Chapter 6
Listening to Histories of Listening: 
Collaborative Experiments in 
Acoustemology with Nii Otoo Annan

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In the field of ethnomusicology one typically encounters a historical emphasis in discussions of sound recording technologies. Surely this follows from how the discipline’s development has closely relied on the evolution of field and archive sound technologies for the documentation, analysis and dissemination of human musical diversity (for example, Christensen 2002; Hart and Kostyal 2003; Baily 2009; Myers 1992; Stock 2009; Rice 2014: 17). In this chapter I shift away from this historical emphasis to engage a contemporary conjuncture: that of listening practices and experimental field and studio recording. My interests here are to discuss dialogic recording and listening encounters with a Ghanaian musical colleague, Nii Otoo Annan, and to present how our collaborative CD recordings open up experimental formats for articulating research on listening and playback.

That sound recording can be powerfully linked both to new knowledge about African music and new possibilities for listening to it reached an unquestionable watershed moment in 1973. This was when Simha Arom introduced an experimental technique that for ever changed analytic access to the music of African multi-part vocal and instrumental ensembles. Recognizing that there was a great deal of conjecture about time and interlock principles based on listening to the gestalt summary of multi-part music in Africa, Arom suggested that it was fundamentally necessary to be able to hear each of the parts separately and in contextual juxtaposition in order to analyse their relations. He proposed a brilliant analogue recording strategy to make possible the transcription of traditional African polyrhythms and polyphonies on a part-by-part basis (Arom 1973; 1976). Arom’s proposal was daring, startling and original. “The method I propose is an experimental one,” he wrote. “It consists in applying the well-known technique of “playback recording” in the field itself” (Arom 1976: 483; emphasis in original). The technique exploits the possibilities of coupling two analogue stereo reel-to-reel recorders. In so doing, the left and right track material recorded on one can be re-recorded to just one track of the other, thus leaving a synchronous open track which can be overdubbed to playback. This makes it possible to record an ensemble, and then to record each component part of the ensemble sequentially. To do this, each player or vocalist records his or her unique solo part while listening to playback of the whole ensemble, or to one or more other parts of that whole.
Arom’s method relies on both a rigorous technological procedure with the paired stereo recorders and the ability of the researcher to work in a highly structured and artificial way with his or her interlocutors. In effect, the researcher trains the interlocutors in the technique of playback, which is to say, trains them to become adept at re-recording, a new overdub way of listening to and performing with themselves. Even if the emphasis is largely technical, methodological reflections on the complexities and intricacies of this approach are found in Arom’s initial articles on the technique (1973; 1976), in his later major analytic works (Arom 1985; 1991), as well as in works written with and by his students (for example, Arom and Fürniss 1992; Fernando-Marandola 2002; Fürniss 1993; 2006).

The key methodological goal of Arom’s technique has been to access sonic structures through a sequential part-by-part transcription that allows for preparation of an analytic musical ‘score’. Indeed, the raison d’être of the playback technique is described as methodological and linked to the necessity of accuracy in transcribing part-to-part relations with a reference pulse. Despite this dominant focus, however, Arom recognized the deeper potentials in the procedure for a multi-dimensional collaborative practice, particularly through the value of dialogic presentation. He concluded:

The method described changes deeply the usual relationship between the ethnomusicologist and the musicians during fieldwork: the musicologist is no longer on one side, with his informants on the other. On the contrary, its application requires very active participation from the musicians; they become true scientific collaborators. It is necessary that they not only understand what they are asked to do in the experimental conditions, but also that they assume the determination of the successive stages of the experimental work, decided upon jointly with the ethnomusicologist. (Arom 1976: 495)

I have never directly experimented with these techniques in the field, even though I have been aware of them since 1974, when, during a student semester in Paris, Arom generously gave me an offprint of his first article (1973) about playback. But as a studio session musician I had a number of experiences of recording to playback. And as an improviser I had a number of experiences of live performance with experimental playback and feedback from prepared tapes, electronics and self-sampling. In addition to these experiences as a performer, I was also familiar with the techniques from the point of view of the recording engineer.

The combination of my recording studio experience with playback, my use of dialogic techniques playback in linguistic and ethnographic research and CD production (for example, Feld 1987; 2011), and a fascination with the radical collaborative possibilities in Arom’s method came together for me in a new way during my first week in Accra, Ghana, in 2004. This is when I both met the Ghanaian multi-instrumentalist Nii Otoo Annan, and heard the sounds of the ubiquitous gutter toad, *Bufo regularis*. Four years later, this conjuncture led to the experimental CD music project *Bufo Variations* (Annan and Feld 2008).
The process that unfolded during those four years, from first encounters through the CD recording and production, exemplifies what I have called acoustemology— the study of sound as a way of knowing (Feld 2012; 2015). Acoustemology is an inquiry into what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening. Acoustemology begins with acoustics to ask how the physicality of sound is so instantly and forcefully present to experience and experiencers, to interpreters and interpretations. It joins that concern to epistemology to investigate sounding and listening as a knowing-in-action, a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible. Listening to histories of listening is one methodological approach to making connections between acoustics and epistemology.

That listening work began with the first recordings I made in Accra, the midnight interactions of the gutter toad *Bufo regularis*. Emanating from two-foot-deep concrete sewers flanking city roads, the toads’ voices are intensely amplified by the cement walls of their foetid amphitheatres, the ratcheting sounds broadcast far and wide. The space–time interplays of the toads, both within particular gutters and across the roads, were acoustically rich and unlike recordings I knew of toads and frogs in rural or urban environments. They exhibited many polyrhythmic dynamics with which I was unfamiliar. Recording multi-channel to a digital hard drive recorder in real time with DSM head-worn recording technology,1 I began each recording with a metronomic figure, the sound of my walking along the asphalt into the spatial surround of the *Bufo* sound-field, and proceeded to allow numerous rhythmic interaction patterns to emerge in the density of repetitions.

In the months after leaving Ghana I mixed several experimental short soundscape composition pieces from this material, and ultimately presented a brief one as a multi-channel mix for the 2006 Ear to the Earth concert in New York City. Then, in 2008, after regular returns to Ghana and lengthy study of percussion and timeline principles with the acclaimed musician Nii Otoo Annan, I played for him a 6 minute 38 second piece I called ‘Bufo Aria’.

Taking his headphones off, Nii Otoo said:

‘Sounding everywhere’, ‘crossing on top’, ‘sitting below’: how might the metaphoric space–time concepts that Nii Otoo used in English be shaping forces of musical imagination? A first revelation was the way Nii Otoo complicated my listening. The multi-track mix I had made focused on the left-to-right, foreground-to-background, immediate-to-deep layers of rhythm that I could hear in the toad interactions. But Nii Otoo was juxtaposing all of that to the additional height and depth layers of

the cricket pulsation. In effect, his listening blew up a larger 3D acoustic picture from the one I created, making clear that the figure–ground relationships that I was hearing could all dissolve into another figure against another ground.

A second revelation was the spatial use of ‘crossing on top’ to signify side-to-side changing rhythmic motion. ‘Crossing on top’ is a way a drummer might speak about additive improvisation, about pattern embellishment or ornamentation layered as an upper auditory layer onto the ‘sitting below’ ground of intermediate and lower-level rhythm-defining pattern repetitions. And ‘Sounding everywhere’ listens to how sound fills and defines space as a density of simultaneous height–depth, foreground–background, and side-to-side interplays.

Over time I considered and queried Nii Otoo’s thoughts on ‘sounding everywhere’, ‘crossing on top’ and ‘sitting below’, both as we were listening and as we were playing together. My desire deepened to communicate something about the intricacy and richness of his listening, his sonic knowing, his acoustemological way of hearing ‘companion species’ (Haraway 2003) in his acoustic environment.

But there are real linguistic limitations here, and neither Nii Otoo nor I understand the other’s language with the degree of precision necessary to get into the deeper dimensions of listening. Besides, we were more used to playing together and listening together than talking. So I proposed that we collaborate on an experiment in listening and playback, one where I might more directly listen in on his way of listening to Bufo toads. And one where he would be able to direct the course of collaboration, and employ my recording, video and recording studio skills to present the musicality of his listening. In other words, what opened up here was an opportunity to use playing and recording, rather than verbal interchange, to represent the beneath-the-surface complexity of our acoustemological dialogue.

This led to a playback and overdub recording experiment where Ni Otto improvised, sequentially, on 10 percussion instruments or instrument sets, while listening in headphones to playback of a repeated six-minute toad and cricket soundscape recording. These recordings open up new lines of inquiry into how routine listening to the environment forms a creative backdrop for knowledge of sonic space and time, for improvisation, for music perception, and specifically for a local understanding the concept of musical variation. Listening with headphones, Nii Otoo’s synchronous performances feed back his musical responses by recording overdub tracks, each overdub an original variation on a different instrument or set.

What is revealed by this listening-in acoustemology is the relational epistemology of how Nii Otoo uses the toads simultaneously as a metronomic click-track, stimulus, calculator and companion species musical interlocutor.

His overdubs feed back the polyrhythmic math that reveals a simultaneous hearing in patterns of three against two, four against three and six against four. They feed back the articulateness of hearing space–time interplays as ‘crossing on top’, ‘sitting below’ and ‘sounding everywhere’.

Some details are required to make clear just what is at stake here. Nii Otoo improvised each of his variations in a complete take, without additional edits or overdubs. Variation 1 is performed on tenor and bass gyil/xylophones. Variation 2 is...
1 performed on the *gome*, a seated bass drum played with heels and hands. Variation 3
2 is performed on a *brekete*, a snared bass drum played with palm and curved stick.
3 Variation 4 is performed on the *odonno*, an under-arm pressure drum played with
4 palm and a curved stick. Variation 5 is performed on *gome*, *brekete* and *odonno*
5 drums. Variation 6 is performed on electric guitar. Variation 7 is performed on an
6 *ashiwa*, a seated rhythm-box bass with three metal keys. Variation 8 is performed
7 on a mix of *gome*, two *kpanlogo* and two *apentemma* drums, played with mallets.
8 and hands. Variation 9 is performed on the ‘gangofone’, Nii Otoo’s experimental
9 rack of seven *gangokui* double bells, played with mallets and sticks.
10 Variation 10 is different from all the others. For our last session, Nii Otoo set up
11 a combination of *kpanlogo*, *gome* and *brekete* drums, hi-hat and ride jazz cymbals,
12 and with jazz brushes played not to the toads, but to a previous overdub of the same
13 toad track. This prepared overdub was played by a trio of the jazz saxophonist
14 Alex Coke, vocalist Tina Marsh and myself on *ashiwa* rhythm box bass. For that
15 trio recording Alex, Tina and I simultaneously improvised to playback of the toad
16 piece, but each in different rooms, and with no eye or ear contact, hearing only
17 the toads in our headphones, with no auditory or visual clue as to what each other
18 was playing. Only afterward, at the recording console, with the toads removed,
19 did we hear the live interplay of our collective conversation and mix it into a trio
20 track (Coke et al. 2008). Nii Otoo’s overdub of that track listens in and feeds back
21 on our trio composite track, adding an African free-jazz overhearing of our trio
22 overhearing of the *Bufo* toads.
23 For the *Bufo Variations* presentation CD recording, we begin with the
24 unaccompanied ‘*Bufo Aria*’, the basis of my original listening to Accra’s gutter
25 toads at midnight, and of Nii Otoo’s listening to my constructed listening. We
26 then proceed with Nii Otoo’s 10 variations, and end with ‘*Bufo Aria*’ again, in a
27 slightly different mix. On 9 of the 10 overdubs the toad tracks are taken away so
28 that Nii Otoo’s total musical response is fully exposed. This is meant to encourage
29 the listener to focus on Nii Otoo’s musical improvisations, but also to either listen
30 again just to the ‘*Bufo Aria*’, or to use the computer to listen simultaneously to the
31 ‘*Bufo Aria*’ and to any of Nii Otoo’s responses. To clarify this process midway,
32 to expose the significance of removing the toads from the mix and to heighten
33 the listening experience, we retain the ambient ‘*Bufo Aria*’ track together with
34 Variation 6 for electric guitar, making it possible to hear Nii Otoo playing along
35 with what he was listening to in the moment, in his headphones.
36 Nii Otoo’s improvisations sound the generative mathematics of many rhythm
37 families. They also map his histories of musical absorption, linking national,
38 ethnic, regional and over-the-border patterns that reach from Ghana into Nigeria,
39 Togo and Burkina Faso. They also head in the direction of jazz. In this way,
40 Nii Otoo’s cosmopolitan listening feedback speaks to how numerous Ghanaian
41 rhythm families sound the historical and musical space and time of place, nation
42 and the interpenetration of international musics.
43 Consider some of these dimensions track-by-track through Nii Otoo’s playback
44 annotations and comments as we listened together to the composite recordings.
His attention to detail reveals much about the complexities of his listening practice and how it feeds back into performance.

In Variation 1, for two gyil xylophones, Nii Otoo says the introduction has ‘the left hand walking’ to my footsteps, and the right ‘coming in’ to trill like the crickets. After the introduction, the left hand states patterns and the right embellishes. Playing the left with two mallets and the right with one, Otoo uses echoing and mirroring in a musical mimesis of the left–right, forward–backward sounding space of the frogs and the up–down sounding space of the crickets. Listening to his composite, he called his playing ‘Kakraba Lobi’ after the famous Ghanaian northern master player who was a frequent performer on national radio and a much-noted teacher in residence at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana (1962–87). Nii Otoo never studied with Kakraba, but said that after seeing him play he wanted to take the energy of his left–right hand interactions and do something less traditional with the technique, where independence of the hands can be spread to multiple instruments and improvisations against ostinatos played with a jazz touch. He credits his use of volume dynamics on this track to the jazz drumming techniques of Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali. Ghanaian instrumentalists more typically play at one dynamic level from start to finish.

In Variation 2, for gome bass drum, Nii Otoo begins with a Shai East rhythm associated with the inland Ga-Adangme people, but in a jazz-inflected form. This transforms to otofo, another Ga-Adangme rhythm. Otoo notes hearing the bell pattern in his head throughout (in \( \frac{5}{8} \) the count is 1-1-1-1-3-2-3). Slowing down at two points, Otoo brings in rhythms of Bamaaya, the social music of the Dagbamba, widely heard at funerals and festivals in northern Ghana. While describing these rhythm fusions, Nii Otoo talked frequently about ‘topping it’ in relation to all rhythms, meaning playing all the interacting dance parts and adding what jazz drummers call ‘fills’, both connecting implied beats and rhythmically underlining overt and non-overt connections.

In Variation 3, for brekete drum, Nii Otoo again uses Dagbamba rhythms from the North, takai, a royal dance for festive occasions, and bamaaya, and uses drum-speaking to interject phrases, ‘Turn yourself!’ , ‘Stand!’ , ‘Wave!’ , ‘Bless you!’ , ‘Strut like a king!’ , all in relation to rhythms associated with kings and princes.

In Variation 4, forodonno ‘talking’ drum, Nii Otoo simultaneously draws on portions of the drum, bell and rattle parts from tikali, again from the North, a ceremonial music for the gods, mixed with sounds from Ipala, a Nigerian sounding of drums talking to gods, telling how to dance. The ending swells back to Ghana, with a familiar formulaic phrase, the rhythm call to assemble of ‘Ghana muntie!’ (‘Listen, Ghana!’).

In Variation 5, for gome, brekete andodonno drums, Nii Otoo uses sisala, another Northern rhythm, which usually involves four drum parts. Here he plays five drum parts on three drums, no bell part, with the rhythm keyed to the timing of the dance. When I asked at this point why so many of the rhythm package choices came from the North, Nii Otoo said: ‘They are heavy, more heavy, spiritually. We feel them reaching down to us here. Nigeria too, they are more heavy with spiritual music, dance music. We must take from them.’
In Variation 6, for electric guitar, Nii Otoo plays off the metronomic pulse of crickets, using them as a background timeline bell. He calls the first song, an original for himself, ‘Otoo kwao’, *kwao* being short for *kweku*, the day name for those born on Wednesday. The second song is a re-versioning from 1960s palmwine and highlife guitar band rhythms he associates with the famous Kumasi guitarists Koo Nimo and Kwa Mensah.

In Variation 7, the *ashiwa* box bass is played in the style of *otoome*, typically a large frame drum played by stick and hand. But Nii Otoo transfers the typically right hand on frame skin and left hand on frame shell pattern to alternations of hand on wood and hands on metal keys.

In Variation 8, for *gome*, *kpanlogo* and *apentemma* drums, Nii Otoo begins with sticks playing the wooden drum shells to indicate walking and shuffling sounds in the night, and then moves to a rolling and tumbling ‘thunder’ sound that he says he picked up by listening to Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali, the famous jazz drummers who worked with saxophonist John Coltrane. Then he goes into fast *waka*, in a jazz form fusing elements of *kpanlogo*, with common pulse bell pattern (in \( \frac{3}{4} \) the count is 2-2-3-2-3) and then develops a solo with different speed alternations, but coming back constantly to phrases that reference the underlying bell pattern.

In Variation 9, for his invented gangofone, Nii Otoo uses Ewe *atsiagbekor* rhythm, from southern Ghana, Togo and Benin, mixing two and three bell parts. *Atsiagbekor* is a well-known social dance form, its dance movements closely keyed to drum motifs. To shifting middle ground parts, new ‘tops’ are added in the form of what Nii Otoo calls ‘speaking’ parts, with evocations of the phrases ‘Come here’, ‘Stay here’, ‘Where are you going?’, ‘Just stay, don’t move!’, ‘I’ll come back and see you!’, ‘Stay on it, I’m with you!’, ‘I’m going and coming!’.

Here Otoo plays with tympani mallets. The second half of the piece shifts from mallets to curved sticks and to Ga *kple*, a stately rhythm of spiritual songs, playing both bell and drum parts and ‘speaking on top’.

These improvisations speak to how Nii Otoo utilizes musical geography as a listening topography and history of ethnic, national and international cosmopolitan dialogues. They also take us into a distinctive musical conceptualization of variation and its basis in rhythm weaving. Could this be an intimation of musical infinity? Trying to speak more deeply with Nii Otoo about variation, I found myself playing different musical examples to elicit his thoughts as well as playing along with him on *ashiwa* box bass. While a respected master of both traditional Ghanaian percussion and popular and jazz musics, Nii Otoo has had little exposure to concepts of variation in Western European art music. As he had never heard the name of Johann Sebastian Bach, I made the introduction, by way of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*.

While completely self-taught, Nii Otoo has considerable knowledge of Western harmony and melodic motion from playing guitar and bass. Not surprisingly, he noticed the repeating patterns of Bach’s bass line motion from one variation to the next, and at one point, stopped to sing the down-and-back line
G–F–E–D–B–C–D–G. But listening in to the density of Bach’s keyboard music, Otoo’s main auditory focus was on something more familiar in West Africa: the interdependence created by independent yet interlocking left and right hands. Nii Otoo asked me to pause the playback several times to listen again to the left–right and front–back play on the double manual keyboard. He greatly enjoyed much of what he heard. All the same, it was the harpsichord’s shimmering timbres that he responded to most immediately while hearing Bach’s music, qualities he likened to the snare of the brekete drum, the rasping interplay of crickets and toads, and the buzz of his xylophone’s resonators.

Take a moment to fantasize what the Goldberg Variations might sound like had Bach been born in Ghana, gone to sleep each night listening to Bufo toads, and devoted himself to the mastery of polyrhythms with the same dedication he showed to harmony. The first of Nii Otoo’s variations addresses this fantasy in a rather good-humoured way, using tenor and bass gourd-resonated gyil xylophones in a G major pentatonic, the instruments tuned G A B D E, Nii Otoo realizing G major as home key of the Goldberg Variations. Nii Otoo plays the left one-octave bass xylophone with two mallets, and the right three-octave tenor xylophone (one octave overlapping) with three. He uses echoing and mirroring in a musical mimesis of the side-to-side left–right and front-to-back forward–distant toads, and the up–down crickets. As in the other variations, you’ll hear his interdependent interlocking as a ‘crossing on top’ and ‘sitting below’, both in the ways he separates and links the two instruments, and the ground-to-figure ways ostinato layers and rhythmic phrase repetitions intersect fragments of newly emergent melodic improvisation.

Nii Otoo has never touched or even seen a double manual keyboard, but Bach’s extensive use of hand crossing was intuited by him solely on the basis of the performance recording. You can also hear a great deal of play between 3 and 2 in Otoo’s rhythmic parsings, and as is well known, the Goldberg Variations’ grand ternary form, with canon in ascent every third variation from numbers 3 to 27, is matched by contrastive binary symmetries on the multiples 2, 4, 8, 16 and 32.

In his Bach: The Goldberg Variations, Peter Williams notes many of the work’s recurring patterns, and some of his phraseology stands in perfectly in a descriptive lexicon of Nii Otoo’s improvisational playfulness: angular lines and inversion (Williams 2001: 56), anticipation in the bass (57), ‘cascading’ and disappearance becoming reappearance (61), ‘patterns crossing, chasing and coming together’ (68), ‘lines appear to go their own way’ (74), ‘many tied notes over the bar-lines’ in re Variations 18 and 19 (75), ‘bubbling lines testing the player’s hand-positioning’ (76), and ‘lines tumbling over each other, answering or running against each other, both up and down’ (79).

Bufo Variations opens up these many listening possibilities, ones that cross and route back and forth between African traditional and popular dance forms, jazz and European art music. The goal of the project is thus to use playback dialogic techniques to record in a way that encourages playful, expansive and creative listenings, ones that make musical connections, rather than ones that reproduce musical partitions. And while none of this was meant to record systematically in order to lead to a
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1 score for musical analysis, the presence of real-time Pro Tools tracks with reference
2 pulse timelines certainly makes possible many additional analytic exercises with the
3 same materials. Like Arom, I take as an ultimate goal the invention of techniques
4 that reveal the musical intelligence and creativity of African musicians. Unlike his
5 playback technique, however, this one emphasizes forms of direct access to the
6 distinctly sensuous and creative character of African experimentalism, ranging from
7 cross-species conversation beyond the human to distinctly avant-garde musical
8 conversation with an improvising trio at a distant studio location.
9 A second CD project, Ghana Sea Blues (Annan and Feld 2012), continued my
10 dialogic experiments in listening and playing with Nii Otoo Annan. But it emerged
11 differently and with more direction and control from Nii Otoo himself. In January
12 2010 Nii Otoo asked me to record 13 of his compositions for solo electric guitar.
13 Ten months later he came to New Mexico for a teaching and performance residency
14 at my university. During his stay we spent several nights in a recording studio,
15 where, listening to playback of his solo recordings, he sequentially overdubbed
16 each of the 13 pieces with 7–10 additional tracks.
17 In each instance Nii Otoo would select a song. Then, listening to the playback
18 of his original guitar solo over headphones, he first overdubbed himself start to
19 finish with the finger bell ododompo. Then, listening to a mix of the guitar and
20 ododompo tracks, he overdubbed a second time from start to finish with gangokui,
21 a double bell. Then, listening to that composite, he laid down a start-to-finish track
22 on shekere, a beaded gourd rattle. And then a track with a pair of conga-type hand
23 drums called apentema. Then, to fill out the bottom, he overdubbed a track on
24 gome, a bass drum played with heels and palms, and finally, a track on electric
25 bass. For 10 of them he also overdubbed lyrics he composed.
26 In the studio we listened back to the multi-track compilations in the Pro Tools
27 editing program, which provides time-coded grids superimposed on the vertical
28 tracks. Nii Otoo and I moved the mixing board sliders up and down as we listened,
29 to simulate ways tracks could be taken in and out of a mix, thus exposing different
30 kinds of juxtapositions of the top and bottom layers of the percussion, and different
31 interactions between timelines and the guitar melodies. Departing for Accra a few
32 days later, Nii Otoo slapped my hand vigorously, and with his infectious grin, said:
33 ‘Ok Prof, you hear the music. Now make the arrangements!’
34 In effect, Nii Otoo had these multi-part grids in his head for those ten months
35 between recording the guitar leads and adding the bell, rattle, drum and bass parts.
36 In the course of these overdub sessions, he gave me the gift of another kind of
37 conversation beyond talk or music performance: acoustic entrée to his mind, and
38 with it the challenge to take his recorded overdub track materials and to make
39 musical arrangements for each song in order to expose something about their
40 inner workings.
41 Studying the 13 pieces consumed me for the next year. I analysed and played
42 with the songs, track by track, phrase by phrase, groove by groove, and using the
43 Pro Tools audio suite constructed musical arrangements that bring the overdubbed
44 layering of instruments in and out to expose Nii Otoos’s engagements with many
Ghanaian and international pop and jazz idioms. In 2011 I twice took rough mixes back to Accra to review with him. And in January 2012, when the work was finished, we released the CD *Ghana Sea Blues*.

To give an example of the experimental questions and ideas opened up in the process of playback listening and making the final CD, I offer a brief story about one of the three all-instrumental tracks, titled ‘Africa Take Five’. When I recorded the guitar solo in 2010, I asked Nii Otoo what he meant by this title, and he tersely replied: ‘“Africa Take Five”. *Um bomp-a-bomp Um bomp Um bomp-a-bomp Um bomp*. You know it, Prof. You know the name. Dave Brubeck. But Africa way.’

The composition ‘Africa Take Five’ is one of three instrumental pieces on the CD. The underlying title it quotes and references, ‘Take Five’, is a composition by saxophonist Paul Desmond, made famous in 1959 on The Dave Brubeck Quartet’s Columbia Records LP *Time Out* (1959). ‘Take Five’ became the Brubeck group’s theme song, and *Time Out* became the first jazz LP to achieve platinum sales status in the USA. In 2005, after years of just about every other kind of commercial and artistic recognition imaginable, *Time Out* entered the US Library of Congress National Recording Registry. It can only be described as among the most widely circulated, broadcast, known and cited recordings in jazz history, worldwide.

An experimental mix of the 1950s West Coast cool style and what were then completely unconventional time signatures in jazz, *Time Out* opened the possibility that jazz could be improvised – indeed, could swing – in time signatures beyond those conventionally based on three- or four-pulse cycles. ‘Take Five’ was notably the first song to demonstrate this in the time signature of $\frac{5}{4}$.

What Otoo sang to me as ‘Um bomp-a-bomp Um bomp Um bomp-a-bomp Um bomp’ sounds out the way jazz ears typically count out that five-pulse cycle: 1, 2 and 3, 4, 5 | 1, 2 and 3, 4, 5. That cycle and accent structure is what is famously announced and repeated throughout Dave Brubeck’s piano part on ‘Take Five’, a L-R-L-R-L-R> hand alternation of the repeated chordal vamp from E₃m to B₃m7 over the introduction and A phrase of the song.

Nii Otoo’s ‘Africa Take Five’ transforms this into an Afro Escher sketch with an inside-out gestalt. Listening to the composite and the breakdown of bell and rattle parts, we hear how he plays in an underlying pulse cycle of 6 while maintaining the feel and implication of an accent cycle in 5. He does this by off-setting the Brubeck piano vamp rendering of the five-pulse cycle to stretch the gestalt: 1 and 2 and 3, 4, 5 | 1 and 2 and 3, 4, 5. In effect, he simultaneously references and evokes the $\frac{5}{4}$ groove of the Brubeck Quartet’s ‘Take Five’ (particularly with the strong push of pulses 4, 5 and across the bar line to 1) but in the push–pull of a more danceable and Afrocentric, even six-pulse groove.

What we hear in ‘Africa Take Five’, then, is an African listening history and a new way of listening to and with the time experiment of swing in $\frac{5}{4}$ offered in Brubeck’s ‘Take Five’. This is one way that listening to African histories of listening, and engaging them through recording, opens us up to other ways of thinking about the play of time, groove and multiple metre. These listening histories also help excavate and query entrenched narratives that position African
ways of hearing in relation to those of the West. In this specific case, one of those narratives is distinctly political, because ‘Take Five’ was, in its time, very much racialized as the cool jazz played and listened to by whites, Europeans and educated elites. Nii Otoo’s creative Africanization of ‘Take Five’ opens up the possibility that the song was heard differently in Africa. And it reminds us that ‘Take Five’ was also enjoyed by many people who had no idea whether the members of The Dave Brubeck Quartet were white or black. This is highly ironic, of course, given that the nationalist US jazz narrative that polemicized cool/white versus hot/black stylistics was the same discourse that relegated Africans to the position of jazz ancestors, actors only in the music’s distant historical past, and not players or listeners engaged with the music in a historical present (Feld 2012).

Listening with Nii Otoo, and listening to his history of listening, also helps us pose another question: Why did Africans like this song so much? Certainly, Voice of America radio, which is where Nii Otoo first heard ‘Take Five’ in his youth, had great prestige, power and wattage in West Africa. We know that Willis Conover, and then his successors, programmed a great deal of West Coast cool jazz for airplay on Voice of America. And we know that this music even became more popular when white artists arrived to play in West Africa as ‘jazz ambassadors’, following Louis Armstrong’s 1960 success in that role (Von Eschen 2006). Still, very few songs with high Voice of America radio rotation ever became as popular, or remain as memorable as ‘Take Five’ in West Africa, especially among musicians, who love to cover it. Why?

Part of the answer now strikes me as rather straightforward, even if it partially resists the cultural imperialism framework that is most typically invoked to address the matter. Namely: African artists and audiences appreciated Brubeck as a musician who experimented with time and rhythm, even when it was with time and rhythm quite foreign to their own local music. It may come as a shock that working-class, uneducated and musically non-literate Africans enjoyed ‘Take Five’, enjoyed the way the Brubeck Quartet was playing with time. But ‘playing with time’ is exactly what Brubeck embraced experimentally, and that is also what many musicians in West Africa know how to do well and enjoy. Indeed, this is just what Nii Otoo says he loves about ‘Take Five’, and why he wanted to make a composition dedicated to the song. Ironically again, as I was visiting Accra in December 2012, it was also Nii Otoo who informed me about Brubeck’s passing, after he heard the news broadcast by Voice of America.2

This is the kind of ‘roots and routes’ soundtrack that James Clifford’s Routes (1997) alerted us to listen for: the sound of discrepant cosmopolitanism. For an African like Nii Otoo Annan, playing with time, loving and mastering the playfulness of ‘Take Five’ and matching it with his own, also tells a deep story about music as a site of black pride and accomplishment. It tells a story of imagined and criss-crossed ancestors.

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alliances in sound. It’s a story born of the recognition that musicians playfully engage
the complexities of rhythm and that there’s a good conversation waiting. It’s a story
about wanting to meet that playfulness on a level field where desires for expansive
agency, for mobility, connection and intimacy, can be realized.

Listening this way to Nii Otoo’s histories of listening is how I hear ‘Africa Take
Five’ as a dense chord of discrepant cosmopolitanism, a chord that sounds a desire
to own, to inhabit, to converse with wondrous music from beyond as much as he
could own, inhabit and converse with multiple layers of Ghanaian and West African
idioms that were so close by. Discrepant cosmopolitanism: how else to describe the
musical revelation packed into Nii Otoo crossing two bell parts to trick our ears into
hearing 5 in 6 and 6 in 5? Discrepant cosmopolitanism: how else to describe the
social revelation that an African musician, one unaware of the polemically racialized
past of ‘Take Five’, can pulverize the imagined incommensurability of its cool \( \frac{5}{6} \) and a rhythmically hot \( \frac{6}{5} \) West African dance groove?

_Bufo Variations_ and _Ghana Sea Blues_ use aspects of field and studio
playback technologies to engage the importance of collaborative and dialogic
listening experiments. These experiments can have important musical and social
implications for performance, recording, analysis, technological mediation,
representation and publication. They can also help realize a decolonized and
reimagined ‘ethno’-musicology, an ethnomusicology where, as Arom proposed
long ago, sound recording technologies and techniques could figure in more
collaborative forms of knowledge production that reach across and beyond
musical and cultural difference.

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4 Dave Brubeck Quartet (1959) Time Out (LP), Columbia Records.


