

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

In this edition the narrative painting of Jak Katarikawa and the jazz of a South African musician, now tragically dead.

MUSIC: "Davashe's Dream" played by Brotherhood of Breath

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The trumpet of Mongezi Feza, playing there with Brotherhood of Breath.

By his recent death in London the world of jazz has lost one of its most individual voices. Mongezi Feza was born in South Africa in 1945, and it was there he learned to blow. But since 1964 Mongezi, as all his friends knew him, had lived in London. With fellow South African exiles, Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana, Johnny Dyan and Louis Moholo he played in some of the most exciting bands to be heard in London - first the McGregor Sextet, and later Spear, Assagai, and the most celebrated of all, Brotherhood of Breath.

Valerie Wilmer has known Mongezi Feza throughout his years in London. Valerie, what was special about his playing?

VALERIE WILMER:

I think that one of the most interesting things was that he brought a new breath, if I can say that, to the London music scene. Mongezi himself said that when he first came to Europe he was disappointed to find that the local musicians were relying on copying Americans so much and all the musicians you've mentioned brought, I think, an authentic African touch and were very influential where what the local

musicians were doing was concerned.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That piece, "Davashe's Dream", I thought was extremely beautiful to listen to, very gentle. What about his technique, his virtuosity?

WILMER:

Well, the interesting thing Alex, is that he played in a way that you're not supposed to play, according to the book, which is he puffed out one of his cheeks while playing the trumpet. Although to the inexperienced listener he might sound as though he had a fantastic technique, he really had a very poor technique in some ways. But what he did was to turn his technique to his own use, almost inventing a technique for himself, as a lot of musicians of his generation have done, and, of course, all through the ages in this kind of music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

When I saw him last he looked to me very frail and small.

WILMER:

Yes he was a very small man, but when he picked up the trumpet and played it was something else. You know one critic described him once in a very interesting way, he said he was high-stepping like a circus pony, Have you ever seen ponies in circuses, that's what he used to do. It was almost like he was so small that he couldn't reach the notes, it was an effort for him. But I think anybody who's heard him knows that he certainly could reach them and hit them well.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Was there anything specially African, do you think, in him?

WILMER:

Well yes, I think the rhythmic feeling is different, definitely a very South African thing like the Kwela music that we've heard a lot of and just a very lively approach to playing that didn't rely as much on American roots as, say, British musicians would be doing.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think he was outstanding as an African musician, especially as a trumpeter? I mean we've had some, to my way of thinking, outstanding trumpeters in West Africa - E.T. Mensah and Victor Olaiya for example.

WILMER:

Well when you hear someone like E.T. Mensah, he plays with a very conventional technique, he hits what we're told in Europe and the rest of the World are all the right notes. Mongezi didn't mind whether it was a wrong note or not. He could make mistakes and get away with them and so he played according to his own personality.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

In what way do you think his music reflected his personality? What sort of man was he?

WILMER:

Oh he was a very quiet person, but when he was on form, enjoying himself, he could be quite explosive. But the themes that he wrote are sort of quiet and gentle themes and yet, when he started to solo, the other side of his nature, which wasn't often seen to the public, came out through the trumpet.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

How did his style develop over the years?

WILMER:

Well I heard him when he first came here, he'd been here for about a week and he and the Bluenotes - as the sextet was originally called - played at the I.C.A. In those days I'd say that they were very much following Ornet Coleman's music. Ornet was one of the most influential figures in the last twenty years of jazz. Mongezi, it's been said, copied Don Cherry, who was a trumpet player who was with Ornet, and they both played small trumpets, little trumpet, piccolo trumpet they're called, sometimes with four valves. But gradually Mong's playing changed where, as I said, he was expressing more of himself, rather than what seemed to us initially as Don Cherry's music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes. Mongezi, as we've heard, played with different groups over the years. How did his style differ from playing with one group to playing with another?

WILMER:

Well there were two bands - Spear and Assagai, which were basically commercial bands, music for dancing, fun music if you like, and Mongs would play in a more Kwela-orientated style when he played with those bands. When he worked with the Brotherhood of Breath or the McGregor Sextet, it was more serious music, if you like. If we listen to a record by Spear I think we can hear the more South African side of his

personality, the more African side.

MUSIC: "Davashe's Dream" played by Brotherhood of Breath.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

This was the South African, as you see. How does his playing with the other bands reflect some other aspect of his personality?

WILMER:

Well the Brotherhood of Breath, which is Chris McGregor's big band, I think the name of it shows a kind of communal breathing of spirits and souls to the audience. It was the idea of giving themselves, their minds, their beings, if you like, and I think Mongezi, when he plays with a band like that, that's what he's doing. When he's playing with Spear he's playing for dancing like he must have done in the townships back home.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well let's hear then the more serious aspect of Mongezi's personality, when he plays with the Brotherhood of Breath.

MUSIC: "Flute Music" by Mongezi Feza from "Flute Music".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

A sound from Mongezi Feza's trumpet, unhappily to be heard no more. That tribute was from Valerie Wilmer.

Let's turn now to a different art form from a different part of Africa. Jak Katarikawe used to be a taxi-driver in Uganda. Now he makes his living by painting. He teaches in the school of art at Makerere University and he has recently been exhibiting twenty-one of his paintings at the Commonwealth Institute in London. Andrew Salkey went to look at them.

ANDREW SALKEY:

Jak Katarikawe, or Jak, as he is popularly known, both in Kampala and in London where he has recently spent some time in setting up his exhibition and doing research work, is I think that most interesting of artists, a narrative painter.

You see, his compositions, mainly made up of human and animal figures, tell stories, some serious, some humorous, but all of them a sheer delight to look at with their striking images and handsome colour and impressive masses and patterns.

Jak Katarikawe paints very direct pictures, using bold forms in even

bolder colours, in oils for example in oils mixed with crayon additions, and he also does very attractive gouache studies.

He uses a cunning simplicity in everything he does: simple draughtsmanship, straightforward relationships of colour and design. And people - women, children and men - in that order incidentally, are his central subjects, especially women, whom he delights in portraying in strong and voluptuously personable, commanding figures. They virtually dominate all the canvases in which they appear, even when they may not be the intended centres of narrative attraction for the artist himself. I mean I saw this in the exhibition.

But it is Jak's narrative strength, his extraordinary story-telling power, that appeals immediately when you approach the twenty-one paintings in the exhibition.

Now here are a few examples of the background stories to the paintings: "Random Love", for instance, tells about the fact that a cow "has three friends but is worried because she is not sure which is the father of the calf". Then there's "Happy Half-Half". That's another painting that's about a woman who, on the eve of her wedding, "hears that her man had been arrested for stealing money with which to buy her shoes. The wedding is cancelled of course, and she is sorry that the guests are disappointed but glad she has found out her intended as a thief"; and the third painting, "There are no Secrets", in which, we learn that "the lady was married. Her husband returned home from safari earlier than expected. The lady's lover, seeing the husband, did not keep his appointment of course. The lady was confused, believing one to be the other. Now she has returned to her mother with her child and is no longer married. She now has a marriage guidance business and tells her clients to remain faithful because secrets will out!"

I took those, incidentally Alex, from the catalogue notes, which, like the paintings themselves, are delightful to look at, again and again.

Jak I think is the kind of painter I could never have enough of. He reminds me of two other important and popular narrative painters: Kofi Ricardo Wilkins, the Jamaican artist, and his work is very well-known in Uganda, where he taught Art at Makerere University, and Arthur Boyd the Australian painter.

All three people you see are what I would call people-centered, folklore, myth-inspired artists. Jak Katarikawe perhaps even more so than Kofi Ricardo Wilkins and Arthur Boyd, because Jak not only represents his people as solid figures in his work but he also illustrates their stories; in other words, he shows them in action, living and entirely memorable.

Well I thoroughly enjoyed his Commonwealth Institute exhibition in London and can only hope that his work travels far and wide throughout Africa, for after all, he is a people's artist, if I ever saw one, and a narrative painter we must all cherish!

TETTEH-LARTEY:

You seem to have been very favourably impressed and you affect me with

your enthusiasm. Thank you very much. And there we must end the programme. Join me again next week for another edition of "Arts and Africa". Until then I'll leave you with more of the music from Spear.

MUSIC: "Shekele" by Dudu Pukwana from "Flute Music".

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