

The Music behind the Mask

By Benson Idonije

Contrary to the views of critics who have taken Lagos to task over his new work, the music has several remarkable aspects to it. It is one of the few new things to emerge on the scene since Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Except that the performance has some inconclusiveness about it that smacks of lack of total professional accomplishment, making it sound like mere experimentation.

The basic treatment exhibited in all the three CDs smacks of creative ideas, imagination and profound talent all of which if well harnessed and accomplished could make Lagbaja the next innovator after Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Emmanuel Tetteh Mensah of Ghana who are now being remembered for their exploits with Afrobeat and highlife respectively.

As a work of art, Lagbaja's new music has a freshness about it that is inviting. And because the progression of the music is unpredictable, it has the potential for growing on the curious listener who is determined to find out where the artist's coming from, and what he is up to.

The entire session revolves around highlife which he has given a typically Nigerian interpretation that is identified with contemporary times. Lagbaja sounds like an idealistic highlife who would take the music to great heights, developing along the lines of his own individual concept and musical ability.

Lagbaja is doing what the highlife exponents of old, among them E.T. Mensah, Victor Olaiya, Roy Chicago, Rex Lawson perfected in their time in terms of extending its musical structure and evolving it along with the dynamic nature of our musical culture. But these highlife greats played in the same structural and melodic form, thereby reducing highlife to a static level. They put highlife on the same pedestal with classical music which is more of the composer's art than the performers with legendary highlife tunes still being revered in their original state like the 'Operas' of Handel and the 'conatas' of Beethoven which have remained in the same performing state for centuries now.

Lagbaja is playing highlife from his enlightened musical perspective. He has even publicly acknowledged Peter King as one of his mentors but the truth is that he imbibed a lot of musical ideas and experience while playing bass guitar for one of Peter King's explosive Afro influenced groups. And because Peter is a prolific jazz instrumentalist, and arranger, these attributes rubbed off on Lagbaja who eventually switched over to the tenor saxophone an instrument which he plays very well.

Lagbaja is able to explosive highlife innovation obviously because of his musical background exactly the way Fela did with highlife in 1965 when he jazzed it up and later consolidates to approach into the rather robust sound identity crown today as Afrobeat.

Perhaps the first point going for Lagbaja is his profound interest in Nigeria's musical culture. His melodies and rhythms are steeped in the culture of the Yoruba people. And more than ever before, he has demonstrated this quality in his new work, a triple CD - set with *Gra gra* as the major song that is receiving public acceptance.

Gra gra is a simple song with some catchy rhythm which has been boosted for commercial appeal by a bassy sound buzz. It may not go down well with adults who are now being referred to as belonging to the "Old school". They are more interested in definitive tunes with definitive progressions and chord evergreens. But *Gra gra* is a chart material which would reflect on the hit parade on release because of the instant reaction of the record buying public which, in this case, is targeted at children below eighteen. And why not?

Simple though the song is, it has a beginning, a middle and an end. While the musical bars that constitute the beginning and the end carry the same repetitive lyrical lines in terms of call-and-response, the middle is very well structured and vocalised by a female voice in Urhobo dialect of Elta state, after which the song experiences some modulation. The only sad aspect of this exciting performance is that the message does not stand out.

Lagbaja has been sharply criticised for leaning on Fela in order to arouse commercial appeal in Abami, where he used the 'icons' statements to buttress his point. But in the first place, the context in which Fela's voice was used as reference point was relevant. Fela was a personification of African ideals and he also preached same. It is not at all out of place to exemplify the preference for African dishes with Fela Anikulapo Kuti who in fact made the point. Again, it is a befitting tribute to Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the anniversary of whose death fell Idue on August 2, and whose birthday is being anticipated on October 15 by Femi, Seun and the various other musicians and organisations.

Gra gra however has the instant appeal that is likely to rob the listener, especially the deejay of agidigbo, which is perhaps the most brilliant performance. From experience the deejay jeyes to play what the people want, and because he invariably does not have enough time to begin to listen to all the song in a "three-at-a-time" act such as I, we, and Abami, Lagbaja's new works, he would always go straight for *Gra gra* as the people's choice.

Agigidigbo is a beautiful highlife number reminiscence of the juju highlife tradition of musical giants such as Ambrose Campbell, Julius Araba and Ayinde Bakare. The song does not experience the big band treatment of modern highlife, neither would it be classed as guitar band highlife. But Lagbaja has established a big band format with the unusual configuration of vocals talking drums and rhythm instruments to create a robust highlife sound. The guitar is however the most important instrument in this setting and it has come up with beautiful palm wine chorus in terms of backing but the

beauty of it all appears to be lost because the guitar sound is suppressed, restrained and inhibited its intensity.

This is a production point which has affected almost all the songs except *Gragra*. The talking drums and Lagbaja's voice seem to overshadow all the other acts. And even though Lagbaja has lent a dramatically cultural voice to singing, his voice appears to unnecessarily exhibit 'vibratos'.

However, selecting all the songs for review works certainly amount to repetition and duplication because in the first place, apart from *Gra gra* and *Agididigbo* the other works are similar in terms of melodic inventiveness and structural configuration. And the reason is quite obvious.

It is difficult for any one artiste to record one album successfully without repeating himself. It must take some time. It takes time to structure the melodic frame. It is even more tedious and tasking to find poetic words to fit into this structure the melodic frame words to fit into these structures as lyrics with appropriate messages. Lagbaja was bound to repeat himself.

Whatever informed the idea of a three CD-set, care should have been taken to come up with distinct melodies - in which case it should have been accomplished over a long period. Usually such accumulations happen more with art music, and not with popular music which is easily dated. It is also alright with re-issues. But what is the whole idea here?

John Lennon and Paul McCartney jointly wrote songs for the Beatles for decades. And as prolific as they were, despite the fact that it was a joint effort, they never released two songs at a time, not to talk of albums.