

Ghana's Highlife Music: Supporting the World's Cultural Heritage

Grantor: Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology

Grantee: Gramophone Records Museum & Research Centre of Ghana

Summary: Preserving Ghana's highlife musical recordings and pop art



New-media pioneer Daniel Langlois of Montreal has developed a private foundation that is an extension of his passions — for artistry, technology, education and ecology. Record collector Kwame Sarpong of Ghana, a naval officer turned executive, has developed a private non-profit organization that is a fulfillment of his passion — for the highlife music that has all but disappeared from his country.

The two men have never met, never even spoken. But the dream-weaving of the former is realizing the dreams of the latter. In September 2002, with the support of the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, the Gramophone Records Museum & Research Centre of Ghana also became virtual, and Kwame Sarpong's highlife culture had a high-tech home. Of course, none of this would have happened without luck, without faith, or without the pragmatics of dedicated middlepersons.

From the beginning in 1997, Daniel Langlois and his Executive Director, Jean Gagnon made the decision that they would be citizens of the world, not just of Canada (or of Quebec). Says Gagnon: "The very first time I sat with Daniel Langlois to discuss the possibilities of my coming



here, after ten years with the National Gallery and the Canada Council, he said it would be ridiculous for us to be involved in new communications technologies and to be limited by geographical boundaries. We wanted to do our little bit to expand the cultural possibilities these technologies imply.”

They prioritized particular “emerging regions” in order to be proactive, not to be exclusive. Applications are considered from everywhere. “In terms of jury guidelines, we don’t insist on our priorities. Once the projects are brought to the committees, they are compared with the other projects on the table on their own merits.” The Ghana project had stiff, stimulating competition.

Ghana is a small, moderately prosperous West African nation less than two-thirds the size of Newfoundland with more than two-thirds the population of Canada. Making life infinitely more complex is the fact that as of the 1997 census Ghanaians were speaking 72 languages. Thank goodness for the common language of music, which is essential there to a degree the West can scarcely imagine. As African musicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia observed, “A village that has not organized music or neglects community singing, drumming or dancing is said to be dead.”

Highlife, a thriving and influential mix of musical influences that predated the fusions of “worldbeat” by more than half a century, became the essence of Ghana from the 20s

to the 70s — “as reggae is to Jamaica, and calypso to Trinidad and Tobago,” says Kwame Sarpong. With the Ghanaian talent diaspora of the 70s, highlife started to influence Western music out of London, but much of its original integrity and vitality went into decline at home.

Kwame Sarpong began to collect high-life records in the 70s when some of them were still new. In the 80s he scoured the regions for older records and more obscure artists, and as he became more systematic, he also became more frustrated by the gaps in the collection. “I realized that this music was dying off, and that the need to preserve that rich musical heritage had become desperate.” In the early 1990s, he hired the services of 20 people in all the regions for “a massive drive” to locate and purchase another 6,000 records. By 1994, when he registered his Gramophone Records Museum and Research Centre, his was almost certainly the largest such collection in the world — some vinyl 45s but mostly shellac 78s representing more than 700 Ghanaian artists and groups. But even when he found a location within the Centre for National Culture in equatorial Cape Coast — three small rooms with tables, filing cabinets, no air conditioning, and none of the communications tech-



nology that even the most modest of Western businesses would take for granted — he still had to bear all the costs of showcasing the collection himself, and there just wasn't enough money to do so properly.

Nonetheless, he remained philosophical. "Right from the beginning, there were forces that militated against the funding of the noble aims of the Museum. While most countries in the West will spend some of their financial resources to preserve their past, Ghana, like other third-world countries, has not yet reached the stage of even feeding its entire populace of the present." But Sarpong was convinced that there was light at the end of the tunnel, and it seemed to be getting brighter when he made a visit to the USA and Canada in 2000 and met Canadian ethnomusicologist Carmelle Bégin at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. When she came to Ghana, she took the opportunity in her turn to visit the Museum, saw its potential, and agreed to be a member of the International Advisory Board that was being set up.

Through her, the Museum was introduced to the Daniel Langlois Foundation. Sarpong developed a funding proposal, that was one of 202 applications accepted in July 2002 by the Foundation. It survived in-house weeding to join 102 other projects submitted to the Foundation's international jury. And it ended up among the 18 projects to receive funding, "the only one from Africa."

Langlois Foundation Program Officer Dominique Fontaine went to Ghana in December 2002 to plan the launch, then came home and dove into the preparations. "It was very intense. We had a long list of specialized equipment to buy from companies in Ottawa and different cities in the U.S. that would clean up and digitize the sound of the old records — and also the artwork on the old labels and sleeves and jackets, because this is among the best visual expressions to have survived from the heyday of this popular culture. It was a huge job of logistical coordination to ship all this precision equipment so that it arrived intact at the right times to be trucked safely to the Museum, which is three hours drive from the airport in Accra, while Gilles St. Laurent, who does audio conservation for the National Library of Canada, could be there to install it and to train Kwame Sarpong —and some students who are doing their internship with him, and a Ghanaian audio technician — in its use. This is the first time that the Foundation has had to be involved in such a manner, and there was a lot of stress, and it required a lot of faith, but it was done properly, and the project is rolling.

Once the project is finished, it will be accessible to everyone around the world. The



Museum will send us on CD the music and the images and the database to manage the collection — musician bios and discographies and copyrights. The website we make and upload from our servers will include everything for which the rights can be obtained, and samples of the rest. We are hosting, partly because unstable power is a constant in their lives, and partly because of our superior security.

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"I think the jury really liked the project because the application was well-written, with clearly structured objectives, detailed history, budget breakdowns, and specifics about the people. It involved a priority region, it included a university, it had ambition and a public dimension — it relates to the cultural heritage of everybody — and good results could open up great possibilities."

Gagnon expands on this last point: "In Ghana the Ministry of Culture never really looked at this little museum seriously. But announce that there's a private foundation from Canada willing to invest \$51,000 in it — not a big amount, but it counts — and they are having a closer look. Especially in the Third World, we can really have an impact on how these organizations are then able — in their own country, and also beyond it — to knock at some other doors. And we hope that eventually others will join with us or decide to do similar things."

Fontaine says "I have worked for museums, for not-for-profit organizations, for organizations with no money, for independent projects. This place encourages all of these interests. And it is avant-garde. It's new ideas, new ways of seeing, new ways of combining art, science and technology. That's why I love working here. They take risks!"

Concludes Gagnon, "the way we approach things at the Langlois Foundation is itself significant. By and large big foundations support big culture, usually by giving a non-profit organization a cheque with no strings attached. Our approach is a lot more grassroots, and a lot more risky — sometimes very controversial." But the outcomes can be enormously rewarding for all involved.

**For more information visit the Foundation
Web Site: www.fondation-langlois.org**