

Exploring Liberia's Musical History

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During the summer of 2008 my research took me back to Liberia for a second time. I had first visited Liberia during the summer of 2005, a trip that was in part funded by a travel grant from UF Student Government. It was extremely difficult finding funding for research in Liberia since the country was on the State Department's travel warning list, and there was no Fulbright Fellowship program operational at the time. Fortunately, I had taken a teaching position at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and was able to finance my trips with my salary.

My dissertation topic focuses on writing a history of Liberian popular music from roughly 1945 to 1990. I am focusing on the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, so most of my time in the country was spent searching for and interviewing musicians and cultural troupe members that were active during that time period. I also spent time at the National Archives (such as they are) and interviewing people at various radio stations, and at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. I visited a conference hosted by the Liberian musicians union, and was interviewed myself on the UNMIL radio station (the UN Peacekeeping Force in Liberia), and for a local television station.

One of the biggest challenges was that most physical evidence was destroyed during the Liberian civil war, which lasted from 1989-1997, with a second phase of fighting from 2000-2003. The massive



countrywide destruction meant that I had to rely on oral histories (over 120 interviews), and copies of Liberian newspapers that were saved on microfilm at the US Library of Congress. For copies of the actual recordings I had to rely on finding items on cassette in the Waterside market, or on vinyl and CD on E-bay. Essentially I am attempting to document the alternative multicultural vision that these Liberian musicians, singers and cultural performers were putting forth before being overwhelmed in the conflagration of the civil war in which

estimated 250,000 lives.

Additionally, this is the first time anyone has attempted to write a history of Liberian popular music, since the older generation of ethnomusicologists viewed any non-traditional music as somehow "impure." It is an exciting and challenging project that has also taken me to Liberian communities all across the US, and a subsequent article that has come from the project on the dance dramas of the Liberian National Cultural Troupe has been used to inform a new generation of young people this past summer at a "Liberian culture camp" in Philadelphia sponsored by the Philadelphia Folklore Project.

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