

# Exit of the highlifer, Mensah

By Benson Idonije

The city of Accra will be thrown into deep grief and mourning today as the people bury veteran highlife singer, Joe Mensah at the Musicians Union of Ghana's (MUSICA) headquarters. Mensah passed away after a brief illness on June 20, 2002 at Korlebu Teaching Hospital, Accra. Until his death, the celebrated highlife star was the president of the musicians union of Ghana.

Actually, there were three prominent, celebrated highlife singers in West Africa in those early big band days of the fifties and sixties. The three were all Ghanaians, comprising Dan Acquaye of E.T. Mensah's Tempos Band; Joss Aikins of the Stargazers Dance Band; and Joe Mensah of Chief Bill Friday's Ambassador Downsbeats, who came into the limelight in Lagos, Nigeria. And this is why his death calls for great concern and sympathy in this country.

It is however sad that the information is reaching Nigerians two months after his demise. But his own situation appears to be better than that of Chief Bill Friday, Joe Mensah's own mentor who passed on in the seventies unsung and unmourned.

At least, a grand burial has been planned for Mensah today, involving not only the musicians union but also the entire culture sector of the Ghanaian society.

Joe Mensah deserves this recognition and acclaim because he contributed to the development and evolution of big band highlife. He did not lead a band as such, but had a good voice and a pleasant personality was admired by all, most musicians to action in the night club circuit.

Mensah's situation can be compared to the relationships between the Count Basie Orchestra and singer such as Joe Williams, Jimmy Rushing and Helen Humes who worked with the band at various times.

These singers became profoundly, vocalising with Count Basie because despite all the arrangements put in place by Basie himself in terms of textures, riffs and solo concepts, the singers enjoyed all the applause in terms of recognition because they were the ones who projected the band to the audience. They were in the forefront while the band provided the backing.