

FILM REVIEWS

J. C. ABBEY, GHANA'S PUPPETEER

Anyaa Arts Kollektif, with Steven Feld, Nii Noi Nortey, Nii Otoo Annan, and Nii Yemo Nunu

Video, 55 min, 2016, Ghana / USA, English, Ga, Twi, Ewe, and Fante, with English subtitles
Film review by Rina Sherman

In J. C. Abbey, Ghana's Puppeteer, the fifth feature in the Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra series, ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, musicians Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan and filmmaker Nii Yemo Nunu, alternate documentary and music video techniques to create a portrait of J. C. Abbey's remarkable fifty-year career as a puppeteer in Ghana through a chronicle of Ghana's music since independence. The film opens with archival footage of Kwame Nkrumah* delivering his 6 March 1957 inaugural speech at the Polo Ground in Central Accra at the independence ceremony of Ghana, intercut with J. C. Abbey reenacting this same historic event with a puppet of Nkrumah. Joseph Commey Abbey, known to many simply as Ataa Abbey explains that around the same time he saw his first puppet show at age 12 at the Young Pioneer Centre in Accra. The tone of the film is set with these two major events: a country is born and a puppeteer of talent with it. Following independence, Kwame Nkrumah incorporated highlife bands

and concert parties into the Workers Brigades, creating the Builders' Brigade Band, a ten-piece formation used to showcase Ghana's African identity. Nkrumah also created the State Film Corporation that made films featuring the Tempos, Ramblers and Black Beats, promoting the cross-ethnic highlife music creation of the Akan, Ga and Ewe people as a conveyor of national sentiments. Ataa seeks to entertain people with his puppet characters, and as a music lover he has created puppets of Ghanaba, Teddy Osei, Bob Marley, Naa Amanua, Sol Amarfio, Amoa Azangio, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Terry Bonchaka, Kojo Antwi, John Coltrane and Elvin Jones... Early on in the film, Ataa Abbey's playful nature is established in his relationship with the other actors, musicians, and puppet characters. Nii Otoo Annan pushes down the hand of the puppet as he reminds J. C. of a funny story in one of his shows about money being stolen that the children loved. The latter in exemplary nonjudgmental manner, corrects him and says the money got stolen by a thief and the spirits were called in to sort him out. As principal narrator of the film, Nii Noi Nortey, sculptor, visual artist, instrument maker and performer of one-string gonje and the saxophone, highlights J. C. Abbey's important contribution in linking "the rule of art and politics" to explain how central puppets were in cultural and civic education in Ghana

in the wake of independence. Nortey points out the natural association for Ghanaians between freedom fighter Bob Marley and Nkrumah in post-independence Ghana, in the sense that the former president had also introduced elements of diaspora into his governance. J. C. Abbey's Marley is staged as a presentation of the singer and a lion with a back stage presentation of the musicians playing "Iron Lion Zion". Nii Noi Nortey adds Fela Kuti as the third member of the pan-Africanist trio, being an exponent of Afrobeat that became a dominant feature in his music. He thus underlines the interaction between patriotism, pan Africanism and cosmopolitanism that was an intricate part of the Ghanaian music scene. While Nkrumah was ousted in 1966, his Pan African and Black Consciousness ideals remained present in the popular music sphere. In the film, we see Ataa at the Anyaa Arts Library, where he greets a lineup of his puppets and takes out Mr. Black Ant with his four legs to play for a group of small children. When J. C. Abbey started working for Ghana National TV in 1968, the first thing he saw was James Brown playing "I feel Good". He said, "When I saw that song I got ants in my pants and I needed to dance, I knew he really was 'a black ant'. What is interesting throughout the film is the diversity of influences and the frequent mention of support from various Western funding agencies and Ghanaian institutions, such as the Ministry of Education and the then Arts Council of Ghana where he worked, as well as the Goethe Institute providing performance venues, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation providing a means of transport, which allowed Ataa Abbey to travel throughout the country and learn song, dance and costumes form

various reasons that he used in his puppet shows. In 1977, a scholarship to Prague took him to the Jan Malik Puppet Studio where he developed the Goat, Cow, Rabbit and Monkey characters for a show called "It's never too late to learn".

Nii Noi Nortey continues with a portrayal of the seventies scene in Ghana with the group Wulomei and its famed lead female singer, Naa Amanua, founded in 1973 by Nii Tei Ashitey, a percussionist of E. T. Mensah, the king of Highlife, and Saka Acquaye, manager and composer of Wulomei. Sometimes compared to South Africa's Myriam Makeba, Naa Amanua watches J. C. Abbey's puppet interpretation of the song "Walatu Walasa" with the 1974 Phonogram album cover as a backdrop. Ataa performs with another puppet of seventies icon of Ghanaian music, Solomon Amarkai Amartefio, founding member of the international chart busting London based Afro-pop group, Osibisa. Aka Rhythm Man, he played in the best local bands such as Rhythm Aces, Stargarzers, Comet and Black Star Band.

The film intertwines a visual and social history of music in the Gold Coast and then Ghana, with Nii Noi Nortey giving the background for wonderful live performances, such as Guy Warren or Kofi Ghanaba, the tap-drummer who introduced Afro-Cuban percussion to trumpeter E.T. Mensah's Tempos, a highlife swing band of the WWII period and beyond into the independence era. At age seven, Ghanaba learned the Charleston from seamen visiting the then British colony of the Gold Coast. Later, a British army captain gave him a gramophone with a disc of the clarinetist Artie Shaw's Non-Stop Flight. In 1955, Ghanaba moved to the States to release a series of pioneering

Afro-jazz albums and worked with jazz composers such as Max Roach, Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk and later had a major influence on the Afro beat innovator Fela Kuti. The sequence is completed with an excerpt of Ghanaba's 2005 performance of Händel's Hallelujah combined with African, Christian and Islamic improvisational elements.

In the final sequences with Fela and the scene with Terry Bonchaka or "Mr. Poulele", the skills of J. C. Abbey as a puppeteer and the musicians come to the fore as they are seen performing from multiple points of view, showing Ataa's intricate arm, hand and finger gestures moving the different parts of the puppets' bodies and instruments, including Mr. Poulele's leg in the air dancing and sophisticated footwork. J. C. Abbey went on to work as puppeteer at Africa TV for a show called "Empowerment", making puppets of leading figures and politicians. He defines his work as follows, "I'm a keen observer of people and their peculiarities and that trait comes in handy all the time. I always come up with concept stories that can be told with the puppets and I go ahead to everything possible to make the performances catch attention." Steven Feld, an emeritus professor of anthropology and music at the University of New Mexico, who met J. C. Abbey in 2007, says of the film, "By doing what these guys have done, which is to give us an alternate history of music in Ghana, they're asking, 'Who tells the story of a nation's music? Is it just the elites and the universities or is it the artists in the streets who have lived these 50, 60 years of history since independence? So the reason why James Brown and Bob Marley and avant-garde jazz and pop music

and hip-hop are in there all together with this world of traditions is the answer: This is what it means to be a contemporary Ghanaian'."

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The film can be seen online at:
vimeo.com/145822130

*Kwame Nkrumah (1909 - 1972), leader of Gold Coast then Ghana from 1951 to 1966, oversaw the nation's independence from British colonial rule in 1957. A founding member of the Organization of African Unity, he was an influential 20th-century advocate of Pan-Africanism.