

## **Araba, grandmaster of melodic inventiveness**

By Benson Idonije

The opportunity of catching him in actual performance should have offered itself much earlier when he was still actively involved. But it did not, until his last days - in the seventies.

Age had already crept in and yet in these seeming last days Julius Araba was still sounding authentic except that his voice timbre which once rang out clearly and generated warmth and energy in all the registers, was now becoming strained. It became obvious that he was making a deliberate effort to project. And even his AFN Skiffle group which used to be six-man strong had shrunk to a duo of himself and his wife.

Such was the situation when Araba was recording in the seventies for ace radio producer Fola Meadows, a veteran broadcaster whose prompting and encouragement provided the opportunity for him and many others to be heard on his juju music programme which essentially featured contemporary stars at the time, on the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. Araba doubled on vocals and guitar. His wife played shakers and provided vocal accompaniment.

These were Araba's last days, and even though the music was not the same, it was a reflection of those good old days which bore him out as one of the most influential pioneers of the music. He was one of the most individualistic innovators of juju music, and his strong point was melodic inventiveness and exploration.

My first encounter with Araba dates back to the early sixties. This was through his music on radio; and the song was *Mokago*, which was the signature tune for a popular magazine programme of the same title in Yoruba.

As a young broadcaster it was the appropriate derivation of this signature tune from the title of the programme that intrigued me - until the music eventually grew on me. Aside from being apt, the music was rich in lyrical lines of exhortation; and it all seemed as if it was specifically recorded for the programme, whereas it had been originally recorded for the programme, hereas it had been originally recorded on 78rpm as commercial material - for sale. It did not only sell on release in the fifties, it was like a national anthem for all Yoruba speaking people.

Ironically, talented and popular as Araba was, he never really went professional in the sense of devoting all his time and energy to the music. And yet he performed the music with profound skill and professionalism. A draughtsman with the Nigeria Railway Corporation where he eventually retired until his death, music went for him only on the

sideline, as a passtime.

Araba emerged on the juju music scene as early as the late forties, and he started as sideman to numerous groups for which he sang and played guitar. But his very last supportive role was around 1952 with a five - piece band led by saxophonist Isola Willy Payne. The group had an all night stand at Mainland Cafe at Alakija, Mushin Opposite Western hotel where veteran Adeolu Akinsanya later played with his Western Toppers Band.

Araba was however encouraged to strike out on his own by Fatai Rolling Dollar after guesting with the band one night, on his return from the high seas, as a sailor. "I came to town one night when our ship berthed at Apapa Wharf. On getting to Mushin, I heard calypso music drifting, out of Mainland Cafe. The music was played by Isola Willy Payne on saxophone."

Continuing, Fatai says, "I entered the club and listened to the five piece band which included Julius Araba on guitar and vocals; and Olasenhi Tejuoso, a friend of mine on agidigbo (thumb piano). Even though they were only five, the music was richa and the sound was big. I was highly fascinated."

More than anything else, Fatai was intrigued by Araba's guitar chords and vocal treatment of most of the songs which were composed by Araba himself. Fatai explains further; "When the band went on break, I walked up to the band leader, Willy Payne to allow me play agidigbo on their next session, and he agreed. Singer-guitarist Araba was so impressed that he approached me after the session, for us to form our own band. That was how we started what was known in those days as "The Rhythm Blues" led by J.O. Araba.

No sooner they assembled the group than they began to attract a large following. The rhythm Blues added a new dimension to juju music with the coming together of Araba and Fatai, two musical giants of like minds. They both had the capacity to compose and write deep lyrics. They had the vocal ability to carry their songs. More over, their ingenuity was motivated by the love for the music - from the deep recesses of their hearts. Their existence was motivated by the desire to play good music, for artistic fulfilment rather than commercial purposes, to please people. and this was because as staff of the Nigeria Railways both of them were quite contented with their monthly earnings.

Araba's Rhythm Blues could not play in night clubs at the time because only brass hands like the Bobby Benson Jam Session, Chris Ajilo and his Cubanos among other were qualified for engagements by the existing night clubs. Consequently, they played at parties for selected friends because money was not their primary consideration. Says

Fatai, "we performed at parties. We did not charge fees initially. We only played for our friends who had special events to celebrate."

As opposed to the highly commercial praise singing juju music trend that eventually took over in the sixties, Fatai says: "We did not indulge praise songs. All that we got for our performances were food and drink. At parties, we were given four roast chicken, a dozen of milk and a bottle of hot drink."

However, this philanthropic gesture was not to last for too long. The band had to buy and maintain their instruments even though they hadn't the equipment of the high voltage amplification type. They had to pay for transportation, and other expenses. "We started charging fees after we went to play for one of our friends at Moleye Street Yaba". Continuing, Fatai says; "The man gave us hundred pounds in addition to the usual gesture of hospitality Araba rejected it saying that we were not beggar. Despite the fact that our friend explained that he gave us the money out of sheer appreciation. Araba still did not accept the money. It was long after the show that I suggested to him that it made a lot of sense to charge fees because we were using our talent and time. He agreed."

Araba and his Rhythm Blues was first noticed in those early days by the then Nigerian Broadcasting Service which held his music in high esteem. He had melody, message and gentle rhythm - all of which were carefully structured and articulated. His group qualified as one of the four top bands permanently constructed for live appearances on the then regular variety show. The other bands were Ajao Oru and his Apala Band, Bobby Benson and His Jam Session, and Tunji Lucky Face and his juju Band - in 1954.

According to Fatai it was the quality of their performance on this radio show that recommended them to Philips records through the help of Steve Rhodes. Araba's initial recordings were *Orimi gbami* and *Olomi gbo temi* for which the band was paid a handsome amount in terms of royalties.

A self made artiste, Araba reached the peak of his popularity in the mid fifties. He was one of the leading juju stars on the scene, even though he was still working with the Nigerian Railways Corporation. A top recording star, almost all his recorded materials, were popular. His repertoire included fusion with foreign idioms, and this helped to broaden the scope and dimension of his music. *Iyawo ma pami* was based on the calypso melodic structure of *Constable Joe*. *Omolere aiye*, *Ogbaya oya*, *Easy motion tourist*, *Saworo woro* among others were original compositions in the free flowing highlife idiom.

Araba's Rhythm Blues later became Afro skiffle group when the group saw the need to identify more with African rhythms.

Araba had the potentials to revolutionise juju music for international recognition, but he really did not approach it as a full fledged profession. His job at the Nigerian Railway Corporation intervened seriously. As a result, he could not even honour engagements outside of Lagos, neither could he accept offers to promote his music abroad.

However, more than any one else, Araba's juju music has provided a traditional platform, a source of inspiration and a reference level for future generations and exponents of this music genre. His meaningful, though provoking lyrics are being adopted along with the rentalisation of his evergreen melodies by today's musicians. Almost all his songs have been bandied around by almost every musician. But it is pertinent to remark that if Sunny Ade has anything new to boost his artistic image, they are his recent renditions of Araba's Mokago and Easy Motion tourist. Omolere aiye has almost filtered into the public domain circuit as a folksong, but it was cp,[psed amd forst [erfpr,ed nu Arana/ Re arranged om tje jogj:ofe odop, amd govem a kazz fee:omg om 1066, Afro beat legend Fela Anikulapo Kuti recorded his own version during the Koola Lobitos days. A fascinating highlife classic, Fela titled it Araba's delight, thereby projecting his acknowledgement into the fore front.

Araba's music continues to stand the test of time because of its melodic exploration. But more importantly, it is his lyrics that continue to fascinate every musician. They emphasise positive vlaues in terms of peace, love morality, justice, dignity of labour as opposed to empty praises and meaningless themes.

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