

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

## Editors

Professor Mary Dzansi-McPalm, PhD  
Professor C.W.K. Mireku, PhD  
Professor Eric Akrofi, PhD

Patrique deGraft - Yankson, PhD  
Ebenezer Acquah, PhD  
Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel, PhD

<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 4 Issue 1

March 31, 2020

## From Students' Pop Band to a Trans-African International Band: A Historical Case Study of Ghana Bigshots Band

Mark Millas Coffie  
Department of Music Education  
University of Education, Winneba, Ghana  
markmillas@gmail.com

**Citation:** Coffie, M. M. (2020). From students' pop band to a trans-african international band: A historical case study of Ghana Bigshots Band. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 4(1), 37 - 60.

### Abstract



The purpose of this study was to construct a concise historical narrative of the formation, development, survival and internationalisation of the Ghana Bigshots Band. It is quite unusual for a pop band to emerge from a Ghanaian university and still survive after school, considering both the academic and industry challenges. The Ghana Bigshots Band, arguably Ghana's first modern 'Afro-fusion' band emerged from a university and came to international prominence. The band has broken the myth of the 'ivory tower', where the academia disassociates itself from the realities of the society. Employing interview and documentary research for data collection, the paper consequently unravels that the transition from students' pop band to a trans-African international band was capital intensive. However, the consistency of maintaining an African identity in the band's compositions and the ideology of blending tradition and modernity accounted for its survival and internationalisation. This study, is,

therefore, recommended as a roadmap for student-musicians who wish to take their craft beyond the academic enclave.

**Keywords:** Afro-fusion, cover band, pop-chain, students band, survival, university

## Introduction

The proliferation of reality shows such as *Bands Alive*, *Cover Version*, *New Music* among others in Ghana over the past decade mushroomed youthful bands such as *Wind Afrique*, *Amen*, *Warriors*, *BIB*, *Trinity*, *Liberty*, *Big Eight*, *Royal Echos*, *Windy Band* among others. These reality shows audition and select talented youthful popular bands across the country to compete for either a cash prize, sound equipment or a performance tour abroad. Students' popular bands such as *Bigshot* and *3X3* from the University of Ghana (UG), *Staff* and *Clef* from the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), *Afringo* from the University of Cape Coast (UCC), and *Eden Vibes* from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) also emerged strongly.

A preliminary investigation on the students' bands from UG, UEW, UCC and KNUST who participated in the past reality shows revealed three challenges. Firstly, the financial burden since the bands had to transport themselves 'to and from' the venue in addition to feeding. Secondly, the bands, at the time of participating in reality shows did not have any strategic plan to survive after the competition. This, also, suggests that they were only interested in the prize package; hence, life after the competition was left at the *mercy of chance*. Thirdly, because the reality shows run for several weeks, they tend to put a strain on the academic work of the student-musicians.

Notwithstanding the above challenges, the students' bands brought alive the memories of the student 'pop-chain' era of the 1970s; and also made a strong statement to refute the perception that seems to suggest that *live band music* is one of the preserves of the *school dropouts*, *vagabonds* and *riff-raffs*. The above perception was gradually becoming axiomatic in Ghanaian parlance, as Ghanaian popular music greats such as Jerry Hansen, A.B. Crentsil, Shasha Marley among others have recounted how they became outcast in their respective families and society just because they were engaged in live band music performance (Marfo, 2016).

Presently, all the named bands have been disbanded except the *Bigshot*. Despite the challenges outlined earlier, the Bigshot Band has successfully transitioned from students' popular band to a trans-African international band. It is the purpose of this study to examine the chronology of events that culminated in the formation, development, survival and internationalisation of the Ghana Bigshots Band.

## Literature Review

Studies on bands mostly tend to focus on marching, winds and brass bands. Driscoll (2012), Baker (2015), Cumberledge (2017), Clark (2019), McKenzie (2019) and Reagan (2019) are six of the many examples. These studies usually trace the origin and development of community and college marching bands, and also document their fast disappearing styles. Collins (1977) and Martin (1991) also traced the origin of African popular music forms such as West Africa's 'highlife' music and East Africa's 'beni' music; which they acknowledged the influence of Western regimental brass band music. In an attempt to outline the developmental stages of Ghanaian popular music,

Collins (2005) broadly divided the stages into three; which are: (the 1880s to 1940s) as the first phase. This phase emerged music forms such as *adaha*, *konkoma*, *dance orchestra* and *palmwine music*. The second phase, which is (the 1940s to late 1970s) also emerged the guitar band and dance band highlife music, while the third phase, which is (1970s to 1990s) also emerged the Afro-fusion music forms such as Afro-jazz, Afrobeat, Afro-rock and Afro-funk. According to Collins, Ghanaian musicians became more Afro-centric, which also inspired the artistic creation of Afro-fusion forms. It is worth noting that while the second phase marks the rise and decline of both guitar and dance band music, the third phase also emerged students popular (pop) bands. The student pop bands, who were mostly secondary school bands participated in a competition called *Pop-Chain*. The pop-chain programme brought secondary school bands to compete for the bragging rights as to which school has the best band with regard to performance. Interestingly, the pop-chain era produced some of Ghana's *high profile* popular musicians such as Ben Brako, Shasha Marley, Bessa Simons, Alfred Kari Bannerman, Kiki Gyan among others. In as much as students' pop bands mushroomed during the third phase, it was also the period where Ghana experienced economic collapse and political instability, which also resulted in a two-and-a-half-year night curfew (Collins, 2001). The aftermath effect of the above experience brought night-time entertainment (live band music performance) to a halt and led to the migration of several Ghanaian popular musicians to foreign countries such as Nigeria, UK, USA, Germany among others. This, however, created a knowledge lacuna between the old and young generations of musicians with regard to live band music performance. Despite the above knowledge lacuna, students' pop band from the universities in Ghana such as the University of Ghana, University of Education, Winneba and the University of Cape Coast have also been in existence for quite some time. These university pop bands are usually run as an academic exercise, where student-musicians perform various popular music forms at functions within the university community for grades. It is important to note that the past decade also mushroomed more university pop bands as a result of the rise in

band reality shows in Ghana. That notwithstanding, recent studies on Ghanaian bands usually focus on the military and police regimental bands, brass bands, neotraditional bands, and the conventional highlife guitar and dance bands. The above statement is evident in the works of Collins (1994, 2016), Ebonyi (2015), Amenyo (2010), Kudonu (2012), Hukportie (2014), Aidoo (2014), Wuaku (2015), Marfo (2016) and Maclean (2018). However, a study of Ghanaian bands in the context of modern Afro-fusion bands is still a desideratum in Ghanaian academia.

It is quite unusual for a pop band to emerge from a Ghanaian university and still survive after school, considering both the academic and industry challenges. The Ghana Bigshots Band, arguably Ghana's first modern 'Afro-fusion' band emerged from a university and came to international prominence. The band has broken the myth of the 'ivory tower', where the academia disassociates itself from the realities of the society. It is in light of this that unravelling the chronology of events that culminated in the formation, development, survival and internationalisation of the Ghana Bigshots Band, is, indeed, in the right direction. Modern, for this study, is referred to the period between 2000 to present. Also, notice that the phrase popular band is used interchangeably with a pop band.

## **Methodology**

A case study research design was employed. Gall et al. (2007) defined case study research as "the in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon in its real-life context that reflects the perspectives of the participant involved in the phenomenon" (p. 447). The case study research design was appropriate for the objectives of this study, which required a close examination of the Ghana Bigshots Band. Data for this study was collected through interview and documentary research. To get the insight into the events leading to the formation of the band, key members (those who have survived since the inception of the band) and past members were sampled purposively for an interview as a first step. Secondly, documentary research (newspaper publication, audio and video recordings) of the band were reviewed to uncover its developmental processes. Finally, key members were interviewed to ascertain the factors that accounted for the band's survival and internationalisation. Notice that the band's development also came with a change in the name such as *Bigshot*, *Bigshots* and eventually, *Ghana Bigshots*.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The formation of the Bigshot Band*

In February 2008, two University of Ghana students, *Sandra Owusu Afriyie* and *Kofi Kudonu*, and two graduates, *Prophet Fish* and *Eric Sunu Doe* came together to form a dynamic youthful pop band called *Bigshot* with nine student-musicians. While Fish and Eric were National Service Persons, Sandra and Kofi were third and final year students respectively. The above-named personalities eventually became members of the Management Board of the band. The band started as a student pop band at the Department of Music, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana. Not surprisingly, talented musicians were recruited from various fields of academic studies and until now the band mainly consists of university graduates who have made 'live band' music their profession. The name "Bigshot" was carved from a quotation by an America poet, Christopher Morley: "Big shots are only little shots that keep shooting". This quote, however, became one of the fundamental principles on which the band stands.

A historical account of the Bigshot Band will not be accurate without briefly talking about a sister group called 3X3. Before the formation and naming of the band, both Bigshot and 3X3 members used to be under the umbrella name 'Pop Band'. The Pop Band was, and still is the recognised and accepted name in the University of Ghana. When the opportunity came for the band to participate in 'Bands Alive', a Television (TV) reality show, the management thought that using the name 'Pop Band' was not appropriate probably because any dance band could be a pop band hence the name 'Bigshot'. Also, the recruitment of talented musicians from the various fields of academic studies somehow augmented the size of the band. Unfortunately, each participating band could only present a nine-member band for the Bands Alive show. This, however, made it difficult for the management to select the best nine to represent the band; hence the decision to split the Pop Band into two. It should be noted that the management was quite biased in the split; the stronger group was named Bigshot while the quite strong group was named 3X3. It is of no surprise that the Bigshot became one of the outstanding bands during the audition process. 3X3, on the other hand, struggled to qualify.

Managing Bigshot and 3X3 during the show was capital intensive; so, immediately the TV Reality Show ended, the management merged the two bands as Bigshot. This decision by the management did not go down well with the members of 3X3; hence some of the members of 3X3 decided to quit the band. It should also be noted that only two members have survived from 2008 till now.

### ***The Developmental Phases of the Bigshot Band***

The development of the band as observed by the researcher can be considered in three phases; namely: *imitational*, *experimental* and *self-actualisation*.

#### ***The Imitational Phase (2008–late 2009)***

This is the developmental phase where the band tends to rehearse and perform only cover versions of existing compositions and also employs only Western instruments such as drum set, keyboards, guitar, bass, and horns. The band was initially formed to participate in a TV reality show, Bands Alive on one of the TV stations in Ghana (TV3). This programme played a vital role in the development of the band since the show employed the hub of popular band performance repertory and style.

#### ***Bands Alive Experience***

Fifty-two pop bands across Ghana were auditioned for the 'Bands Alive' reality show on Ghana's TV3 Station. Out of the fifty-two (52), twelve (12) were selected for the reality show. Five of the selected twelve (12) were found outstanding in performance, and Bigshot was among the outstanding bands. Sadly, Bigshot became the second evictee of the reality show despite the band's outstanding performance at the audition. However, the band left the show with the pride of being the first band to be adjudged 'Best Performance' on performance night. The band was also recognised distinctively as the only band to have performed a composed theme song for the reality show. On the night of eviction, the band gave a rendition of Elton John's *Sacrifice*, which was well-received by the audience. The late Mac Tontoh, a renowned trumpeter of *Osibisa* fame, and also a judge of the show, commenting on the band's performance, remarked: "...I can see you (Bigshot) in Las Vegas..." This remark by the late Mac Tontoh later became a popular phrase among the band members up till date. It also shows and explains how promising the band was right from its embryonic stage in 2008. See figure 1.



Figure 1. Snapshot from 2008 Bands Alive Video Bigshot Band at Bands Alive Reality Show, TV3, Accra.

Not long after the reality show, Sandra Owusu Afriyie, a Management member, unfortunately requested to be excused from the band. This was quite unexpected, as she doubles as a singer and also being the person to have proposed the idea of forming the band for the reality show. According to Sandra, her fiancée at the time was not comfortable with her association with the guys in the band; hence the decision to quit (S. Owusu Afriyie, personal communication, September 10, 2018).

In August 2008, the Management Board of the band came out with a five-year development plan. The plan was to keep the student-musicians together for the five years (2008–2013); since most of the band members at the time were in their first year. It was also envisaged that by the end of the five years, the students would have become graduates to play the band professionally devoid of academic pressure, which was a major challenge to commercialising the band.

### ***The Experimental Phase (late 2009–2011)***

This phase of the band’s development was the time the band started playing its compositions and also experimenting with African traditional instruments such as the *gyile* (xylophone), *atenteben* (bamboo flute), *nyonyo* (metal bell), *shakashaka* (rattle), *gome* (square boxlike wooden framed drum), *donno* (hourglass drum), and *tsonyshi* (traditional palm drum) to create an identity as an African band. The passion and struggle of creating an identity for the band by performing its original compositions in this era coexisted with the necessity of performing cover versions for financial survival. Below are the traditional instruments as indicated in Figure 2 and 3.



Figure 2: Bigshot Band at the Second Edition of the New Music Ghana Regional Competition at Alliance Française.  
 (Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2010).



Figure 3: Alex and Fish playing the Atenteben and the Gyile respectively. The Atenteben and the Gyile give interesting traditional appeal to the entire composition  
 (Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2010)

In September 2009, the band embarked on a recording project at *Rhythm Africa Studio* in Ashongman Estate. However, due to financial constraint, the project was discontinued. By the time the band was able to raise funds to continue the project, the studio engineer was unwilling to mix the songs without any apparent reason. After some time, some of the songs were re-arranged and sounded far better than what was recorded at the studio. This re-arrangements of the songs led to the abandonment of the project.



On December 11, 2009, the band was invited to perform at the album launch of Ghana's highlife music legend, Ebo Taylor. This invitation also allowed the band to perform with some 'high-profile' musicians in Ghana such as Pat Thomas, Gyedu Blay-Ambolley and Lee Dodou as a carpet band (host band). Commendations from the guests, industry players, and the legendary Ebo Taylor after the programme, coupled with brief newspaper reviews on the band's performance, did a lot of good. This, however, challenged and motivated the band to strive to get more recognition through excellent stage performances. Below are some newspaper reviews of the band's performance.

In reference to the launch of Ebo Taylor's Bonze Konkoma Band and album (Koulibaly, 2009, p. 46) wrote: "...Guest artists at the band and album launch are saxophonist, Ray Allen, trumpeter Osei Tutu, and the Bigshot Band from the University of Ghana". In reference to the album launch of *Ebo Taylor's Bonze Konkoma Band* (Koulibaly, 2010, p. 5) wrote:

... Pat Thomas had, before the Bonze Konkoma came on, performed his popular *Sika Ye Mogya* (money is blood) with the intrepid Big Shot band from the University of Ghana. Big Shot is an exciting collection of young players of whom more should be heard of in the coming months.

### ***New Music Ghana experience***

In April 2010, another opportunity came for the Bigshot Band to participate in the second edition of another reality show called 'New Music Ghana'; however, this was not a television-based programme as compared to 'Bands Alive'. According to the bandleader, Ransford Acquah, the band lost interest in participating in reality shows after the band's eviction from Bands Alive. The bandleader was of the view that reality shows that are adjudicated by the public via texting (SMS) are usually not fair and also the best groups or artists are usually evicted before the grand finale (R. Acquah, personal communication, March 1, 2018). The Bigshot Band became interested in participating in the 'New Music Ghana Festival' probably because it was in line with its ideals as compared to *Bands Alive*. Comparing 'New Music Ghana' to 'Bands Alive' reality shows, It is worth noting that while the 'New Music Ghana' did not only aim at encouraging originality and creativity among young musicians but also promoted the use of traditional African instruments and gender, 'Bands Alive', encouraged and promoted cover versions of existing compositions. See figure 4.



Figure 4: *Fish leading the band with the Gyile at the Second Edition of New Music Ghana Regional Competition at the Goethe-Institut, Accra.*  
(Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2010)

The second edition of the New Music Ghana reality show attracted other students' bands from the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). Out of about ten bands that participated in the competition, Bigshot won the third position at the end of the show. Even among the students' bands, Bigshot proved to be the best band because none of the students' bands, except Bigshot, was among the best three. See figure 5.



Figure 5: *Bigshot Band at the finals of the Second Edition of New Music Ghana Competition at Alliance Française, Accra.*  
(Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2010)

The band's splendid performance at the 'New Music Ghana' show attracted reviews from Ghana's number one entertainment newspaper, *Graphic Showbiz*.

In reference to the 2010 inter-regional contest of 'New Music Ghana' show (Owoo, 2010a, p. 5) wrote:

The bamboo plant has served as material for a variety of musical instruments, the most popular being the *atenteben*, but these members of the Bigshot Band recently decided to demonstrate another way of extracting music from the plant by rhythmically banging cut pieces on the floor...The Bigshot band is from the Music Department of the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana. It has qualified, alongside Royal Echoes and The Wings to represent the Greater Accra/Volta Regions in the grand finale of the 2010 New Music Ghana contest.

In reference to the 2010 inter-regional contest of New Music Ghana Festival (Owoo, 2010b, p. 4) wrote:

...Also comprising students and graduates of the Music Department, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Bigshot Band will showcase blend of diverse styles including the use of bamboo sticks that create wild rhythms when hit on the ground at specific angles.

In reference to the finals of the New Music Ghana 2010 contest (Owoo, 2010c, p. 22) wrote:

...Comprising past and current students, Bigshot mounted the stage with a dramatic fusion of rumba and highlife with inflexions of traditional Ghanaian rhythms alongside brilliant interpretations and communication with the audience.

In reference to the launch of Turkish Airlines in Ghana (Owoo, 2010d, p. 5) wrote:

...The seprewa expert is mostly known for solo expositions but he came on with a bigger sound, backed by the Bigshot band of the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon. He rendered his usual "akwaaba" (welcome) stuff and

stayed on for a few items before leaving the Bigshot band to carry on with its brand of catchy home-grown sounds.

Due to the band's exceptional stage performance in the 2010 edition of the New Music Ghana, the late Cephass Sackitey, the then Associate Director of *Alliance Française-Accra*, fell in love with the band. In 2011, he allowed the band to perform on two major shows at the Alliance Française (Launch of Arterial Network Africa, Accra Chapter in May & Fete de la Musique in June). See figure 6.



Figure 6: The three female backing vocalists/dancers performing at the launch of Arteria Network Ghana Chapter at Alliance Française, Accra. (Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2011)

### ***The self-actualisation phase (2012–present)***

This phase of the band's development was the time the band achieved its identity as an African band by employing the use of more African idioms and traditional instrumental resources such as the *atumpam*, (talking drum) and *pamplo* (bamboo sticks), as indicated in Figure 7.

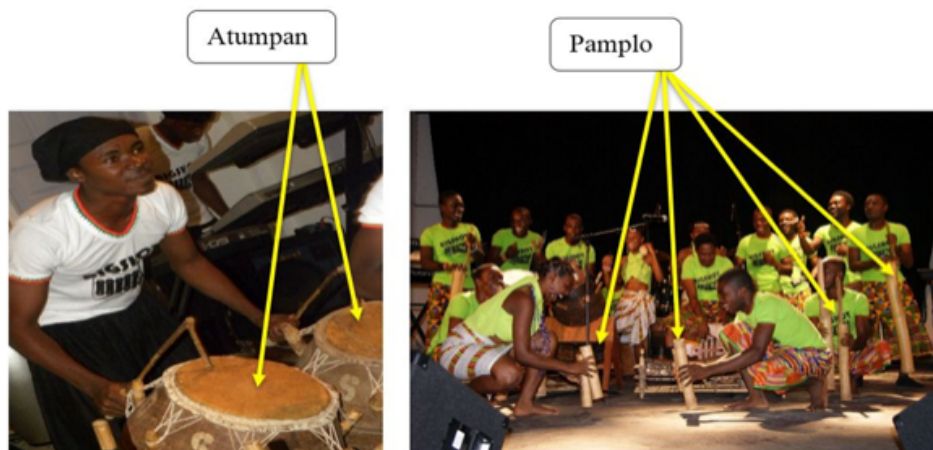


Figure 7: Alex and the entire band playing the Atumpan and the Pamplo respectively  
 (Image courtesy: John Owoo, 2010 & 2011 respectively)

The band in this phase strategically attracted performances, which required original compositions rather than cover versions. This, however, made the band perform little or no cover versions. It is of no surprise that when the band heard of the second edition of the 'New Music Ghana' show, the Management did not hesitate to allow the band to participate.

### **Challenges of the Band**

In 2012, the band did not do much performances due to financial constraints and academic pressures in the university. The decision to focus on original compositions rather than cover versions also made the band suffer financially. This is, because, most of the *gigs* (engagements) were cover version oriented, and it was also quite rewarding to be a 'cover' band at the time. This, notwithstanding, the band participated in the third edition of the 'New Music Ghana' show but could manage with the 'Second runner up' for the second time.

Bigshot Band, by being a students' band, was obliged to entertain the university community by playing more shows on campus, which were usually free as compared to external gigs, which bring some financial gains. The year 2012 was indeed the most challenging period in the history of the band. This was the time the Management was contemplating restructuring the band; whether to remain a *big band* as it were or reduce to a 'combo' due to financial constraint. Also, the unenthusiastic attitude of some band members towards rehearsals created the impression that there was nothing to play for. This, however, posed a big challenge to the band's composer, in that, the size of the

band forms an integral part of the composer's idea of composition and arrangements.

Another challenge was that the band felt threatened when the general public got to know that Bigshot at the time was a university band and it was made up of students and graduates. According to Kofi Kudonu, a Management Member and sound engineer, it is sometimes discouraging to see some industry players trying to disregard and discredit students-musicians just because they are students. Kofi Kodonu further argued that:

Ransford Acquah, the leader and bass player of the band enrolled to study music at the University of Ghana, Legon in 2006. Before that, he had performed with several high profile musicians in Ghana, some of whom had not received any form of music education yet were regarded as professionals. Would you say Ransford is no longer a professional because he is now a student? (K. Kudonu, personal communication, January 20, 2018).

With this perception about student-musicians, the band did not usually get what it deserved. Some potential clients also felt that with the kind of education the band members have received, they may seem to know their 'rights' and because of that, would not even dare to have any dealings with them.

### ***Recording the Band's Debut Album***

In the last quarter of the year 2012, Prophet Fish, a Management Board Member of the band met with Markus Coester, a German anthropologist whom he had known during his playing days with Ebo Taylor, Ghana's legendary highlife musician, in 2008. Fish gave Markus Coester a live video performance of the band to watch. This gesture by Fish became the turning point in the history of the band and also the actualisation of the band's dream of recording and releasing a debut album. The band was very keen on maintaining its identity as an African band even during its challenging times. The band's association with some diplomatic missions in Ghana such as the *Alliance Française* (French Cultural Centre), *Goethe-Institut*, (German Cultural Centre) and the Cultural Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy, served as a motivation for the members. This, however, gave the band some kind of hope for the future regarding its compositions and stage performances. In January 2013, a five-member Committee was strategically formed by the management, with the task of raising funds to subsidise the transportation cost of the band members to and from rehearsal since most of them had become graduates; and also for a possible live studio recording. Three months into the task, the Goethe-Institut, offered to support the band financially. In April 2013, the band received a grant

from the Goethe-Institut, under the directorship of Robert Sobotta. The purpose of the grant was to assist the band members to defray their transportation cost for six months intensive rehearsals towards the recording, production, and promotion of the band's debut album worldwide. Before that, the band had hosted a U.S. State Department-sponsored band *Matuto* on Africa tour at the University of Ghana and the residence of the US Ambassador respectively. Bigshot's collaboration with Matuto further cemented the rapport between the band and the Cultural Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy. In October 2013, the band successfully recorded a ten-track album at the 'Mastermix Studio' in Accra by *Sammy Helwani*, one of Ghana's prominent sound engineers, despite a failed attempt at 'H2 Studio' also in Accra.

### ***Rebranding the Bigshot Band***

The band mostly employed Western musical instruments and idioms during its first developmental phase, and also used a 'catchy-phrase' "comes like a gunshot" as its slogan. The management later changed this catchy-phrase to "redefining our music" after a deliberation. According to Kofi Kudonu, the phrase "comes like a gunshot" sounds quite radical and also suggests some kind of vandalism, which made some fans and well-wishers uncomfortable. However, the latter phrase "redefining our music" helped in reshaping the ideals of the band by introducing African traditional instruments in the instrumental resources of the band (K. Kudonu, personal communication, January 20, 2018). To make the latter phrase meaningful, the band explored children play songs, rhymes and rhythmic games as its creative resources. This is evident in the band's compositions where children play songs and rhythmic games are re-arranged in a big band vein. Samuel Boahen, the band's guitarist also raised a concern about a band in the U.S. using the name *Big Shot*. Even though the difference in the names is in the wording that is *Bigshot* (one-word) and *Big Shot* (two-word), they, however, sound the same (S. Boahen, personal communication, June 5, 2018). To avoid creating confusion in the ears of the band's potential fans and also any future litigation with the band in the U.S., the name of the band was altered before the release of its debut album. Markus Coester, a German scholar suggested *Bigshots* instead of *Bigshot*. Considering Markus' suggestion, Aristedes Hargo, the band's choreographer also recounted on some occasions where people have referred to the band as Bigshots either by pronunciation or writing, whether consciously or unconsciously (A. Hargoe, personal communication, October 15, 2018). In light of this, the management, by unanimous decision changed the band's name from *Bigshot* to *Ghana Bigshots Band*.

### ***The international breakthrough (Trans-African International)***

Before the launch of the band's debut album on September 12, 2014, the band toured Germany and the Netherlands from June 12 to July 8, 2014. The band, through a recommendation from Markus Coester, performed at the largest African Studies Conference in Bayreuth, Germany on June 13, 2014. After playing a couple of shows in Germany, the band then moved to Holland. See figures 8, 9, 10.



*Figure 8. Fish leading the Band in a live concert at the University of Mainz, Germany.*

*(Image Courtesy: Kofi Kudonu, 2014)*



*Figure 9: Ghana Bigshots Band live in concert at Yaam, Berlin. Germany.*

*(Image courtesy: Richie Queku Zap, 2014)*





Figure 10. Snapshot from 2014 Afrikafestival Hertme Video Ghana Bigshots Band live in concert at Hertme, Enschede, The Netherlands.

The band, on returning from the Europe tour launched its debut album, *Tu Na Me Nsa* (dig and let me scoop) in Ghana, which had already been released on the Popular African Music Record Label in Germany. The launch was on September 12, 2014, at the University of Ghana E.T.S. Drama Studio. The ten-track album is made up of songs such as *Don't spoil my name*, *Ewe Blues*, *Dance Music*, *African Music*, *Games*, *Duade Aguao*, *Kplotoo Nane*, *Tornyor*, *Awo Pɛ* and *Tu Na Me Nsa*, the title track. The band has done significant performances and collaborations with international bands and institutions since the launch of its album. See table 1.

Table 1.

*Collaborations and Performances*

Year	Event
2019	World Music Expo at the University of Ghana
2018	Yamaha E – Band Competition – Winner (Audience Choice Award)
2017	Collaboration with a Japanese Band, <i>Kiwi &amp; Papaya Mangoes</i> at the Alliance Française, Accra
2017	<i>Soundflames</i> , a workshop & performance program for student- musicians at the Music Department of University of Education, Winneba
2016	<i>Osangoi Music Festival</i> at the University of Ghana
2015	Collaboration with a U.S. Band, <i>Adam Larson Quartet</i> at the Goethe-Institut, Accra
2015	German Day Celebration at the German Ambassador’s Residence
2014	German Day Celebration at the German Ambassador’s Residence

***Ideologies (tradition & modernity)***

One of the foremost ambitions of the band right from its inception was to become an internationally acclaimed band in future. However, the band was not oblivious of the fact that it was not going to be an easy task. To achieve the above ambition, the band needed some ideals to help reshape its future. Eventually, the band, through research, decided to base its ideologies on some profound statements by some iconic Ghanaian music personalities. Below are some of the statements.

Ephraim Amu, a contemporary Ghanaian Art music composer, as cited by her daughter, Misonu Amu, “There is no harm in embracing good things of other cultures that have universal value but by all means, we should keep the best in our own” (Amu 1988, x). He, therefore, used Western-styled harmonies over rhythms in African cultures. Similarly, Daniel Amponsah (Koo Nimo), one of Ghana’s legendary folkloric guitarists, expressed a similar opinion on Ghanaian highlife music: “I feel we should move but be guided by what we have” (Collins, 1994, 127). He, therefore, married (fused) the traditional highlife guitar rhythms with Spanish and Latin American music (Afro-Spanish) style

with arpeggios. Dick Essilfie Bondzie of Essibons record label has been operating in the local Ghanaian music scene since the late 1950s. He also shared an interesting thought on Ghanaian music: “I have a strong belief that provided we can represent our music in a way palatable to non-Africans; we can market abroad and make a breakthrough. The right representation is the thing” (Collins, 1994, 259). Essibons believes Ghanaian music should be internationally appealing because that is the only way to market it globally since the Ghanaian market is relatively small and cannot produce that much. The analytical findings of the above statements reveal that the three renowned music personalities believe in *tradition* and also in *modernity*. Ever since the band achieved its identity as an African band, the phrase, ‘tradition and modernity’ has been its bedrock.

### ***Instrumental resources***

#### **African Traditional**

*Gyile* (Xylophone)

*Atenteben* (Local Bamboo Flute)

*Tsoyshi* (Local Palm Drums)

*Shakashaka* (Rattle)

*Donno* (Metal Bell)

Atumpan (Talking Drums)

Donno (Hour Glass Drum)

Pamplo (Bamboo Sticks)

#### **Western**

Drum Set

Keyboards

Guitar

Bass

Horns (Trumpet, Flugelhorn, Trombone)

### ***Creative resources***

As a trans-African international band, the Ghana Bigshots falls on the dance band highlife tradition as its creative source. The band also explores Ghanaian nursery rhymes, children play songs and rhythmic games resources. The band’s distinctiveness is the appropriation of African traditional instruments such as *gyile* (xylophone), *atenteben* (bamboo flute), *nyono* (metal bell), *shakashaka* (rattle), *atumpan* (talking drum), *donno* (hour glass drum) *pamplo* (bamboo sticks) and *tsoyshi* (traditional palm drums) into its compositions. There is an equal blend of African traditional and Western instrumental resources, and this is what Coffie (2018) referred to as modern Ghanaian dance band highlife music.

### **Performance Philosophy**

The exceptional stage performance of the band, which is a fine blend of music, dance and drama, can be attributed to the band's 'audio-visual-emotion' (AVE) performance philosophy. This philosophy captures the attention of the audience through the band's 'hypnotic' sound (A–audio), boosts audience morale to yearn for more through a 'lively' and 'colourful' stage arts (V–visuals), which eventually establishes 'intimacy' between performer and audience (E–emotions) to achieve a 'performer-audience' relationship, leaving the audience in a state of 'amusement' and 'amazement' during and after performances.

The Bigshots is presently a thirteen-piece band, which is made up of graduates from the University of Ghana and University of Education, Winneba. The academic qualification of the band members currently ranges from *Bachelor's Degree* to *Doctor of Philosophy Degree* from diverse fields of academic studies such as Music, Dance, Drama, Linguistics and Earth Science. The band's membership structure is gender-sensitive, and also quite flexible. The band employs two female backing vocalists, who also double as dancers. Their alacrity on stage during a performance is a delight to watch. It is also worth noting that the size of the band may be reduced to a combo depending on the nature of a particular programme and/or the availability of members.



Figure 11: Snapshot from 2018 Yamaha E-Band Competition Video. A section of the Ghana Bigshots Band that participated in 2018 Yamaha E-Band Competition.



Figure 12: *The full complement of the Ghana Bigshots Band.*  
(Image courtesy: Dr. Frank Hukportie)

## Conclusion

It is truistic that the Ghana Bigshots Band started as students' pop band at the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana with the prime objective to provide entertainment for the university community. It is worth noting that the band's participation in the *Bands Alive* reality show changed the band's focus from providing entertainment just for the university to the world at large. The transition from students' band to a trans-African international band was capital intensive and also coupled with academic pressure. To mitigate the above challenge, the band created an African identity, which is inextricably tied to its creative resources, instrumental resources and performance practices. This, however, opened doors of opportunities for the band among the international community in Ghana; and hence, the band's survival and internationalisation. This study, is, therefore, recommended as a roadmap for student-musicians who wish to take their craft beyond the academic enclave.

## References

- Afrikafestival*. (2014, September 17). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T9n-ScJQ-0>
- Aidoo, S. (2014). *Saxophone solos in Ghanaian Highlife Music: An analytical study of Tempos and Rumlbers International Bands* [Unpublished M.Phil Thesis]. University of Ghana.
- Amenyo, C. A. (2010). *Tradition and Innovation of Hewale Sounds: A neo-traditional Ghanaian band* [Unpublished M.Phil Thesis]. University of Ghana.

- Amu, M. (1988). *Stylistic and textual sources of a contemporary Ghanaian art music composer: A case study of Dr Ephraim Amu*. [Unpublished M.Phil thesis]. University of Ghana.
- Baker, A. T. (2015). *Exploring the Factors that Limit the Performance of Contemporary Music by Amateur Musicians in British Brass Bands* [Unpublished MA thesis]. University of Huddersfield.
- Bigshots Band to launch a maiden album*. (2014, September 8). [Blog]. GhanaWeb. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/Bigshots-Band-to-launch-maiden-album-on-Sept-12-324834>
- Clark, R. H. (2019). A Narrative History of African American Marching Band: Towards a Historical Understanding. *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, 1–28.
- Coffie, M. M. (2012). *Dance band highlife: Analytical study of Ebo Taylor, Stan Plange and Kwadwo Donkoh*. [Unpublished M. Phil Thesis.]. University of Ghana.
- Coffie, M. M. (2018). Bigshots band's too kɛ adun: A modern Ghanaian dance band highlife music. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 2(2), 33–51.
- Collins, J. (1977). Post-War Popular Band Music in West Africa. *African Arts*, 10(3), 53–60.
- Collins, J. (1994). *Highlife Time*. Anansesem Press.
- Collins, J. (2001). *Making Ghanaian music exportable*. Ghana Music Awards Seminar, National Theatre.
- Collins, J. (2005). "A Social History of Ghanaian Entertainment since Independence." *Historical Society of Ghana*, 9, 17–40.
- Collins, J. (2016). *Highlife Giants: West African Dance Band Pioneers*. Cassava Republic Press.
- Cumberledge, J. P. (2017). The Benefits of College Marching Bands for Students and Universities: A Review of Literature. *National Association for Music Education*, 36(1), 44–50.
- Driscoll, M. T. (2012). *New Orleans Brass Band Traditions and Popular Music: Elements of Style in the Music of Mama Digdown's Brass Band* [Unpublished DMA thesis]. The University of Iowa.
- Ebonyi, S. P. K. (2015). *The use of African folk and highlife tunes by the military bands* [PhD dissertation]. University of Ghana.

- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Ghana Bigshots. (2014, July 1). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Edz0q6AOik>
- Hukportie, F. K. (2014). *Military band in Ghana: A historical inquiry*. Sierke Verlag.
- Koulibaly, K. (2009, December 5). Launch of Ebo Taylor's Bonze Konkoma Band and album. *The Mirror*, 46.
- Koulibaly, K. (2010, January 7). Album launch of Ebo Taylor's Bonze Konkoma Band. *Graphic Showbiz*, 5.
- Kudonu, K. (2012). *New Trends in Ghanaian Popular Music: A case study of Local Dimension Band* [Unpublished M. Phil Thesis]. University of Ghana.
- Maclean, G. A. (2018). The roots of brass bands in Ghana: The premier brass band in Winneba. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 2(2), 53–66.
- Marfo, P. (2016). *The appropriation of local instruments into Ghanaian Highlife music: A study of Rumlbers Dance Band* [Unpublished M.Phil Thesis]. University of Ghana.
- Martin, S. H. (1991). Brass Band and the Beni Phenomenon in East Africa. *International Library of African Music*, 7(1), 72–81.
- McKenzie, C. S. (2019). *A Timeline and History of the Band Program at the University of Miami* [Unpublished DMA thesis]. University of Miami.
- Owoo, J. (2010a, May 20). "New Music Ghana" Regional Contest. *Graphic Showbiz*, 5.
- Owoo, J. (2010b, June 3). New Music Ghana Festival. *Graphic Showbiz*, 4.
- Owoo, J. (2010c, June 17). New Music Ghana Finals. *Graphic Showbiz*, 22.
- Owoo, J. (2010d, August 5). Launch of Turkish Airlines in Ghana. *Graphic Showbiz*, 5.
- Reagan, M. V. (2019). *A History of the University of Illinois British Brass Band, 1981 to the Present* [Unpublished DMA thesis]. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Wuaku, H. M. (2015). *A Contextual Study of Brass Band Music within the Peki-Kpando Area of the Volta Region of Ghana* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Ghana.

## **About the Author**

Mark Millas Coffie is a composer, arranger, vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, researcher and lecturer in popular music at the Department of Music Education, University of Education, Winneba. He was the preferred choice as bassist for several prominent musicians in Ghana, most notably Ebo Taylor, Bob Pinodo and Cindy Thompson. His research interests span a broad array of issues in the area of popular music and performance.



## Editorial Board

JAAC have committed editorial team with expertise in the diverse fields in the African Arts and Culture disciplines. They are well grounded and work together to maintain the reputation of the journal in academism.

### Chief Editor

Professor Mary Dzansi-McPalm, PhD

### Co-Editors

Professor C.W.K. Mereku, PhD

Professor Eric Akrofi, PhD

Ebenezer Acquah, PhD

Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel, PhD

### Managing Editor

Frimpong Kwaku Duku, PhD

### Graphic Editors

Patrique deGraft-Yankson, PhD

Joseph Essuman, PhD

### Distribution Editor

Ernest Kwesi Amponsah, PhD

### Advisory Board

Kingsley Ampomah, PhD

Rev. Ohene-Okantah

Isaac Opoku-Mensah

### Past Chief Editor

Prof Kojo Fosu

## Call for Paper

The Journal of African Arts & Culture (JAAC) is an open access online platform for scholarly dialogue relating to African Arts and culture. It is committed to publishing and disseminating high quality scholarly materials that demonstrate the power and significances of the arts and culture in general in African society past and present. This journal with interdisciplinary scope publishes progressive research in the field of ancient, contemporary and modern African Arts and Culture. It covers issues in both performing and visual arts; accepts original scientific papers, critical essays, interviews, exhibition and book reviews, critiques, short reports amongst others.

JAAC welcomes article submissions at any time. JAAC is published four times a year: March, June, September, and December.

Send all inquiries about your article submission to:

jaac.journal@gmail.com OR

info@jaac-sca.org

For more information on submission guidelines visit <https://jaac-sca.org>