

The thunderous drums of 'Guy Warren'

By Benson Idonije

He used to be Guy Warren of African. Now he is Kofi Ghanaba, and he is about the most committed cultural and ideological artistes in Africa today. He was part of the formative process of African popular music in the thirties, and has been actively involved in its development and evolution to date.

In line with this artistic philosophy, Kofi Ghanaba is headlining a large contingent of artistes on a visit to Lagos. For four days, in December, Ghana's consuming passion for cultural promotion will be demonstrated at the MUSON centre when over thirteen musical and dance drama troupes perform, courtesy Lagos-based promotion outfit D' African Perspective.

It is among others, aimed to "forge greater understanding and cooperation as well as serve as a catalyst for socio-economic development." But the one objective that brings back pleasant memories of the past is the fact that the cultural festival is designed to build on the cultural commonalities between the two countries. And the commonality that readily comes to mind is 'highlife', which the Tempos Band, led by E.T. Mensah introduced to Nigeria in 1949.

History may well be repeating itself as, leading this cultural revival is Kofi Ghanaba who as Guy Warren cofounded the Tempos Band.

In actual fact, his association with E.T Mensah started from the late thirties when, together they assembled the Africa Rhythm Orchestra, a fifteen piece band with five saxophones, at a time when there was a preference for horn solos.

Guitars played a background role as part of the rhythm section, and the technically evolving rhythm that emerged gave highlife its character during these formative years. The rhythmic concept of the music was determined by Guy Warren who swung this big band at the drums.

E.T. Mensah and Guy Warren came together again in 1947 to form the first version of the Tempos Band led at the time by Pianist Joe Kelly. Propelled by the urge for new musical horizons and desire for more adventurous sounds, Guy Warren went abroad, to Britain and America to play with the great saxophonist Kenny Graham where Afro Cuban interpretations infused Latin elements into jazz.

Kofi Ghanaba's visit, if fully exploited and taken advantage of, is capable of bringing with it a cultural revival in the area of highlife like E.T. Mensah did 48 years ago.

Some of the young groups on the cultural bill play highlife that is far removed from its colonial traits. It is a new wave sound that is totally steeped in Ghanaians and African culture. Some of these groups have featured regularly on the bill of the Union of Radio and Television Network of Africa (URTNA). The highlife rakes up the melodic and rhythmic elements of Ghana's cultural music with well executed horns and guitars to give it international appeal.

At 74, Kofi Ghanaba is still waxing strong, vibrating with cultural awareness. A lot can be gained from his experience acquired over decades.

A widely acknowledged drummer, he is not only the greatest, most experienced percussion man in Africa, he is widely recognised on the international scene where he is admired by some of the greatest musicians and drummers on the jazz scene.

Critics often refer to Art Blakey of the Jazz Messengers as the "unquenchable fire stoker," possessing the "dynamic force of six African drummers." But Blakey himself conceded superiority to Ghanaba as the "personification of the emergent drums of Africa," referring to his drumming technique as "overwhelmingly explosive," the "sound of thunder". And this was after listening to his Emergent Drums album recorded in 1963 and published in 1964 by Columbia Records. A solo effort, he played all the instruments, drums, conga, African bamboo flute, piano and sang.

There are eight songs in the album, all composed by Guy Warren and featuring Hail Osagyefo, Recital for flute and drums" Akwapim theme, Blind boy, blue flute, Prajna, Babinga Banezele, a congo pygmy drum suite, and Agasinga, dedicated to the memory of Lumumba.

The entire session is not just one in which the percussive voice of Ghana is showcased. In it the voice of Africa speaks through the sound of Kofi Ghanaba.

The liner notes were painstakingly written by Warren himself and they explain in vivid terms the manner in which multiple overdubs were achieved in the process of recording all the instruments, the circumstances that informed choice of material, the geographical locations and scene in Africa which provided inspiration, and the different moods and situations that the various drumming approaches set out to capture.

In his own words 34 years ago, Guy Warren summed up the implications of this artistic effort: "This music you hear now paints you a picture of what is happening in Africa today, not forgetting what happened yesterday. Many lives have been lost. Many homes have been broken. But out of chaos will yet rise the power of the new African."

These tales of woe are more true and relevant today than they were in 1963. The power of the "new African" may yet lie in his cultural awareness.