

Cora... an unusual platform for Nigerian music

By Benson Idonije

The Committee for Relevant Art (CORA) takes another giant stride this weekend in its continuing business of promoting literary consciousness and the reading culture among Nigerians.

Tagged: Lagos Book and Art Festival, the event begins from today, September 13 and runs till Sunday, September 15 at the open lawns of the National Museum, Onikan, Lagos. It is the fourth in the series. Coupled with a total of 43 Art Stampedes held so far from June 1991. At each edition, artistes, cultural administrators, enthusiasts and patrons discussed pathways to improve the management of the culture industry, the quality of the arts as well as design. CORA, a non-governmental, non profit-making, strictly private initiative has come into reckoning as perhaps the most active in the promotion and exposition of all the elements of Nigeria's cultural dimensions.

However, a special feature which has characterised all its activities is the encouragement and identification with authentically creative music and musicians, some of whom have since risen to super stardom today. Without knowing it, CORA has demonstrated the fact that it has ear for good music and that it is capable of helping to direct the course in which Nigerian and African music should go.

On hand to liven things up at the venue of the Book and Art Festival which begins today is Seyi Solagbade an artist who is now well known as one of the new stars on the Nigerian music scene, but whose potentials were first recognised by the CORA. The exponent of a vibrant tradition of post-Fela's Afrobeat, Seyi's Black Face group has evolved a new sound that has been accepted even on the international scene - from reports received from Kayode Samuel, the Nigerian producer currently handling his music on both sides of the Atlantic.

There appears to be a lull presently in his musical career, but the undeniable fact still remains that Gbedu Master Kola Ogunkoya, has perhaps the closest sound identity to Fela's Afrobeat. Some people might not see this as a compliment in that it should be ideally expected that every musician endeavours to be himself in terms of creating his own individual sound.

But if these critics listened to the Gbedu Master's recent works they would realise a transformation from Fela's Afrobeat influence to a highlife-oriented concept where he perhaps naturally belongs. This is to show that artists are free to take off from an imitative tangent, which they often use as stepping stone for discovering themselves. It is only artistes without talent that would forever continue to play imitative music, and Kola has since proved that he is a bundle of talent.

He was greatly encouraged from the beginning by the CORA, which discovered his artistic creativity many years ago. The last time he provided entertainment to CORA's activities was in February this year when, in celebrating elder artiste Steve Rhodes at 75, the Stampede examined in retrospect, the relevance of Ulli Beier in Nigerian arts with the theme, Ulli Beier: To be or not to be.

Having just arrived from America and bubbling with new ideas and approaches to his music, Kola Oguikoya was featured at this 41st Stampede with big band whose music was more in the highlife idiom than the Afrobeat with which he was formerly identified. Veering from his own original compositions to popular hits from veteran highlife musicians such as Victor Olaiya and Rex Jim Lawson the audience was propelled to the dancing floor which on this occasion was the open lawn of the National Theatre, Iganmu.

Interestingly, this event also attracted such musicians as Peter King and Lagbaja who drew almost everybody to the dance floor when he took the microphone. But on his own, the masked man had previously been featured on this platform. One remembers seeing him double on vocals and keyboards on an occasion some years ago, at CORA's headquarters in Festac Town.

And besides, the most critical in terms of putting Lagbaja on the progressive path over the years has been CORA whose secretary and chairman separately came up with incisive reviews of the masked man's music and career. Positioning him as the greatest new star to emerge since Fela, the most extensive and in-depth interview ever had on Lagbaja was done by CORA's secretary for FESTAC NEWS in September 1996.

Coming at a time some critics were beginning to be wary about the masked man's direction and approach, the review, which continued through two editions of the publication, attempted to dispel some of these notions and solidly portrayed Lagbaja in a positive perspective by tracing the music from the beginning and telling what the man behind the mask was up to.

The morning of the second day of this weekend's festival has been dedicated to celebrating the birthday anniversary of Jimi Solanke, who was 60 on July 4, 2002. According to the programme, there will be a festival around the personality and professional life of Solanke on a day dedicated to children and youth activities. This is in recognition of the many musical programme he initiated on radio and television for children. But beyond that, he is being recognised for his contribution to drama and music in particular where, like his counterpart, Tunji Oyelana, he has really excelled.

It took the Committee for Relevant Art in conjunction with O'jezz Entertainment, Onike, Yaba to pull solanke from the University of Ife where he is based as artist-in-residence, to Lagos for the celebration of his 60th birthday two Sundays ago.

At the Great Highlife Party, otherwise known as the Elers' Forum, he turned out to be the main entertainer, evoking nostalgia with some of his previous hits and compositions.

Solanke has not been specifically billed to perform at the Book and Art Festival, but knowing his artistic urge and enthusiasm to perform whenever the opportunity offers itself, Solanke will sing on stage with active involvement. More so as Seyi Solagbade's orchestral setting is bound to provide the right atmosphere for highlife and afrobeat, an area that happens to be Solanke's natural habitat.

The Committee for Relevant Art which is behind this all-happening event is a cultural activist organisation dedicated to the creation of a fertile environment for the full flowering of the Nigerian arts.

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