

Looking back and ahead

By Benson Idonije

In less than five days, the year 1996 will transform into 1997. At a time such as this, it becomes necessary for individuals, corporate bodies and establishments in all fields of endeavour, to look back, examine their operations and appraise the entire situation for the purpose of projecting into the future. The Nigerian music industry. If there is any at all needs this stock - taking to forge ahead, and make a head way.

Looking back, one is encouraged by the fact that the electronic media has taken bold strides and made a lot of impact on the people, judging from the powerful presence of private radio and television stations; and the response of the people in terms of awareness, and interest as demonstrated by their active participation in programmes.

In terms of popularity and audience pull, NTA 10 tops the list of all the TV stations, obviously because of its network coverage, professional competence, and location, RayPower 100 FM is towering above all the FM stations because of strong clear signals, entertainment in terms of music, and the flexibility of its general programming which allows for audience involvement. Radio Nigeria One is in a class by itself with regard to news coverage.

Some stations are bound to measure their success in 1996 by the amount of money made from commercials, but my yardstick for assessment is different. For television, one is interested in the quality and volume of local productions in relation to foreign programmes; and television can blame its non performance on financial constraints. Radio should be able to promote the culture of the people, especially through music in commercial broadcasting; but even if the attitude of FM stations changes in favour of the concerted air play of Nigerian popular music, the constraints are there. There is not enough music to fill the air time from day to day because the Nigerian music industry is static, unproductive, with nothing to offer in terms of material and professionalism.

Highlife as a genre is on its way out leaving behind the opportunity for it to serve as a source of inspiration, a reference point for other forms of Nigerian popular music.

Juju music used to draw from highlife in terms of rhythm and melodic inventiveness. Then, the practitioners all had their different styles and approaches Performances had distinct and purely individualistic identities; and the music was easily recognisable in the hands of I.K. Dairo, Ebenezer Obey, Sunny Ade among others. But today, it has lost its melody and rhythm, degenerated to fuji with a typically uptempo beat that never changes. Juju music has transformed into mere drums and voices with a disturbing rhythmic monotony in which the guitar can no longer find its chord sequence.

Fuji for its own part is losing all the identification with traditional forms, imbibing rock- oriented styles and interpretations in the hands of exponents who are beginning to westernise it by the introduction of guitar and organ.

However, one musician after my heart whose natural talent and creative ability have manifested themselves, with some individual sound is Wasiu Alabi. He has a lot of potentials, and he is apparently re-enacting the phenomenon which the late Ayinla Omowura exhibited in apapa music. He needs a lot of encouragement from radio and the entire mass media for what he is worth, in the coming year.

There is however an Afrobeat movement of jazz-oriented performers who are drawing inspiration from Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Lagbaja has become popular in this genre because he has been able to carve a highlife oriented direction for himself; Femi attracted attention with "Wonder, Wonder", and both of them owe this success to RayPower 100 FM which gave their music excessive airplay with promotional interviews; and why no. All the same, these two musicians and the others are still in process of evolving and consolidating their individual sounds.

Afrobeat, live jazz, is a challenging type of music which demands a lot from the exponents in terms of mastery of the instrument, and the good knowledge of chords and harmonies, but as it is, there is a general lack of music education on the Nigerian scene, a phenomenon which is not limited to the Afrobeat scene alone, but has affected all the departments of our popular music forms, turning out mediocres as musicians. Who says that juju, fuji, highlife and all the musicians do not need formal music education? As a matter of fact, like any other profession nobody should call himself a professional musician, let alone undertake public performance if he has not acquired the necessary skills of the profession.

What the Nigerian music industry needs now to take off is a music school where all prospective musicians no matter what type of music they intend to play eventually should be trained in the art of playing the instruments of the orchestra, composing arranging, singing and all the musical elements that are necessary to equip him for the professional performance of music.

Many students are already taking advantage of Peter King's School of music at Ilogbo, Badagry Expressway, Lagos; but more schools should emerge he accommodate everybody, as a first step.

After training, the musicians need to perfect their art by playing with a band, and this is radi-television band becomes a complete necessity for the development and growth of the music industry like ours.

The nucleus of the band should take off with a group of established musicians consisting of individuals who are proficient in their instruments, under the leadership of a knowledgeable versatile musicians who should also act as music director. As students pass out of school, they join the band to prove their worth and serve their apprenticeship before they become qualified to strike out on their own either as band leaders or sidemen.