

Succeeding the masters

By Benson Idonije

The unrestrained frequency with which star musicians disappeared from this earth to the great beyond in recent times is frightening and shocking. The situation is beginning to give entertainment watchers great concern, especially as all the victims of death are innovators, major influences and heavy weight musicians.

Maybe the shock should be absorbed and accepted with equanimity and philosophical calmness in view of the fact that death is a necessary end which will surely come to all of us at one point or the other. But what is really worrisome is that there are no followers to take over from these musicians, and as such the continuity of our musical evolution is at stake, the perpetuation of our cultural heritage is in danger.

Highlife King E.T Mensah and juju maestro I.K Dairo died in 1976; and since this year a long list of musicians including Eddie Okonta, Prince Nico Mbanga, Fela Anikulapo Kuti and lately Fran Kuboye have joined their ancestors.

Even before the exit of E.T Mensah and Eddi Okonta, highlife had been on the decline because most of the practioners themselves failed to revitalise it for the sake of updating it and identifying the music with the changing times. But Eddi Okonta tried his best within the limits of possibilities to introduce new perspectives to highlife. In later years Eddie had a regular Friday night show at the end of every month at Buka Hotel in Surulere where numerous fans listened to him in big band style as he injected new ideas into highlife. Using "Bisi," his popular hit of the seventies as a reference point, he created rhythmic patterns and melodies in concert which attracted his old fans as well as young audiences to the dance floor. One would have thought that this new sound would arouse the interest of young musicians for exploitation and continuity, but it apparently did not make any such impact on them. They all prefer imitative foreign music which often leaves them with the line of least resistance through the use of cold machines. Apart from the Steve Rhodes Voices and Lagbaja, I have not heard any refreshing highlife from any group for a long time.

I.K. Dairo won an MBE in 1960 for his great musicianship and creative performance of juju music, and was consistent until he died. His career did not experience any progressive evolution as such but the highlife oriented style he created for juju music and the refreshing revitalisation he gave to "Salome," perhaps his biggest hit, in later years, was enough to inspire the young generation. Instead, they are more interested in unmusical fads and up tempos that defy categorisation because they are neither here nor there. Juju music is suffering a pitiable and worse fate than highlife because the exponents have all the potentials for elevating the music, but they all seem to be confused without definite focus.

The late Fela Anikulapo Kuti has a lot of disciples who are capable of keeping the spirit of the music alive. And the likes of Femi, Kola, Dede, Bisade and Olajide who all have their various groups are currently hantling for definite identities within the framework of Fela's Afro beat. I wish all of them well because, after all, every musician usually starts by initiating the mentor of his influence. It is the ability of eventually strike out on his own and establish an individuality that is the hallmark of a creative musician. However, the seeming inconsistency of Lagbaja may be capable of raking in immediate commercial

success, but it does not augur well for a sense of direction and the perpetuation of Afro beat.

Prince Nico Mbarga made his fame with "Sweet mother", perhaps the biggest hit ever recorded in Africa. And for it to be recognised all over the world, it must have a lot in it to offer musically. For some, rhythm was the attraction - in the Congo - Zairean idiom; and for others, the message was the motivating factor especially as it extolled the virtues of a mother.

These musical attributes are propulsive enough to inspire the young generation into developing the 'Ikwokilikwo' sound. But, apart from the efforts of Ikenga superstars and perhaps Oliver De Coque which have fizzled out, nothing has been done in this direction ever since.

Fran Kuboye bowed out only last Thursday, and by her death, the country has lost a great jazz singer. Incidentally this is an area for musicians whose preference for artistic fulfilment overrides all other considerations. And in these times when commercial music is the order of the day, it is difficult for any one to follow in Fran's heels, let alone step into her shoes.

In an ideal music industry, the scene is so filled with artistes of varying talents that the question of succession is a natural phenomenon which emerges from a mechanism that is also naturally put in place. In this ideal situation, art and culture are given the pride of place in the scheme of things; the people's culture is allowed to dominate and control their lives; and the artist is held in high esteem.

The successors to our great musicians living or dead cannot emerge because they are just not there. What we are experiencing now is the cumulative effect of a gradual erosion of our cultural heritage in favour of foreign orientation. And until our system pays special attention to the evolution of our culture, to the point of giving it all the recognition and importance it rightly deserves, genuine artistic creativity cannot be enthroned.