

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey bringing you this week's edition of "Arts and Africa".

GRAMS

ORIGINAL SUFFERHEAD - Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Fela Anikulapo Kuti telling us to "Go to Lagos" where the music is. Well that's what our first guest did, but in rather unusual way. He is Sir Mervyn Brown, until recently Britain's High Commissioner to Nigeria who for four years worked as a diplomat by day and a musician by night playing with and organising concerts for some of Nigeria's leading amateur and professional musicians.

David Stephens asked him first about his own musical expertise.

SIR MELVYN BROWN

I play tenor saxophone in jazz, I play classical music on clarinet and I play a bit of music in both styles of music. There I found a lot of very good musicians, particularly solo singers who, on the whole, weren't doing very much in the way of performing and I was able to bring these together and put on quite a lot of concerts with myself accompanying. I found that, although I wouldn't have regarded myself as a pianist because there weren't many pianists around, I found myself playing a lot of piano, accompanying singers in classical music and also more modern music including jazz. So what I did mainly, more than anything else, was organise concerts for charity with these very fine solo singers of different nationalities, Austrian, British, American and especially Nigerian, of course. Then also I took part in evenings at the Nigerian jazz club, The Museum Kitchen, which is the main centre of jazz in Lagos.

DAVID STEPHENS

Who were the favourites of the jazz scene?

SIR MELVYN BROWN

Well I suppose the best-known was Fela. And a very fine musician on tenor saxophone. The others, there are a number of good jazz groups. One of the best jazz groups of the traditional mainstream style actually was the Navy Band.

SIR MERVYN BROWN

The Navy had a band for playing usual military music but also sections formed a very fine jazz group which used to play at this jazz club from time to time. There was a good traditional style jazz group called "The Lagos Swing College Band" and then what has developed in the last few years is the two groups who are more or less interchangeable organised by this chap, Tunde Kaboye. First of all "The Extended Family" which as its name implies is an open house. We had a basic group which people would come in and join. I was made an honorary member of The Extended Family so I used to perform with them sometimes. Then a smaller group called The Frances Tunde Kaboye Jazz Quintet featuring Tunde's wife, Frances Kaboye who is a very, very fine jazz singer indeed, and this was more the style of music, say classical jazz of thirty years ago with the soloist and swinging quartet behind them and I used to play very frequently keyboard with that particular group.

TAPE

Music by the Frances Tunde Kaboye Quintet.

DAVID STEPHENS

How were you treated by Nigerians and expatriates? Did they regard it as rather strange to have a British High Commissioner who put on the dark glasses and check jacket and went into a jazz club, the smokey atmosphere of the jazz club in the evenings?

SIR MERVYN BROWN

Yes, I think some of them did. They were surprised certainly and I wouldn't be surprised if one or two of the expatriates disapproved because jazz still has these overtones of some rather improper activity based on its origins in New Orleans etc. In time people came to except it and I would think the majority approved, not that I ever wore dark glasses or check jackets (Laughs). But it was a surprise to see a High Commissioner performing not only in jazz clubs but also on the public stage. There were a few eyebrows raised but I think on the whole when people saw the end result was some good performances and it was for a worthy cause, for charity because I raised about forty thousand naira for charity in my four years there, I think on the whole it was widely accepted. Certainly the Nigerians, at the end, they organised a concert in my honour before I left and an evening at the jazz club which was rather nice.

DAVID STEPHENS

Musicians like Sunny Ade are very professional musicians and you are a professional diplomat and an amateur musician. Are there problems becoming a professional musician in Lagos?

SIR MERVYN BROWN

Yes, I think there are. I mentioned there are a number of extremely good musicians in Nigeria and many of them are professionally trained. On the classical side I might mention some individuals received very fine classical training in Britain and they've gone back to Nigeria and find that there is no market for classical music, particularly in Nigeria so they have to turn to some other way of earning a living and doing music in their spare time. Even the professors of music, they don't earn their living by performing. They either teach music, some of them work at radio and some of them have other jobs perhaps at the Ministry of Culture and therefore do music in their spare time. And there are only a few groups or individuals who have gone professional and still make a full time living.

SIR MERVYN BROWN

Tunde Kaboye, for example, he works at the Museum. He's the director of the Museum and therefore does this in his spare time. So really most of the people who make a full time living, I think you'd find them overseas either in America or England like Sunny Ade.

GRAMS

SYNCHRO SYSTEM - King Sunny Ade.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

King Sunny Ade and his African Beats, some of the favourite musicians of Sir Mervyn Brown talking there to David Stephens. We now move to diplomats of another kind: Eight Zimbabwean artists who's work is being exhibited at major galleries in London and New York. The exhibition is titled "The Spirit of Zimbabwe" and is organised under the umbrella of the Zimbabwe National Arts Foundation. David Stephens went along to the opening here in London and spoke to the Organiser and Chief Executive of the foundation, Derek Huggins, and asked him what they were trying to do.

DEREK HUGGINS

What we are trying really to do, I suppose, is to show the love of the land, the country and to try and convey that impression, that impression of the land, its sunlight, its vastness, its space, its skies, its colour, the red earth and all the other things that go into making the country what it is, into the heart of London.

DAVID STEPHENS

How many artists work did you bring with you?

DEREK HUGGINS

We have brought works by eight well-known Zimbabwean artists. The exhibition is really in three categories, Zimbabwe stone sculpture, paintings in oil and mixed media and there are textiles together with a number of graphics, really four categories.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David then asked Derek to describe the work of two of the artists, first the sculptor John Takawira and then the multi-media artist Helen Lieros.

DEREK HUGGINS

Joh Takawira is commonly known as "big John", his is indeed a big man with bald head and a bull-like neck and arms like anvils. He works, in the main, in black serpentine. He has deep seated mythological beliefs and often in John's work you will see a transition, a transformation like a man changing into a baboon or a man changing into a bird or an eagle or something like this because he actually believes that the spirits of the deceased actually come back and enter into another live being.

DAVID STEPHENS

Turning to another medium, painting, the work here of Helen Lieros is very, very striking and probably my favourite of the whole exhibition. This is very beautiful, very striking reds and blues. It looks almost like a cave painting, a sort of ochre colour with almost inscriptions on pieces of rock.

DEREK HUGGINS

Well there's a lot of almost hieroglyphics on perhaps what you could call stellae or something. Yes, you're quite right. This one she calls "Conflict of Man" and certainly you've got conflict of man, you've got a tiger-like creature with a person perhaps in supplication in some way and other areas with figures and symbols and so on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Derek Huggins, Chief Executive of the Zimbabwe National Arts Foundation talking about "The Spirit of Zimbabwe" exhibition, held in London.

Let's bring this edition of "Arts and Africa" to a close with some more of that music by the Frances Tunde Kaboye Quintet - with Frances Kaboye on vocals and Sir Mervyn Brown on piano. Until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

Music by The Frances Tunde Kaboye Quintet.