

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ABSTRACT

Among African countries where hip hop has a strong presence, Ghana is an interesting case study in the relationship between hip hop and afrobeats. Ghana has benefitted from the popularity of afrobeats, with several Ghanaian artists releasing collaborations with international artists. Many Ghanaian hip hop artists have also been helped by the relationship between Ghana and the African diaspora and leveraged that relationship into a successful rap career. An examination of hip hop in Ghana requires a consideration of genre classification in a music scene where hip hop and afrobeats often intersect. It also requires a consideration of the historical relationship between Ghana and the African diaspora, which has been strengthened in the wake of the 2019 Year of Return. Ghana's relationship to the African diaspora has influenced the development of music genres in the country. The arrival of hip hop in Ghana especially influenced the development of hiplife and then afrobeats. Ghanaian hip hop maintains its own identity, while at the same time sharing an identity with hiplife and afrobeats. Ghana is not the only country where hip hop and pop music share a close relationship, but one cannot study Ghanaian hip hop without also studying Ghanaian hiplife or afrobeats. Because of the close relationship between hip hop, hiplife and afrobeats, this contribution includes a discussion of the latter two, along with a discussion of the roles that genres play, both from a music standpoint and from a marketing standpoint.

Hip hop in Ghana exists alongside and intersects with other popular music genres, namely hiplife and afrobeats. Ghanaian hip hop has influenced and been influenced by these other genres. While hip hop in Ghana has had its own distinct identity, at times its identity has been merged with hiplife and afrobeats. Because of the close relationship between hip hop, hiplife and

KEYWORDS

afrobeats
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NOTABLE DIASPORAN GHANAIAN ARTISTS

- Abra Cadabra
- Blitz the Ambassador Bazawule
- Dizzee Rascal
- FOKN Bois: M3nsa and Wanlov the Kubolor
- M.anifest
- Stormzy
- Sway
- Tinchy Stryder

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afrobeats, an overview of hip hop in Ghana also requires some discussion of hiplife and afrobeats. The relationship between hip hop, hiplife, afrobeats and other genres is complicated, and their histories are intertwined. It is perhaps because of the relationship with these other genres that we find hip hop artists in Ghana experimenting a lot and creating a space for artists with very diverse styles.

It is important to begin with the role that the movement of African peoples and their music played in Ghana's relationship with hip hop. The relationship between Ghana and the African diaspora is a long one, and it plays an important role in the development of music, including hip hop, in the country. This relationship is due in large part to Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, who was a giant figure in the global movement for African unity and Pan Africanism. Nkrumah had lived in both the United States and England and saw Ghana as playing a role in bringing the diaspora and the continent together. The migration of African Americans to Ghana after the country's independence in 1957 is due in large part to Nkrumah's welcoming of those in the diaspora to come and help build a newly independent Ghana (Taylor 2019). During the 1970s and 1980s, many Ghanaians were migrating to England (Schans et al. 2018). These migrants, many of whom took their music with them, helped to create the communities that would also contribute to the development of hip hop in Ghana (Burns 2009). After 1980 we see large numbers of African migrants, including Ghanaians, coming to the United States (Burns 2009; Schans et al. 2018). Ghana remains an important destination for African Americans settling in Africa. The 2019 Year of Return saw over 1 million tourists visit Ghana, which was an increase in over 200,000 from 2018 (BBC News; Tetteh 2020). In addition, the country has sent its citizens to study and live all over the world, including large communities of Ghanaians in the United States and the United Kingdom. This has all impacted the country's rich music scene, including a hip hop community that is varied in its sound and style. Ghana's contemporary musical journey is tied to its relationship with the diaspora, as well as political events within Ghana.

Hip hop arrived in Ghana in the early 1980s (Osumare 2012; Shipley 2013). Like in many countries, hip hop was first adopted by middle-class youth and youth with ties to friends and family abroad. Often, Ghanaians who had family in the United States, especially in New York City, were able to get access to American hip hop music and magazines. The music was a popular import from the United States. The youth that formed groups and began to rap, came from predominantly wealthier families where they had access to much-needed resources, contacts and networks.

After 1991, buoyed by elections and a new constitution, Ghana saw the emergence of a number of private radio stations (Shipley 2013). This provided an opportunity for young artists who would have an outlet for their music. Those radio stations needed local music and the artists needed the stations to distribute their music.

In the 1990s, hip hop grew in popularity and rap artists such as Reggie Rockstone and Kwaku-T and Bayku of Talking Drums introduced a new genre, hiplife. Prominent hiplife artists included Tic Tac, Vision in Progress (VIP), Obrafour, Mzbel and Castro. Hiplife was initially thought to be Ghanaian hip hop performed over highlife beats (Osumare 2012). It has traditionally been sung with lyrics performed in local languages, namely Twi, Ewe, Ga and Hausa.

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The 2000s brought another hybrid style of music and dance, azonto, to the mainstream. Azonto is a genre of dance music that originated in Ghana and has gained popularity across Africa and abroad with the 2011 song 'Azonto' by Fuse ODG. Rap artists have also used azonto beats to create popular club and dance tracks, like Sarkodie's 2011 song 'U Go Kill Me'.

In the early 2000s, Ghanaian and Nigerian pop music converged in the London music scene. In 2011, Ghanaian club DJ and promoter DJ Abrantee coined the term afrobeats to refer to the mix of Ghanaian (including hiplife) and Nigerian popular music that was growing in popularity (Adu-Gilmore 2016; Hancox 2012). As an umbrella term, afrobeats includes hiplife, juju music, and even South African house. Many hiplife artists, like Sarkodie, are now categorized as afrobeats artists, and the terms afrobeats and hiplife are often used interchangeably. Internationally, hiplife has been assigned an afrobeats identity. In this sense, afrobeats is seen by some to be an evolution of hiplife and other genres (Starling 2015). Given the hip hop influence on both afrobeats and hiplife, it is not surprising that both genres have also been labelled 'African hip hop'. However, there are hip hop artists in Ghana (and Nigeria) that are not hiplife or afrobeats artists. In a study of Ghanaian hip hop, it becomes important distinguish between hip hop and hiplife/afrobeats.

Artists and scholars debated the definition of hiplife for years. Hiplife has been called Ghanaian hip hop, rap done in vernacular languages, Ghanaian techno-pop and a hybrid genre (Adu-Gilmore 2016; Dzitrie and Agbemava 2022; Osumare 2012; Shipley 2013). Hiplife, and Ghanaian afrobeats, are genres of Ghanaian music that blend hip hop, reggae and other sounds. Initially hiplife distinguished itself because artists performed in local languages, but later hiplife artists also performed in English.

The process of genre classification has not always been based on an analysis of distinctions between the music itself. Genre classification have been heavily influenced by marketing strategies, and the promotion of industry-based genres, which are dictated by profit maximization (Lena and Peterson 2008; Lena 2012). Industry labels and producers are often looking to brand a style that will have mass appeal (Lena 2012). 'Afrobeats' created a term that made it easy for the international market. It is also likely that part of the marketing strategy of many afrobeats producers entering the US market was to market afrobeats as African hip hop. The twelve-episode, Netflix docuseries *Afrobeats: The Backstory* (2021) is a detailed history of the rise of afrobeats. The docuseries highlights the works of Ghanaian and Nigerian artists, and credit Ghana as being the foundation of *Afrobeats* (2021). It also discusses the use of the 'hip hop' label to bring afrobeats to the American market (*Afrobeats: The Backstory* 2021).

There are sonic differences between many hiplife/afrobeats songs and hip hop songs. Most hiplife/afrobeats artists sing and do not rap their lyrics. While rap artists have experimented with melody in their rap styles, singing is about melody. Singing is about creating a melody with your voice and staying in tune or singing in the correct notes/keys (Adu-Gilmore 2016; Bradley 2017). Rapping is about the beat; it is about rapping to a given beat or creating a beat pattern with the rhymes. Hiplife/afrobeats songs that are sung (i.e., are not rap songs) contain fewer words because singing elongates the words. This does not work for rap, which typically requires more words to fill a rap bar/line (Bradley 2017). Rap songs contain more words, but more importantly, they follow specific rhyme patterns.

Unlike in some other countries, Ghanaian emcees frequently move between genres performing hiplife, azonto or afrobeats tracks. They often make decisions based on financial benefits and with little impact on their credibility as serious emcees. In other countries, like Senegal and South Africa, hip hop heads and artists have been integral in the development of hip hop culture, knowledge and music. In many of these countries, there is criticism of hip hop artists that are judged to be too pop or too commercial. There is also criticism of pop artists (afrobeats) who are labelled hip hop. Labelling hiplife or afrobeats as hip hop effectively appropriates hip hop's identity in Ghana (and Nigeria), impacting hip hop artists in those countries.

An artist's level of hip hop authenticity is subjective. The question of authenticity stems from hip hop's early history as a counterculture that saw commodification as a threat to authentic representation and creativity (Clark 2018; Cobb 2008; Diallo 2022). The history of hip hop's evolution in Ghana and the influence of hiplife, and later afrobeats, likely impacted the development of a large hip hop community (emcees, graffiti artists and breakers) at the scale of the hip hop communities in other African capital and major cities such as Dakar, Kampala, Nairobi, Cape Town, Johannesburg. In other cities, open mic nights, hip hop festivals, graffiti crews, hip hop dance and/or hip hop education/workshops are integral parts of the hip hop culture.

Many emcees, such as Reggie Rockstone, Kwaku-T, Sarkodie, Edem, Kwaw Kese and Yaa Pono, have produced records that move between hip hop, hiplife, azonto and afrobeats, blurring the lines between the various genres. For example, Sarkodie, one of Ghana's most high-profile emcees, raps over hip hop, hiplife and azonto beats. His song 'U Go Kill Me' is a popular azonto track that features Sarkodie's signature fast-paced rap style. Meanwhile, Sarkodie also blends hip hop and hiplife tracks on his albums.

Ghanaian emcees showcase their diversity in widely different sounds, styles, flows and personas. For example, Edem and Keeny Ice are among the few artists to rap in Ewe and represent the south-eastern Volta region. Both artists have released hiplife/afrobeats tracks. Both artists have also released songs that focus on their hip hop lyrics such as Edem's 'You Dey Kraze' and 'The One', and Keeny Ice's 'Made in Aflao' and 'Living Dead'. Wanlov the Kubolor, by contrast, in many ways redefines what it means to be a Ghanaian emcee. His eclectic look, style of singing, beat selections, song topics and use of Pidgin English distinguish him from most local emcees. His 'folk' song 'Human Being' departs in style from most Ghanaian musicians while his songs 'Sometimes' and 'Brkn Lngwjl', with fellow Ghanaian emcee M3nsa, display his hip hop lyricism. Wanlov the Kubolor's aesthetics are also outside of the box created by mainstream hiplife or hip hop artists. The self-proclaimed African Gypsy has his hair in locs, and usually wears a wrapper, no shoes, and a variety of African print tops and T-shirts. The controversial artist often provokes discussions about religion, sexuality and politics through several of his projects, including two musical films, *Coz ov Moni* and *Coz ov Moni 2*, and albums. In a country where homosexuality is illegal, Wanlov the Kubolor is one of the few hip hop artists anywhere to be vocal and take an activist stance on LGBTQ+ rights.

There are also Ghanaian emcees whose music is more consistently grounded in hip hop in terms of lyricism, style and beats. These Ghanaian artists rap in English as well as Pidgin English, Twi, Ewe and other languages spoken in Ghana, and they do so over hip hop beats and African beats. Artists like Eno Barony, J-Town and C-Real do collaborations with various artists but their own verses are usually rap verses. For example, Eno Barony's hiplife/

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afrobeats song 'God Is a Woman' is a collaboration with Ghanaian soul singer Efyra, while her song 'Rap Goddess' is a hip hop track. On both tracks Eno Barony's verses are rap verses.

Perhaps one of the most well-known Ghanaian emcees is M.anifest. M.anifest lived in the United States for several years before permanently returning to Ghana after 2012. M.anifest's sound has changed since he returned to Ghana: He uses more African beats, he has used more Twi and Pidgin English in his rhymes, and he does more collaborations with hiplife/afrobeats artists. In 2016 a beef between M.anifest and Sarkodie was started with the release of the diss track 'God emcee' by M.anifest. The two-year beef between these two prominent emcees was quintessentially hip hop, and in the tradition of historic hip hop beefs such as the Jay Z/Nas beef. There were parallels between the M.anifest/Sarkodie beef and the Kanye West/50 Cent beef. In both situations, class and street authenticity became part of the conversation. Both Kanye West and M.anifest comes from a middle-class backgrounds and both are the children of academics. Both 50 Cent and Sarkodie come from more working-class backgrounds and often used their street or hood legitimacy to mock their opponent.

The presence of artists like Eno Barony, J-Town, C-Real and M.anifest helps us distinguish between hiplife/afrobeats and hip hop in Ghana. The beef between M.anifest and Sarkodie further differentiated hip hop from hiplife/afrobeats in Ghana. Ghanaian hip hop artists who are not also hiplife/afrobeats artists sometimes maintain distinct identities as hip hop artists that are connected to international hip hop communities.

Ghanian hip hop's separate identity was further established with the arrival of drill music. In the 2010s drill arrives in Ghana via England and the United States, and becomes popular in Ghana's second largest city, Kumasi, which artists dubbed 'Kumerica' (Audiomack 2022; Boateng 2020). In the 2022 documentary *This Is Kumerica*, drill artists discuss the impact of hip hop and intentionally connecting their drill music (known as 'asakaa') to hip hop and drill culture in America. Like in the United States, many of the young artists performing drill in Ghana are using a street slang that speaks to other youth. In Ghana, artists perform in Twi, with some major artists like Yaw Tog, Kwaku DMC and Jay Bahd doing collaborations with international artists. Yaw Tog's 2021 remix of his song 'Sore' with British-Ghanaian artist Stormzy was a mainstream success, receiving more than twice the views on YouTube as any video released by more established Ghanaian hip hop/hiplife artists like Sarkodie or afrobeats artists like Shatta Wale.

Finally, there are many Ghanaian emcees that are based outside of Ghana, either full-time or part-time, splitting much of their time between Ghana and the United States or the United Kingdom. Artists like Blitz the Ambassador and M3nsa all rap primarily in English and all have styles that reflect both their upbringing in Ghana and their experiences outside of Ghana. Blitz the Ambassador, who is based in New York City, combines jazz instrumentals and West African rhythms in his music. He raps primarily in English and has collaborated with Ghanaian artists as well as artists from the United States, Europe and Latin America. Blitz the Ambassador's work has led to the release of an independent film (*The Burial of Kodjo* 2018), a position as a creative director on Beyonce's *Black Is King* (2020) project, the release of a novel (*The Scent of Burnt Flowers* 2022), and the position as director of *The Color Purple* (2023) film.

M3nsa, who is based in London and often performs with Wanlov the Kubolor as one half of FOKN Bois, has tracks that mix genres with different

styles of rapping and singing. Artists like Blitz the Ambassador, M.anifest, Wanlov the Kubolor, and M3nsa were introduced to hip hop during secondary school in Ghana. Their music represents hip hop sounds, as well as sounds from various Ghanaian musical influences.

It should be said that the visibility of female emcees in Ghana is very low, and most of the emcees in Ghana are men. Some women can be seen in hiplife, but they remain largely invisible in hip hop. This is not completely unique to other hip hop scenes, where the presence of female emcees is always dwarfed by that of male emcees.

The rise of hip hop in Ghana was impacted by the country's ties to the African diaspora and important events in the country's history. A lot would shape the direction of Ghanaian hip hop and the emergence of hiplife, azonto and afrobeats. At times the differences between the genres can be confusing, but there are differences. Ghanaian hiplife is not synonymous with Ghanaian hip hop. While many hip hop artists also perform hiplife/afrobeats music, there are also several artists who only perform hiplife/afrobeats music or only perform hip hop.

Genre classification that relies more on marketing strategies than what makes a genre distinctive in structure and sound will often be contested. The popularity of hiplife/afrobeats has impacted efforts of Ghanaian (and Nigerian) hip hop artists to connect with international hip hop markets. In US hip hop platforms like *The Source*, Africa is represented far more by hiplife/afrobeats artists than by emcees.

The hip hop scene in Accra (and Kumasi) is unique and has developed in ways that are different from many other hip hop scenes in Africa. There will not likely be any definitive resolution to the debates around hiplife's connection to hip hop. What does this mean for the idea that hiplife is Ghanaian hip hop? It seems likely that after hip hop comes to Ghana in the 1980s, the music would ultimately take different, though sometimes parallel, paths. One would lead to hiplife and then afrobeats. The other would see hip hop keeping identity in which several Ghanaian hip hop artists saw themselves as part of a global hip hop culture and community. Additionally, it is perhaps because of the influence of hiplife and afrobeats that there is so much diversity in Ghana's hip hop. Ghana's hip hop scene makes room for artists to experiment with beats, rhythms, language, flow and aesthetics. While the boom-bap sound and American hip hop aesthetic can be found in Ghanaian hip hop, so can other diaspora and African styles. The continued back and forth between Ghana and the diaspora, especially since the 2019 Year of Return, also means a continued exchange and evolution of (hip hop) music between Ghana and the diaspora.

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