



## Parachute Radio in Ghana



### **“The Talk of Accra”**

**By Christopher Lydon**

Photos by Eric Osiakwan

*Slavery is the living wound under the patchwork of scars. A lot of time has passed, yet whole nations cry, sometimes softly, sometimes harshly, oftentimes without knowing why.*

~ Poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang,  
introducing his collection: *Cape Coast Castle*.

*What has been striking is the fact that we talk very little about slavery and the slave trade in Ghanaian society. I was educated here, at the University of Ghana, where I took a B.A. in History. Essentially I had to show up in a graduate seminar at the University of Virginia, taught by Joseph C. Miller. That is when my learning process began.... West Africans are different from Americans in that way, in that they choose not to talk about unfree ancestry.*

~ Professor Emmanuel Acheampong,  
History Department, Harvard University

*Colonialism also had its effect in establishing certain external things as norms. For example, in many contemporary Ghanaian funerals, you hear the “Dead March” from Handel’s “Saul.” That is the wound that is still there, in that people accept that model. I don’t blame people entirely, because to heal these wounds, to change the situation, you must have equally good and challenging music created by a contemporary person as an alternative. When it’s not there, you will sing the “Hallelujah Chorus.”*

~ Ethnomusicologist and composer Kwabena Nketia

Ghana is a rich mine for talk radio. I’ve never heard radio callers like Ghana’s. Typically they introduced themselves by name, then said, "I'd like to make a contribution." Offerings could be tart, whimsical, politically incorrect, comic, prayerful and at moments testy. Some, because their phone bills are unmerciful, opened with an angry blast at being kept on hold. One man, with whom I agreed that slavery was surely a crime, was upset with me for being stumped at his question: “Are you people ready to pay for it?” In general over a fortnight, I felt an endearingly modest, constructive and collective spirit connecting the “contributors,” taking turns in the village dance, tossing their spice into a common pot. "That was my contribution," they signed off.

I was surprised to learn that the liberation of radio in Ghana is a recent thing. FM stations have sprung up only since the mid-1990s. It was talk radio, by some accounts, that crystallized Ghana's weariness with Jerry Rawlings and elected President John Kufour a little more than a year ago. It is a yeasty element in a reviving democracy.

Yet I was also struck overall that Ghanaians and I were just beginning to learn how to talk about the things that seemed to interest them and me the most.

It is not so much that Ghanaians are (as they like to say) great talkers. It’s that there is so much serious stuff to talk about.

## Questions Simple and Urgent:

Why are these exquisite people poor?

How did the modestly thriving British colony of the Gold Coast become, since independence in 1957, “hippick,” (from the World Bank acronym HIPC, for “highly indebted poor country.”)?

What has become of the Pan-African voice associated with Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah and three non-Africans revered in Ghana: Marcus Garvey, George Padmore and W. E. B. Dubois?

Will we be able to identify Ghanaian flavors in an evolving global culture? What’s new from the genius designers and weavers of Kintse cloth? And what of Ghana’s brilliant and distinctive High Life musical tradition that has nourished the circular stream, the feedback loop of Afro-Cuban and North American jazz? How is it by the way that the sound of Ghana’s pop music, in taxi cabs and on the radio everywhere, is dominated today by computerized drum machines, here in the land of the drum?

We hear Ghana’s new president John Kufour proclaiming a “golden age of business,” dubbing Ghana the information technology capital of West Africa. But of course we wonder: how will the Internet and all the new tricks of IT be different from the old tricks—the train, the telephone and Western weaponry that served the colonizing powers better than they served Africans overall?

I parachuted into Ghana in early March. I had no deal going in, just a connected young Ghanaian supertechie Eric Osiakwan as my native guide, and a colorful list of stations to visit: Joy-FM, Vibe, Radio Universe and such. We settled with Choice FM because it had a reputation in talk and streamed its broadcast to the Internet, and because general manager Larry Benson sounded excited to see how an American played the game. No money changed hands. The agreement was that I would have the Choice mike from 9 p.m. till midnight for two weeks, and I would produce the program myself.



Our opening-night radio conversation in Ghana was devoted to the Internet itself, partly because the governing board of the Internet, ICANN, was meeting in Accra, with significant participation of Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, which was also sponsoring me.

Accra is bursting with nearly 300 cyber-cafes—inversely proportional, one supposes, to the number of computers in Ghanaian homes. At BusyInternet, the biggest and brightest of the cafes, it was stunning to watch the alacrity, stone-seriousness and quick mastery among the young customers at their screens. My colleague Ben Walker made another stunning discovery in interviews: a main thread of the around-the-clock emailing and web surfing is what amounts to an SOS, a combination of job-hunting and visa-shopping, a collective “get me out of here.”

I was disconcerted (no matter that John Perry Barlow made fun on the air of my “New England liberalism”) to learn that the cyber-sweatshops are already up and running in Ghana—processing New York City parking tickets, for example, and other data-processing assignments. But there is a case to be made for the sweatshops, and Ghanaians make it, in the form of a question. If the job is watching TV security monitors on London parking lots, say, is a Ghanaian better off uprooting himself to London for a lowly wage—or watching the same parking lots, via the Internet, back in Ghana?

Herman Chinery-Hesse, who runs the biggest little software company in Ghana, gave us the Internet dream with an air of authority. The Web, he said, is a leveler, an equalizer that puts Ghana in touch with the world on universal terms, unlike the British railroads that pointed the way from the cocoa fields and gold mines to the harbor. “If we can train fantastic architects in Ghana, they can build buildings in China... The Internet does not know origin or color or race.”

In the long run, the argument goes, the Internet will draw other Ghanaians back home, with a pay packet. It is the perfect device, Chinery-Hesse maintained, for pineapple farmers, or musicians, or witch doctors, marketing their wares. John Perry Barlow has believed it for years: that the web makes a perfect fit with the social psychology of traditional Africa. “The cyber-café,” he said, “is really a lot like the old village well. Everybody goes down at the same time, not because the water is so good at that hour, but for the information.”

The sentimental clincher for me was the brimming, beautiful earnestness of omniscient Edwin Baeta, quoted above. He is about 20 years old, a “client support executive” who had helped me out of my self-inflicted jams at BusyInternet, on Ring Road, the Silicon Alley of Accra. He told me: “We must practice giving ourselves the things that sustain us,” and he thinks the Internet is one of those things. What I said on the air was that I couldn’t imagine an African laying track for any of Cecil Rhodes’ railways a century earlier voicing Edwin Baeta’s inspiration about “shaping the future.”

*This is our High Life! You gotta dance with a handkerchief in your right hand, and a calabash of wine in your left... I mean, when you talk about melodies, you go to Guinea. And when you talk of vocal music, you go to South Africa. When*

*you talk of rhythm, you come to Ghana. Ghana is the richest in the variety, the diversity of rhythm. No composer in the world can match the ancestors in this country.*

~ Ghanaian music producer Faisal Helwani

*You'd rather use a Hoover than a broom. That's the modern world. But you have to make people feel guilty about using a drum machine instead of a drum.*

~ Comedian Fritz Baffour

*At its best, the Internet can help Africa skip the industrial period... Africa sort of shrugged that whole period of history off, and is suffering somewhat economically—but has not had to suffer the worst depravities inflicted on us. I mean, you come to Africa and you see a sense of human connection that is almost entirely missing from the Northern Hemisphere... I'd been a cattle rancher for a large part of my earlier life... This is narcissistic and grandiose, but I wanted to help Africa do what I had done, which was to leapfrog the industrial period... I got here and realized: if anyone was poor, it wasn't Africa. It was us. And my desire was suddenly to wire Africa, not so that the money could flow downstream, but so that that their heartfulness and connection might flow upstream... It wouldn't be the usual deal where some Northern institution comes down here and with its "excellent intentions" turns Africa into an addict. And that's been one of my big purposes in life ever since... Here is a tool that can greatly enhance the oldest and best network on the planet, which is the matrix of African social relationships.*

~ Cyber-cowboy, songwriter and author John Perry Barlow

*A decade ago I was unaware of what I know now: we can do more than just cope with our lives; we can direct them, create the lives we want. We can choose. This is the single fact that makes our lives so distinctly different from our parents... It requires diligence, constant, earnest, painstaking practices – and love... It is God's will that we live more abundantly. What we have is the universe's gift to us. What we become is our gift to the universe.*

~ Edwin Baeta, on the staff of the BusyInternet cyber café in Accra

We played "Desert Island Discs," picking all-time favorite sounds with Ghanaian producers and performers, to get the conversation started on music. Radio talk about music should buzz with overtones of some other invisible, impalpable, powerful mystery. Love, truth, God—that sort of thing. Often, I feel, music talk is a religious conversation, disguised or once removed. Our music shows on Choice FM had all of those spooky resonances. They became, furthermore, a way of talking about a general crisis of West African culture.

The musicians I met in Ghana live between despondency and despair inside a heritage of grandeur. A strict curfew in the 1980s, under President Jerry Rawlings, killed a booming live band scene in Accra, which has never revived. The government taxes imported musical instruments as luxury items—as if they were toys for millionaires, not the tools of an export industry. A pay-for-play rule at commercial radio stations favors Michael Jackson and the stars of British and American record companies. So you can hear Celine Dion wailing all over Accra. And now Ghanaian performers, too, have joined the computer revolution.

Ghana's pop so-called Hip Life sound today has no horns or drums in it. It's a singer with a synthesizer. The legendary High Life producer Faisal Helwani ranted on our air about the gangsters, fools and mercenaries who run the insidious trash music scene today. "Play something you don't like three times in a week, and you'll get to love it," he warned. Ghana's "Divine Drummer," who had a brilliant American career as Guy Warren but is honored at home with the name Ghanaba, or "child of Ghana," told us he had urged Jerry Rawlings to "outlaw the computerization of our music," by fiat. It's not the musicians who need protection, but the living treasure of an ageless tradition. Many Ghanaians, to judge by our callers, are in a panic about it.



Chris Lydon with the "Divine Drummer" known in Ghana as "Ghanaba," meaning "child of Ghana."

The poet and critic Kofi Anyidoho made it a writer's problem, too, quoting Ghana's foremost poet, Kofi Awoonor: "And those who want to be seen in the best of company have abjured the magic of being themselves."

*There are in this world two great requisites which help to make a nation famous and opulent: creative genius and a spirit of imitativeness, that is, emulation. A nation that has got neither of these qualities can not be progressive. If the people*

*of the Gold Coast, especially the Fantis, in their instinctive imitateness, had coupled with it discernment and discretion, they would have nothing to fear but everything to gain and rejoice at. But alas, such is not the case. They are more like the mimic monkey who paid dearly for it by cutting his throat with a sharp razor whilst imitating the actions of his master while shaving.*

~ From the first Ghanaian novel,  
*Marita, on the Folly of Love*, by a Native (1886)

*Africa has all the content [for the global culture]... Historically, when you talk about culture, we are significantly endowed. Talk about music, or design motifs—though I understand most of the Kinte stoles sold in New York these days are actually manufactured in Korea... I think the content will always be with us... The system that generates the content will always be with us. The challenge is how to make money out of it.*

--Political scientist Amos Anyimadu, University of Ghana at Legon

Ghanaian political talk is fixated on a left-right party division that seems to stem from the tension in the independence movement fifty years ago, between the “self-government” faction and Nkrumah’s “self-government NOW!” upstarts. The moderate right is now in office. The moderate left is in a funk. The foreign creditors are in power—a point almost too painful to talk about. One exception is the confrontational, very popular comedian known as KSM, who makes HIPC jokes out of Ghana’s humiliation. “Merry Christmas and a HIPC New Year,” he says. He refers to President Kufour’s neighborhood as “HIPC Junction.” On our program KSM sounded interested in running for office himself on a “No More Loans” platform. “If [there] were no means of getting aid from outside,” he asked, “would we allow the country to sink? Or would we come up with something creative to rebuild it? We are not challenging ourselves,” he said. “We are not looking to our own resources.”

Neither are Ghanaians proud of their discourse on AIDS. The official figure on HIV infection is 5 percent of a 20-million population. No one I met doubts that the crisis is bigger than that. But almost no one is sure how to talk about it, in public or private.

Audrey Gadzekpo, a star lecturer at the University of Ghana’s Institute for African Studies, was candid about the lack of candor: “I think it’s a dilemma for married women, because the society has been very accepting of infidelity on the part of the man. A lot of men will step out on their wives, but when they come home, I’m not sure a lot of these married women have the power to say No to their husbands, even if they suspect their husbands are not being faithful.”

All the men who called our program on sex and gender issues either defended male chauvinism or rationalized it. The most generous observed: “You see, in the past, the Ghanaian woman would take what would go on in the home. Because we men are not being counseled in this idea of marriage—we are taught that you buy the woman; the more she’s educated the more

expensive is the dowry. So we feel like we've bought the woman home... and if she's assertive we can't stand it."

Vaguely and perhaps irrationally, I connect the inhibitions and blockage here with the haunting old taboo on African talk about slavery. (Not that an American can afford to sound superior in the discussion of slavery and its consequences: it was the United States that led the walkout from the UN's racism conference in Durban late last summer.)

A young technologist in Accra, Ph.D'd in the United States, told me about his own wake-up call as a teenager in Ghana.

The story was this: In an explosive family argument, this young man had overheard his grandfather revealed, put down and ruled out as a former slave who'd been sold into the family. But the boy also learned that his grandfather could, and did appeal to the village chief for a fine against his betrayer—for breaking the Asante commandment: thou shalt not refer to the unfree origins of any person. The boy had learned, in short, that slavery persisted in Ghana well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but could not be discussed.

A caller to our program, Mawuli, may have been speaking for the rising generation when he complained that "the phrase we hear a lot around here is: let's bury our differences. This is the rule in societies in which the defeated never have a chance to tell their story. In the conflict between the slavers and the enslaved we've always tried to solve the problem by covering it up. But when we bury our differences we bury our history."



Ghanaians were shocked in the mid-90s when at a cultural gala held at the Cape Coast Castle, Jamaican dancers went on strike—refusing, as they said, to dance on the bones of their ancestors at a fortress built to warehouse slaves bound for the trans-Atlantic Middle Passage. The moment

was repeatedly cited to me as a turning point in Ghana’s culture of denial. African-American “Roots” tourists keep chiding Ghana for its old amnesia.

So a deeper inquiry appears to be underway. The Cape Coast poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang says, “to dissolve the fetish it is necessary to keep the story of slavery and the slave trade open-ended and to avoid closure; to clear the way to debate and to perpetually initiate rather than conclude the argument so that every new generation may visit it to quarry its lessons.”

*Somebody said: if you put a new slave ship off Ghana today and said people could have that chance of going to America, with certain risks, the ship would be full overnight... It’s a pretty general story when you look at the voluntary forms of migration we have now that are not far removed from slavery. People are virtually walking across the Sahara to get into Europe to do menial jobs...*

--Political Scientist Amos Anyimadu

*The greatest thing when we were kids was getting your first cowboy suit. You couldn’t wait to show it off. We’ve been bombarded with American films and books, and now I see beautiful people with so much to contribute to the society and they go to the States and clean out hotel rooms and work in old folks’ homes.. Not that people shouldn’t spread their wings. But there’s something wrong when you have three-quarters of your young people wanting to go to the States... England is just a stopover for them to be able to jump to the States. The line is “Get to the States, man!”*

--Comedian Fritz Baffour

*Some of us are here not to give any government a honeymoon. We’re nowhere in Ghana... There is no glass... Kwame Nkrumah would be extremely disappointed.*

--Satirist “KSM”

My mission, continuing from Jamaica, heading next to Singapore, is to tease the possibility of an inclusive conversation in a polarizing world--a conversation across the color lines and poverty lines through the human population, starker and uglier since September 11.

In radio land, we find ourselves at a new intersection of local-broadcast and global-electronic technologies. My ongoing question is: what sort of environment, what sort of ecology might this cross roads—these crossed wires—produce? And how might we nudge the answer in the direction of civility, openness, substance?

What are the broadly engaging human questions in 2002 that can also make pointedly local conversations in and about the Caribbean, also West Africa, also East Asia? What are the never-before chances, in this low-cost but universal space, for human interactions around politics and culture? for arguments about history, and the future? for definition of individual and national identities?

For me there is a fascination in the conversation itself and also in the means we never had before of pursuing it. Internet technology makes possible a cheap and democratic spoken interaction across many old geographic and political, ethnic and religious barriers. The next trick is to turn a technological breakthrough into a human device. Can we use this new medium to share social and intellectual capital? to catalyze a culture that's trying to happen? to open and stimulate a fresh conversation in a still unfamiliar, still unrestricted cyberspace?

We are trying to imagine if not design a new sort of conversational coral reef in a new sort of sea.

I have a name for this traveling show by now: "Wide World." It resonates with ABC's Wide World of Sports, also the World Wide Web. In my head, though, it refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal, initiated when he was a 16-year-old freshman at Harvard. He began: "I do hereby nominate and appoint 'Imagination' the generalissimo and chief marshall of all the luckless ragamuffin Ideas which may be collected & imprisoned hereafter in these pages." Then and ever after, Emerson called his journal "The Wide World."

On the way to Singapore, we must figure out how to solicit some more of that infinitely broader Internet audience. But already in Jamaica and Ghana there have been more than enough surprised and articulately delighted callers on the line to suggest that citizens of many stripes are ready for a different sort of intellectual marketplace, hungry for a new conversation.

## About Transom

### What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.



Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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## ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

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