

# Restoring the beauty of Highlife

By Benson Idonije

All the efforts made over the years to return highlife to its pride of place in our cultural music setting have been futile. And yet, more than ever before, it has become necessary for highlife to flourish.

Concerned media watchers from the publication imprint have written excellent essays, lamenting the gradual demise of highlife and advocating a revival. Even though its best cannot be considered good enough, the electronic media has done a lot to bring back the nostalgia of highlife so that it can be appreciated by the younger generation.

In this regard, NTA's Top Celebrities and lately Stars of the Tube are shining manifestations. The former is a true exposition of talent and creativity, but the latter is more of an formation interview that probes the musical profile of veterans.

However, Bala Millers's efforts have proved rather impressive because he has always used the Pyramids to introduce; new perspectives and bring highlife to contemporary level in terms of arrangement, choice of artistes and material.

On radio, the efforts of the likes of Ikenna Ndaguba, a veteran broadcaster and great lover of highlife, did a lot to motivate us into promoting highlife in the 80s, an effort that gave rise to well-researched programmes like Best of Highlife which I later handed over to the late John Ndisika, a highly committed and devoted broadcaster who handled the programme in specialised manner until his death recently.

Various other stations have played highlife and tried to give it a boost, but in recent years, because of their overtly commercial policies, most of them merely did so to comply with the stipulated 'percentage' handed down by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission.

Veteran musician and broadcaster Steve Rhodes has contributed immensely to the development and survival of highlife. Since the 60s, he has been promoting highlife through concert performances for the bands to be able to examine their styles, approaches and individuals side by side.

I remember the highlife competition he organised in 1965 at the Federal Palace Hotel, featuring Rex Lawon, Roy Chicago and His Rhythm Dandies, Fela Ransome-Kuti and His Koola Lobitos, among others. The late Eddy Okonta stole the show at a recent concert at Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, in which Steve.

Rhodes musically and professionally told the story of highlife from its genesis to date. These shows were intended to bring about a sense of competition in a bid to improve professional performing standards. But perhaps Steve Rhodes's greatest contribution is his revitalisation of highlife, using the "Voices" to achieve this objective over the years.

Efforts have also been made by groups like Wura Fadaka and lately Lagbaja whose music is essentially highlife; but they have failed to make the desired cultural impact because their music is not convincing enough. It is existing solely for its entertainment value.

Wura Fadaka relies on folk-songs and old tunes that have filtered into the public domain circuit. Cohesive as the rhythm is and melodic as their harmonies sound, the combination of guitar, percussion and a saxophone does not reflect the ultimate reality and nature of highlife, which is customarily identified with the orchestral sound that emanates from trumpets, trombones, saxophone as frontline instruments, with a guitar-bass-drums format at the rhythm section level.

Obviously, the band is operating as a combo for economic reasons, just like the sensational Lagbaja who plays one saxophone against keyboard, guitar, bass and percussion, masquerading his way through with a gimmick of circumstance.

Both bands are musically innovative, but the music cannot inspire a scene from an authentic and lasting point of view. It cannot lay the foundation for a highlife revival.

Maybe we should borrow a leaf from the Francophone countries of Africa which are miles ahead with their own brand of highlife that continues to be dynamic, earthy and contemporary.

Call it the rumba beat. Soukous, Congo-Zairean music, makossa, jive, jazz and whatever else you like, the music is moving. And the death in 1989 of Franco, the colossus of African music who has been the source of inspiration, did not in anyway prevent the scene from forging ahead. Rather, it spurred it to action and served to inspire a music industry that has become so vibrant and active that it has produced many young, creative musicians who are now entertaining the whole world and promoting the culture of Africa.

What I think we should do in concrete terms to create a highlife culture is to establish a television band - and NTA and AIT should explore the possibility.

The band will be led by a trained musician who is versed in arranging and composing with a bias for jazz and popular music. The TV band should devote its full time to rehearsing for weekly programmes. It should not be an occasion for re-enacting old highlife songs. Where they do, the songs should be revitalised with new arrangements. Essentially, the band should rely on its own compositions.

To sustain the programme, bandsmen ought to be highly paid because they are professionals who can read scores. Their remuneration would come from sponsorship by some of our willing oil and multi-national companies that can afford to contribute towards the promotion of our culture.

The television band ought to serve as a period of apprenticeship for perfecting the art of our young instrumentalists, after which they could move out to form private bands, if they wish. Their places would be filled by new entrants from time to time.

The programme is bound to have a multiplier effect in the sense that it will produce seasoned musicians for the scene. As a reference point and a pool to draw from, it will inspire younger musicians into learning to play horn instruments, instead of falling back.