

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX. TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts And Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and to-day, the songs and music of a Cameroonian guitarist.

We all know how much music and singing play a part in the life of Africans. There are songs for all kinds of social situations, like marriages, births and death. But it is still fascinating to find someone who plays the guitar and sings folk music. Augustin Kinni from the Cameroon is at present studying in Paris but finds time to play his guitar. Margy Brearley, Producer of "Arts And Africa", talked with him in Paris and first asked him not about his music but about the costume he was wearing.

AUGUSTIN. KINNI

It's a traditional costume worn by the Balis in the Cameroon in the North West Province, and it's normally embroidered by men. Formally it was worn just by the kings and the nobles, but today there's some sort of vulgarisation and people wear it anyhow. There is still some sort of restriction on certain symbols because there are symbols which are called royal symbols or titled symbols which are put on the clothing. Also on the cap, like the one I wear is special. For instance there's a feather in the cap and at home anybody who had a feather in his cap was somebody decorated by the Chief or by the King for some noble act done. Or he could be a title holder in the family or in the clan. If it was a red feather, it was a symbol of valour like somebody who fought in war or who killed an enemy. Then they gave him a symbol of red, which is a symbol of blood or symbol of victory, as they say. And we also have a white feather which is full of peace.

MARGY BREARLEY

It's tremendously colourful, orange and red and white and black with very intricate designs. It really is very, very fine. You've also got a very fine guitar. It's an unusual shape: it's got an oval top and then sort of curves on the bottom part. Where does that come from?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

It's a Brazilian guitar, made in Brazilia, but maybe sold in London. I bought it in London last year when I was there.

MARGY BREARLEY

What makes it different apart from the shape of the bowl part?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Also the style makes it easier for a player to handle. It's lighter. But the volume also, because the sound of the guitar depends on the build of the voice box, so the curving gives an echo which reverberates in side. The strings also are softer to play.

MARGY BREARLEY

When did you actually start learning the guitar ?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

That was when I was twenty really. I told a friend of mine I was interested in playing. He had a guitar and he sold it to me and started teaching me. But it had been my intention to study the guitar long before, but I couldn't.

MARGY BREARLEY

Why hadn't you been able to ?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Well, in secondary school where I was, we had to get parents permission to play a different instrument from what the school used to teach us. The teacher thought I wouldn't study much if I gave time to the guitar. In our society really the guitar was looked "low" upon, and they felt the guitar was only meant for people who didn't succeed in life. They thought really learning guitar was just going wayward somehow.

MARGY BREARLEY

Well, it certainly hasn't happened to you. Here you are studying for your Doctorate, I believe, isn't that right ? What subject are you doing ?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

I'm doing Political Science - traditional institutions with regard to modern developments.

MARGY BREARLEY

Well, to get back to your music, you actually write the songs you sing, don't you?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Yes, I do much of the writing and composing of the songs.

MARGY BREARLEY

We've listened to some of them and I've been amazed at the variety. One song, for example, was called Munang and that was sung in Mungaka and it sounded very Cameroonion to me. Can you tell me what the song is about?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Yes, Munang is really made up of proverbs that are common in the society and Munang in itself means a plot: plotting against somebody or trying to make a plot. People say, well, if somebody is always plotting or trying to carry on secrets, they wouldn't stay because people always talk about secrets one day or another. So in the song I use mostly the proverbs and they say: the sun can never be hidden if it shines because the rays will be seen. Rain cannot fall without leaving some water flowing. A person wouldn't just die without a cause. People don't think we just die like that. If somebody is good, they will see his goodness, maybe in the children or in the people, his friends. So there's always a successive effect to any act whether good or bad.

MARGY BREARLEY

And there's also perhaps a reason behind a lot of the mysteries of the world.

AUGUSTIN KINNI

That's the thing and maybe we don't even know if they exist really.

MUSIC "Munang"

MARGY BREARLEY

You say another song on human rights and this one is in English. Why did you write that song?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Well, I felt committed really to the human right movement. I felt it's good, the trend of to-day, that people can stand up really to talk for people's' rights. We have wars, the world has know that. It's not only the wars we think of, we think also that there should be a solution to them. So I

AUGUSTIN KINNI

saw the problem. It's true we have inflation, we have everything. But who'll find a solution if we don't think and talk about the problem. I was happy to find that a man like Carter stood up and said "today, let's make a stop, even though it's not going to be immediately, but it's going to come if people co-operate."

MARGY BREARLEY

Part of the Choms had this funny line about going off to Mortincue with your "peanut baby".

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Yes, I just feel that if the world was peaceful, people could do anything they liked. A peanut baby is someone one likes, you know, have a nice time!

MUSIC

MARGY BREARLEY

The song "La Vie Präsente", is very different song. You sing it in French and it has the sort of romantic quality that seems to fit "Paris in the autumn".

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Yes. I think it's due to my Paris life inspiration. Just observing things, and just listening also. I feel the atmosphere contributed a lot to the song. That's why, maybe I have, as you say, a French feeling. I felt it that way.

MARGY BREARLEY

One of the things that you talk about in that song is the feeling of time passing and that one can't tell what's coming tomorrow. Is that a theme you write and think about a lot? Are you concerned about that aspect of human-life?

AUGUSTIN KENNI

Yes, I think time is a thing we cannot seize on. One can only capture time, the time he has and use it. It's just like I'm talking to a friend. I can suggest we do something - well, why not do it? If we say tomorrow, we might never meet tomorrow and if tomorrow comes, let's do it again.

MARGY BREARLEY

It's a very positive way of thinking.

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Well, I think it helps me to live that way really because I think we cannot live negatively?

MARGY BREARLEY

The final song you sang entitled "Juju E Dey Com " - can you tell me about that ?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Juju is a pidgin meaning, but there's so much meaning behind it, because juju at home is something which is frightening. Always when someone wants to frighten you or tell children: "shut up don't cry or if you cry, juju will take you". It's the same thing in society, everybody seems maybe at ease. Well tell him there's something terrible coming, keep everybody alert, tell him "don't just sleep. Take your gun, take your machet, take your bicycle. Don't let juju come. It's just like keeping everybody alert. Maybe, there's nothing at all."

MUSIC "Juju".

MARGY BREARLEY

I mentioned earlier that it seems that all your songs have their own particular style and it does seem as if the styles are a bit related to the language you are singing in. I think particularly what I like about the Cameroonian is the fluidity of the music. How does that happen ? How does it come about that Cameroonian music has this fluidity ?

AUGUSTIN KINNI

Yes, I think we sing a lot, especially when we are still small and our songs, I think, are so much influenced by the environment. We have a lot of beautiful sounds, like we hear birds, we hear many frogs croaking in the night - all sorts of sounds. I think that helps to develop our ear of music because we sing quite a lot in harmony. Really, the Cameroonians, I would say we really love singing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it's very obvious that he does. Augustin Kinni, thank you.

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for now. Why don't you join us again next week for another "Arts And Africa".