

Great highlife party... the rhythm moves on

By Benson Idonije

The organisers of the monthly Elders' Forum are gearing up for the 14th edition of this Great Highlife Party from 5pm-11pm on Sunday, November 24 at O'jezz Club, Onike, Yaba, Lagos with excitement and enthusiasm. This renewed commitment is informed by the spate of encouragement it is presently enjoying from home and abroad.

Last week Thursday, the highlife revival project took the centre stage on the Art Beat programme of the British Broadcasting Corporation's African Service. Even though not professionally articulated, the programme assumed the documentary format in which voice and sounds were used to reach actuality. The aim of the project was highlighted as well as its objectives and achievements so far.

Voices used included those of film maker-turned musician Ola Balogun who spoke at length about the emergence of Iroko as a musical force to be reckoned with on the new highlife scene. Titi Oguntoyinbo, a young female highlife singer who is presently blazing the trail helped to capture melodies of vintage highlife. She vocalised works from the Moribodo system of the late Crosdale Juba who died at the prime of his youth peak of his popularity in 1978.

Also given vocal treatment was Victor Olaiya's Sisi yen. A powerful singer with great promise, Titi sang these songs as inserts to confirm certain situation and buttress the trend of thought of the documentary. And she sang them with great feeling and emotion, adhering beautifully to melodic progressions and rhythmic configurations, even though there was no music to accompany her. As a result of its commitment to the on-going highlife revival project, METRO FM will be on the spot again on Sunday to record another session for eventual broadcast. New songs have been rehearsed by Tunde Osofisan, Alaba Pedro, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Maliki Showman and World Boye who featured in the last programme.

And new acts such as Apapa Jay and Jimi Solanke will be added to give the session a new feeling. Apapa Jay who spent over eleven years with Adeolu Akinsanya will be singing his mentor's songs while Jimi, who has his own individual compositions would be evoking the nostalgia of the sixties when he composed songs like Onilegogoro for the late Roy Chicago of the famous Rhythm Dandies.

The highlife revival project is also receiving acceptance outside Lagos. In Port Harcourt for instance, David Bull, Sony Brown and others are gearing up for another performance in Lagos while Chief Aiyegbeni, owner of the prestigious De Rovans Club at Ibadan is asking for a highlife performance. Himself a musician whose customary instrument is the saxophone, Aiyegbemi is asking for the big band configuration in which melodies are richly treated and the various instruments are given the opportunity of solo concessions.

Live performance of highlife is limited to O'jezz club alone in Lagos. At Nimbus Art Centre on Maitama Sule Street in Ikoyi, audience feasts on vintage groups, prominent among them, Orlando Julius who also has a night stand at the Golden Gate Restaurant, Ikoyi. Guitarist Alaba Pedro performs at two venues on the mainland, including a cosy spot in Surulere and Ellas Hotel, Ebute Metta where highlife enthusiast Segun Moyela slumped and died a couple of months ago.

Only the other day, veteran broadcaster and musician Yinka Craig was toying with the idea of moving the highlife revival project which has O' jez Club, Yaba as its base round to other venues. He suggested Tarzan on the Island and Coliseum at Ikeja.

These are brilliant ideas arising from an awareness that has taken root. These are moves that are indicative of the people's feeling about the direction, which our musical culture should go. Incidentally, these moves are tending towards the recreation of the highlife years of the fifties and sixties when the music was performed in all the clubs. Highlife is essentially a night club thing with sociological implications underlining it.

And the interesting thing about the music in those days was that because various musicians in different clubs in various styles performed it, one could go round all the venues listening and dancing to highlife all the way without getting bored.

Because of obvious proximity, the starting point for me in those days was Empire Hotel where the music of Stephen Amechi and his Rhythm Skies was heard and danced to in its original and traditional form. A performance of Igbo Kamga, a blueeytype highlife composed and sung by the late saxophone player Chike Emegokwe did not only give one food for thought, it also provided some inspiration.

Directly opposite Empire Hotel and adjacent to 14A Agege Motor Road where Fela lived was Lido bar where Charles Iwegbue unleashed one of the most powerful trumpet sounds of that period. Providing, indigenous Nigerian settings for the aggregation he named Achibogs, he played a highly original type of highlife that had a large following among whites who were also attracted to the place by the large population of women of easy virtue.

The next place of call towards Yaba was Ambassador Hotel, Sabo where Bobby Benson once played but was now taken over in the early sixties by the Ambassador Down Beats led by ex-Bobby Benson jam session trumpeter, Chief Bill Friday who also sang. But he launched out with an all