

Liberia: Taking a Note From the International Jazz Day Held At the American Embassy in Monrovia

By Philip N. Wesseh, 1 May 2014

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was among many guests at the American Embassy in Monrovia during the celebration of the International Jazz Day held by the Embassy on Wednesday. Others that graced the occasion were Internal Affairs Minister, Morris Dukuly; Gender Minister, Julia Duncan Cassell; opposition leader, Dr. Togba Nah-Tipoteh; former Liberian Ambassador to America, Nathaniel Barnes; Maritime Commissioner, Biyan Kesselly; Acting Information Minister, Atty Isaac Jackson; AFL Chief of Staff, Daniel Ziankhan; National Archive Director, Bloh Sayeh; the Director General of the General Services Agency (GSA); workaholic Mary Broh and journalist Charles Snetter, whose radio program is also involved in promoting jazz music.

According to information contained in the official program for the day, it is said that in November 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially designated April 30 as International Jazz Day in order to highlight jazz and its diplomatic role of uniting people in all corners of the globe. International Jazz Day is chaired and led by Irma Bokova, UNESCO Director General, and legendary jazz pianist and composer Herbie Hancock, who serves as a UNESCO Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue and Chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

The day usually brings together communities, schools, artists, historians, academicians, and jazz enthusiasts all over the world to celebrate and learn about jazz and its roots, future and impact; raise awareness of the need for intellectual dialogue and mutual understanding; and reinforce international cooperation and communication. This international art form is recognized for promoting peace, dialogue among cultures, diversity, and respect for human rights and human dignity; eradicating discrimination; promoting freedom of expression; fostering gender equality; and reinforcing the role of youths in enacting social change.

Additionally, according to the program, International Jazz Day is the culmination of Jazz Appreciation Month, which draws public attention to jazz and its extraordinary heritage throughout April. In December 2012, the United Nations General Assembly formally welcomed the decision by the UNESCO General Conference to proclaim April 30 as International Jazz Day. The United Nations and UNESCO now both recognize International Jazz Day on their official calendars.

During the celebration at the American Embassy in Monrovia, the reputable International Music House Sound crew of venerable or "Old-hand" in the business of music, Amb David Daniels, a man who has received many accolades for promoting music in the country, performed to the admiration of the audience.

In dedicating a special music to President Sirleaf, Amb Daniels spoke of how the "high life" music started from Liberia and was later carried to Ghana and Nigeria. Although the occasion was all about playing jazz music, I was touched and took note of the brief remarks of Amb Daniels on the issue that "HIGHLIFE" music became popular in Ghana many years ago, to an extent that some people believed that it was from Ghana that highlife music originated from.

Frankly, I got to know of this issue many years ago when the BBC reported that 'highlife' music started from Liberia and was carried to Ghana by some Kru fishermen. Last Wednesday's comment by Mr. Daniels only reinforced what I gathered from the BBC before. But as I sat listening to the band religiously, I began to ponder why we are credited for being the "SARWEE" (a Kru word for initiator, originator, pacesetter, or inventor) in many things and regrettably we are still lagging behind, especially so in some of those areas we are credited for being the "first."

Recently on similar issue, I wrote an article on the issue of Liberia or Liberians being the first on many issues, as it is with the "highlife" music. In that piece, I said, "If there is any good thing that this country can boast of is the fact that it continues to rank high when it comes to making history. I stated at the time that this country and some of its citizens have made history to an extent that whenever the issue of being the first comes up. Liberia, in most cases is always the first in many world events.

Emphatically, I said that for this, it is often said that Liberia or Liberians are always the first. The phrase, "always first" came about during the colonial period when this country was declared the 'First Black' independent country in Africa in the 1800's. Besides the issue of independence, a Liberian, Angie Brooks Randolph, became the First Female President of the United Nations General Assembly.

The issue of first about this country and some of its citizens came to serious limelight and prominence when President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf came to power as the "First Democratically Elected Female President of Africa." Even during the civil conflict, one of the positive things that kept this country's name high on the public agenda, was the fact that one of its sons, George Weah, now Amb. George Weah, then an international soccer star, became the first black or African player to win the FIFA's "World Best" player award, which has now been renamed as the FIFA Ballon d'Or.

In all fairness whenever I ruminate on this issue of Liberia or Liberians being the first, my blood always boils in me to see that despite all these good news, we are still lagging behind in many aspects of life. We were the first black independent country and more importantly, endowed with enormous resources, yet, we are still lagging behind in terms of development. Moreover, we produced the first African as the world best of the year but disappointingly, our sporting programs are yet to make the necessary impact.

On the entertainment side, we started the "highlife" music from Liberia, yet we failed to develop and promote it as the Ghanaians and others have done. Many years ago, our music and film industries made impact; presently, we are yet to really develop these industries, thus making our market to be fraught with many foreign films and music. I am not against foreign materials, but equally, we have the talent and skills to also produce local materials for consumption.

Once more, we should not only be bragging about always being the first, we should match this with concrete action to produce the desired results. As a country endowed with resources, we should use them to move the country from backwater to prosperity; at the same time, as a country with talents, and many natural features, let us begin to develop our tourism program to attract many visitors and also contribute to national income. We must always develop our sporting programs. The issue of the war can no longer be an excuse or alibi to the country's poor sporting program.

As I reflect on Wednesday's International Jazz Day, all is not lost; we can still correct those mistakes in the past for which we did not develop the "highlife" music. Bravo to Ambassador Malac and her staff for Wednesday's program that rekindled my desire to inspire Liberians to do some of those things that are necessary to also put this country on the map.

Until we can realize that it would be fruitless to always brag of being the first, when, in fact, we as a nation and people, have not matched this with visible actions to indeed, be speaking of our talents and desire to be counted among well developed countries of the world after more than 160 years of existence, I Rest My Case.