

# Eddy, the trumpet major

By Benson Idonije

The main ingredient of African music is 'rhythm', and one musician who knows how to use it to full advantage is Eddy Okonta, highlife superstar, singer, composer, band leader and Obi of grumpet.

A graduate of the Bobby Benson Orchestra for which he played trumpet and sang, Eddy served a long term of apprenticeship which culminated in outstanding professional musicianship, with proficiency in arranging and compsoing. He now plays the guitar, an instrument which comes in handy for finding his chords in the process of perfecting his compositions.

As one of the pioneering big bands in the country, the Bobby Benson Orchestra offered all its graduates a well rounded musical l experience and discipline, as they were exposed to all dance music forms including swing, Latin-American, jazz, Afro Cuban, the ball room type that dominated the colonial era, and all. Eddy was not only involved in this unique experience, he was also part of the revolution, the formative processes of highlife which eventually led to the studio recording of "Taxi Driver," Bobby Benson's greatest hit.

It was not surprisng therefore that when he struk out on his own in the mid-fifties to form thestar Aces, "he had a wealth of experience to draw from. He did not find it difficult to establish a highlife direction for himself as he eventually became the resident band at the Paradise Night Club, Ibadan, a joint which was a meeting place for all music and fun lovers in the country who came to dance to live performances of such hits as Asili, Oriwo, Kelewele, Anyidi, Ejenelulo, Okokoko, among others. But perhaps the greatest attraction for the dance floor community was his prolonged version of Abele, a Ghanaian hit song previously made popular by E -T. Mensah, but given a new treatment with a beautiful horn arrangement that reffed a figure behind Ghanian singer and memdber of the band, Nat Buckle, with his usual hard-driving and appealing rhythm accompaniment.

The same enthusiastic fans followed him to Lagos in the sixties when he moved bases, as he played at Central Hotel, IYaba. I had been a fan of Okonta all along, but I came into close contact with him in the early seenties when, as Music Producer, I recorded him extensively for Dance and Highlife music programmes.

It was extremely difficult at that time to maintain and keep a highlife band especially the big band type for which Eddy Okonta had a preference, for economic reasons. Consequently, for all engagements, including radio and television shows, he relied on ad-hoc arrangements involving United Natgions kinds of groups, assemblies of musicians from various backgrounds and settings who had not rehearsed to be able to blend together. But he had the organising ability of a good bandleaders, and the musical talent for grooming musicians easily, at short notice, to play what he wanted.

Most of his colleagues sound boring with the same repetition of their old songs in live performances, but Eddy Okonta's evergreens are always revitalised because he introduces a dnew element and perspective to a song each time he plays it.

Eddy's trumpet is perhaps the clearest and strongest on the scene, playing around with the top most notes of the instrument with ease, as often as he wishes a phenomenon that is traceable to Harry James and Louis Armstrong, two influential traditionalists who are Eddy's source of inspiration.

Another attribute which sets him apart is the propelling force of his rhythmic concept which makes dancing irresistible; and it is no wonder at all that he stole the show a few years ago at a highlife night organised by veteran musician and impresario, Steve Rhodes at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos.

Eddie Okonta has a lot of singles to his credit, but has recorded two albums, with the very first being one of the biggest highlife hits in West Africa even though it failed to make the desired impact in terms of sales because of poor marketing and promotion.

Titled Victory: Fire back to town the album was recorded in 1978, at a time highlife was unpopular and Eddie, one of the finest exponents of the music was inactive.

The album has a number of good qualities to recommend it. Influenced by the prevailing recording tradition of the time, the songs, three of them, have taken on long stretches which helped at that time, to shore up highlife to the level of juju music in terms of popular appeal, danceability, and as a social music type.

Eddie Okonta has always had a knack for big band highlife and he is here, parading a seventeen piece band where he sings and takes most of the solos on trumpet. The most attractive material, and the one which continues to sell the album is Bisi, based on a melody that has been popular with highlife since its palm win guitar - oriented days. It is the second track on the second side, preceded by the one he calls Life, a monologue that ruminates on the elusive possibilities of man's existence. The first side is one whole groove, titled Janeth 78 Nkwuto.

Recorded on Ekimogun Label, the entire session arranged by Eddie who also plays trumpet, acoustic guitar, composes and sings, with Polygram recording engineer and reputable highlife musician Etim Udoh, whose input in terms of production and engineering, contributes to the sound quality and general cohesiveness of the ensemble.

Based on the success of this album, Phonodisk Records signed Eddie on for a follow-up which proved unsuccessful. Recorded in the early eighties and aptly titled Obi of trumpet it parades a good choice of material which are all marred by poor production, even though the studio was supposed to offer better recording facilities.

However, Eddie Okonta is still around with us and his trumpet is still as strong and exciting as ever, all because he is the Obi of trumpet.