

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa.

MUSIC EXTRACT - NDOZIVA RIPI

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The music of the Mbira introduces a programme about Zimbabwe. But today I am going to be talking to someone who has just returned from a visit to Zimbabwe, a regular producer of Arts and Africa, Florence Akst. Now Florence, why did you choose that particular song to begin the programme?

FLORENCE AKST

Two reasons Alex. One is that the rhythm is so basic to the music that I heard in Zimbabwe. It's traditional and it's the base for nearly all the songs that are sung. Another is the subject: it's about a traveller, so many of the songs are about travelling and this one is a traveller who has got lost and he's rescued by an eagle who shows him his way home. The eagle was the first piece of sculpture that I saw when I went into the really quite famous National Gallery in Harare. Sculpture of course is perhaps the best known art form in Zimbabwe and there were sculptures there by people I'd heard of, works I hadn't seen by really quite famous names now, like Taylor Nkomo, John Takawira, Sylvester Mubayi who had a splendid Baboon figure out in the grounds of the Gallery in the grass, looking very lifelike and rather threatening.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are Zimbabweans exclusively sculptors or are they interested in paintings as well?

FLORENCE AKST

Well it's strange really because sculpture was only really introduced in a vigorous way 50 years ago but now it predominates to a very great extent and it's very popular and profitable, a great deal is sold. Painting doesn't seem to be particularly popular, there are some painters and there are new people coming along. I by chance saw a very interesting painting, a landscape in oils that really held my attention in the offices of a charity and that had been

painted by a war victim, somebody called Lancelot Taingwa who had been a guerilla, had been captured as soon as he entered the country and had spent over thirteen years in prison and there in prison he had managed to start drawing.

LANCELOT TAINGWA

I began doing art in prison that is doing it on toilet papers with pencils. Then later when I was being released I started doing some sketches. I had to develop, but I am still developing I have not yet reached the stage of being an artist.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well he's got a rather funny voice - gravelly.

FLORENCE AKST

Well, yes he has and I hope people are listening clearly because Lancelot is deaf, very deaf indeed. He really had to watch my lips moving as much as listen to my questions. And he's deaf because when he was first captured he was beaten about the head very severely until his eardrums were burst in order to get information from him and he is in fact very much crippled by the war but not so much that he isn't trying hard to develop this interest in art. Christian Care first gave him some material for drawing and also suggested that he went to the Polytechnic to take lessons, and in fact Lancelot is not doing oil paintings there he told me that he is being taught drawing with a pencil and he is finding it extremely difficult because through the dreadful experiences he's been through he trembles a great deal and indeed he was when I was with him and so it's very very difficult holding a pencil but apparently he's persevering. He's very anxious to learn this new skill and this new way of expressing himself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I suppose in addition to Lancelot Taingwa the war has affected a lot of other artists.

FLORENCE AKST

Well you see it in the visual arts in that sculpture for instance often has a rather political subject as well as the natural ones I was talking about earlier but obviously it's easier to see it in the written word and I was talking to a writer Geoffrey Ndhala he has already one novel out. One is being published this year and he is in the middle of writing a third. The last, the one that he's writing, is very much about the war; the one that's about to be published this year called "Southern Cross" has the war, as he put it, rumbling in the background of the story about young people, and I put it to him that perhaps now that the war is more than two years behind independence in Zimbabwe that people should forget about it and look forward, he didn't agree with me.

GEOFFREY NDHLALA

I think the war is part of our culture, you know just like the revolutions of the late 19th century, 1890's. Those, if you would forget about those, then perhaps you would be putting you know cutting out a chunk of our history, out of our culture. So I think it is important that we preserve you know the war, we have gone through the war and this obviously has caused so many changes to our way of life in Zimbabwe. So to ignore the war would mean perhaps not having the correct basis or footing for starting off for the future. We should have the war I think as the basis because that is where our Zimbabwe comes from, our independence comes from, so we should see it as a very important event or epoch in our history and a very important facet of our culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Florence, Musaemura Zimunya agreed with your suggestion in a recent interview for Arts and Africa that there's a significant dearth of creative literature in comparison with the amount of political debate that has gone on in Zimbabwe, is this going to remain so?

FLORENCE AKST

Well that's a matter of opinion isn't it. There are notable novelists, for instance there's Charles Mungoshi and Stanlake Samkange, several, but not the large number of authors, not the large output that some other African countries have but it did occur to me that the war in Nigeria, the civil war in Nigeria produced a large number of novels eventually, but they were almost all written from the Biafran point of view; written by people who were at least militarily defeated and as the African's in Zimbabwe are anything but the defeated of the independence struggle, they are in fact the victors of the independence struggle, perhaps this will deny them the sort of strength of feeling that turns itself into a work of fiction. Wait and see.

MUSIC EXTRACT - MARENJE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I hardly need mention Florence that that sounds very very traditional.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes it is, it's basically the Mbira again the lead Mbira, I would call it using the modern phrase, is played by Ephat Mujuru one of the best known Mbira players and also constructors of Mbira instruments in Zimbabwe and a group that have kalabashes, the rattles and of course a singer. I'm particularly happy that we should be hearing that tune because it has so much that is essentially Zimbabwean and above all the flowing sense of the rhythm. It's not a rhythm that you can separate into phrases. It goes on and on and on and this is true of all the music that I heard that was traditional. It was almost like listening to a river flowing past you. In the contemporary music, in the pop music, this same sort of rhythm is very apparent still.

MUSIC EXTRACT - MAKONA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What's the title of that song, it's beautiful, to begin with it's very South African to me, it's South African black to me.

FLORENCE AKST

Well of course the peoples of Zimbabwe are related to people in South Africa. This one is called Makona and it too, I think you would agree, has this flowing rhythm. It is the journey song isn't it. It's this movement this time perhaps less of a rhythm, more of a train with the singer being the passenger on the train.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's tremendous bass, I like the bass instrument there very much.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes it came over very well didn't it. But I'd like to play another disc that is quite different to my ears. This is a song called Gone Wild, it's got an English name and before I say any more lets hear a little of Gone Wild.

MUSIC EXTRACT - GONE WILD

FLORENCE AKST

Well the music of Gone Wild to my ears reflects very much the tremendous number of components in the lives of people living at least in urban Zimbabwe - influences from South Africa, from Europe, from various bordering countries, from the United States. I think it would take Hilton Fyle to analyse that particular piece of music. I can hear Afro-rock, everything perhaps to Jim Reeves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well do you get the general picture of life, cultural life in the country. I understand that the place is rather quiet and sedate.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes. Gone Wild makes it sound as though it's throbbing but this is not the sensation I got, I felt more that there was a certain caution and reserve about not only people and individuals but their expression in art. I was told that perhaps that's a colonial experience. I'm not sure. I would suspect that it is part of the temperament of a lot of people in Zimbabwe. So I wouldn't like to predict the future though I am very curious to see what it brings.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I am quite sure that the Zimbabweans having established their feet very firmly politically will establish their feet equally firmly in the artistic field.

Before we end I'd like to remind you of our special Jubilee Art Competition I certainly hope that artists in Zimbabwe are busy preparing their entries. For rules and conditions of the competition you should write to:-

FLORENCE AKST

"Arts and Africa" Jubilee Art Competition, Bush House, BBC London

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now Florence, what music would you like to choose to end the programme?

FLORENCE AKST

Well I have very happy memories of wandering the streets of Harare listening to the music coming out of the music shops. And besides the music that is particularly Zimbabwean there was quite a lot that had a Congolese flavour and this Zimbabwean group 'The Same Age Boys' play a delicious number called Musango Maive Neyi.

MUSIC EXTRACT - MUSANGO MAIVE NEYI