



## Book Review

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Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming (eds), *Music, Performance and African Identities*. London: Routledge, 2012. 346 pp. £85.00. ISBN: 978-0-41571961-2 (hbk); £28.00. ISBN: 978-0-41571961-2 (pbk)

In this volume, Tayin Falola and Tyler Fleming compile a vibrant selection of essays about the role of popular music in African societies. In light of concerns that too much African music scholarship has either a narrow anthropological purpose or a purely mechanistic fascination with the music itself, the editors state their intentions to ‘wrestle’ music scholarship from the grip of ethnographers and musical technicians. As such, this interdisciplinary volume features contributions from historians, journalists, linguists and sociologists and is designed to illustrate the social significance of music within African contexts. A total of 10 African states, four recent historical periods and musical genres such as rap, hip-hop and country supply the material for analysis in the respective articles. In spite of this geographical, historical and stylistic diversity, the collection retains a strict thematic focus and comprises a good starting point for readers interested in the sociology of African popular music, African politics and political identities.

According with their intentions to bring African music scholarship into the larger ‘cultural matrix’, Falola and Fleming have selected articles which demonstrate the social impacts and social functions of music. Focusing mainly on collective identity formation, the volume moves beyond a purely anthropological understanding of African music. Rather than taking music as a social fact, reflective of the society which produced it, the essays reverse this creative agency and seek to illustrate the ways music can shape and influence societies. For example, Katrina Thompson’s piece on Tanzanian ‘rap cartoon’ portrays how rap musicians from the marginalised Maasai tribe use satire to manipulate how the Maasai identity is perceived by other Tanzanians. Similarly, Batamaka Somè demonstrates how *takiboronse* in Burkina Faso has been instrumental in the development of a national identity in the wake of colonial dominance. Also, Obeng’s, Chikowero’s, and Bruhwiler’s respective contributions show how musical performance can be used by oppressed groups to exert self-determination, subvert entrenched power hierarchies and/or express political dissent. While the narrowness of ethnomusicologists’ contribution to music scholarship may have been overstated slightly (the editors themselves describe how ‘larger social meanings’ of music have been sought out by ethnomusicologists in the past (pp. 9–14)), this interdisciplinary

collection certainly contributes to, and reflects, the increasing diversification of African music scholarship.

By contrast, the second element of the editors' interdisciplinary project, namely, to move away from formal musical analysis, has perhaps brought about a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In a volume with 'music' in the title where most of the material being analysed is lyrical semantic content, actual music is conspicuous by its absence. It seems that in their wholesome rejection of purely formalistic inquiry into African music, the editors have also wilfully missed an opportunity to explore the ways in which structural musical elements relate to the social sphere. The work of Wilfred Mellers, Theodor Adorno or Richard Tauskin, for example, have demonstrated that formal aspects of music (i.e. melody, rhythms, sound, production styles) can be analysed in relation to their social contexts. Works by these and other musicologists are by no means apolitical; they show that analysis of the structural elements of music can enrich, rather than encroach on, cultural and sociological inquiry. Furthermore, in turning their backs on 'music' in its pristine sense and defining it holistically as a generic performance art, the editors have made music indistinguishable from any other cultural product. As such, the volume misses an explanation as to why music, with its melodic/rhythmic properties and propensity for collective performance, can be particularly empowering as a mechanism of social change in comparison to other art forms. While the editors' desire to prise music scholarship from the grip of ethnomusicologists is justified in their introduction, it seems that this need not have initiated a complete exclusion of structural musical elements. The collection may have benefited from an article which dealt with music more directly.

Turning to the editors' secondary objectives, Falola and Fleming claim their collection strays away from the conventional presentation of African music as being 'the mouthpiece of the oppressed' (p. 78). As evidenced by the articles mentioned above, many of the authors corroborate rather than contest this association. However, a number of contributions do justify the assertion that the volume presents an untypically diverse array of musical applications. For example, Farai Bere's article is eye-opening in this regard. He shows how the Zimbabwean state appropriated contemporary hip-hop in order to close off avenues for political dissent. By exploiting musicians and producers, who were eager for commercial success, the state was able to use the music industry to control the dissemination of pro-state propaganda. This article, along with Xavier Livermon's and George Nyabuga's, supplies the nuance promised by the editors, and the volume as a whole empirically demonstrates both the liberating and oppressive social applications of music. This empirical tension is then situated in its relevant theoretical space by Juliana Dias, whose article is well placed at the end of this largely descriptive collection. Arguing against the binary thinking of the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools, Dias forwards the notion that elements of both resistance and conformity can be present in the same cultural product. In her words, 'resistance may co-exist with acceptance, overcoming, exchange, capitulation, incorporation and negotiation between dominant culture and popular cultures' (p. 316).

This essay articulates and theoretically justifies the ambivalence of music's social impact as implied by the other articles collectively. It therefore neatly concludes the collection and substantiates the perspective outlined in the editorial introduction.

Overall, the volume succeeds in demonstrating the diverse social impacts and functions of music in African societies. Although music itself hardly features, the case studies from scholars of various backgrounds are consistently rich in analytical nuance and empirical clarity. As such, the collection makes insightful contributions to the growing interdisciplinary space within African music scholarship.

**Reviewed by Cathy Wilcock**

*University of Manchester, UK*