

The ever new Ebenezer Obey

By Benson Idonije

Ebenezer Obey may not possess the charismatic attributes of a stage performer. His music may not be capable of arousing the kind of instant reaction associated with chartbursting flukes. But his repertoire has the potentials for growing on his audience, and making a lasting impression, to the point of becoming evergreen - an indication that he is deep and creative, and that his influence on the juju music scene is formidable and tremendous to say the least.

From 1963 when he released *Olomi Gbo Temi* and *Gbebe Mi*, his style was in the idiom of his mentor and former band leader, Fatai rolling Dollar with whom he served a period of apprenticeship before striking out on his own. But he soon found his own direction and established his own individual sounds culminating in the big hit, *Board Members* around 1972.

As an innovator, he was responsible for introducing three guitars and the western drum kit to the scene, thereby concluding the transformation of juju music from its neo-traditional status to an urban social music type.

The timelessness of his music came to public notice in 1980 when I was producing a hit parade programme for Radio Nigeria 2. On monthly basis we tried to determine the ten best selling records in the Lagos area of the country with the services of a research and marketing company which did a scientific survey by delineating all the record shops in Lagos to three categories - small, medium and large. During the month, especially on weekends, the research company detailed its operatives to the various shops and waited for customers to physically buy records. On their way out they handed over to the researchers the details of the records, title, artist and label, which the researchers recorded. On addition, the sex, age, religion and tribe of record buyers were also recorded by research agents who collated these data at the end of the month to determine the best ten selling records, and who bought what.

Although Sunny Ade topped the charts most of the time with albums like *Searching For My Love*, *Check E* and others, Ebenezer followed closely, consistently with such albums as *Eyi Yato*, *Leave Everything to God*, among others.

In addition to this consistency, we discovered that his records never left the top ten no matter how old. We also noticed that his previous records kept appearing on the Top Twenty which the extent of research reflected for unofficial use. Album like *Obey in the sixties*, *Board Members* and a host of others were forever in the charts, a clear indication that these evergreens were still in demand.

It is not surprising that Ebenezer Obey is now an evangelist, well grounded in the work of God. From the beginning he was always gentle, unassuming and religious, a trait which most of his records portrayed even before he ventured into gospel juju music. All his compositions are generally well thought out with messages that have morals to teach even though, like the others he was also involved in praise singing in the seventies, as exemplified by his album headlines *Iwa Ika ko Pe* where he dedicated a track to "Jinadu" "Recorded in 1974 in the usual long, undemarcated groove which allows for party time danceability, there are twelve songs running into one another in various tempos some popular favourites include *Maa Se Nso*, *Ninu*

Odun Tawa Yi Orimi Maje Nte, Imole De Eyo and Motun Gboro Agba De, among others.

This album is from the key days of the band, with performance and popularity at their peak, featuring the velvet voices of the like of Oke Aminu and Bode Akiwowo, percussion man Samson Ogunlade, and guitarists such as Monday John and Segun Awe, among others.

Like every other music genre juju music is passing through evolutionary phases, with all the groups after him subjugating it under the influences of modern rhythms and melodies, but Ebenezer Obey refused over the years to succumb to unnecessary dynamics. Instead he used these foreign influences to consolidate his orchestration without losing the same conventional, traditional juju sound.