

How to keep your music career going: 3 tips from a Ghanaian star

By [Josh Opoku Brew](#)

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Ghanaian parents have historically discouraged their children from becoming musicians or marrying musicians. A music career is still not seen as one that can provide a steady income to support a family, and the behaviour of musicians is seen by some as deviant. These attitudes stand in the way of musicians wanting to make a career out of their art.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

I am a professional musician, music scholar and environmental activist who's interested in the global challenges that musicians face. In a [recent paper](#) I examined the strategies adopted by [Okyeame Kwame](#) (OK), one of the pioneers of [hiplife music](#) in Ghana, to sustain his career. Hiplife music combines traditional Ghanaian music styles like [highlife music](#) with hip hop.

Okyeame Kwame is one of the few pioneers of hiplife from around the mid-1990s who remains active in the industry. He has received several local and international awards for his music and as a philanthropist. Examples include the "Key to the City" of Cincinnati and the United States Volunteer Award from former US president Barack Obama.

My research took place over 12 months and I used an ethnographic approach, including participant observation and interviews, to study the Ghanaian music industry. During the period three things emerged as reasons why Okyeame Kwame's solo career has been sustainable for two decades.

These three things were resilience, diversification and interconnectivity. Resilience is the ability to keep one's identity and stability, even when facing disruptions and changes. Diversification is basically about having other options. Interconnectivity refers to the state of being connected with others – musicians and fans. I concluded that he was particularly good at all three things.

This approach offers lessons to help musicians explore career sustainability strategies in various contexts.

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as the capacity to recover and maintain an identity and continuity despite setbacks and change. Ethnomusicologist [Jeff T. Tilton](#) explains that resilience involves finding weaknesses and strengths related to changes, then improving in the weak areas and enhancing the strengths.

Based on my research I concluded that Okyeame Kwame had shown resilience through difficult times.

For example, the group he was part of, Akyeame, [broke up in 2004](#). They had been a group since 1997 and had been successful.

He used the breakup to identify his vulnerabilities. These included writing music in Akan (the Ghanaian language he often sings in); a lack of knowledge of the music business; and administrative work. His former partner, Okyeame Quophi, used to do the administrative tasks while he focused on performances.

Okyeame Kwame explored ways to overcome these limitations by attaining higher education. He enrolled at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and attained a bachelor's degree (music and Akan). This formal education improved his music-writing skills. He now writes songs and has received many awards for his writing skills.

Diversification

Okyeame Kwame believed it was possible to make a sustainable career. But relying on performances and selling music wasn't enough.

He used his music to become well known and then built on his popularity to create another business to earn money. He [explained](#):

“ *The music itself is not valuable, but the secondary economy of being a musician is valuable.* ”

His personal business includes a company that manages other artists, organises events and creates television advertisements. He also owns a male underwear company.

He uses his brand to enter into endorsement deals with corporate bodies where his image is used to create a market for the companies. These arrangements create an audience for him.

Interconnectivity

Interconnection is fundamental for survival in the music industry. Musicians must nurture a good relationship with their fans and colleagues by collaborating on music and other projects.

Economists Jordi McKenzie, Paul Crosby and Liam Lenten, in their [work](#) on creative production methods in the music industry, recognise the rise of collaboration among musicians on individual song projects.

In their [paper](#) they showed that “high quality music and an increase in market demand gained from the fan base of both musicians” are some of the benefits musicians gain from collaborating.

Okyeame Kwame does not create all his music alone. He sometimes collaborates with other artists, like Kidi, Beenie Man and Kwame Eugene.

Conclusion

While there seems to be little risk of music disappearing from our planet altogether, those who make and care for music are continually faced with choices that affect the vitality and sustainability of music practices. The viability of any music culture depends on the availability of musicians.

Musical and cultural futures are extremely dependent on and affected by disturbances and changes in economic circumstances. Hence, not paying attention to musicians’ economic sustainability can lead to unsustainable music.

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