

Echoes of the sixties

By Benson Idonije

Independence anniversary celebration are now low-keyed, with activities limited to prayers in mosques and churches, all because things are no longer what they used to be. But the attainment of independence in 1960, and the memories of the years that followed up till the civil war in 1966, were celebrated with lavish jollification and nationalism - a situation which gave every one a feeling of oneness and belonging. Those were the days, and these good days can come back again.

However, behind the facade of its political implications, people saw independence as life more abundant. And so celebration needed heavy doses of heart throbbing 'highlife' for its entertainment value as well as social significance. Highlife was at its best.

The two highlife groups that reigned supreme were the International All Stars led by Victor Olaiya, and the Rhythm Dandies fronted by Roy Chicago. Both leaders were trumpeters and graduates of the Bobby Benson Orchestra, but they had their distinct styles.

Victor Olaiya who was directly influenced by E.T. Mensah, patterned his highlife along Ghanaian melodic lines and rhythm structures. His own popularity spilled over from the decade of the fifties and he had some of the finest instrumentalists while the band played at prestigious parties with his base at the Cool Cats Inn, at Apapa Road in Lagos where he was the resident band.

Roy Chicago came into the limelight at Abalabi Hotel, limelight at Abalabi Hotel, Mushin even though he had led a successful band at the Central Hotel, Ibadan. His popularity came on the threshold of independence, with his introduction of the talking drum into highlife in 1960 through Iyawo Pankeke composed at the time by Apolio Armide who later joined the Nigerian Navy.

Chicago's highlife style had its accent anchored on rhythm, as he explained Nigerian folksongs with vocals by Tunde Osofisan, one of the finest singers on the highlife scene.

Performing in the same Nigerian traditional style was Adeolu Akinsanya, master lyricist and singer who wrote and sang in a style that was immediately recognisable. Based at the Western Hotel, Mushin, he led a formidable group that was fronted on trumpet by Kendy Alex with star guitarist Apaipah Jay, as he rolled out social commentaries that were topical and well informed.

Rex Jim Lawson, who later became the King of highlife, and in fact one of the greatest across Nigeria and Ghana from where the music originated, made his impact at the Mayor's Hotel, Onitsha as leader of the Mayor's Dance Band. Transforming into the Mayor Band in 1964, he came down to Lagos where his influence and fame increased. A fine singer, trumpeter, singer and composer, his melodies and rhythms were drawn from the rich cultural heritage of the Rivers people.

As an artiste, Lawson's star qualities were many and varied. He sang with great feeling and was able to put across his message with clarity and meaning. He was not only an accomplished trumpeter within the context of the music that he played, he also had the unique ability to put the band's ensemble sound perfectly in tune at short notice. And this is an artistic feat that many bands still find difficult to accomplish today. He had ear for good music, and so he had hornmen with good, pleasant tone who were able to evolve a clean, straight ensemble sound.

Also contributing to the celebration of independence in the sixties was E.C Arinze, a fine trumpeter who led a popular and successful band at Kakadu Hotel, Yaba, Lagos in 1961, nurturing such stars as Etim Udo, a saxophonist of no mean stature, and Victor Uwaifo, guitarist and singer who later struck out to form the Melody Maestros.

A giant of highlife who made his influence fast on the scene is Eddy Okonta. A foremost graduate of the Bobby Benson Orchestra and one of the greatest trumpeters on the scene. He was based at Ibadan with his Star Aces and succeeded in evolving a unique African rhythmic pattern for highlife. He died earlier in the year. But guitarist Apaipah Jay is currently leading a memorial band in his honour to immortalise his name and music.

Saxophonist Chris Ajilo gave the Bobby Benson Orchestra stiff competition in the fifties when they both played various dance music forms. But Ajilo's Cubanos played night club dates in the early sixties, and even though it was a small group, it posed challenges to big bands; served as a source of inspiration to young musicians and look highlife to progressive heights.

The likes of Charles Iwegbue and his Archibogs, Stephen Appechi and his Rhythm Stars, Aguy Noris and his band exploited and his band exploited rhythms and melodies from Igboland as they played at Lido Bar, Empire Hotel and the like around Idi-Oro, Lagos.

Eric Onugba led a fire band at Central Hotel, Yaba on trumpet, and it was this aggregation that nurtured Stephen Osabele who was then a vocalist, to stardom, striking out on his own with the hit success of One Pound No Balance around 1964.

The likes of trumpeter Dan Satch was holding the forte at Aba in those days at the Traveller Lodge, where renowned saxophonist Tex Beck, eventually led a second set in 1965. And in Port Harcourt, a Rex Lawson, influenced group made a lot of sweet highlife music led by David Bull. The sound was richer than that of Rex Lawson, especially at the rhythm section level and ensemble sound which included a power tenor saxophone. But Rex Lawson's harmonies and melodies were unique, and that is why they all have become evergreens today.

Highlife was quite popular in the northern part of the country. Aside from the fact that bands made good money from tours to that part of the country from the south, Satch Ayo led an explosively big band which was resident at Jos, but popular all over the north.

One highlife band that captured the true Ghanaian feeling on the spot was the Ambassador Downbeats led by trumpet player chief Bill Friday whose tea Time Dance sessions helped to introduce a new dimension to entertainment in Lagos. Most of the musicians were Ghanaians who included ace saxophonist Joe Amisah and vocalist Joe Mensah.

Afro-beat King Fela Anikulapo-Kuti played highlife in England during independence. Called the Koola Lobitos, the group recorded highlife that is reminiscent of the conventional Victor Olaiya tradition.

The group was, however, reformed in Nigeria in 1965, monotonously boring, and being a jazz musician, he played the music from the jazz standpoint and brought about a complete revitalisation, a new highlife sound.

Associated with good times and jolification, highlife was the music that celebrated our independence in 1960, just as the only surviving musicians in terms of band leaders are Victor Olaiya and Stephen Osita Osadebe. We should use this opportunity of Nigeria's 37 independence anniversary to remember all the highlife stars who have joined their ancestors - Bobby Benson, Baby Face Paul, Chief Bill Friday, Rex Jim Lawson, Charles Iwegbue, Eddy Okonta, Adeolu Akinsanya, Roy Chicago, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Inyang Henshare, Agu Noris among others.

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