
H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 109

James A. Winders, *Paris Africain: Rhythms of the African Diaspora*. New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2006. xvi + 231 pp. Notes and index. \$39.95 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4039-6004-7.

Review by James E. Genova, The Ohio State University-Marion

Since the 1980s there has been a profound shift in both the trends and the inspirational sources of music. Those changes have often been grouped under the rubric of the emergence of “world music” as a distinctive genre that itself lacks specificity. African musicians and musical styles have occupied a prominent place within the explosive growth of world music. Music critics and scholars generally agree that performers and composers from the former French colonies in West Africa as well as ex-Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) are among the most influential in the development of contemporary African music as well as its dissemination to the wider world. However, as with many other forms of cultural expression from Francophone West Africa, France and domestic French politics are never far removed from the circumstances of production in Africa or the ways in which those products reach the extra-African world.

James A. Winders has provided a thoughtful and interesting look at the African music scene as it emerged from the 1970s to the present in *Paris Africain: Rhythms of the African Diaspora*. Built largely around a series of interviews with prominent musicians (including Francis Bebey and Manu Dibango), the narrative traces the intricate links between the history of African migration to France and the emergence of the contemporary African music scene. With a brief glance back to the colonial period, Winders notes an early interest in the cultures of West Africa among French musicologists and ethnographers. Concomitantly, anti-colonial activists in the region embraced music and other forms of cultural expression as a means to counter French influence and overcome foreign rule. Within that emerging cultural struggle, a pattern of migration emerged that led to the establishment of a vibrant, but largely self-contained African community in France, especially in Paris. Many migrants who arrived in France seeking education or employment as laborers either had musical backgrounds or gravitated toward music as a means of self-expression as well as a way to maintain contact with the culture of their homeland. It is with those humble beginnings that the African music scene established itself within migrant communities in the metropole.

From the start, Winders highlights the links between African and French domestic politics (as well as the relations between France and African states) and the growth of contemporary African music. With official French conceptions of what constituted “real” African music still largely based on ethnographic models from the colonial period, promoters and recording studios often did not reach out to experimental, hybrid musical forms that emerged by the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, the lack of production equipment and an adequate distribution system in Africa, led musicians from Mali, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and elsewhere in Francophone West Africa to migrate to France in search of opportunities to perform and record their music. While in France, African musicians developed their own distinctive styles that drew inspiration from their home countries and incorporated instruments and techniques learned in France. By the early 1980s a handful of African musicians had gained wide popularity within their own communities in France, a few even gaining notoriety back home, but their appeal to the larger French public remained limited.

Winders argues that the election of the Socialist government under President François Mitterrand in

1981 and the selection of Jack Lang to head the Ministry of Culture marked a watershed in the emergence of African and world music as important genres in France and around the world. The Lang ministry took steps to open recording facilities and distribution networks to African musicians. Radio stations, essential elements in the large-scale familiarization of artists and their music with the listening public, opened their airways to African music and sponsored concerts to showcase African musicians. This opening coincided with relaxed immigration regulations as well as a desire to reconstruct French identity as more pluralistic. Within this changed atmosphere, African musicians flourished and became sought after by music promoters and recording studios. The immense popularity of African music in the Paris of the 1980s directly contributed to the coining of the term “world music” by distributors seeking a means of marketing the product to an audience generally unfamiliar with African music.

However, Winders notes that even during the heyday of the African music scene in France the handwriting was on the wall. The 1980s was also the decade that witnessed the rise in the electoral fortunes of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National largely on an anti-immigrant platform. As the right gained in political power even the Socialists backed off their original gesture toward a pluralistic notion of “Frenchness” and steered more toward the re-affirmation of Republican unity. By the 1990s African musicians were finding it harder to gain airtime on radios (due to tightened restrictions on the language content of programming) and promoters were no longer backing the musicians as lavishly as in the previous decade. Significantly, many musicians who had gained some popularity in France during the 1980s returned to their home countries in the 1990s and sought to build local recording studios and found their own radio stations. Many commented in interviews with Winders that they found France less hospitable to African music and they also sought to re-connect with their roots, believing that too much time out of Africa caused the music to become too Western over time.

Paris Africain is one of the few studies to date on the history of contemporary African music and as such it is bound to occupy an important place in what should be an emerging scholarship on the subject. However, it is more than that; it is also a unique study of immigration in France and of the African migrant communities in Paris. Winders deftly handles the complex and potentially unwieldy matrix of immigration politics, African politics, cultural trends, business history, and even gastronomy (there is a section late in the book on African restaurants in Paris and their connections to the music scene) in a way that keeps the reader alert to the multivalent influences that shaped and were shaped by African music. Winders highlights the role of African musicians in the battle to defend the *sans-papiers* in the 1990s from forced expulsion from France. Many musicians were themselves “*sans-papiers*,” but had been permitted to stay in France because of their status as musicians. Others sought to aid those threatened with expulsion by including them as members of an ever-expanding entourage of musicians in order to gain the necessary documentation to stay in France.

In the end, Winders points to the loosening of the historic ties between France and its ex-colonies in West Africa as many musicians from the region either are making careers in their home countries or they prefer to migrate to New York and other points in the United States over France. For most musicians the choice is based on two factors: the first is the strong anti-immigrant (especially anti-African) sentiment in France as expressed through the electoral success of the Front National; the second is the economic power and marketing possibilities found in the United States that simply do not exist in France. In the absence of direct government promotion and a public that is receptive to the product, France has settled into a place that is important in the history of contemporary African music, but is not as central as it was in the 1980s.

Overall, Winders has provided a useful, interesting, and persuasive account of the connections between cultural movements, immigration, and politics in the global age. His interviews with promoters, musicians, and others connected with the business are often insightful and offer a window into the complexities of the industry from the perspective of those on the outside trying to get in. It would be useful to have a bibliography at the end of the book to offer some additional scholarship that may touch

on the history of African music and immigration history in France. Occasionally, Winders frames the interviews too much in the manner of a fan club member meeting the object of his long-standing adoration and the reader gets too much of the Hollywood-esque scenery of smoke trailing from a lit cigarette with a stoic figure seated at a café in the Latin Quarter. However, one can hardly blame him when those he is meeting have in fact been so important to the construction of the way in which we listen to music around the world today. For fans of music and scholars interested in Franco-African cultural relations, *Paris Africain* is certainly worth the read.

James E. Genova
The Ohio State University-Marion
genova.2@osu.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172