

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 today we welcome back an old friend:

MUSIC: HIP HIP HIP BY BOKOOR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Many of you by now will know the name John Collins, leader of the Accra-based Ghanaian group, BOKOOR, whom you heard playing there. John Collins is an English-born musician living in Ghana, who last year compiled and presented a series of programmes on the history of West African popular music for the BBC African Service called 'In The African Groove.' Well John called in at the 'Arts and Africa' studio recently on a visit from his home in Accra, together with his guitar and harmonica.

MUSIC: WO BA YAA BY BOKOOR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well John, what are those two songs we've just heard?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, they were two songs from our latest release which we put out on pre-recorded cassette in Accra. The first song was a sort of Afro reggae music that we have been developing in the last year and the

second song, 'Wo Ba Yaa' is about corruption, it's about 'kalabule,' you might have heard the word 'kalabule' which is based on a Hausa phrase meaning 'corruption.' The words are saying how corruption should be cleared out of the country because it's killing us, and of course, since the coup the army has been doing this. The song has become very popular and it has been played a lot on the radio in Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Well they seem to be wanting to escape from it rather than do anything about it, from the words they use and they want to fly away to somewhere. Where they expect to go to I don't know.

JOHN COLLINS

Well, you see we wrote the song before the coup.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

I see.

JOHN COLLINS

That's why. We didn't know where to fly to.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Now, what is the present state of popular music in Ghana?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, it has declined in the last few years because of general inflation and economic mismanagement; the music industry has dried up. In the mid-seventies actually, everything looked very hopeful. There were bands around like Hedzolleh Wulomei and so on, but in fact it has never really gelled, and the scene has really shifted to Nigeria in the last few years.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

It's interesting, isn't it, when you look at the popular music scene in Africa as a whole, how the centre of influence shifts from one country to another. In the early fifties, for example, it was all South Africa. Then in the middle to late fifties, it was Ghanaian high life, Etmensah and the Broadway Band, Red Spots and Blackbeats and the like - they were very, very popular and then after that, Congo-

lese music, which in fact has never really lost its influence. Then in the mid-sixties, early seventies it was all a hotch-potch, wasn't it, with western influences creeping in; reggae, rock and pop music with no particular country in the ascendancy. Now it's back to Nigeria. Why do you think that Nigeria is dominant at the moment?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, it's the richest country in West Africa and they have got the recording studios and the production facilities and I believe this year they are going to produce 12 million LP's in Nigeria.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Good Heavens!

JOHN COLLINS

Whereas in Ghana it's never even reached a million. And now there is no plastic in the country so it will probably be nothing this year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's interesting you talk about Nigeria being prosperous in the music industry because Nigerian musicians themselves are not happy with the state of the recording industry in Nigeria. They are complaining about the lack of facilities and some of them come here to record their music because they find they can find multi-track studios here.

JOHN COLLINS

There is a waiting list in Nigeria because it's such a big country - 80 million people. But also Nigeria has 8 and 16 track studios which might not satisfy people, because now in England we have got 24 and even 32 track recording studios. In Ghana they have only got 2 track studios which as you know is really antiquated. Not only that, in Ghana one of the recording studios there is not air-conditioned. You are working at about 110 degrees. Those records we made, we made in a 2 track studio with a number of technical strikes going on and with no air-conditioning. So we really had to sweat to get that music out.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I wonder what improvement you could have made to that recording. I thought it was very pleasant to hear, of course I am not technically minded.

JOHN COLLINS

Well, if we had made it on an 8 track or 16 track I could have really mixed the music afterwards but if you make it on a 2 track, it's fixed.

ALEX TETTELH-LARTLEY

I understand there are many other problems as well with regard to entertainment - that there is a shortage of beer in the country which is an essential part of Ghanaian entertainment?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes well, what's happened is that the night life has declined over the last five years - or ten rather. When I first came to Ghana in '69 it was all out in the open - live bands, beer flowing, everybody enjoying themselves. But now everybody goes into these dark, dismal discos and listens to foreign music. The live bands are really suffering and in fact a lot of musicians have left the country.

ALEX TETTELH-LARTLEY

There seems to be a lot of money around, I don't see why.....

JOHN COLLINS

Well, there was a lot of money around before they changed the currency but it was an inflated currency, now there isn't very much money around at all.

ALEX TETTELH-LARTLEY

That's rather dismal, anyway I hope things will improve.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, I'm sure they will

ALEX TETTELH-LARTLEY

When I visited Ghana a couple of years ago I was shocked to see people freely at the roadside taping music from LP's and selling these tapes without anybody caring a hoot.

JOHN COLLINS

Pirating, you mean? Yes, there are so many problems in Ghana. There's pirating, non-payment of royalties by the GBC and Broadcasting and the studios and so on and what happened is that the musicians have been forced to form unions. There are now two unions in the country, the Musicians' Union and the Indigenous Musicians' Co-operative. Things got so bad, just before the coup, that the Musicians Union decided to have a march to the Castle for official recognition, because unless the Government recognizes the union nothing can be done about the situation. The union is claiming that about half the Ghanaian musicians have left the country. Whether this is true or not I'm not sure but most certainly a lot of musicians have left.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTLY

It's sad that. One must at the same time accept that with this pirating going on music was getting round to many more people than would have been the case otherwise.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, but the musicians are starving while this is happening and it's not right that the music should be going around and that the people who make the music should be starving.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTLY

You talk about these two unions. Have they been able to solve this problem they are facing? I mean, what did the march to the Castle achieve?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, when the Musicians Union 'Musica', is the proper name - marched to the Castle they saw some people there, they said they were going to look into the recognition question. But then after that was the coup so I'm not quite sure what the situation is now. I suppose the new government with its sort of clean-up and so on will look into the whole music industry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTLY

How has this affected you and your band?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, our main trouble at the moment is recording. As I said before, we have just recorded on two-track and because of this I'm going to be forced to take the band out of Ghana to record so I'll probably be bringing them to England this year or next year to record in a decent studio.

ALEX TEITTEH-LARTEY

Well, how about yourself, apart from this difficulty you have with the band. I mean, you are here now, do you intend to do anything about this here?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, I'm actually here on business for the Musicians Union and I'm collecting some information about copyright and so on - recording companies in Africa and when I go back I'll be giving them the information that I've got.

ALEX TEITTEH-LARTEY

Now about the band. Who records and who composes your music for you?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, there are three of us in the band who do most of the compositions myself, Gifty and Jones and we have one or two writers who contribute songs from time to time. Just about all our songs are our own compositions, I think - we have recorded 28 songs now.

ALEX TEITTEH-LARTEY

Well, most of those I have heard are in one of the local languages, Ga especially - do you understand Ga?

JOHN COLLINS

No, I don't speak Ga very well, I speak a bit of Twi. But what I usually do is I write my songs, I write the ones in English and also sometimes in the Afro-beats I'll write the melody and then we will put in some sort of phrase which will be in Ga or Hausa or something but of course somebody else has to come in and do that for me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I'm interested in seeing you use this rattle made from nuts.

JOHN COLLINS

The telavi?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. And you made a very nice recording of it, what I can only describe as a 'Nut Rattle Blues.'

MUSIC: NUT RATTLE BLUES BY JOHN COLLINS (SOLO)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, apart from this you have got another composition haven't you?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes. This one is a song I wrote last year and I'll play it in the way in the sort of raw state and it's called 'Come to Me.'

MUSIC: COME TO ME BY JOHN COLLINS (SOLO)

JOHN COLLINS

Anyway that's how it sounded when I first wrote it and then at the end of the programme you'll hear the final result when we recorded it in a studio.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh, that's fine. Now John you left Bokoor back in Ghana. What, have you deserted them? For good?

JOHN COLLINS

No, not at all. I'm only here just temporarily you know. I'm going back on Tuesday and then I hope to be bringing the band or some members of the band back to England to re-record all our stuff in a good studio.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That'll be a good experience for them.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, very good.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I'm sure they will enjoy it. I really look forward to having the whole line-up here in our BBC Studios. I'm sure they will do a marvellous job for us.

JOHN COLLINS

OK, thanks.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now back to this recording you said. I think this is the time for us now to listen to it.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, this is the final result.

MUSIC: COME TO ME BY BOKOOR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, John Collins thank you very much indeed. And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. Don't forget to join us again at the same time next week. Until then, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.