“There has never been anybody in the history of Jazz music like me...I am to Jazz music what Kwame Nkrumah was to modern African politics.”!

These bold words belong to the late Kofi Ghanaba, the Ghanaian-born drummer who pioneered jazz-African fusion music during the era of decolonization. Anyone familiar with Ghanaba and his music, whether as the wise African in Haile Gerima’s celebrated film “Sankofa,” or as the young, dynamic percussionist Guy Warren who had taken London, Chicago, and New York by storm in the 1950s, will immediately recognize his legendary hubris. But there is a grain of truth here beyond his conceit. Their lives might be read as parallel stories of two important Ghanaian-born intellectuals whose transatlantic travels between the United States, the United Kingdom, and West Africa profoundly shaped their politics, ideas, and identities. Both men studied at Achimota College in the Gold Coast; both men spent time in the United Kingdom where they encountered an African diasporic community whose politics and art widened their horizons; and both men spent several years in the United States, which they initially envisioned as a land of freedom and possibility in an era when the United Kingdom’s imperial fortunes were declining and the so-called American Century was beginning.

Nkrumah first arrived in London in 1935, just after Italy invaded Ethiopia. Although he was passing through en route to the United States, Nkrumah fell in with a group of like-minded activists mobilizing against the occupation and demanding that the League of Nations protect Ethiopia’s sovereignty. His experience with Pan-Africanism on English soil left an indelible mark on Nkrumah. He proceeded to the United States a few months later, where he studied at Lincoln University (an historically black college in Pennsylvania) and the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned advanced degrees in education and philosophy. Upon returning to England in 1945, he deepened his political involvement in the
anticolonial movement, helping to organize the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England. Of course, Nkrumah would go on to lead his country to independence, becoming Ghana’s first president.²

Like countless black intellectuals, artists, and activists, transnational encounters generated the conditions for Pan-African and Third World solidarity, as well as cultural exchange. For Nkrumah, this meant inviting black expatriates to settle in independent Ghana, while remaining wary of the United States as an emerging neocolonial power and threat to African sovereignty.³ For Kofi Ghanaba, such transatlantic encounters sometimes had the opposite effect—leaving him bitter, deeply alienated from his “American Negro” brethren, eroding potential diasporic bonds of solidarity, and hardening both his Ghanaian nationalism and non-racial humanism. While cosmopolitan London certainly broadened his cultural horizons and musical knowledge, its concert stages and smokey jazz clubs occluded the violence of colonialism. And while he was exposed to Caribbean and other black New World cultures, his collaborations with white musicians opened up a path to imagine a postcolonial order based on interracial brotherhood. Like Nkrumah, England was initially a transit point on the way to the United States, where he hoped to transform the music world with his unique hybrid of jazz, African rhythms and European classics. He dreamed ambitious dreams of creating music that promoted a new humanism for the coming postcolonial world.

From Ghanaba’s point of view, his experiment was an unmitigated failure. “The African influence never took hold of the American. He never developed it and he never really had a proper contact with it; he never played it and he wouldn’t be bothered with it.”⁴ But his American experiences did set him on a trajectory that led him to largely abandon jazz, rediscover traditional West African song, change his name from Guy Warren to Kofi Ghanaba, and ironically, develop a newfound appreciation for England.

Born Kpakpo Warren Akwei, in Accra, Gold Coast, on May 4, 1923, “Guy” was named after US President Warren Gamaliel Harding. His mother, Susana Awula Abla Moore, was an unmarried teenager when she gave birth to him. His father Richard Mabuo Akwei, respected headmaster of the Ghana National School, maintained very little contact with his son besides financing his education.⁵ As a consequence, Guy refused to take the name Akwei.

Warren attended the Government Elementary Boys’ School in Accra, where he led the school band in his last two years (1937–1939), and acted in various local productions.⁶ His formative music education, however, came from hanging out at a local bar, “where little bands came to play night after night. They would let me in as a child because I loved to listen to Harry Dodoo, a first class drummer who used to perform tricks and comedy like the American drummer Baby Dodds. I heard the music and learned to sing what they were playing. It was all primarily American music that American seaman brought to Accra, the port.”⁷

He was only 15 when he earned a spot as a drummer in the Accra Rhythmic Orchestra, a popular highlife band.⁸ Highlife, West Africa’s urban dance music, originated in the Fante coast in the late 19th century, but by the 1930s and 40s it had been “modernized,” infused with rhythms and styles from other parts of
Africa and the diaspora—notably, the cha-cha, tango, calypso, pachanga, marabi music of South Africa, Congo pop music, and Nigerian juju. Like nearly all highlife bands, the Accra Rhythmic Orchestra peppered its repertoire with jazz pieces, some featuring Warren on drums, who imitated the white swing drummers he had heard on records. As he once explained to drummer Max Roach, “I was in a colonial territory and the history and the music of the Afro-American was exported to me in a different form, in a bastardized form. So I knew about Gene Krupa, and Buddy Rich, and the ‘Grey’ [white] drummers. And I was influenced more or less by the Buddy Rich style, so even though I had a spectrum of drummers to listen to and choose from, I had a partial affinity for the Buddy Rich style.”

Warren’s musical and dramatic talents earned him a scholarship to the Gold Coast’s prestigious Achimota College. He enrolled in the teacher-training program in 1941, but two years later, his mother died at 37. With the loss of his mother and continued estrangement from his father and his family, he decided to leave the Gold Coast and head to the United States. Fascinated by the American GI’s stationed in the region, he had already begun to “imitate them. How they spoke, their movements, how they walked, how they did everything. I wanted to be like them, you dig?”

Then one evening, while hanging out at a local bar, Warren met Captain Mike Yeltsin, an American military officer who worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Yeltsin immediately detected Warren’s exuberance for America and recruited him for the OSS, first as his personal assistant and then as an intelligence agent. Warren dropped out of school and underwent intensive training as a member of the OSS, which, in his words, consisted of learning “how to behave like an American… He had de-Africanized and de-Anglicized me and I’d become an American, a GI… He wanted me to enter America as an American soldier.” Thus, after years of listening to and playing American music, admiring American culture, hearing American seamen tell stories of city life across the Atlantic, Warren promptly became an “American” through military service.

For several months in 1943, Warren’s work with the OSS took him to Lima, Peru, Vera Cruz, Mexico, Key West, Florida, and finally New York City. He had finally reached his destination—the jazz capital of the world. But his training and work schedule afforded him little time to “play.” He did venture into Nick’s Tavern in the Village, a club known for Dixieland and Chicago-style jazz, and sat in on drums with trombonist Miff Mole, but he never felt like it was his scene. “It was an all-white rendezvous and I was like a freak there.”

Warren was back in Accra before the end of 1943 and began working as a journalist for the Spectator Daily while serving as an undercover agent for the OSS. The following year, after he was discharged from the military, he took a position as the jazz disc jockey for the Gold Coast Radio Broadcasting Service and returned to music. In 1947, Warren joined the popular high life band, the Tempos, with E. T. Mensah and Joe Kelly. They frequently played for the all-white European Club (later called the Accra Club). With the founding of the Convention People’s Party led by Kwame Nkrumah rising to prominence in 1950, organizing strikes and boycotts throughout the country for elections and ultimately independence
from the United Kingdom, spaces like the European Club became increasingly fraught with tensions.

One evening in 1949 or 1950, during a break between sets while Warren was speaking with a UK army captain, a Canadian patron walked up to the two men and said, “What’s an American nigger doing here?” Warren ignored him at first, brushing him off as another drunk patron. But then the man “pushed me and says to me, ‘Say sir when you talk to a white man.’” Warren took it as an affront and replied with a single punch to the stomach that sent the Canadian tumbling to the floor. “It was pandemonium,” he later recalled. “For any African to go to a European club and beat up a white man, that was sensational.” Although the incident made Warren something of a local hero, it also cost him his gig with the Tempos. He left the Gold Coast and headed to London, where he continued to work as a correspondent for several West African newspapers, hosted a series of jazz programs for the BBC, and played with UK tenor saxophonist Kenny Graham and his Afro-Cubist Ensemble.

Graham, who was just a year younger than Warren, had just left the UK military when he formed the Afro-Cubists in 1950. His concept clearly owed a debt to the thriving Caribbean jazz scene in London—fueled, in part, by the Windrush generation of Caribbean immigrants who had come after the war to rebuild the city. Warren liked the idea of playing African percussion in an experimental jazz context, but the Cuban emphasis never sat well with him. “We were always clashing on this,” Warren later recalled, “that the African conception was what we needed more than the Afro-Cuban.” Unfortunately, Warren left the United Kingdom in 1951, just prior to the band’s debut recording session. He returned to West Africa laden with Cuban percussion instruments (bongos and conga drums) as well as a deeper knowledge of jazz, calypso, rumba, and other diasporic music. Struck by the similarities between West African high life and Trinidadian calypso, Warren formed his own Afro-Cubist ensemble and traveled throughout the region, performing at the 1953 inauguration of Liberia’s president William Tubman. He decided to stay, taking a job as assistant director and DJ for Liberia’s Eternal Love Broadcasting Corporation (ELBC). Besides introducing jazz and Caribbean music to West African listeners, Warren “played classical music… Duo Bergerac, Rimsky-Korsakov, Berlin, Stravinsky, Mozart, you name it, Handel, Chopin, all of them… I read their notes, played their music and got to know it.”

Thus by the time Warren left for Chicago in December of 1954, bent on introducing “African jazz” to an American audience, he was well versed in a wide range of musical genres. And he seems to have arrived at just the right time. During his five-year sojourn to the United States, Africa loomed large on the political and cultural stage. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, African nationalist leaders visited the United States and made pilgrimages to Harlem, while African-Americans formed liberation support committees and looked to the continent to blaze a more hopeful future for the diaspora. Not surprisingly, an increasing number of jazz musicians released recordings bearing African themes: Randy Weston recorded “Bantu,” “Kucheza Blues,” and “African Lady,” on his landmark LP, *Uhuru Afrika*, Buddy Collette, “Tanganyika,” Sonny Rollins “Airegin”, John

Warren found work right away with Gene Esposito and his Jazz Latin group. Esposito, a trumpeter and vibes player, liked Warren’s playing, both as a drummer and percussionist, and hired him right away, making him the first and only black member of a band comprised entirely of Italian and Jewish musicians.22 Esposito lost jobs because he had hired a black musician (and the fact that he was African and not “Negro” did not seem to make a difference). But even in the clubs that accepted the band’s new percussionist, the audience did not always appreciate Warren’s style. They expected to hear Chano Pozo or Sabu Martinez, not West African rhythms.23 But he refused to compromise. He vowed, “I will not only do pure African music but I will do African-American music. I’ll do African-European music. I’ll do European-American music. I will touch all the areas that I am capable of doing but always with a little African touch. And that’s exactly what I did.”24

In the spring of 1956, Warren, backed by Gene Esposito’s band, recorded his first LP, Africa Speaks, America Answers. He wrote and arranged all of the compositions, played percussion as well as the drum kit. It was arguably the first jazz/African music fusion LP in history—even more astounding given the band’s predominantly Italian and Jewish membership. Warren’s original compositions defied inherited categories by fusing traditional African music and jazz with popular dance rhythms (highlife) and classical music. Yet, many of his compositions, such as “Africa Speaks,” “Ode to a Stream,” “Eyi Wala Dong” (My Thanks to Him), “Chant,” and “Invocation of the Horned Viper,” were either based on traditional sacred music or convey spiritual/religious themes. That Warren was a “real” African willing to incorporate traditional sacred elements in his music only enhanced his spiritual cache, not to mention his authenticity. And yet, Warren did not practice any West African religion, nor was he a Muslim or a Christian—despite his frequent use of both Islamic and Christian themes in his music. Warren was a practicing Buddhist!25

All the praise and press, however, yielded little income. After nearly two years in Chicago, with about as much money as he had when he first arrived, Warren moved to New York City. He immediately landed a job playing at the African Room, where calypso and Afro-Cuban music was featured. The fact that such a venue existed (and there were two in NYC) was further indication of the growing popularity of African and African-based music like calypso. But it also meant the music was highly commercialized and marketed in a manner that played on stereotypes. Warren waged a constant battle against these kinds of representations, choosing to wear his own clothes from Ghana rather than the “uniform” of cut-off shorts and a tattered straw hat.

In 1958, Warren recorded his next album for RCA-Victor, Guy Warren Soundz: Themes for African Drums. The instrumentation was paired down to percussion, flute, and trombone.26 Once again, Warren composed all of the music, though it was markedly different from Africa Speaks in that he was less interested in fusing
jazz and West African music than in experimenting with ceremonial music and foregrounding the drums and voice. In other words, the longer he remained in the United States, the more invested he became in traditional African music. Warren occasionally plays flute, and he deftly uses trombonist Lawrence Brown (of Ellington’s band) as an unaccompanied voice. The song that would eventually become his best-known and most recorded composition, the strikingly beautiful “Love, the Mystery Of,” was written specifically for a dance performed at the African Room.27

Themes for African Drums received very few reviews, despite Warren’s enthusiastic promotion. RCA-Victor marketed the disc by playing on primitive African stereotypes. Rather than use Warren’s image on the LPs sleeve, they hired a model. A shirtless, sweaty, muscular black man is crouched on the ground playing wildly with his mouth wide open, as fire blazes in the background. Warren hated it: “It’s all a white man’s idea of selling a product.”28 He realized that as long as he refused to play the role of the primitive African from the “bush,” he could not succeed in the United States as a recording artist. And he was overshadowed by Michael Babatunde Olatunji, the largely self-taught Nigerian-born drummer whose LP, Drums of Passion, would go on to sell an astounding five million copies. Indeed, when Columbia Records signed Olatunji to record Drums of Passion, its producer, John Hammonds, literally broke off communication with Warren, who was desperately trying to sell his third LP.

American record producers did not know what to do with Warren. They wanted wild, hip-gyrating rhythms, but he delivered a creative, hybrid recording that defied categorization. Although he hired Richard Davis on bass and Ollie Shearer on vibes and marimba, Warren played all percussion parts, flute, piano, and vocal. And he set out to transform the modern drum kit into a modern African instrument, while pursuing new musical fusions, juxtaposing traditional, ceremonial music with modern rhythms and harmonies. Only Milt Gabler of Decca agreed to release it in 1962—three years after it was recorded—under the title, African Rhythms: The Exciting Soundz of Guy Warren and His Talking Drums.29 By this time Warren was through with the United States.

Warren entered the United States full of energy and hubris, something of a closeted “American” himself, ready to Africanize jazz and establish a place for himself in the annals of music history. By the time he returned to Ghana, his disinterest in America had turned to bitterness. In an unpublished letter to Time magazine sent in the fall of 1962, Warren wrote off the African-inspired jazz coming out of the United States a “gimmick” and even attacked his friends, drummers Max Roach, Art Blakey, “and every s.o.b. [who] jumped on the wagon to MAKE MONEY.” He denigrated their music as “racial and prejudicial” and “very hollow and meaningless to me.” In Warren’s view “IT IS NOT AFRICAN MUSIC.”30 Years later, he claimed that, “Me and the Black American musicians never got together . . . I never worked with an entirely Black group when I was in America. In fact, I never even rehearsed with an entirely Black group. They just didn’t want to know. They were playing Bebop.”31 This was not true; on the contrary, except for Gene Esposito’s band, all of the ensembles Warren led during his short sojourn in the United States were entirely black.
Weary, he returned home, continued to make music and participate in the nation’s political life. If he had expected a hero’s reception, he was disappointed. He discovered quickly that his own countrymen were about as ready to embrace his musical innovations as the Americans. Following a spiritual hiatus to Benares, India, Warren spent much of the 1960s splitting his time between Accra and London—where he worked with Jamaican saxophonist Joe Harriott and recorded a solo drum suite based on the music of Congo pygmies. Titled *Emergent Drums: The Voice of Africa Speaks through the Soundz of Guy Warren of Ghana*, the LP was recorded in London in 1963. Warren played all instruments—drums, flute, piano—and sang. Although he would continue to record over the course of the decade, he moved in radically new directions, exploring traditional music across the length and breadth of the African continent, as well as collaborating with more experimental musicians on the London jazz scene.

London was calling for many reasons. First, Ghana’s political situation became increasingly untenable. As a friend and confidante to President Kwame Nkrumah, Warren endured a wave of political backlash after Nkrumah was deposed in a US-backed coup in 1966. Second, the London scene inspired Warren to renew his collaborations with jazz musicians there, who in turn granted him the kind of respect and deference he never enjoyed in the United States. Ironically, as demands for Black Power and “Soul” Power rippled through black London neighborhoods, Warren stridently criticized black musicians and extolled whites as superior interpreters of his music. He attributes their success to their willingness to humble themselves, to learn and listen, their technical skills, even their sense of privilege and ownership. “The people who can [play my music] are the whites,” he casually asserted in a 1980 interview. “I have worked successfully with whites because I suppose they have the love to learn, to grab what you have and claim it to be theirs. So the whites are my constant followers in that they are technically facile and good. They can read music and play whatever you want them to play. Whereas the African musicians whom I’d like to use are illiterate and underdeveloped as technicians.” Indeed, certain UK jazz musicians—notably trumpeter Ian Carr, saxophonists Don Rendell and Brian Smith, pianist Michael Garrick, former Cream drummer Ginger Baker, and others with whom he worked in the late 1960s and 1970s—were singled out for praise.

Several of these musicians appear on Warren’s 1969 LP, *Afro-Jazz*. Recorded in London, he returns to his earlier efforts to fuse highlife and jazz, but with an avant-garde sense of harmonic freedom. Although he never completely gave up his dream to revitalize jazz with African rhythms, his interests clearly varied throughout the rest of his life. He deepened his study of traditional music, recording and performing with various indigenous drum troupes, and his own music eventually dispensed with the jazz influences so prominent during his US sojourn.

In the end, however, Ghana was home. By the late 1970s, he pretty much withdrew from the London scene and never really engaged or identified with Black communities there or in the U.S. He eventually settled in Achimota, changed his name to Kofi Ghanaba in 1974 as a patriotic gesture, raised a family there, and finally earned the national recognition and deep sense of belonging he had been
searching for in his travels. When Ghanaba passed in December of 2008 at the age of 85, he had become something of a national treasure in Ghana—though, like so many “treasures” he died virtually penniless.

Notes

12. Ibid.
14. Ghanaba interview with author, August 12, 2004
15. In 1947, the Tempos consisted of Joe Kelly—tenor and vocals; E. T. Mensah—sax, trumpet; Guy Warren—drums; Pop Hughes—sax; Bossman—bass; Peter Johnson—guitar; Vron Kofie—piano (soon Therson Kofie on piano). Collins, E.T. Mensah, 15.
17. Hartigan, “Ghanaba and the Heritage of African Jazz,” 146; Melody Maker (June 10, 1950); Warren, I Have A Story to Tell, 74–75.

21. For a fascinating discussion of Africa in the imagination of jazz musicians during this era, and before, see Norman Weinstein, A Night in Tunisia: Imaginings of Africa in Jazz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993).


23. Ibid., p. 16.


26. Warren, I Have a Story to Tell, 32–33. Initially, Brown was not available for the date so Warren’s producer, Nat Shapiro, suggested another trombonist named Ferdinand “Al” Alcindor. After no less than twelve rehearsals, Warren dismissed the Juilliard-trained Alcindor as an “idiot” and fired him before recording a single track. While Alcindor never distinguished himself as a trombone player, his son, Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor, Jr.—better known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—distinguished himself on the basketball court.


32. While he certainly had his share of die-hard fans on both sides of the Atlantic, local critics panned his debut performance of the drum suite, “The Third Phase,” at the first Accra jazz festival in 1960. Warren, I Have a Story to Tell, pp. 119–122. He reprinted several letters from fans and defenders of his music from the U.S. and within Ghana, some directly responding to criticisms of his 1960 performance of “The Third Phase.”

33. Emergent Drums (Columbia 33SX 1584) [UK]; Native Africa [Vol. 1] (KPM 1053); Native Africa [Vol. 2] (KPM 1054); Afro-Jazz (EMI/Columbia SCX-6340) [U.K.]; The African Soundz of Guy Warren of Ghana (EMI Records Fiesta FLPS-1646)


35. Emergent Drums (Columbia 33SX 1584) [U.K.]; Afro-Jazz (Columbia SCX 6340) [U.K.]. He recorded a 2-LP set, Native Africa (KPM 1053 and KPM 1054).