

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and if you want to know what we'll be talking about today, just listen to this.

Music

TETTEH-LARTEY

There's no mistaking it - the sound of high-life. There must be lots of people of my generation who look on high-life as their very own. I thought that today we'd hear what a couple of people have to tell us about the story behind the music.

The foremost exponent is, and there's no doubt about it, E.T. Mensah, and that was the E.T. Mensah Tempos Band that we heard a moment ago. Stuart Sutton-Jones has been visiting E.T. at his home in Mamprobi on the outskirts of Accra, Ghana, and he got E.T. to talk about high-life and his career in high-life for "Arts and Africa".

STUART SUTTON-JONES

E.T. when did you first start in the music business?

E.T. MENSAH

As long as 1932 when I was in school I was playing the flute. The real music was started round about 1950's, when I was organising the musicians to make a tour on the professional side.

SUTTON-JONES

Was this tour connected with politics? Because I know there was a lot of support in the CCP both for musicians and from the musicians for the CCP.

MENSAH

No, it was not actually in support of politics. During those days we were all lending our shoulders wherever we could get, to seek self-government.

MENSAH

We were doing our part. The rallies - we went there just to play for the fun of it.

SUTTON-JONES

But in the late 50's and the 60's Ghana was really supreme on the international West African music scene and West African music, high-life music, particularly your Band was known outside of Africa. But since the 60's the dynamism and the strength of the Ghanaian music industry has gone down. Why is this?

MENSAH

It's just because I was first in the Government service and doing my music part-time.

SUTTON-JONES

What were you doing in the government service?

MENSAH

I was a Pharmacist. During the 50's I gave more attention to music as my full time profession. I was taking the musicians around, along to Nigeria (all the cities in Nigeria) Benin, Togoland, Ghana, Sierra Leone, as far as Conakry - I was touring there making music. I specially propogated the high-life music - then I found I was facing difficulties in my tour.

SUTTON-JONES

Such as?

MENSAH

The Musicians organised together, they banned me.

SUTTON-JONES

Why did they do that?

MENSAH

Especially in Nigeria they felt I was taking their money away when the people were patronizing me.

SUTTON-JONES

Because you were a Ghanaian - a foreigner?

MENSAH

So they organised against me.

SUTTON-JONES

What year was this?

MENSAH

I think it was early in the 1960's.

SUTTON-JONES

And that's the year of Nigerian Independence ?

MENSAH

Yes, during that time. So I went back to the Government service until 1962, and then my business became the other way round. Full-time Pharmacist in the Government Service, and the music became my hobby.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That resume was only the start of the conversation and we'll be hearing more of it in a little while. First, though, to a time long before E.T. Mensah first picked up the saxophone and trumpet. John Collins who's lived in Ghana for much of his life and has played with many bands in Accra, has written a book on the history of high life so Stuart asked him when and how this unique style of music came into being.

JOHN COLLINS

There were really three sources of highlife. One is the brass band music that's been popular in Ghana for about 60 years and came from the fort music, the military parades and such like. One is from the seaman and the other is the Church music - the Christian Church music and piano music. So these three sources were fused with indigenous African music to form highlife around about 1900.

SUTTON-JONES

And when did it develop into the form we know now ?

COLLINS

Well, the point is there isn't one form now - there are about three or four forms. They had a sort of common origin but then they split into different types of high life, like the big band highlife which came up particularly through the brass band variety, and then it changed into the large orchestras in the 1920's playing rhumbas and so on - fox-trots and then it became the swing bands of the 1950's. And the other sort of high life is called the palm-wine variety because it used to be played by guitarists, wandering guitarists with box guitars, acoustic guitars, and they had a reputation for always being drunk on palm-wine.

SUTTON-JONES

Was it true ?

COLLINS Yes!

SUTTON JONES

Now who was the greatest exponent of that.

COLLINS

The living exponent is Kwaa Mensah.

MUSIC

COLLINS

This sort of the high life was divided into the sort that was played in the cities and the sort that was played in the countryside. And the one that was played in the city was mostly the dance orchestra variety, and the sort that played in the countryside was the palm-wine bands and the brass bands too that continued to flourish.

SUTTON-JONES

How did this change with the war, the second world war ?

COLLINS

Well, the war had so many effects directly on the music, besides it brought musicians here -

SUTTON-JONES

Where, to Accra ?

COLLINS

To Accra from abroad, foreign musicians, and they formed bands - several of them did and it was this that sparked off the sort of E.T. Mensah Band which is based on the jazz combo, about 7 or 8 people rather than the early ones which were dance orchestras. You know, sometimes some of them in the 20's and 30's had about sixty members - violins, the whole lot, but the later ones were basically rather similar to jazz bands and E.T. Mensah and Guy Warren - that's Kofi Ghanaba, he's called now, were the two pioneers in this and they were influenced by some white musicians who came from England. There was, I think, Sgt. Leopard who formed Sgt. Leopard and His Black and White Spots,

SUTTON-JONES

Oh, that's right.

COLLINS

In about 1942, in Accra, and then the Tempos came out of that.

MENSAH

Much of my inspiration has been derived from one, Leopard - Sgt. Leopard - and he was interested in forming a group here. He collected some of the aspiring musicians here, myself, Guy Warren, Bob Finch, Joe Kelly, etc. And Leopard found that our skill here, technically

MENSAH was far below the standard in the West. So he started to train us.

SUTTON-JONES

So you were a member of the Black and White Spots

MENSAH

I was the trumpet player - I dropped the saxophone and played the trumpet.

MUSIC

SUTTON-JONES

What exactly did you have that enabled you to changed the indiginous West Africa music into your form of high life which is well known internationally ?

MENSAH

The first point was that I was interested in school music especially marching songs and so as late as 1932 I was playing flute in the band in school. From flute I went to saxophone with the Accra orchestra. Then I went to tenor sax, I went on to play trumpet, that was 1937. Now we formed the Tempos band and we were playing, and our main interest was in jazz music. In fact all those with whom I was playing in the Tempos Band they all left and I continued with the Tempos Band and they could best express their music then in high life so I just departed from our swing or jazz music to high life. It was less difficult for me to put them on that road.

SUTTON-JONES

Which jazz musician influenced you particularly ?

MENSAH

Surprisingly I was rather taken with Louis Armstrong, Harry James. I played set music just to see their style and copy it. And then also there was that Latin American in London, Edmundo Ross.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And in 'Meeye Ayera' you can hear those Latin American rhythms from the Tempos Band led by E.T. Mensah.

MUSIC

But the influence of Sgt. Leopard, Louis Armstrong and Edmundo Ross on E.T. Mensah and His Tempos couldn't match the influence of E.T. himself on the music of Ghana and far beyond. So much high life is recorded in Nigeria these days that it's easy to forget that it all began with E.T.'s first visit there.

COLLINS

There was a sort of high life in the country called Konkonba which was played not on western instruments but on just drums. But this too had come from Ghana and this had influenced Juju music in Nigeria - but that's a different story.

SUTTON-JONES

But the way that high life developed after the war more or less in tandem with the rise of nationalism and so on...

COLLINS

The effects were many. A lot of the bands played songs, you know, in favour of Independence. The more important the thing, in terms of, say, nationalism - the growth of nationalism, were the concert parties. There's a very popular musician in Ghana, and Nigeria, who everybody knows, called E.K. Nyame, he's dead now. He formed a concert party and up to that time all these concert parties, sort of vaudeville type theatre, had been using the dance orchestras and mostly western music, very few high lifes. But E.K. Nyame brought the concert party and the high life guitar bands together, that was about 1950, and once he did that, the others followed suit. Now it was these concert parties that grew up in the 50's that were important if you are looking at it from the point of view of the rise of nationalism because a lot of the plays and E.K. Nyame himself brought up many plays which were in favour of Nkrumah, and they went touring the whole country. You see the early concert parties, the ones that were based in the towns were the orchestras, they didn't move out of the towns. The later ones, the E.K. Nyame sort, went all into the bush areas. This was before television or anything like that or you know, radio had just come in - so they were sort of bringing lots of new ideas and they had plays written in favour of Nkrumah and songs. And I think, in fact, that I should add E.K. Nyame himself used to travel with Nkrumah when he went abroad.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Another way of exporting high life to the rest of the world! But there's still much more of the story of high life to be told before we're up-to-date. We'll just have to wait for another edition of "Arts and Africa" to bring a further instalment featuring more bands playing high life. But to end the programme let's stay with E.T. Mensah and His Tempos Band and a Pan-African number from the days of Kwame Nkrumah called 'Congo'. So goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.