

The music or the man

By Benson Idonije

Artistic gimmicks of circumstances have always existed in show business. They were there from the beginning and have continued to be a permanent feature with musicians. But none as I know, seems to have equalled Lagbaja's 'masquerading' device in terms of design, strategy and manifestation.

The purpose of this gimmick approach in showbusiness is to crave for identity, establish an image, and become different for the purpose of attracting attention in a profession where millions of people are daily competing for recognition and acceptability.

But having attracted attention, first with the sound, the fans need to know the superstars who turn them on as they have become idols and role models in some cases. And knowing them entails seeing them play live, getting them to sign autographs and so on; eye ball to eye ball, face to face.

Lagbaja is playing commercial music for entertainment and so needs to relate to his fans not only in terms of the sound of his music which has gone down well with fans, he needs to do so in an in-person situation. And for the audience to reciprocate, they must see his face.

If anything, avant-garde jazz musicians who play weird music for creative listening should be hiding their identities, not an entertainer like Lagbaja. Every musician has his or her own gimmick of circumstance but it is usually manifested within the limits of reasonableness and rationality. Examples abound at home here in Nigeria and abroad.

Miles Davis used to turn his back on the audience and when it was his turn to take trumpet solos. At a point he even resorted to walking out of stage after his solo stints, to come back when it was time to state the theme of the songs and finish. He once explained that his music was more important to the audience and that he was not an entertainer. He further stated that he moved out of stage while the side men utilised their solo opportunities, to give them the chance to concentrate, adding that he could not be standing looking on, doing nothing as it were while they improvised. These explanations might not be acceptable, but they were gimmicks designed to hold the members of audience who loved him as a result.

Aside from Fela Anikalapo Kutis' Pan Africanist philosophy and activism, he was a maverick and an iconoclast. In order to create a sensation he announced his marriage to 27 wives, a number which astounded the entire world.

While at Empire Hotel from where the 'African Shrine' really started operating in the early seventies to honour his night club dates, he had to ride on horseback from his house which was only a walking distance to the other side of his 13A Agege Motor Road residence. And while he crossed the busy highway to go to the club on horseback, traffic would be halted to a standstill. In addition to the members of the neighbourhood which came to see him, motorists parked their cars to catch a glimpse of the Afrobeat King. All these were gimmicks of circumstances, the culmination of which eventually turned him into an institution because of the consistency of his artistic development.

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Highlife veteran Victor Olaiya had one of the finest bands around in those days. At the peak of his popularity when he played at big events he had this gimmick of lying face upwards together with all the horn men, to play their instruments. The microphone might not pick the music directly for proper sound balancing. And while they lay on the floor, they played the same notes and passes that they were capable of creating while standing upright. But it was seen as a feat, which in fact earned Victor Olaiya the honorary doctorate degree when he played in an oversea country in those days.

Eddy Harris was a fine saxophonist, in the Charlie Parker mould who played brilliantly with big bands as well as small groups. In the early seventies when jazz fusion was earning commercial success for the like of Herbie Hancock, Grover Washington Junior and Hank Crawford, Eddy Harris emerged on the scene with soul-rock treatments of songs like I need some money, Get on down, Bumpin. That's it among others, in which he doubled on vocals with an edge over the others. But when he realised that Grover Washington and George Benson were introducing elements of vocals into their songs, he came up with another device; that of electricifying the sound of the saxophone. In doing this he built an amplifier into the saxophone, and the gimmick did not only increase the intensity of the sound, it also gave the sound identity an unusual and queer texture which attracted commercial attention. He was reviled by critics for compromising his music just as Herbie Hancock was put down for breaking through with Head hunters, but Harris was the better for it. He smiled to the bank.

The first soul group to emerge on the Nigerian scene during the soul era of the late sixties was the Soul Assembly led by keyboardist, guitarist, singer Segun Bucknor. A very fine singer Segun Bucknor projected songs like "How sweet it is" and Hayes and Porter's "Hold on I'm coming" made popular by Junior Walker and the dynamic duo of Sam and Dave respectively. The band was swung at the drums by Summit-Smart Cole.

However, in the wake of the seventies when African music began to gain grounds with Fela Anikulapo Kuti setting the pace, Bucknor's direction changed towards Afro rock. In order to back this trend with same ideological image, he came up with a clean shaven, dome head like Isaac Hayes which gave him the perception that he wanted of himself "Adanri Sogba Sogba."

Gimmick of circumstances are necessary because they help to motivate the artiste, fire his imagination and institutionalise people's perception of him. But they should not be over exaggerated to the point of isolating the artiste from the people.