

When a king transits...

By Benson Idonije

The supremacy that Ray Power 100 FM seems to have over the other stations has been attributed by some media watchers to the advantage of modern technical facilities of the state-of-the art dimension. This impression was erased last Saturday when the station displayed professional expertise in broadcasting a rather timely memorial package in honour of Fela. It was a marathon session, a befitting programme which obeyed the ethics of the profession.

Only two weeks ago, considering its audience - pull and popularity, I admonished the station as the one to show the lead in identifying with our cultural heritage, the promotion of which is paramount in broadcasting whose aim is to educate, inform and entertain. The promotion of culture however is unwritten because it is basic and so it overrides all the three objectives.

The other time, I was specifically expressing my displeasure at the inadequate coverage given to Eddy Okonta's death. Maybe it is because Eddy enjoyed the peak of his popularity in the fifties and sixties, an era that completely eludes this generation. But perhaps Fela is enjoying all the patronage because he is an institution whose music is culturally revolutionary, and even after his death his music is still contemporaneously relevant. Which ever it is, Ray-Power 100FM deserves an award for the beautiful show it put up last Saturday with Fela's music when it set aside all other advertised programmes from 5.30pm till the next day. The station also single-handedly carried the promo for the press conference which was very well attended the next day. And this, no doubt, is an index of its popularity.

What is particularly remarkable about the programme is the fact that all Fela's works were available and were played. Although the compilation was not in any chronological order, it covered Fela's entire music career from the Koola Lobitos through Afrobeat to his African music of recent years.

I personally enjoyed everything especially the definitive highlife sessions that featured Ololufe, ni, Yese, Aya wa ni, Araba's delight among others, which all evoked the nostalgia of the sixties, pointing to the genesis of the band. I had another opportunity to enjoy his trumpet solos which he shared with Isaac Olasugba on alto saxophone.

I was also enthralled by the Afrobeat sounds where the solo concept shifted to Igo Chico's tenor saxophone along side Fela's organ in such exciting songs as Lady, Alujonjon Kijon, Shakara, among others.

Apart from highlighting the classical African music of his later years, the session also captured all the mid-seventy songs where Fela was heard at his best in terms of harmonic progression as well as Solo concept where he improvised creatively, with great energy on songs such as Rere run, Boleya Ko ya, Zombie, Yellow Fever among others.

The compilation did not leave out trouble sleep yanga go wake am, a highlife - oriented performance and classic which he recorded during the Afrobeat era to improve on and update his highlife exploits.

The programme was not presented but the entire package told the story of Fela from 1965 to 1997 when he died.

I would like to commend the commitment of the stations chairman, Chief (Dr.) Raymond Dokpesi himself who was instrumental to the procurement of Fela's entire repertoire. As a matter of fact, I remember going with him to Fela's house while I was coordinating a training programme for producers and presenters at the inception of the station about three years ago. He asked Fela for permission to play his music for which he was ready to pay whatever royalties Fela pleased.

I remember that Fela was so impressed by his honesty and approach that he asked him to pay whatever he pleased to his manager, Beko Ransom-Kuti, saying that many stations had been playing his music without paying anything. He also directed as to how he could have access to all the recording.

Last Saturday's brilliant outing by RayPower 100FM reminds me of the series of memorial programmes done by Willis Conover, former presenter of "Music USA and "Jazz Hour" on Voice of America in honour of big band jazz leader and composer, Duke Ellington who died in 1974.

In this case, it was ideally presented and the late Willis Conover traced the career of Duke Ellington from the twenties with the Duke leading a band of brilliant individual musicians, their solos given unity by his arrangement, he went on to the thirties when the Duke took on status as a composer becoming more and more concerned with problems of form and harmony, developing sophisticated textures.

Willis Conover finally moved on to the fifties when the music became less adventurous, moving along within the patterns he had already defined, and relying more on the virtuosity of individual soloist than upon the orchestral strength of the band.

The immediacy of RayPower's broadcast could not have given the station enough time to chart a course for a logical sequence of ideas that would have involved presentation, but the station's play-along was very effective. One only hopes that "Features" and "Documentaries" on Fela and his music would follow hereafter on Radio and television. Fela is not dead. He is alive!