

The skinning of highlife

By Benson Idonije

The beauty of highlife was in its orchestral setting and form. Then it was in its basic element, in the E-T Mensah.- Rex Lawson - Victor Olaiya tradition where frontline instruments were used to boost the ensemble sound as well as create combos. In Ghana where highlife was first made popular, it is rightly referred to as guitar-band highlife, and in Nigeria it has transformed into juju and pockets of imitative highlife.

This evolution has been building up since the late 60's, but its full manifestation came to light in the early 70s with the likes of Warrior, Ebenezer Obey, Sunny Ade of Nigeria; and Akwaboa, Nana Ampadu and K. Gyasi of Ghana at the peak of its popularity.

The prevailing socio-economic situation brought with it a general state of lethargy in which musicians opted for the guitar, a much easier instrument to play than horn instruments which were also more expensive to purchase. It also required some level of literacy to cope with harmonic progression, arranging, and all the musical challenges posed by highlife band instrumentation. It was therefore more convenient to buy the guitar and the related percussion instruments of the band, an outfit which was also cheaper to maintain. Ironically, this kind of development occurred in the beginning, even though it was engendered in completely different circumstances by different influences.

At the dawn of highlife which was essentially a night club type of music, for the elite, there were talented musicians especially in the illiterate bracket who were inspired by the guitar they made their own has guitars, either to local designs of foreign imitations and sat down with bowls of palm wine, to pick out melodic lines of what they heard drifting out of the hotels. This lower class street entertainment known as palm wine music was made up of percussion and traditional drums to support the guitarist-singer who played what he heard with deep feeling, and because of his status, he identified more with the roots of traditional culture than highlife which had then just emerged from the prevailing elitist ball room dance music.

He had been exposed to a deep seated culture of guitar music that included the influence of 'Kru-men' from Sierra Leone, Sailors who played tunes which were known as 'Maringa' as they operated along the coastal regions of West Africa down as far as the Congo; and guitar idioms from South America.

But the palm wine style was perfected in Ghana for public entertainment by guitarists such as Kwame Asare, Kwa Mensah, Koo Nmo and made really popular by E.K. Nyame whose brilliant outfit was popularly referred to as EK's Band, as he played soulful and roots guitar, lead singing with a sonorous voice, and employing a group-vocal harmony style that was easily recognisable. Ralph Amarabem, a Nigerian from the Eastern part of the country ranked next in popularity as both of them recorded extensively for EMI records.

Similar forms and situations also evolved in Sierra Leone and especially Nigeria, where the likes of Tunde King, Ambrose Campbell, Okonkwo Adigwe, Paul Ede and Julius Araba and others became the prime moves.

These early practitioners in both countries influenced the generation of guitar bands that

later dominated the scene of the 70s; and from that time till date musicians have never wanted to have encounters with the horn instruments of the orchestra except the guitar which has become a short cut, and a line of least resistance:

However, the socio-economic factor that informed the preference for guitar-oriented music in the 70s was not limited to West Africa alone, it was a global phenomenon which affected pop groups as well as jazz bands. Popular music outfit which hitherto backed vocals with horn movements and arrangements now rely on group-vocal treaties, supported by synthesisers and moogs, big band jazz has thinned down to combo sounds.

There is now a dearth of guitar players and horn men on the West African scene, but the situation is different on the international scene where even though they do not aggregate in terms of musical groups, musicians are individually proficient from training in the various schools of music, and thank God Peter King now has an ideal school here in Lagos, where our musicians can train.

On the other hand, a lot depend on the will and determination of our musicians. After all, there were many horn men around in the 50s and 60s who all learnt from private arrangements, because they were interested.

Our musicians need to embrace the need to learn horn instruments, and in fact all the instrument of the orchestral. International focus is now on African music, and the guitar cannot-cope-with the possibilities and challenges of African music. They would need horns to fully exploit the various cultural elements; complex rhythmic patterns; and the artistic significance of African music.