

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts And Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey introducing a self-proclaimed messenger from the Gods.

That revolutionary message comes from Jimi Solanke, the Nigerian entertainer. Well I know Jimi as an actor but now he spends as much time singing as acting (and he has an LP called "In The Beginin..." to his credit), so should I describe him as "a budding, young musician"? Jimi, typically, gave the matter some thought before he answered me!

JIMI SOLANKE

Ah... I believe that I am young in terms of home, "young young", because I am old 35 - but I am young, but not as a musician because I've been practising this art of musicianship for about 17 years and so I'm not young - a 17 year old boy is not all that young!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I've known you as an actor -

JIMI SOLANKE

That's true. I am also an actor. You know you can't divide the two of them. Both of them, they go hand in hand. In my music my actorship helps me - in my acting my musicianship helps me. So you can get the flow of the line by thinking of the flow of the music and you can get the flow of movement by thinking of the flow of music, by some kind of flow in some acting styles you've done before - so they both work hand in hand.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From what you've said it looks as if your music is very individualistic. How can you be recognised by this individuality?

JIMI SOLANKE:

It is the gods speaking through me. That's the way I claim it. The gods of our fathers, they speak through me. I accept them to use me as their spokesman, and so my music is totally traditional. The only aspect of western instrumentation is because it has to sell all over the place and then you will identify some instruments maybe they play. They may even make someone buy it who doesn't even understand the language at all. I mean the gods speak through me and you can just say it is the voice of the gods through Jimi Solanke.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you say you are the mouth-piece of the gods. What do they ask you to tell the world?

JIMI SOLANKE

Oh, they ask me every time, they keep telling me to remind everybody that they are still there, that their presence is still all over - I mean in the water we drink all over, day to day, you know, night to night, the things that had been happening (I'm talking about my own home situation because I'm still there). Because in homes all over Nigeria you still find the shrines, the actual ones shrines of Ogun, shrines of Shogun, and people still worship them till now but we who are just "clean of head", we think that kind of worship is too dirty, but I'm not but I'm not saying that they are dirty because it is just too clean. I just believe they are there that's why I've got to accept the spokesman of the gods.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Did you come to accept this spokesmanship of the gods because of the experiences you had, travelling around the world?

JIMI SOLANKE

Yes, and because of my having stayed with them - I mean the people who are still practising now - the old men. They pray for me every day: "Where is Jimi we want to see him. Ah - the boy!" You may hear it everywhere. So I believe in them and so they too believe in me. The Mogba in Ede, for instance, he knows me, he's like my Father. He's the man who takes care of the Shogun shrine in Ede, In Timi Palace - the Oba of Ede. And in Oyo they know me. I was even initiated in life into a Olumuro cult. All these things are so peacefully set up - I mean the rituals are so ... you've just got to understand them.

MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that song is 'Ojoje'. It's an invitation which says 'Let's get together and take part in the ancestral sacrifice.'

And in taking the old Yoruba gods of Nigeria under his wing, Jimi Solanke has learnt to respect the traditional stories, especially the religious ones, the ones that answer the basic questions that men ask. For instance, how did the world begin? Jimi told me the Yoruba creation story.

JIMI SOLANKE

As Olodumare, God the Yoruba believe, gave a bag of soil, a chicken and a chameleon to Obá Atala but Obá Atala loves his drinks so much that he couldn't get to the water. Eshu, trickster god of Mischief, the people called devils to us are part of the gods - he's one of them. He has his jobs, he is the errand boy, Eshu stays at the cross roads he was waiting for Obá Atala with the god of palm wine. When the Obá got there he drank and drank and drank, and fell asleep, he couldn't even get to the water. Eventually Olodumare waited for him, Olodumare the god, he saw him sleeping and then called on Oduduwa. (Oduduwa is whom we agree now as the father of the Yorubas. Around there was the Oduduwa Club, Oduduwa Union, and now the three States of the Western part of Nigeria, Ogun, Oyo and Ondo are called the Oduduwa States). So Oduduwa went down to where Obá Atala was sleeping, took the bag of soil, the chicken and the chameleon, and went to the water and sprinkled it, let the chicken scatter it and put the chameleon to tell the farmers about the soil, and the soil was made. That land was Ile Ife, and today the land is Ile Ife so why won't I believe it?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think your music being so traditional, would be understood by the world generally without sort of background to the story?

JIMI SOLANKE

Let me tell you one thing. You see, when you talk of background we have to find backgrounds to other stories as told of creation by other people, by other situations. If you want to find the background of this, that's the way I take it. If you cannot start finding out the background of Genesis and the background of other things like Islam, then today we cannot find the background of my gods and how earth was created in my own mythology.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I was just thinking of, say, a few notes of explanation of what you are actually saying in the song so that people will appreciate it even more.

JIMI SOLANKE

Oh yes, I'm only like the preacher. He believes in what he's talking about. I believe in what I'm talking, about that's all. And I'm not asking people. If you can just listen to the songs properly, take it like an entertainment thing, it will be there if you're not going to question it. If you question it, well, ask me I will be able to explain some more, but if you don't question it it will be there. You believe those who said the earth was created in that manner - that's very funny! To old men at home when you say God just said "Let there be light - and there was light", "Let there be water ... " they will say: "That could have been magic or what?" To my people at home, old men that I move with, old 70-80, when we start telling them this they tell us: "No" - they tell you what they believe, and I believe that's how many other stories and attitudes of creation were handed down, by telling that this happened that time, and when this happened this happened. I have gone back to listen to them and I've been listening to them now 20 years ago. That was the last time I went to Church. I confess I come from a very, very, very Christian family, but I'm just laying out my own attitude to religion and to other things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think that people, when they listen to your music should take it as it is or leave it?

JIMI SOLANKE

I'm not saying they should take it as it is or leave it. I've explained; if you want to question it you can question me, find out how to get me, and I give you a lot more preaching. I'm trying to get you to understand me. And if you take it on the entertainment point of view you'll just have it there, and you know, its there, lurking behind the back of the mind - just there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Jimi, I think at this point we should play some of these songs and see what effect you have on us - and the listeners.

MUSIC

That's a traditional Yoruba song, 'Ire-gbo Gbo'. It's a prayer asking the ancestors to direct all the goodness in the world onto the supplicants. But in Jimi Solanke's arrangement I thought I detected some elements - rhythms perhaps - that sounded more like reggae than anything else.

JIMI SOLANKE

In music, we don't have to say this is African music this is American music, this is Caribbean music. I have come to accept all of them because I have gone into research in the depth of the rhythms. I've come to accept that they all come from the same source, the same origin. So when a Caribbean man is singing reggae, and it's played

JIM SOLANKE

at home in my little village and a farmer who has never been out of that village starts dancing, keeping a nice - you know sakara rhythm into it, then you find that the origin is the same. The language in which it has been sung now might be different because of situations, but the same rhythm applies, which is, in fact, what we found out at FESTAC. People came with drums and gongs from everywhere, and going about listening to this band play that band play, and this group from here, you find that the same rhythm was there in my mind even from one hall to the other.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. All these rhythms have the source from Africa. Well, it's not surprising really, when you come to think of it. After all, the players of those rhythms are descendants of Africans.

And to end the programme, Jimi Solanke with 'Olurombi'. So until next week at the same time it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

MUSIC.