

## The real sound masters

By Benson Idonije

Perhaps because of the vibrant nature of the American scene, fans sometimes fall over themselves in the desperate bid to secure autographs from such producers as Quincy Jones, Baby Face and H.B. Barmum among others in celebration of their greatness. Inadequate though this gesture seems, it is still superior to the experience here where the likes of Lemmy Jackson and Odiom Iruoje are hardly talked about.

Iruoje, for instance, has international reputation in the profession, having produced stars from home and abroad. The list is really long, and they include Manu Dibango in connection with his famous Home Made album of 1979. He produced South Africa's High Masekela and the famous Hetoleh Sound which was recorded in Ghana. Paul McCartney, former member of the Beatles who recorded Band on the Run in Nigeria in the seventies; Sonny Okosun and his very initial hit, Helpi Chris Okotie and the 1982 smash hit, I Need Someone: Bongos Ikwue with Otachi popo; Tony Grey's Ijudo: Tee Mac's Mixed Grill; BLO's Chapter One album; Sunny Ade, Blackman Akeeb Kareem as a Decca artist, Fela Anikulapo Kuti as an EMI recording star; Haruna Ishola's Apala Disco recorded on Phonodisk with the inclusion of the trap drums as an added innovation; Ayinla Omowura, Lijadu Sisters, Nico Mbarga Garaldo Pino and many more. Explaining the role of the producer, Odion says: "Simply put, a producer picks up raw material from the artist, polishes it and makes it more attractive for the market as a finished product." When a producer comes across an artist with talent, he listens to the material with a view to finding out the magnitude of this talent, the strong and weak points - whether these talents manifest in the area of composing, song writing, arranging or singing as the case may be. These are some of the elements that will inform the direction in which the artist's music should go. It is now the duty of the producer to recognize these talents, harness and develop them."

According to Odiom, from this point on, the producer and the artist work together, and in the process, the producer takes note of all the weak elements earlier discovered in order to make sure that they are rectified and perfected. It is when they are both sure that everything is in order through rehearsals and preparing the artist for the studio that the producer looks out for suitable session men who can adequately interpret the music."

Ideal recording facilities are very crucial to the success of any project, notes Iruoje, saying: "Apart from finding good session men the producer must ensure that an ideal studio is found - one that has good facilities acoustics to reproduce the material faithfully, exactly the way the producer and the artist want to hear it. The studio must have the right environment that can inspire everybody taking part in the production. Concluding, he says: "The role of the producer does not end until the record is released into the market. And in order for the producer's work to be financially rewarding he

continues to keep a watchful eye on promotion and marketing."

From this account, it is obvious that the producer is the brain behind any recording - from conceptualisation to actualisation. His expertise is capable of making or marring a record, and by implication, the career of an artist. For this reason the producer should be held in high esteem. He should share equal credits with the artist.

In the course of charting a sense of direction for the success of some new musical material, the producer takes certain decisions whose implications are not readily comprehensible to the layman but are informed by the producer's special training in terms of cultural curiosity, the natural flair for the profession and good ear for music. When in 1975 Manu Dibango needed an album with some home cooking from Nigeria, most people did not understand the rationale for moving the musicians from Lagos to Calabar by road for rehearsals. This cross country movement was to enhance the philosophy behind the recording Iruoje explains:

"Manu came from France, having listened to what I did with Fela at home here in the early seventies and asked me to work with him. He wanted an album with elements of African music - from the Nigerian perspective. I suggested Geraldo Pino's band for the session work. To achieve this aim, we travelled to a village in Calabar where the feeling of the music was thoroughly imbibed. There, we did all the rehearsals. We came back to Lagos to lay the tracks with Pino's boy and Zeal Onyia. By the time we got to France to do more overdubs, Manu and the new musicians were compelled to fall in line with the fascinating African rhythm established in Lagos, a feat they achieved by psychologically changing the orientation of the musicians back home. Home Made eventually became a big bit."

A more interesting scenario unfolded in 1987 over Odion's first recording project, on arrival from England- from a special training in production, acoustic, engineering and artist and repertoire management. He stood his professional grounds on the potential of late Ayinla Omowura's Apala music: His explanation: "On return to Nigeria in 1970 my first recording project was Ayinla Omowura's Danfo Osiere, an extended play which turned out to be a big hit."

"The late Taoridi Adedigba, himself a veteran music producer of our traditional idioms, introduced Ayinla Omowura to me. I listened to the music and was immediately fascinated by the unique style which was quite different from the conventional pattern of veteran Haruna Isola who had influenced every other exponent. They would not pass audition at the time unless they sounded like Haruna. But as soon as I heard Ayinla I took him to the studio because he had something new to offer."

EMI used to rely on the judgment of its sole distributor - like the other recording companies, in those days. They were the agents through whom the records went to the public for mass buying. The sole distributor rejected the record, but producer Odion Iruoje stood his ground on the product. "It was customary then for samples to be sent

to our sole distributor who at the time, was Alhaji Bolarinwa Abioro, a great name in the music industry, for approval." He rejected it on the grounds that it was not imitative of Haruna Isola who was the king of Apala, complaining that the voice was rough and harsh. But, I told him that these same elements that he disliked were the qualities that endeared Ayinla to me. He insisted he would not sell it. I did not give up because I believe strongly in the viability of the music. I went ahead to the then managing director of EMI to discuss the matter. He too took sides with the sole distributor.

"I then decided to give it to another distributor. But before I did, I sent the sample with an official letter to Alhaji Abioro saying that I would give the distributorship of the record to somebody else if he did not indicate his intention in writing within three weeks. He wrote back in no time to say that he did not want the product. Having documented it, I offered it to one Alhaji Adetunji of Omoaje Records at Ibadan, who was highly enthusiastic about the music. He asked us to press a thousand copies instead of the usual three hundred approved for new artists. He was supposed to take them to Ibadan, but on his way, he called at Mushin and Bariga to play the music to some record sellers. They were all sold out. He came back immediately to EMI to order for another 4,000 copies. And that was how Ayinla Omowura blazed into prominence.

THE GUARDIAN, Friday, December 11, 1998