

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me for a radio view of the sights and sounds of Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE

And today, without doubt, we're concentrating on sound - a special sound, the sound of one man,

MUSIC BY DOLLAR BRAND from "Anatomy of a South African Village".

That was the sound of Dollar Brand. Now, Dollar Brand is a musician. I nearly said he was a jazz pianist, but as he doesn't only play jazz and as he plays other instruments besides the piano let's just call him a musician. A South African musician, in fact a Cape Town musician. Dollar Brand is very keen to escape being labelled. Just as his music defies classification, so his travels around the globe have made him international and during his years in the United States he achieved the accolade of playing with, guess who, Duke Ellington's renowned jazz orchestra.

The other day Dollar Brand gave a concert here in London. It was a solo affair but he still drew a capacity crowd. Now, Dollar believes that the extraordinary power in his music comes not from himself but from external spiritual sources - so he takes the audience applause standing still with his head bowed. Well, in the audience that day was Kona Caulker. Dollar's music was new to her and as she told him next day, it made a strong impression.

KONA CAULKER:

Dollar, I heard you play for the first time last night and some of the time I wanted to dance, but most of the time I just felt like crying. I'd like you to start with the first instrument that you played which was the flute. The sound that you played last night is not a sound I have ever heard before - it was like two or three different things happening all at the same time. Could you explain a bit more of the technique of that and then maybe you could play a little bit for me so that our audience can hear what it sounds like?

DOLLAR BRAND:

You know, over the blowing hole, I blow into it and I sing at the same time and I'm just beginning to explore the possibilities of it.

CAULKER: This is just through experimenting that you arrived at this particular technique or is it something that maybe people have done before or something you were taught?

BRAND: I don't know, I don't know if it is something that has been done before on the flute, but it is basically how music is played at home, you know. You know, a constant drone at the bottom and then the melody on top of that. But I haven't heard it being done in the flute.

FLUTE MUSIC BY DOLLAR BRAND

TETTEH-LARTEY:

As Kona was explaining, those sounds come from one flute - not an easy accomplishment by any means. And there are complications about Dollar Brand himself. That rather unusual name is the one he uses professionally for he has an Arabic name since he became a Moslem some years back.

He's quite willing to explain the technique he's discovered that makes the flute into something similar to a bag-pipe (but without a bag of course). After all, it has the same background drone.

BRAND: You know, this is the drone. The basic tone is... (drones on flute) and then I play (more droning, with melody).

CAULKER: You know, that reminds me of something because when I was little in my father's village, in church there was no piano or no orchestra and everybody used to sing the parts that you would normally do on the piano and the men would do the harmony but exactly in the same sort of way - is that what you're doing?

BRAND: Yes, I am Moslem, you know, my name is Abdulla Ibrahim - Dollar Brand is only my professional name and so I the drone, I use the drone (sings Allah Ahbar Allah).

CAULKER: Can we move to the piano now? When you were playing there were some parts that I would call jazz for want of a better word, some other parts that were very lilting like classical music and then you always kept coming back to this very churchy, stumpy kind of number, o.k. Does this feature in all your work? Where does it come from, that basic choir kind of Baptist almost kind of singing thing?

BRAND: You know, I was a Christian before I was converted to Islam - all of us, all musicians come through the church. I like to play everything I have ever experienced that is why I moved away from the jazz idiom, because the moment you say jazz, it is a label and it limits you.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now, at the beginning of the programme I mentioned the Cape Town origins of Dollar Brand. It seems to me that however terrible the conditions in urban South Africa, the cities continue to produce the most gifted of all black South African artists. Perhaps I'm wrong but Dollar seems a case in point. His particular part of Cape Town, District Six, helped to form him into the musician he now is.

CAULKER: Before, I asked you about District Six and it brought a whole smile to your face because it is obviously something that you enjoy, o.k? Could you tell me something about District Six?

BRAND: Well, District Six in Cape Town was a beautiful community, now people have been moved out to different areas, but it was maybe like Harlem in its hey-day. Like it was a poor neighbourhood but we never saw the poverty because there was a beautiful communal spirit, and a lot of beautiful things came out of there. All the musicians used to live there, painters, and it was really something very beautiful.

CAULKER: How did you start out your music there?

BRAND: Well, mainly with the minstrels. You know, they have a carnival every New Year and there are different groups - very colourful costumes and parades through the streets.

CAULKER: How old were you at that time?

BRAND: Oh - everybody's into that when, you know, you open your eyes and....(laughs). If you are not in the minstrels at New Year everybody sits outside or goes to the stadium and digs them.

SOUTH AFRICAN MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY: Now, Dollar says of himself that his awareness of music began "as soon as I opened my eyes" but working with American jazz artists in the United States must have opened his eyes, too. Another sort of African music jazz but adapted to a new setting. Well, after eight years away from home he readjusted himself to life in Cape Town. Kona Caulker wondered whether his music also had needed any adjustment.

BRAND: I always like to use a saying, I don't know who said it but it says "The only people who do not change are prophets and fools." Everything affects me and changes me. I wouldn't say the music has changed but maybe the forms of expression have changed but basically I'm still involved in the same thing that I started out with.

FLUTE MUSIC BY DOLLAR BRAND

TETTEH-LARTEY: Well Dollar Brand playing his Indian flute. And behind the flute was that the voice of Kona Caulker joining in? I wonder. It certainly is a lovely sound. And much more pastoral a sound than an urban one.

Well, with me in the studio is Tony Delius and I can see a smile of pleasure all over his face. Now, Tony Delius, I know you used to go and hear Dollar Brand playing in the old days in Cape Town. Is District Six really the creative centre for the city or were those fond memories?

ANTHONY DELIUS:

Well in a way it is a place that is made into a beautiful place by fond memories but actually, of course, it was the most dreadful slum.- it was a huge slum running right across the centre of Cape Town. It certainly was the great centre of all the liveliness of the coloured people themselves who are scattered all round Cape Town and they themselves go on