

## Developing the artist through objective criticism

By Benson Idonije

In his usual, defiantly blunt and down-to-earth manner. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti once admitted: He begged for the very first promotional review I got in my life from the papers. Yes, I begged for it and I went through hell. But today, I am the most published artist in this country. Everyday journalists just dey beg me for interview." This was sometime in April this year. I was in his house with two Guardian reporters who were anxious to interview him.

One is not about to do another story on Fela, but one is only predicating the thrust of an argument on his example which one finds instructive and appropriate.

Actually, one month to the launching of the Koola Lobitos in May 1965, we wrote a letter to the then Editor of the Daily Times, asking him to send a reporter to the band's rehearsals at 14A Agege Motor Road for the purpose of giving the music a mention.

We were not prepared to give anybody any form of gratification because we believed that we had powerful sound; and Daily Times did not ask for anything either. All we wanted was an honest and objective opinion from the press.

We were then referred to the Features Editor who said he had nobody to send to us, but that if we wanted them to listen to the sound of the music, we should record and bring the tape to him so he could play it back. Since this was the only option open to us we had no choice but to comply.

The exercise entailed a lot of work on the part of the band as we had to go to the studio to record the entire repertoire on a reel to reel tape. When we submitted the tape to him the third day, the Features Editor said he had no playback machine on which to listen and that we should look for one ourselves. We then took the machine to his house; and he took his time to listen to the music.

He eventually came out with a review that was so objective and inspiring that it spurred the band to success. It did not condemn the band's creative effort neither did it describe the music with any such emotional superlatives. The review merely said that the music was new and exciting, but that it was completely devoid of commercial viability. And so the story was captioned. "Fela's music has fire, but can it sell?" To provide an answer to this million dollar poser, the band was determined to incorporate the missing commercial element. To achieve this objective, the band kept the fire burning continuously unquenched for six years before finally striking the desired commercial appeal in 1970.

Artistes are no longer patient and honest with themselves. They are all in a hurry to get to the top. And besides, there is lack of genuine and honest criticism that is capable of giving an artist the genuine sense of direction that could put him on the path to stardom. A lot of them are media hypes whose popularity exists only on the pages of newspapers and magazines. They also receive undeserved airplay and publicity from radio and television. The Daddy Showkeys, Chukzee Moseses, Zaki Azzays and Baba Frayos of this world are displaying tremendous potentials through initiative musical efforts but they should be told by the media to channel their creative talents towards the exploitation of our traditional idioms instead of playing them up and giving them a sense of false security.

I remember being a member of an audition committee in the '70s as producer in the Music Department in radio when some mediocres thought they could bribe their way through. There was this case of a juju band which we were assigned to listen to in a hotel at Somolu area of Lagos State. The bandleader accorded us the best of hospitality as we were treated to various delicacies and exotic drinks. At the end of the exercise, he went further to put money in our pockets, but all that did not prevent me from writing a report which pointed out his weak points, one of which was that he did not know how to tune the band. He came back to me fuming and registering his displeasure, but in later years when he waxed stronger, he came to thank me for encouraging him to improve.

Many young broadcasters are stuck on the brink of mediocrity mainly because they refuse to undergo all the necessary professional training. Instead of listening to the guidance of informed veterans, they rely on friends and unqualified well wishers who always tell them that they are the greatest. These friends indulge in phoning and writing in so that their names could be heard on air - to boost their ego.

Each time I hear "Open House Party" on RayPower 100 FM, my sensibilities are insulted because of the way it is continuously suffering from poor professional handling in terms of production. Unknown to the producers, they are being erroneously encouraged and spurred on by the letters they get from gullible listeners who claim that it is the greatest programme they ever heard on radio.

Professionally speaking "Open House Party" is a "Variety and Light Entertainment" programme whose format in terms of production approach is definitive. And no matter how unconventional their approach may be, it must be within the limits of creativity. But what we hear all the time seems no less than a mere cacophony of sounds from human voices.

All the actors assemble in the studio hail their presence. They then go ahead to tell funny stories and narrate strange experiences. And the programme is made.

The programme can be more authentic and interesting if only its producers would take advantage of a basic production training where in the first place they would be made to appreciate what the programme is out to achieve, its essence and role in broadcasting. They would then be introduced to the elements that constitute a "Variety and Light Entertainment" package.

However, the media has a very important part to play in the development of an artist's genuine creativity. The publication imprint will be making a valuable contribution to the arts by shutting out of publicity, mediocres who parade themselves as musicians. On the other hand, since one of the basic qualifications of a presenter is the possession of an ear for good music, he would do well to desist from giving undeserved air play to substandard songs and imitative tunes that cannot survive, let alone give the artist the image and sense of direction he deserves.