

Alaba Pedro, master of guitar stroke

By Benson Idonije

Basically, the guitar is perhaps the most popular of all the Western-oriented instruments of the orchestra. And like the keyboard, almost every musician plays the instrument to some reasonably professional degree. Most of them use it to give their compositions the right structures they need in terms of chord progression, form and tunefulness.

For this reason, the guitar in terms of performance has become rather competitive, with millions of exponents competing for recognition. Only the most outstanding have come into the limelight - genius like Charlie Christian who invented modern jazz guitar playing; Wes Montgomery, noted for chorded solos at the octave; Barney Kessel versed in single note guitar picking; Kenny Burrell whose phrases are synonymous with the blue; George Benson, a disciple of Wes Montgomery, among others.

The situation is the same in West Africa and Nigeria in particular where the likes of Apipah Jay, Tunde Sole and Alaba Pedro reign supreme.

Pedro leads a very formidable band whose music is a blend of the old and the new. His customary instrument is the guitar, but he has since become an accomplished singer-composer, whose songs reach out professionally in terms of vocalisation and instrumentation. His self-penned repertoire enjoys the best of professional accompaniment because they reflect performances that are resplendent with the type of actualizations that stem from the original concepts of the composer-arranger himself.

Pedro's direction is essentially highlife and African-oriented fusion with other forms of music. His highlife music is not particularly steeped in the tradition of Roy Chicago, his mentor. Rather it reminds the listener of the vintage years of the music from the fifties to the sixties. His sources of inspiration are many and are mainly Ghanaian-oriented, including E.T. Mensah, the pioneer of the music form himself through to the more progressive Stargazers and Uburu Professional Dance Band. He is however grateful to Roy Chicago, his former band leader, whose Rhythm Dandies prepared him for the challenges of band leadership. Working with Roy Chicago imbued in him a great sense of rhythm that draws from the various dimensions of African music. Says he:

"I joined Roy Chicago in 1961 to replace Mike Enahoro a fine guitarist who left for England at the time. I was with the band up till the time of the civil war when it disbanded in 1969". Pedro continues: "It was a highly disciplined band which offered me the opportunity to develop musically. Moreover, I was the youngest member of the band, and so I was willing to learn. The band was versatile and could play almost all types of music, but I benefited more from highlife, its specialty which relied more on Nigerian melodies with rhythms rooted in indigenous elements. I learnt a lot from the band."

Pedro's guitar playing assumed an authoritative status in the eighties, and he was considered one of the leading exponents of this instrument, as he provided studio sessions to almost all notable bands around at the time. He says: "While still with the Rhythm Dandies, I contributed guitar sessions to the late Charles Iwegbue's music especially Soko which was a big hit in the early sixties.

"I provided all the guitar works to Inyang Henshaw's band that used to back Hubert Ogunde, but even when the band disbanded Ogunde still continued to use me. My guitar sound can be heard in Yoruba Ronu which has become a classic."

Continuing, Pedro explains: "It was through my association with the late Ogunde that I got a job as leader of the UPN Band in 1979, a big outfit which however disbanded in 1981."

Pedro started playing the organ with the big band he led for the UPN, an experience which has since strengthened his skills on the keyboards. From 1996 up till November 1997 for instance he was the resident pianist at Eko Hotel, Lagos where he created piano solos as well as sang, sometimes performing within the limited contexts of combos both for entertainment and as background staff.

However, Pedro still finds the guitar his favourite instrument, one that gives him room to express himself naturally. Of his influences on the instrument. Pedro says: "The people that I listened to in those days were Ghanaians. They played the best guitar and dominated the Nigerianscene in the fifties - I mean guitarists such as Stan Plange and Ebo Taylor. They were the greatest. They were brought to Nigeria by the late great trumpeter and band leader Chief Bill Friday who led the Ambassador Down Beats at Yaba."

Pedro also has great respect for some Nigerian guitarists who eventually took over from the Ghanaiana. "I love listening to the likes of Fred Coker, a prolific guitarist who has been outside the country for decades; Yinka Robert, who had stints with Victor Olaiya, Harbours Band, Koola Lobitos; Bassey Udi whose reputation was held in high esteem in the Eastern part of the country; and Apipah Jay who later came into full recognition with the Western Toippers Band led by Adeolu Akinsanya. We did not only take over from the Ghanaians, we also succeeded in establishing an identity for the Nigerian guitar tradition. We broke the myths in the late fifties."

Before Pedro joined Roy Chicago's Rhythm Dandies in 1961, he had played with the Palm Tree Band at Ibadan in 1956 under the same musical instructor with tenor saxophone player Y.S. Akinnibosun. He had a stint at Fakunle Major Hotel Oshogbo with the resident band. He moved to Ibadan again to play with ex-Eddy Okonta's Rhythm Aces' saxophonist Zeb Philips and His Blue Nine. Pedro also played at the Right Time Hotel, Ijeb Ode.

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