



A.B. Crentsil is one of the heavyweights of Highlife music, the Ghanaian world famous genre created in the 19th century.

By the time the record you are now listening to came out, he had not much to prove. He already was an established artist and the main vocalist of Sweet Talks, one of the most popular Ghanaian bands of the 1970's. When two childhood friends, popular musician / record producer Charles Amoah and executive music producer Richie Osei Kuffour, offered him a record deal in the early 90's, he probably didn't feel so much pressure. Little did he know these studio sessions would give birth to the biggest song of his career.

Charles Amoah, who had released his Sweet Vibrations LP in 1984 to great acclaim and extensively toured in Europe with bands such as Black Earth, and Saraba, was eager to bring a new sound to Crentsil, an artist he had admired for years. Throughout the 1980's, Highlife had been changing pretty radically, following the same evolution as Congolese Soukous, Caribbean Zouk and most popular black music genres of that era: Heavy use of drum machines, synths and digital technology was conveniently replacing big bands and expensive analog studios and equipments. This new breed of electric Highlife dubbed 'Burger Highlife' could be defined as a fusion of Disco, Jazz, Funk and Pop with the popular Highlife beats, rhythms and lyrics. According to A.B. Crentsil, the name was a reference to the ever present American cultural influence on Ghanaian musicians. Local radios like GBC2 were playing Rhythm & Blues, Soul, Funk and Disco on repeat since the Second World War. Amoah, who was also heavily influenced by American bands (Commodores, Earth Wind & Fire, Kool & The Gang...) has another take on the Burger tag: "I initially called this particular kind of Highlife 'Ethno Pop'. Bürger is the German word for citizen, and that's how Ghanaian musicians living and working in Germany were calling each other". The two countries had close ties during Colonial times, Ghana's Volta region being part of the German colony of Togo before World War I. The country declared its independence in 1957, but Ghanaian immigrants kept on coming in the following decades, mostly for educational reasons (with university exchange programmes in place for

Ghanaian students), and of course job opportunities. Back then, Germany, with its cutting edge recording studios and its engineers' expertise was an attractive prospect for Highlife musicians. Most Burger Highlife albums were recorded, produced or mixed in Germany, and often in sound engineer Bodo Steiger's Rheinklang studios in Düsseldorf. 'Obi Baa Wiase» and «Sika Be Ba», the two tracks presented here (from the album Gyae Me Life Ma Me), were recorded in Amoah's Cage studio in Accra. AB's vocals and Ralph Karikari's guitars were recorded in Accra's Ghana Films Studio. The tapes were then sent to Rheinklang studios where Bodo handled the mixing. He developed a long lasting relationship with Charles Amoah and other big names like Nana Tuffour, Rex Gyamfi, Max Kofi, George Darko, Amekye Dede, Daddy Lumba... He kept on recording Ghanaian musicians until his passing in 2019. Peter Krick, a German sound engineer and founder of Skyline studio in Düsseldorf, is another name worth mentioning for his long-lasting involvement with Highlife.

The music for both "Obi Baa Wiase" and "Sika Be Ba" was entirely composed and played by Charles Amoah, using minimal equipment: a DX7 synth, a Korg M1, a Yamaha RX5 drum machine, and an Akai 1000 sampler. The guitar parts were an exception though, and Charles believes they played a big part in what made "Obi Baa Wiase" so special. He spent three full working days recording three different guitarists, and still not satisfied, ended up offering the part to his bass player, renowned musician Ralph Karikari (who played with The Noble Kings, Super Sweet Talks, George Darko etc., and is credited for inventing the "Sikiyi Highlife" style by emulating the sound of a drum with his bass guitar).

A.B. Crentsil provided the lyrics for both tunes on the spot. Obi Ba Wiase's message is one of gratitude and faith: it says we should appreciate our life way more and follow the example of people who have a lot less but still praise God all day. Charles remembers fondly Crentsil's larger than life personality: «A.B. slept a lot, he really loved sleeping. His lack of punctuality was easily dismissed by his wonderful sense of humour and it wasn't uncommon to find musicians rolling with laughter on the studio floor.» Charles also remembers vividly the 'Obi Baa Wiase' session: he

could feel the magic in the air while working on the soon to be hit, and knew something special was happening. A.B. asked for a break in the middle of the session, which Charles adamantly refused until the song was finished and the magic fully captured.

Success was not immediate, and Charles was first a little concerned by the lack of buzz following the immediate release of the Gyae Me Life Ma Me album. But a few months down the line, the situation took a new turn. 'Obi Baa Wiase' was making its way into radio playlists, weddings and festive celebrations. It was covered by local bands, and soon most of Ghana and its European and American diasporas were hooked. It became A.B. Crentsil's most requested song at live events for the following decades.

The two artists always kept in touch, received an award in 2017 for the song's contribution to Ghanaian music and performed it live during the ceremony. They remain friends and active musicians to this day, and Amoah also played a big part in the professionalisation of the Ghanaian Music Industry, organising many workshops and collaborating with the emerging societies of composers, authors and publishers.

As producer Richie Moore wrote on the album back cover: «A perfect integration of two musical geniuses, the result of which are the scintillating tracks of music on this record... so all you party fans go onto the floor and dance the body music».

CREDITS:

Vinyl Transfer: Frédéric D'Oria-Nicolas

Mastering: Nicolas Thelliez

Lacquer Cut: André Perriat

Graphic Design: Erwan Coutellier

Liner Notes: Etienne Tron

Project Management: Louis Hautemulle & Etienne Tron

Special thanks: AB Crentsil, Charles Amoah, Richie Osei Kuffour, Benjamin Lebrave, Diane Bouvet