

Uwaifo, giant of African Music

By Benson Idonije

Perhaps the biggest hit from Africa until Prince Nico Mbarga stormed the entire world with "Sweet Mother" in 1977 is "Joromi." Deeply rooted in Edo culture, it was created in the '60s by Victor Efosa Uwaifo, one of Africa's foremost musicians.

This time 30 years ago, the Melody Maestros led by singer guitarist, showman, composer Victor Uwaifo was making history at the peak of his musical performance, enjoying a popularity index that established him as one of the first to succeed in executing African music with western instruments without destroying its cultural essence. To this end, he employed horns, guitars and drums as the instruments of the orchestra, a phenomenon which was quite a contrast to Felas Koola Lobitos whose music though innovative and revolutionary, and tended to be sophisticated in the jazz highlife style.

Both hands emerged on the scene in 1965 to save highlife from its drabness; and ironically they were not competitors because they attracted different types of music. Felas followership was drawn from the enlightened, sophisticated youth, while Victor had his audience - pull from the grass roots as he treated them to heavy doses of "Akwete", an indigenous idiom which he discovered from the rich cultural heritage of Edo. The two bands also helped to widen the scope of highlife music in terms of rhythmic patterns.

A holder of the National award of MON for his commitment and dedication to the promotion of African music, the government also appreciated his efforts by sending him to represent Nigeria at the Black Arts Festival in Algeria in 1969.

One of Polygrams top recording stars, Victor Uwaifo has released singles and albums which have sold well enough to make him comfortable. He has since invested his fortunes and skills into a 16-track studio in Benin City from where he has been turning out albums over the years.

His popularity however started to decline in the seventies with competition from Afrobeat which became widely accepted, and in particular from Benin based Osayomore Joseph, a young musician who played in the same idiom but introduced elements of social commentary apart from the fact that he was more adventurous. All the same, Victor's music still exhibits maturity and experience acquired over decades of professional involvement.

I caught Victor Uwaifo in the act for the first time at Kakadu Hotel, Yaba around 1962 as guitarist with "E. C. Arinze and His Music", one of the greatest most innovative highlife bands on the scene. E. C. Arinze was a fine trumpet player and band leader who combined dance music with progressive highlife, and so always had young, adventurous musicians as sidemen.

Guitarist Victor Uwaifo was not only the star of the band, his highlife compositions in Edo which he also sang always drew crowds of dancers to the floor. Credit must go to E.C. Arinze who had a great influence on him and all the members of the band whom he gave opportunities to demonstrate their individual talents, composing singing and soloing. He was in the band at the peak of its popularity with star performers such as Rasaki on tenor saxophone, Etim Udo on alto, Exy Ohunta, vocals among others, who all related musically well to him. The point must be made that Victor acquired all the grounding and confidence he needed from E.C. Arinze to be able to launch out on his own. And when he did he made instant impact, as an accomplished musician.

Unfortunately, Victor has since lapsed into semi-retirement, coming out occasionally with albums from his own studio despite the fact that he is still full of energy and talent. What is more, he is forging ahead in his education and maturing.

The decline in his music career can be put down to loss of direction, an inconsistency which has left him drifting from his chosen focus of "Akwete" to all kinds of popular dance music forms in search of commercial appeal.

Replete with inconsistencies and misdirection are his 1977 release of the album, "Five days a week love" and the 1979 recording of "OTF," featuring various music forms which are clear testimonies of this lack of definite focus.

However, he will forever be remembered for creating hit songs like "Joromi," "Araba de", "Guitar boy," "Duduke," "Egoye goye", "Iworodo", "Sibere sibere" among others.