



hip-life

In Ghana, as all over Africa, hip-hop is the young music of choice. But finding the right balance between local and global is a major concern. James Bainbridge reports

In Accra's Kwame Nkrumah Circle, where countless market stalls merge organically with two of the Ghanaian capital's main roads, Amanziba Nat Brew glowers on the front page of the copies of *Showbiz* newspaper thrust through taxi windows by vendors. The story concerns a near-fatal injury suffered by the legendary local musician and producer on an American tour. Round the corner at a restaurant with cow leg, goat and pepper soup on the blackboard, Nat Brew cuts an imposing figure with cowrie shells in his dreadlocks and his arm still in a sling.

He is taking a break from a recording session at nearby Hush Hush Studios to explain that his music is definitely not 'hip-life'. A fusion of hip-hop and 'highlife' – urban West African party music – hip-life hit the Ghanaian charts in 1992 and has gone from strength to strength. Hip-life acts such as Osibisa, VIP and Tic-Tac are nudging into the ranks of West African musical royalty. Putumayo World Music this year decided it wanted a piece of the Accra action and recruited the renowned Goodies Music Production to carry out its A&R in Ghana.

However, even as hip-life artists enjoy new levels of success, the genre is attracting criticism for its American tendencies. "Hip-life is leaning towards the Ghanaian thing more than it used to [but it is still] very American – more about sex than anything else in its videos and lyrical content," says Nat Brew. "I call my music '*rogha*' – rhythms of Ghana. This is one of the few countries in the world that has so many rhythms... I want to tell the world what we have here."

This analysis of hip-life certainly holds up to a listen to the albums available on poor-quality CD and tape from Accra's many music booths. *Last Show* by hip-life pioneer Reggie Rockstone features tracks such as 'Mobile Phone', with sampled Nokia bleeps and lyrics about Microsoft.

Nat Brew's view finds some sympathy with another pillar of the Accra music scene, Fiifi Norman. A former dancer for the likes of Fela Kuti, the Wailers and Burning Spear, Norman has more recently worked with Afro Moses, who has succeeded internationally with Ghanaian music ranging from hip-life to traditional songs. Norman admits that "the hip-life scene is taking over today" but encourages his charges, such as the 25-year-old singer Sikaihn, to produce highlife. "We must let them [young people] know their roots," he says.

Afro Moses himself has certainly never lost touch with his roots, despite being based in Australia. Having originally left Ghana for Europe with promoter Kwabeina Sarfo Maanu, who also took Youssou N'Dour to Europe, he has been voted as Ghana's top international music ambassador on two occasions. On albums such as last year's *No Victims* with his band Moses O'Jah, Moses shows off his skills on 14 traditional instruments including the *kora* (21-stringed harp), *kalimba* (thumb piano) and *tama* (talking drum). His music fuses traditional rhythms with "modern grooves such as reggae, funk, raga and lots more". Reggae has a fervent following in Ghana, the adopted home of Bob Marley's widow Rita.

"No one, no matter where they come from, should lose touch with their roots," says Moses. "I always make a point of trying to educate the upcoming artists in Ghana to find out about their history, personally and musically. If that is always part of you and passed onto others, we can keep the true heart of Ghanaian culture pumping."

But it is a different story at Accra's Ashanti International Studios, where William Osei-Amankwa Konadu, better known as the Ghanaian impresario Nana King, is dusting down his new album *Never Say Die*. In his bandana and wagon wheel pendant, the Los Angeles-raised musician is hoping to lead the charge of Ghanaian acts into the lucrative American music market.

Although *Never Say Die* features local references (*'That's how we do it in the G. H.A.N.A... it's just another day in the A.C.C.R.A.'*), it sounds like a Californian record with its smooth hip-hop and R&B tracks such as 'Thug's Prayer' and 'Ice Cream Man'. The American music industry veteran believes his approach, which has already found favour on Accra radio and at a hip-hop festival in Nigeria, will be a sure winner Stateside. "Don't forget, [the reggae star] Beanie Man was from somewhere before he got to LA," he says. "[Ghanaian artists] can use me to get further... to penetrate to the real record labels."

It seems a noble mission to promote African musicians in the West, but at what cost? Will young Ghanaian musicians heed the advice of local elder statesmen, or will the allure of success lead them to emulate what they see coming out of the glitzy American market and studios run by the likes of Nana King?

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Among the singers lounging in the shade outside Ashanti International Studios – all in their 20s, and mostly wearing American football tops – Ex-Doe (as in 'extra money') says he is not worried about Americanisation as Ghanaian musicians are producing "African hip-hop [with a] different flavour".

"We're in a third world country but we've still got influences from other countries. People here have a different place in the world – a different lifestyle," he says, perhaps a little unconvincingly. The 28-year-old points out that he raps in Ewe and Twi as well as English and that he sings about traditional subjects such as religion. "God gave me my talent so I have to praise him with my talent... to inspire people in a good way."

The same is true of 24-year-old AB – real name Abena Takyi. Although, in true African

style, the chanteuse names her parents as her greatest influence, she readily reels off a list of Western role models such as Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliot.

However, there are encouraging signs for champions of Ghana's musical heritage – notably the 23-year-old rapper Batman. Name-checking Nat Brew and Afro Moses alongside Busta Rhymes and KRS-1, Batman has already recorded two solo albums and collaborated on some 70 others, including *Never Say Die* with Nana King. He is popular among both young people and older, more discerning listeners who rate albums such as *Crazy*, Batman's old-meets-new collaboration with highlife star Nano Addo.

"Hip-life is more African than when it started," argues Batman. "Originally it was African lyrics being put onto hip-hop beats and blended with highlife. Now beat-makers take local rhythms and modify them into the sound of hip-hop, but it's still local. The lyrics are English but it still sounds local."

This echoes the older musicians who can trace a direct line from hip-life and highlife back to traditional Ghanaian music. "Highlife came about by taking complicated cross-over rhythms and modernising them, bringing traditional music to the dancehalls when Ghana was going through hard times," >>

Clockwise from top: make money, make money – rapper Ex-Doe; Batman giving it the full hip-hop swagger; rising star AB; Afro Moses in traditional dress





Left: La Pleasure Beach, outside Accra, hosted a 'fiesta' in July featuring many of the well-known hip-life crews

Below left: Fiifi Norman, who has recently collaborated with Afro Moses



says Afro Moses. "Those complex rhythms have now shaped themselves into the complicated word patterns of hip-life. The latest artists are extremely talented at this style and use the traditional language in a very clever way, creating a flow of words that rhyme and twist really well. Even if you don't understand the language, it sounds great."

Likewise, Nat Brew says hip-life draws on more than just hip-hop and highlife – which is itself the result of Western influence, having developed out of palm wine music in the 1920s as a reflection of the European culture of living it up at the weekends. "Hip-life is pieced together from other forms of music – from the highlife rhythm, and from a southern Ghanaian form of choral music... and from *Simigra*, local seaside rap from the western region," he says.

Of course, for every musician like Batman who takes their lead from Nat Brew and Moses as well as what they see on MTV, there are more who, like Ex-Doe and AB, are less clear about their cultural identity. Outside hip-life producer Slim Buster's studio, three rappers in their early 20s cite American stars as influences but struggle to explain how Busta Rhymes et al have any real relevance for them as Africans. "What they're [American rappers] used to talking about over there is what happens out there on the streets. They talk about everyday life, and everyday life happens to us too," offers one.

As the trio swaggers off up one of Accra's dusty streets, Fiifi Norman tells the story behind a nearby ad for a singer called Angel. When she was killed in a car crash, the blame fell on her boyfriend Edwin Eastman, a talented rapper who has guested on American albums. He is now in prison. Meanwhile, Accra has already seen its first label war – between Ashanti International

and Kassa Records, following Ex-Doe's song 'Maba', which 'dissed' Reggie Rockstone.

Such tales smack of Americanisation. Indeed, Africanhiphop.com claims the savvy industry player Nana King encouraged Ex-Doe's inflammatory lyrics to incite a label war, hoping to generate the kind of controversy seen Stateside and in larger African cities like Lagos and Johannesburg. This is perhaps an inevitable, and not overly sinister, effect of globalisation. After all, first world cities from London to Sydney are full of kids in baggy trousers who have not necessarily forgotten their roots. Why should Africa be any different? The only worry for hip-life, which attempts to mix the sounds of the radically different cultures of Ghana and the US, is that the American influences will prove more dominant and Ghanaian music will lose out in the long run. ●

What do you think?

★ Has 'world' hip-hop become a bland, homogenised entity? Is the American influence affecting world music? We want to know your thoughts. Write to letters@songlines.co.uk and you could win £50 in HMV vouchers

Top Hip-Life albums



Tic Tac, *Most Wanted* (Alordia Promotions)

The 26-year old star's new album is as fresh as the mint he's named after, featuring jaunty dance floor fillers, alongside homages to his roots. 'Fefe Na' Efe' is based on the Ashanti proverb about beautiful women that inspired Fela Kuti's song of the same name.

VIP, *Pussycat* (Goodies Music Production)

This feel-good album from the award-winning trio features suggestive lyrics bouncing along on top of steel drums and a calypso rhythm.

Batman, *Samini* (Lexyfri Productions)

He calls his ragga-infused style African dancehall, others call it rag-life. Emmanuel Samini's self-titled second solo album sees him develop his much-copied lyrical flow.



Sidney, *Obiaa Nye Obiaa* (Goodies Music Production)

Also known as the ninja, Reggie Rockstone's cousin raps in English and Twi on his sixth album about subjects such as African child soldiers and, on the controversial eponymous single, social equality.

Abrewa Nana, *Maba* (Bandex Music Productions)

Anyone who can rhyme 'red lobster' with 'deputy minister' and 'Ghana ragga buster' has to be worth checking out. This comeback record from rag-life's rising female star, winner of the Best Female Vocal Performance gong at the Ghana Music Awards UK, features her male counterpart Batman.

The UK's best hip-life distributors are Kumasi Market (020 7639 3851/020 7732 8125) and Wayoasi Music & Services (020 8257 3497)