

Fan, the Voice

By Benson Idonije

Coming nine days after the burial of Afro-beat legend Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the death of Fran Kuboye, the legend's niece is a terrible shock and big surprise to every one. However, since death is a price which we are all bound to pay at a point in our lives, we all should be ready to succumb at any time without questioning the rational.

But the undeniable fact still remains that so soon after we lost an artistic colossus, Africa is missing another gem. Fran was a dental surgeon by professional calling, but she was better known for her artistic creativity as an outstanding female jazz singer.

I knew her since the Koola Lobitos days of the sixties when the family lived at 14A Agege Motor Road where it all began. As a young girl, she used to come home frequently on holidays from Britain; and each time she came she spent a considerable amount of time listening to the band's rehearsals with engrossed interest. I was not surprised that she eventually became a prolific jazz singer.

Fran projected to the optimum with a voice that was rich and naturally blues-oriented; and like most of the female jazz greats she had a way of reducing any song, whether it was in the conventional pop bracket or tainted with extraneous fusions, to the blues.

Basically rooted in Bessie Smith, elements of Sarah Vaughan were evident in her up tempo treatments of familiar songs which included W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," Duke Ellington's "In a mellow tone," among others. The influence of Ella Fitzgerald was strong and pronounced at medium tempos. When she performed ballads for instance, it was obvious that she had listened a lot to Billy Holiday. But underlying her overall performance in terms of mood and inflections was an individuality that combined all these influences into a style so forceful that she stood out as a female singer who displayed strength and ease at all the registers.

The reality of the situation was that her musical capacity was bigger than that of the Extended Family in terms of instrumental backing, individual solos, change-making with respect to chord progression, evocative phraseology, all of which a singer of her stature needs for inspiration and high fly.

I attended a number of the Jazz 38 sessions and I discovered that she was at her best when the late Afro-beat legend sat in with the Extended Family to double on tenor saxophone and piano. She was inspired by the myriads of ideas and phrases that were generated by Fela's saxophone; she was propelled by the piano which was in the Herbie Hancock - Red Garland tradition where he tripped into block chords.

Some of the best times of the Extended Family, and the period that gave Fran great opportunity for self expression was perhaps in 1980 when the group included Frank Fairfax on alto saxophone with Emmanuel Ngomali, perhaps the finest modern jazz pianist on the Nigerian scene, on the line up.

Frank Fairfax succeeded in elevating her mood with his strong, hard-driving alto saxophone sound while Ngomalio put down the chords and established a definitive progression for Fran to sing along.

Another brilliant performance was put up by Fran at the band's launching of "Jisting" in 1991 in a session that turned out to be the first CD to be produced in Nigeria. The music was obviously in the Afro-highlife, idiom but in her characteristic style, she succeeded in putting her stamp of authority on the vocalisation with a blue-oriented approach which has certainly endeared the CD to buyers across the globe.

I am not alone in this high opinion of Fran who has come a Long way. Femi Jarret, renowned artist manager who coordinated the efforts of the band for two years pays glowing tributes to Fran and her high level of musicianship.

Said he, "Fran is one of the most beautiful jazz singers this country has ever produced. For her, jazz came naturally. She was born with it. If you look at the stock from which she comes, it is not a surprise. To buttress my point, you find that Jazz 38 was a meeting point of all peoples - white, black, you name it."

"Everytime people came to Jazz 38, the focus was Frances Kuboye. Like Fela, I wonder who will fill her shoes in this Extended Family Band. Put my consolation is that I was privileged to work with a talent like Frances.

"When I managed the band during a period of launching of listing" the only album to her credit."

"There is somebody somewhere who is duely to take over from Fran; and that person is her daughter, Tamilore. Don't ask me how. I just know this. Time will tell because in Tamilore, the spirit of Fran will live on."

Certainly, Africa has lost perhaps the greatest female singer on the continent at a time when jazz singing has virtually disappeared, giving place to commercial efforts that are devoid of artistic creativity.