought we would go to the studio and record something.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Ivan I would see a flicker of a smile on your face when we played that piece of music, why did you find it so exciting?

IVAN ANWAN

Well, among the pictures selected this young group from Keta are doing exactly the same thing that he is playing. You can see the movement. When the rhythm changes these fellows go into some sort of a trance and the movement and the expression that comes out of every move, it's unbelievable. This picture is exactly what the music is about. And when you listen to the music you can understand the picture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Jean I can see a smile of approval on your face.

JEAN JENKINS

Yes because in fact you know you get so lost in the movement as you see it and as you hear it, you never separate the music and the dance. They are so much a part of one another. And you are totally involved in the atmosphere, there is no feeling of 'I am an outsider', what you feel is that you are a part of all this music because everyone is a part of it. It's the great difference between Europeans and Africans. It's the feeling that Europeans go to a concert and they sit apart from the musicians, they listen. In Africa, it's all one.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now we have got in the studio some records of Ghanaian music sent to us by Verna Gillis, from America. I would like you to listen to one of the records and then give me your comment.

TAPE

MUSIC OF THE ASHANTI

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This piece of music is described as music of the Ashanti. How representative do you feel this piece of music is Ivan?

IVAN ANNAN

Currently, there is this type of music going on in Ghana. It is what they call the Adinda. It's a village type of music which has something to do with story telling.

FELIX COBBSON

But Ivan, in saying this you have to draw the line between the indigenous Ashanti music and also music influenced by Western culture. Here this gentleman is using a guitar. Now the guitar is not an indigenous instrument of the Ashanti people, it isn't.

JEAN JENKINS

Can I take you up on a couple of points about this. I mean I'm not an Ashanti, I'm not even a Ghanaian, nor am I an African but the fact is that in a way this record makes me feel sad and I never thought I could ever feel sad when I listen to African music but in a way it's because okay, I've made a number of recordings of Ghanaian music I've never made a record of them because I don't think what I have is good enough, is typical enough, is really find enough to show really the moods of Ghanaian music as you have shown in your photographs. And I wouldn't dream of doing so until I have that kind of music that is now being presented to an American public on a gramophone record is music which is atypical which certainly has no notes at all, in fact that piece of music was called Highlife, which it is not and we have good Western Highlife. And one of the things

that we find in early Highlife is that it is not just Western instruments it's not at all. I mean they use the xylophone. They play Highlife on the xylophone, on the kora, it is not just on Western instruments. It is a different style of rhythm and it takes great big elements of African music and elements of Western music, mingles them and you make something new. What I find sad about this particular record is that it is neither new nor is it particularly interesting nor is the guitar playing particularly good nor is it African, it is sad.

ALIX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now we have some other music on the record Verna Gillis sent to us and I think we should be fair to her and play some of the other bands.

TAPE

MUSIC OF THE ASHANTI

ALIX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Felix there is another piece of music from Northern Ghana. Does that meet with your approval?

FELIX COBBSON

Yes, definitely and I could hear it, I could feel it and no doubt at all I could say straight away that this is music sung by a Northerner in the emphasis he places on the words. Straight away yes, it is an indigenous, Northern Ghanaian singing his own song yes. It meets with my approval.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to go for the traditional?

FELIX COBBSON

Well yes that's what Aklowa is all about, to bring traditional music to this part of the world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Felix we have to ask you what you are doing at the moment and what your plans are for the future.

FELIX COBBSON

Well Alex, at the moment we are staging a play called Kweku at the Young Vic which starts on Monday and in fact 3 weeks ago we staged this Kweku at the Royalty Theatre in Ipswich and by gum, the atmosphere we created there, we burned the whole place, the reaction of the children, the audience. We have never had this before this is what African culture is all about. We bring to the people of the West, the action and this we feel is very, very important indeed. African music or African culture is completely ignored in this part of the world and the only way the people see the truth and capture the richness of our cultural heritage is for you to show them in a form of action.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Thank you very much Felix. We couldn't end on a better note than that and thank you also Jean Jenkins and Ivan Annan. Before we leave you we would like to play you another excerpt from the record sent to us by Verna Gillis 'Music of the Ashanti' called Kete. Goodbye.

TAPE

'KETE' FROM 'MUSIC FROM THE ASHANTI.