

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC AND SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today, the unique sounds of a famous jazz musician from South Africa.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jazz is a kind of music more associated with North America than Africa. But there's one name from Africa that is very familiar in the world of jazz: Dollar Brand. Dollar Brand grew up in District 6 in Cape Town, South Africa, the artistic pulse of the coloured community, and, as he puts it, "like Harlem in its heyday". After a childhood in this poor but artistically and communally alive neighbourhood, where the Christian Church, choir music, minstrels and street carnivals played an important role, he spend eight years in the U.S.A., playing amongs other things with Duke Ellington's band. He himself and his music have been affected by all these influences and it is hard to put him in a definite category. He recently gave a concert in Paris as part of the Festival of Autumn, and Margy Brearley our producer went along to see it. After the show she managed to have a quick chat with him, whilst both were "high" on the music, to use a popular phrase! She first asked him whether it was difficult

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for him to go to South Africa to give concerts, given the apartheid policy of the Government.

DOLLAR BRAND

No, I don't get myself involved in politics, you know.

MARGY BREARLEY

And it hasn't been a problem for you to take your group and play?

DOLLAR BRAND

No.

MARGY BREARLEY

It was a fantastic concert, by the way, really fantastic!

DOLLAR BRAND

Thank you very much.

MARGY BREARLEY

Listening to your music I found that I didn't recognise anything that sounded very traditionally African.

DOLLAR BRAND

You see, about two thousand years ago, people in Africa were at a concert and they played some music and people said: "It doesn't sound traditionally African". In two thousand years, this will sound traditionally African.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

After the U.S.A., Dollar Brand returned to Africa and lived in Swaziland, where he started a cultural centre. There were so many students that he temporarily closed it down and resumed his professional career. Although now living in New York again, his dream is to get back soon to re-open the centre. Now one of the pieces Margy really loved and which was composed in Swaziland was a flute solo. Dollar blows into the wooden flute, plays the melody on it and sings in harmony - all at the same time. Margy asked him the name of the piece of music.

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DOLLAR BRAND

It's called Nimvula.

MARGY BREARLEY

What does that mean?

DOLLAR BRAND

It's a rain song. It came to me while I was living in Swaziland.

MARGY BREARLEY

Is that how the rain sounded in Swaziland?

DOLLAR BRAND

No. When you play the song, it starts raining!!

MARGY BREARLEY

(Laughter) You must have an evil influence on the Gods then!

DOLLAR BRAND

The God.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A haunting piece of music. Now Dollar Brand is the professional name of Abdulla Ibrahim who, as the name suggests is a Muslim. Some of his music, however, especially his piano solos, remind one of Christian Church music and even classical music. But Dollar Brand dislikes such labels.

DOLLAR BRAND:

Yeh, you know, when I started playing music, people started telling me that I sounded like Debussy. But, it's just what I feel.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Margy Brearley, who saw him perform, is here in the studio with me. Margy, he's really a talented musician isn't he?

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MARGY BREARLEY

He really is and he's a lovely person as well, Alex. It was great to be there and hear him live. Watching him was just a very moving experience. His face was very quiet, he took his music really seriously and he had a kind of inner calm that reflected his religious beliefs.

DOLLAR BRAND

I know what I would like to move towards in my music. I guess I will try my utmost to move in that direction. Whether I will reach the ultimate goal, I can only hope and pray.

MARGY BREARLEY

What's the ultimate goal?

DOLLAR BRAND

The ultimate goal for me is to be close in the light of Almighty Allah or Almighty God. Where I hope that the music will take me is in the fullness of Allah's light.

MARGY BREARLEY

When you play your music, do you feel as if that's where you're going? Do you feel as if you are linking up with a superior power?

DOLLAR BRAND

Oh, I don't even think so, I know so. I know from experience.. Oh! It's such a beautiful, such a beautiful feeling, beautiful experience that I hope that people will share.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there should be more chances for people in Africa to hear his music next year, as there is a big African trip in the making, starting in Tunisia and working South. I am sure he will be very well received. Dollar Brand, thank you.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. Join us again next week for another Arts and Africa.

MUSIC