

Omowura, colossus of african music

By Benson Idonije

The first time I heard Ayinla Omowura in actual performance was in a recording session at EMI's Oregon studios. This was in the 70s and it was a colourful and exciting session replete with all the trappings of talent and artistic creativity.

The great exponent of Apala and colossus of African music was there with his entire group and the recording engineer specially assigned to the band because he was used to their antics. Strong drinks were bandied about the studio like ice cream as people drank straight from bottles, and the already charged atmosphere was given high energy by the poignant smell of marijuana - all in a bid to stimulate inspiration and enhance performance.

I saw raw talent and artistic motivation at their best as three albums of 36-minute duration were recorded effortlessly at a go, with the session flowing naturally and smoothly, unhampered by unnecessary breaks arising from musical lapses. No time was wasted on adherence to chord progressions and performance in any particular keys. There were no music scores, neither were the songs written down for all to know the order of performance. The whole thing was written in the mind; and as soon as the first percussive note was struck, the session took off with the call and response pattern in which Ayinla waited from one chorus to another, establishing social commentaries with thought-provoking proverbial and anecdotal lines.

Once he had cause for a retake, but instead of redoing the portion that did not sound satisfactory, he did it all over again. And this time, even though the rhythmic pattern was in the same racy, intricate fashion, the singing was not exactly re-enacted in the same progression, word for word. But the same message was conveyed and the same meaning was made - a true celebration of African music.

I stayed through till the end of the recording because I was carried away by the intricate complexities of his rhythms and the bluesy, down-to-earth voice that sang. I did not understand the message but the compelling sound of the ensemble and the artistic creativity of his vocal inflections registered an indelible impression on my mind. And this was against the background that before this exciting experience, I was only exposed to the gentle, conventional but majestic rhythms of Haruna Ishola, the unconventional style of Ligali Mukaiba from Epe, and the plain, matter-of-fact sound of Y.K. Ajadi.

The uniqueness of Anyinla Omowura's music was just beginning to attract public appeal and his popularity assuming legendary proportions when he died. As a matter of fact, at the time of his death in 1981, *Ebi kii pa'gun dojo ale*, one of his greatest albums, was enjoying tremendous popularity at the number four position of the then Radio Nigeria Top Ten Chart, whose idea was created by veteran broadcaster Ikenna Ndaguba.

His popularity was more pronounced at the grassroots level, and that is why it was more visible in areas, such as Mushin and Agege, where all the meat sellers, motor drivers and all looked forward to his new releases. He was a superstar, an institution and a great crowd-puller.

I had cause to attend one of his live shows at Mushin on the invitation of his recording company. I reached the concert venue alright, but before I could get to the stage, it was a lot of hassle as I was subjected to indignities and humiliation from his followership who physically barred people from getting through. There were three hurdles to cross. The first one at the periphery was that of dancers who jumped for joy to the music that floated through from the distance. The second was a group of bouncers and bodyguards hefty and foreocious-looking youths who drank and smoked freely. The final hurdle was posed by well-dressed men and women whose business it was to do the final screening before leading visitors to their seats. Such was the security arrangement put in place, and the magnitude of fan worship that he enjoyed. Needless to say that on stage he was power-charged and highly inspired.

Ayiola Omowura's death was premature and untimely, but he left a good number of albums behind. His first big hit was *Challenge Cup*, a social commentary on a football match involving Stationery Stores, with "Ode tio p'etrin a mura, also in the same album, helping to consolidate his acceptance. Hit albums, which are also of evergreen interest, are *Owo tuntun*, *Abode Mecca*, *Eyin Oselu wa*, *Egbo tuntun*, *were were la fin s'ere wa*, *Shaki n se bi ora*, *Awa kii se olodi won*, a posthumous release, among others.

A foremost African musician, Ayinla's influence is beginning to manifest itself on the youth and their execution of the various social music forms of today, a trend which is a glaring testimony to his innovativeness, and the depth of his creativity.