

# Remembering Nico Mbarga

By Benson Idonije

Judging by the philosophy of today's broadcasting and the prevailing attitude to programme production under the guise of "accepted standards of modern day broadcasting," it is unlikely that the next generation of broadcasters will have any professional tradition to fall back on.

Prince Nico Mbarga, author of the monumental hit that rocked the whole world in 1977 died on Tuesday, June 24. Up till now, at least in Lagos area, no station has come up with a befitting memorial programme in his honour. It is a shame that even the BBC mentioned it last weekend and played "Sweet Mother" as a mark of its popularity all over the world but at home here we have more regard for foreign musicians than our own artistes who are contributing invaluable to the development of our culture.

Ray Power 100 FM is the most popular radio station around today, at least in Lagos area; and if it truly realises the tremendous amount of listenership it attracts, the station would rethink its approach to programming for its target audience to embrace everybody, both young and old instead of ministering essentially to the youth whose main interest is foreign popular music. Otherwise, the late Nico Mbarga should have been enjoying concerted and well deserved air play by now, just like Bob Marley did for a whole week last month. The excuse has always been lack of knowledge engendered by generation gap; and ignorance is no excuse in these matters.

The Guardian group raked up a big scoop on Mbarga last Sunday many thanks to the Editor himself and his assistant who took keen interest in the prompt investigation and publication of the story a comprehensive one which should be a source of reference to the electronic media for building memorial programme. But no one has really taken advantage of this facility.

Radio relies on music for the sustenance of most of its airtime; and this is even more so in these days of commercial broadcasting. It is traditionally believed that no matter the amount of royalties the musicians gets from air play, radio cannot do without his music. For this reason radio stations owe it a duty to acknowledge their endeavours and honour them especially when they die, just by devoting some amount of air time to their music and celebrating their demise. It is a moral obligation which has become a tradition.

More importantly, this last respect in terms of tribute becomes the more imperative considering the artist's target area. Let us not forget that the overriding aim of broadcasting is the promotion of culture.

The late Mbarga might not be the greatest musician in the country, but talking about international hits from Africa, a subject which "Sound and Screen" discussed and concluded last week, he is the author of the biggest hit so far from Africa. What is more "Sweet Mother" is an ideal hit in the sense that production was not done with the foreign record-buying public in mind, with a production approach that is western-oriented. Rather, it was articulated with all artistic honesty from the African point of view; and yet it attracted mass international appeal.

Mbarga tried hard in his life time to equal the standard of "Sweet Mother" in terms of appeal and sales, but he never came close to it until his death.

Cynics might see "Sweet Mother" as a fluke and a flash-in-the pan, but beyond it, Mbarga was a revolutionary musician. Apparently inspired by the Congo-Zairean guitar concept, he evolved and popularised the "Iwokhulikwo" idiom, influencing a whole generation of heart-throbbing guitar pickers who attempted to provide an exciting alternative to highlife, among them Ikenga super stars. Oriental Brothers and Oghere super.

Mbarga may mean little or nothing to this generation, but he means a whole lot to our culture which he has boosted and sold to the outside world. Certainly all the people whose lives he touched all over the world in 1977 are bound to see his death as a painful loss, at the age of 47.

However, Africans must learn to celebrate their artistes; and it behoves the electronic media to lead the way and create the awareness.