Reflexive Ethnography: An Ethnomusicologist's Experience as a Jazz Musician in Zimbabwe
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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Center for Black Music Research - Columbia College Chicago and University of Illinois Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30039289
Accessed: 17/01/2012 06:59

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REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY:
AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST'S EXPERIENCE
AS A JAZZ MUSICIAN IN ZIMBABWE

LINDA F. WILLIAMS

As ethnomusicologists, we often bring our own history to the fieldwork experience, and we express ourselves through unions of the past and present. Although for the past twenty years I have worked extensively as a jazz saxophonist with musicians in the United States, I have always felt a need to study improvisation cross-culturally. As a female saxophonist undertaking jazz research in Harare from 1992 to 1994, I was a bit apprehensive about what my role would be in the context of the Zimbabwean music industry, particularly while conducting research in a country where previous studies and personal conversations had shown that women were not fully respected (Impey 1992; Makwenda 1992; Maravanyika 1993; Msoro 1994). Thus, my fear of being classified as a "novice female instrumentalist" caused me to observe musical performances critically by maintaining a low profile during the first month of my research.

At the end of my first month in Harare, I ventured out one evening to perform in one of the Harare clubs where jazz bands appear nightly. Upon entering, I was immediately overwhelmed by the large crowd, congenial outbursts of laughter, people dancing alone near their tables, and the overall exuberant energy throughout the club. I was surprised, in particular, to see people dancing to jazz rather than merely sitting and listening to it. Retreating to a corner near the rear of the club, I attempted to understand the subtle differences in a type of music very similar to American jazz. At this stage of my research, I perceived that every musi-

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cal note appeared to constitute a unique response to the different shades of dance and movement.

After observing and listening to the band for more than twenty minutes, I felt confident that I could express myself on stage musically. So I unpacked my saxophone and spoke with the bandleader, Simangaliso Tutani. Soon, I was invited onto the platform to perform with the musicians. As I walked toward the bass player to get in tune, I noticed that most of the people in the club had their eyes fixed on me. My heart pounded rapidly as I walked toward the microphone to test the volume level. Unexpectedly, a young woman in the audience stood up and shouted, “Carry that cross, sister; show them what we can do!”

Despite the emotionally charged atmosphere, I found my fear dissipating, instantly being replaced with confidence. This unwavering sensation brought me into the larger social arena, causing me to be absent from that world but to be an active part of it. The reaction of members of the audience reassured me that I had their support, which later became an important element of the performance dynamic that I experienced in Zimbabwe.

During the early months of intense performances and discussing and formulating ideas with musicians, I began to notice that, although I was meeting with a variety of professional musicians, they were all men. Most well-known singers and instrumentalists in the popular bands, the music promoters, and the band managers were men. This did not surprise me, because globally music has tended to be controlled by men, but I suspected that there were more women in the industry than I had initially been led to believe. Who were the female vocalists singing on the records that I had listened to and the women disc jockeys I often heard presenting music on Zimbabwean radio stations?

I began asking Zimbabwean musicians and university students about the participation of women instrumentalists. Their responses, oddly, were: “There aren’t any that we are familiar with” or “Most women don’t perform on stage except as dancers or singers.” I then approached women that I had met at clubs in which I had performed, and they were able to recount a few names. Most of these women appeared to be associated with concert hall or popular entertainment settings during the

1. Being an African-American female saxophonist made a radical difference in my performing experiences in Zimbabwe. Since I am not a Zimbabwean woman, who may have had to abide by the cultural recognition of gender and performance in a society that acknowledges women as singers and dancers, I had complete freedom to perform as a saxophonist without much criticism from male musicians who look on a female instrumentalist as radically departing from the norm. However, I participated not as an apprentice but as a professional musician performing with other professional musicians who were just as adept with jazz and improvisation as I, and I was judged on that basis.
1940s through 1960s; however, all references to women musicians were vague. Later, through interviews with women who frequent jazz clubs throughout Harare, I learned of other female musicians, and slowly a list of names began to accumulate. I began to realize that, contrary to the initial impression that I had had been given, women constituted a hidden yet sizable force in the music industry, some of them operating as key agents within the industry and others as traditional healers and performers of the mbira. After thoroughly investigating and searching, I finally met women band managers, disc jockeys, singers, songwriters, and music journalists. Yet it became apparent that these women were being "whisked away" by male agents in the industry and by the popular print media, even though women had been publicly praised for their participation in the Chimurenga—the Zimbabwean civil war, where women inconspicuously fought along with their male counterparts.

Given an environment wherein gender roles were presumably being contested, why was it that women appeared to be increasingly denied a place in public performance? What is it about public performance in the arts that foregrounds deeply entrenched power differences between the sexes? And why has the changing social and political climate within the country restricted the inclusion of women in music?

The invisibility of women in commercial music is by no means peculiar to Zimbabwe. For African as well as African-American women in hip hop, jazz, gospel, and popular music, there was often heavy pressure not to compete with men for jobs, which at times came to represent both symbolic and concrete proof of the male's struggles in cultures that denigrated their malehood. Men in Zimbabwe were particular victims of the disempowering effects of colonialism, urbanization, and the migrant labor system and therefore claimed control of public musical consumption as one way to reclaim individual and collective function and social authority.

Once I began to interview Zimbabwean women musicians extensively, it became overwhelmingly evident that they had seldom—if ever—had the opportunity to tell their stories to interested journalists or researchers. The contributions of women musicians had virtually never been accorded public interest or respect. This is not surprising, since researchers in general have only recently begun to include gender and power, as opposed to the gender divisions of roles, in the practice of music. Earlier perspectives were shaped by Western perceptions of Third World

2. The mbira is a set of tuned metal keys mounted on a wooden soundboard and placed within a gourd surrounded by bottle tops or pebbles to enhance the sound. The gourd functions as the resonating chamber. The mbira is similar in physical function yet distinctly different from the kalimba or thumb piano.
women, because the interests of funding agencies in First World countries significantly informed research priorities.

Challenges to the gender-based role of the music industry in Zimbabwe would inevitably result in reduction of the resistance to women’s participation in such occupations and would command the respect of men in the industry and the public at large. Eventually, women would be able to challenge the debilitating experiences of harassment by their male counterparts in the music industry and be treated professionally by male members of their groups. Dramatic changes in public attitude toward women in music will take years to occur, but the recognition of the need for change represents a significant opportunity for resistance against male hegemony in the industry and a way in which women will be able to continue to explore their own musical potential and gradually command public recognition for their contributions to music.

Standing in the dressing room of a nightclub in downtown Harare, just before we were to go on stage, bassist Bryan Paul, guitarist Jonah Marumowoka, and I shuffled our music arrangements while contemplating what songs to perform. Fifteen minutes earlier, we had been notified that our drummer, Joni “Papas,” would not be appearing with the group because of a family crisis. Confident that the bassist and rhythm guitarist could resolve our problem, I sat quietly, allowing Bryan and Jonah to negotiate. I recognized that without a reliable drummer, we would have to compensate in order to hold the ensemble together. I also envisioned the experience of listening to my internal sounds, since the absence of the drummer would require me to adapt my own innate time line rather than being guided by the rhythmic drive of the ensemble.

As I stood in the dressing room waiting for Bryan and Jonah’s decision, I realized that I had begun to resist performing without a drummer. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized that the source of my resistance was that relying on the drummer’s cues as a signal to end each song allowed me to express myself comfortably and without struggle. In my sincere attempt to combine reason with emotion, I found myself ambivalent. Slowly, I gave up the major controlling element in my musical life—attempting to be flawless. This critical step took an enormous amount of energy, courage, and contemplation. I accepted my inner feelings as they were and gradually abandoned that sacrosanct notion.

I began to recognize the battle between my internal ideals and external circumstances as a source of intellectual growth. Later I realized that other people did not know how I felt about my individual musical sound or, more specifically, what I thought I should sound like. As many musicians can testify, we develop our personal styles not only from emulating
individual innovators but also from creating our own internal sounds. The distinction between individualism and shared awareness becomes obvious when framed by a backdrop of mutual understanding.

Bryan’s and Jonah’s facial expressions revealed their fear of the musical ensemble’s inability to carry out the prearranged program. I suddenly became concerned about the group’s stability. I proposed that we all relax and choose songs that would not sound empty in the absence of our drummer.

The performance began thirty minutes late. As we walked onstage, the audience’s response seemed hesitant, as if to question immediately the absence of a drummer on the platform. Knowing that we would have to focus our concentration intensely throughout the entire three-hour performance, we decided to begin the concert with a contemplative melody, Antonio Jobim’s “Meditation” (a medium-tempo bossa nova). The music evolved with each of us carefully listening to one another and paying close attention to each individual’s bodily movement in an effort to restore the silence in the sonic texture left by the missing drums. Not only were we mutually attuned to one another, but we were also influenced by the energy generated by those who were listening and watching.

The three of us were keenly aware of both the social context and the degree to which the music, in the absence of drums, would affect the listener. As a result, the performance became a kaleidoscope of activities in which we functioned as musicians, psychosocial scientists, and actors. Response cues were not only demonstrated musically, but many signals were perceived intuitively. As individual musicians, we were concerned with maintaining a shared awareness throughout the performance. Potential changes became more ambiguous. Our collective effort to understand this unique performance situation enhanced our individual creative space. Our ambitious readiness became evident in sight, sound, and movement.

I was struck at that moment with the mental process of formulating different objectives and new patterns of action. I no longer considered ways in which I could convince others of my sound. As a consequence, I began responding immediately to my inner feelings in an attempt to reach a mutual agreement with the external sounds of both Jonah and Bryan while simultaneously trying not to create boundaries between our listeners and us. We knew a great deal about what we were doing in the process of interaction; however, we did not know what the consequences of our activities would be, which nonetheless influenced our musical discourse. It is through this type of action that individuals intentionally or unintentionally recreate the social environment in jazz performance.

In that immediate timeframe, I gradually examined how we, as musi-
cians, took into account our audience members. To what extent did they belong? To what extent did they regard themselves as being influenced by our shared values, or were they guided by the fact that we were obligated to take into account their expectations and opinions, to some extent, in deference to their power over our musical behavior?

In the absence of the drummer’s percussive “fill in” during solos, we decided to lengthen each song, permitting the guitarist and me to undertake a reciprocal interplay of patterns in most of the songs. This adaptation allowed the bassist to assume the responsibility for maintaining a heavily accentuated driving rhythm. As the event unfolded, the guitarist and I thoroughly explored the creative process by taking extended solos, because the bassist preferred not to solo while functioning as both bassist and pseudo-drummer. He accomplished this physically by hitting the body of his bass, using his instrument as a sound board to replace the drums. Within this dual capacity, he not only supplemented the role of drummer, but he increasingly enhanced the group’s sound by producing highly rhythmic accentuation on the bass strings. We had altered our group’s organizational structure and constructed an interactive matrix in which a trio evolved from our original quartet.

Some of the organizational ideas of our original group had dissolved. The idea of relying on drum cues as a signal to end each song, the rhythm section’s eight-bar introduction to most songs, the percussive fill-in during solos, and the signals of trade-off patterns from drummer to instrumentalists were all renegotiated. Linear time became cyclical. The search for a pervasive rhythm to frame our solos was no longer guided by a single goal, since there was no central organizing principle. Each of us began randomly to choose the time and moment to exploit the musical space in which we found ourselves. Indeed, both silence and sound were intensified as our audience (it seemed) became passive subjects observing an unexpected ritual. Even the waiters tiptoed from table to table as if consciously avoiding replacing the “missing element” of the drum beat.

One hour and thirty minutes into the performance, Bryan recognized that our time frame of the first break for the evening had not been collectively established. So powerful was his invocation that everyone, including the audience, felt an urge to take a break. Bryan manipulated the volume of his bass guitar strings and pranced around on the stage in a semicircle as if to announce the conclusion of the set. Only then did Jonah signal me to begin the introduction of Sonny Rollins’ “St. Thomas,” our session-break song. Wondering how I could indicate to the band to start playing this piece without hearing the anticipated “rim taps” from the
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We met in the dressing room to discuss and evaluate our performance. Not recognizing the fact at this time that our discussion would be recorded (our stage manager did not remember to pause the tape at the end of our first set), we had the following conversation.

_Bryan_: Performing without a drummer is extremely difficult, I must admit. And certainly discomforting.

_Jonah_: At least, this unexpected opportunity allowed us to connect intuitively in musical terms. Would you agree? . . . And my ears must have grown three inches as I listened to each of your cues. In a sense, I felt extremely tuned in to our sound, unlike many other previous experiences.

_[a pause during the conversation for approximately thirty seconds]_

_Linda_: Yes, despite my nervousness, I felt that we functioned exceptionally well without a drummer.

_Jonah_: Absolutely. I was a bit surprised at the outcome of how well we performed as a group depending only on our immediate situation.

_Bryan_: So, all is well for right now. But, during the next set, what suggestion does anyone have for appropriate tunes? The audience seems a bit reserved.

. . . Perhaps we should play a series of Latin-jazz compositions and leave the bebop stuff to perform only with a drummer. Sometimes I . . .

3. Common in many South African languages, clicks (or ingressive sounds) are produced by drawing breath into the mouth and explosively withdrawing the tongue from the hard palate.

4. During the first set, we performed such bebop compositions as “A Night in Tunisia,” “Groovin’ High,” “Hot House,” and “Round Midnight.”
Jonah [interrupting Bryan]: No, no, no. Offering people something else when the beer runs out is not such a good thing to do. If we secure the rhythm tightly, we will survive. The rhythmic concept seems to be an ongoing major problem we’re experiencing with those bebop tunes tonight. So if we concentrate severely with each of our parts intertwining, then we should not have a problem with bebop pieces. Hey, Linda, what do you think?

Linda: I have no suggestions. Everything seems okay. I believe that once we are accustomed to performing without a drummer, we should continue to listen more closely to one another, so by the end of our second set, we will leave stage without feeling stressed.

Bryan: Well, should we begin the next set with a ballad?

Jonah: I don’t think so. The audience seems hyped. Perhaps we should play something up-tempo?

Linda: Oh, what about Coltrane’s “Mr. P.C.”?

Bryan: That would be nice.

Jonah: Good choice.

Approximately fifteen seconds passed as we each moved our instruments from their vulnerable positions near the entrance door, placing them in a corner to the left of the room, in case someone walked in to offer us drinks. Pacing from one end of the room to the other, Bryan remained silent. Suddenly, he stopped, turned around to face me directly, and began to speak softly. He said, “By the way, Linda—your click performance on the last song was very effective.”

Contemplating the kind of energy that is required to communicate successfully without the presence of one member, I began to think creatively about silence, and my reaction to click sounds emerged. As a closing gesture, I had figured out a way to bring the entire ensemble together. Since any one musician can initiate meaning, it is the fundamental responsibility of the entire group to resolve those issues; thus, performance transforms into a reflexive exercise in which musical formulations acquire many levels. When one does not rely on language, the demand for appropriate reactions heightens one’s responsiveness to sound. Since most musicians are sensitive to change within the overall tonal texture, “tuning in” becomes significant. Hearing changes allowed each of us to contribute a response; negotiation represented a display of competence in performance.

Artistic performances are ultimately aimed at an audience, and in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, the function of an audience varies from context to context. In many Zimbabwean clubs, the audience is actually a part of the creative process. In other situations, depending on the exclusivity of the club, the audience is more passive. In these contexts, a distinction between performing for an audience or performing to an audience dictates the outcome of many performances.
As we went onstage following our session break, the audience’s volume level had increased. From the beginning, the audience was engaged in myriad conversations. While most of the young adults moved to the bar area, the older men and women moved closer to the stage. The waiters, having discarded the restraint that they had shown during the first set, seemed more relaxed as they moved about the room. Bryan and Jonah seemed more content, and I felt that the worst was over. We decided to open the second set of the concert with John Coltrane’s “Mr. P.C.,” followed by Antonio Jobim’s “Girl from Ipanema,” and finally, “Green Dolphin,” a composition by Steve Kaper and Ned Washington later transformed into a jazz standard. However, before the bassist completed the first measure of the introduction, the audience began applauding. As a result, I pondered whether our first set was extremely impressive or if most audience members supported us because there were only three of us. The circumstances and overwhelming applause catalyzed our strong determination to draw the audience into the performance.

Having already established the performance rules during our first set, we were tuned in musically as well as socially. This psychosocial adjustment supported our selection of conventional songs that were designed to involve the audience. We were socially induced into seeking an intense interaction with our audience. After opening the second set with Coltrane’s “Mr. P.C.” (an up-tempo minor blues in C), we began the second phase of the performance. Instead of playing the implicit Latin-rhythmic style during the first four measures of “Green Dolphin Street,” the bassist immediately began to establish a jazz-fusion intro-vamp by overaccenting and plucking the strings of his bass. Because of this sudden stylistic change, the guitarist was forced to place less emphasis on creating the standard chord changes. Jonah’s musical reaction was to begin a series of sparse harmonic substitute changes that inevitably altered what I had initially perceived as the melody. These factors stimulated a renewed vitality in our performance disposition. At that point, interaction had taken on a double dimension: symbolic interaction among ourselves and social interaction with our audience.

Once again, we were faced with shifting our performance roles from artist to entertainer to comply with what we assumed would engage our audience in the absence of a drum. The chilling possibility that the audience remained in the club not because they felt intrigued by the performance but simply because they happened to be there entered my mind. In such a moment, the boundaries of my own personhood resolidified. In a moment of weakness, I fell victim to my own attempt to readopt those culturally acceptable patterns that I had previously abandoned—playing sounds that would appeal to an audience. However, shifting my focus
not only to that which an audience member is likely to appreciate but also to what she or he is likely to overlook gave me a backdrop against which to create more effectively.

During the last song of the evening—"Autumn Leaves" by Johnny Mercer and Joseph Kosmer—we all recognized Fungai Mhalianga, a well-known Zimbabwean blues singer, approaching the stage. As he moved toward the microphone, his gestures conveyed his insistence to sing, although he had not given any of us prior indication that he wanted to participate. Although "guest singing" is common within performance convention, it is rather unusual for a singer to come on stage without permission or prior invitation. Climbing up onto the platform and removing the microphone from the podium, he walked across the stage, superimposing a series of chants above our vamp. Before we reached the bridge of the song, our guest singer had joined in on the chorus and had begun to sing extemporaneous lyrics, completely disregarding the original text.

No sooner had the singer completed a verse in the chorus than the guitarist began creating chords in yet another key. These new chords and sounds continued until our guest singer recognized that these sudden modulations were intentional. At this point, the politics of musical aggression had entered the stage. Recognizing the guitarist’s purposeful modulation, our guest responded by simultaneously readjusting to the newly formed chords. In recognizing the modulation and intent of the musical message, Fungai took additional steps to reestablish dominance. Snapping his fingers to increase the tempo, he unequivocally communicated an implicit confrontation. Group members not only vied for an opportunity to challenge him further but were simultaneously musically charged and inspired by his artistic virtuosity, as demonstrated by his ability to readjust immediately to each newly formed chord. A resolution, therefore, depended upon participants’ sharing of a conceptualization of the situation while at the same time not revealing it to the audience. The underlying understanding is consensus, a mutually defined relevance to the situation, and a code of behavior regarding appropriate outcomes of a situation. We followed the agreed-upon rules concerning appropriate modes of interaction while onstage within a suddenly induced context. Aside from the purposeful manner and collective response of the group in attempting to compensate for the guest singer, such an act became a challenge while also creating an exciting closure for the event.

As I look back on my experiences, I recognize myself as operating on three levels: professional musician, ethnographer, and teacher. As a professional musician, I was able to check the veracity of information both
observed and given to me. As an ethnographer and a scholar, I was able to examine American jazz evolving in an African context. Because I taught university students and applied music students, I understood how my presence affected the environment.

Often a participant observer’s experience (in the fields of ethnomusicology and anthropology) consists of an apprenticeship with a confirmed master of the observed genre. In my case, however, I arrived in Zimbabwe with knowledge of musical practice equal to that of the musicians with whom I performed. I relied on my prior training to create new ideas within the context of a collective awareness.

During the course of my fieldwork, my roles shifted from fellow musician to ethnographer to teacher. At different times I was an insider knowledgeable of the music and an outsider coming from a different cultural environment. Varying my role and informing the musicians that I interviewed of which role I assumed at a particular moment proved invaluable. Although I might on occasion deliberately assume any of these roles when I thought it would yield a bit of information, each role was genuine. The fact that both I and the people with whom I interacted recognized varying degrees of affinity with different professional communities—so that each played roles ranging from jazz musician to teacher, for example—provided a basis for me to resolve the tension between performing full-time and undertaking research. The fluidity of these relationships allowed the unique opportunity for all participants to see various opinions from different angles.

There is no doubt that jazz performance and discourse falls well within the boundaries of ethnographic inquiry. Furthermore, although the technological and informational revolution allows the rapid transfer of both ethnographic and musical information from continent to continent, there is no substitute for interaction allowed by actual collaboration with professional musicians performing music within the realm of an ever-evolving event.

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