

The African music patriots

By Benson Idonije

A quiet revolution is gradually taking place on the Nigerian music scene. A new cultural awareness is building up. The educated youth are embracing and evolving a genre that is bound to be Africa's internationally accepted form of popular music. Call it the 'new wave' or the 'new music.' Don't label it jazz - oriented. The patriotic name to call it is 'African music'; and this is quite fitting and appropriate.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the pioneer and innovator of this trend has been a major force and influence, crusading the genre alone for years, but as a reflection of the desires of the discerning public and the entire society who are usually responsible for determining the course of events, vibrant, forceful and creative sounds are coming, in recent times, from such exponents as Femi Kuti, Bisade Ologunde, Dede Mabiaku, Kola Ogunkoya, Kayode Olajide, Duro Kujenyo, Demola Olukotun, among others - crop of young, talented musicians exploiting rhythms from various cultural settings and backgrounds; deriving melodies from the exposition of African culture and tradition; generating harmonic progressions that are steeped in jazz.

A lot has been said by critics, especially about those of them who are in the forefront.

Whatever anybody says, the musician is the architect of his own fortune because he is responsible for actualising all his capabilities within the limits of creative possibilities. All the same, he should not ignore criticisms, especially when they are objective and borne out of experience; such criticisms should be carefully examined and given serious thought.

There is nothing in a name, you may argue. What is important is the music. This is true, only to some extent because just as product-packaging is important as a presentation technique for attracting attention to the product and giving it a likeable image, a band that is competing for international acceptability must allow its name to reflect the music in terms of origin and identity. This is why labels like 'Positive Force', 'Weavers,' and 'Higher Life' cause me some discomfort.

I believe that Fela's example should be a lesson to all. He took highlife to America in 1969 with the 'Koola Lobitos.' And because the music was not accepted for reason of the fact that it is not African, he immediately shifted the concept to African - oriented music. As if that was not enough, he was forced by the same prevailing circumstances to change the faceless 'Koola Lobitos' to 'Africa 70,' for the sake of identity. And that was the beginning of his success story.

It has become obvious that highlife as a music genre is not African, even though its flavour continues to spice all African forms of music to give it commercial viability. So 'Higher Life' as a label is not good packaging for a band whose music is African, especially in today's terms.

By way of documenting history, highlife originated from Ghana, and at the peak of its popularity engendered by the likes of E.T. Mensah's Tempos Band Black Beats, Star Gazers, Red Spots, Rhythm Aces, among others, the country's culture was highly boosted. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's head of State at the time and some patriotic individuals made an efforts to change 'high life' to a label that truly depicted the country's cultural heritage. Osibisiba, the name of an indigenous Ghanaian rhythm was offered to replace the English 'highlife,' but because it was not officially enforced, it did not catch on.

After all, the music did not derive its name originally from any concrete relevance to the artform itself. It came into existence by some circumstantial off-chance. Highlife was essentially a night club type of music where clubs were posh and well decorated, with bars stocked with all kinds of exotic drinks. Conditions for admission were stringent in those days as the gate fees were high and not within the reach of the poor; clients had to be coupled; compled suits with bowler hats to match or full native dress were advocated. Only the elite who fulfilled these conditions gained admission, causing a host of music lovers who could not pay their way to remain outside where they listened and danced to the highlife that floated through the rooftops. And with a mixture of envy and admiration they told the privileged elite as they went in. "You enjoy highlife." That, simply is the genesis of the tag, highlife.

This new music requires a good knowledge of jazz, and the whole essence of jazz is improvisation, an artistic feat which is acquired through natural talent, a good knowledge of chord progression, and the mastery of a chosen instrument through long hours of daily practice, involving scales and exercises.

Duro Kujenyo has become a brilliant individualist, a virtuoso keyboardist who knows his chords. I listened to him last week at the 70th anniversary jazz night of Yoruba Tennis Club, playing with the Extended Family led by Fran and Tunde Kuboye. However, generally lacking in all the new wave' groups is improvisational concept. All we hear is an exercise in thematics, a situation where soloists are saying nothing, unable to make the desired changes.

Femi is beginning to have confidence in himself as he has found his feet with 'Wonder Wonder,' Kayode Olajide is forging a new and exciting cultural direction; Bisade has potentials for improvisation with his beautiful tone - an attribute that points to a very bright future. But he has tendencies for indulging in overtly commercial performances, a phenomenon which gives a musician instant popularity, behind the facade of which lies a false sense of security. This same phenomenon is capable of affecting the life span of a musician because it does not stimulate the futuristic expectation of the public.

All told, this man has all the makings of a superstar of international magnitude. May be what Lagbaja needs now is to disentangle himself from gimmicks of circumstances and be himself, unmask and blow that horn!