

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A unique exchange between the artists of Sierra Leone and an English city, and the new African music which continues to take London by storm. That's the lineup for today's Arts and Africa. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to the programme.

MUSIC - Toure Kunda

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The highly distinctive sound of Toure Kunda from Senegal, one of seven African bands taking part in a festival of African music here in London. We'll be hearing from one of the organisers of the festival later in the programme. But first a fascinating exchange programme involving artists from Sierra Leone and the English city of Leeds.

Over the years we have heard a great deal on this programme about the isolation felt by Africa's contemporary artists. Well, it seems the problem is not just confined to Africa. A group of artists from Leeds conscious of the need for wider exposure and anxious for contacts with artists in different parts of the world, decided to set up an organisation devoted to cultural exchanges. It's called 'Services to the Arts in Africa' and the fruits of its enterprise are now being enjoyed in the two cities of Leeds and Freetown, Sierra Leone. In a unique project, exchange exhibitions have been set up enabling the two cities thousands of miles apart - to share each others art. One of the organisers of this inter-city art swap is Michael Anderson, a lecturer in art who has just returned from Freetown where he helped set up the Leeds exhibition and where he also held meetings with art students and lecturers at Milton Margai Teachers' College. Michael, now you have just returned from Freetown where you set up the exhibition, what did the people there think about the scheme.

MICHAEL ANDERSON

I got the impression from the moment I arrived there that they were most interested to hear of anything that was going on out of their country that was involved with art. They were very receptive to our ideas, they wanted to see different kinds of art, they wanted to hear different ideas of art expressed, and generally they wanted to begin some kind of dialogue in which they could share their ideas with us and could hear from me what kind of things we are concerned with in our art in Britain.

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So, the exhibition was very useful to them to have and it was very important for the British artists to have their work there. It was interesting for the people in Freetown to see that exhibition but it was the wholeness of the venture I think as much as anything, the fact that I could be there to talk about the work with them, to draw attention to particular kinds of qualities that some of our artists were interested in - that began a kind of dialogue, a kind of conversation between the Freetown people and ourselves which could in fact go on longer.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's interesting. I would like to know if they found anything in common between what you showed and what they themselves were producing? Did they find any common links?

MICHAEL ANDERSON

Well the common link I suppose was that we, all of us, feel a great need to express ourselves visually and the nature of the work in Freetown and the nature of the work in Britain is in many ways really rather different. The work in Freetown I found very exciting and the work that people have seen from Freetown over here has excited quite a lot of people but I think that the kinds of concerns that we have tend to differ. I don't think that either concern is necessarily more important than the other. I think that's it's fascinating that we all bring different kinds of concerns to our ventures in art and the people of Sierra Leone are very concerned for a magic in their art, a narrative content, subject matter that one should get a sense of an occasion or a story or some sense of ritual from their work. In Britain the art that we have, whilst we have been influenced quite a lot over the ages by African art generally, our art is normally concerned with more compositional, or architectural kinds of concerns, our art grows from art, we are interested in the structure of painting and we begin to get to be very formal about our kinds of paintings in Britain and in America and in Europe generally of course, so to be confronted with art which is perhaps not as concerned with overall structure but more concerned with a sense of message and occasion, is really very vital to us I think and something that we enjoyed very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well did they in your discussions with the artists and the art teachers, did they apart from the actual work of art produced discuss any problems they had? Did they have any problems?

MICHAEL ANDERSON

Yes, they have a very major problem which I am sure that they would want me to voice on their behalf and this is the problem that they have in actually being able to obtain materials. It's a matter of the availability of the material, and the materials at the right price. When one looks at some of the works that have been produced in Sierra Leone, one marvels at how much care and concern has gone into producing works of that quality with such difficulties that they have in actually being able to get hold of the raw materials that are required for art.

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It's a very basic and fundamental problem but it's one which they voice very often there and one feels a great sympathy for them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Michael Anderson thank you very much indeed and I wish you all the best with your project.

MICHAEL ANDERSON

That's very kind of you. It's been most enjoyable so far and I do feel reasonably confident that things can continue into the future. Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well now let's hear some new music from Zaire. The band's called 'Les Quatres Etoiles', in English 'The Four Stars' and their song: Nvuna Chantal.

MUSIC - Les Quatre Etoiles

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Les Quatres Etoiles are the latest band to perform in a seven concert festival of new African music here in London. Rarely have African music lovers had such rich pickings. Among others there's been Nana Ampadou and the African Brothers from Ghana, Youssou N'dour from Senegal as well as Toure Kunda who you heard at the beginning of the programme. They have all performed at London's concert hall 'The Venue' as part of a special festival organised by the Greater London Council entitled 'London Against Racism'. To discuss the performances I'm joined by a fellow Ghanaian, Charles Easmon, a representative of Sterns African Record Centre and one of the organisers of the concerts. Well Charles welcome to Arts and Africa.

CHARLES EASMON

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you say London is now being treated to the best new African music?

CHARLES EASMON

Well, some of it. It's only involving eight bands and I could name more than 100 all of the best quality. So at least we are seeing eight of them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, Toure Kunda who we heard at the beginning of the programme had a very interesting mixture of traditional music, of reggae, of afro-funk and the whole lot, and I also understand that they are the top in the African charts.

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CHARLES EASMON

Well they are a relatively new name to most Africans but in Francophone Africa and Paris, for about the last year and a half they have been the number one group and their records sell an awful lot. Their music: well, they come from Senegal but in their early days they were heavily influenced by reggae from Bob Marley but then too, that raised an interesting point because a lot of the traditional Senegalese music sounds like reggae and a lot of people are wondering if there isn't a historical link between the two. Since then they've developed this international African sound and they have influences from all the different types of music you mentioned as well as the strong traditional feel using traditional instruments. So Senegal is a real hotbed of musical integration.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how are they received in Anglophone Africa?

CHARLES EASMON

I don't think they are known in Anglophone Africa yet. But, we can expect that over the next year or two I'm sure. There is a bit of a barrier inherited from the colonial times and it shows in the music business in that Francophone Africa rarely hears Anglophone Africa's music and vice versa, so this is all changing now and it can only be for the better.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Les Quatres Etoiles who we just heard also sound very West Africa. I know they are from Zaire. A beautiful pleasant relaxing sound which you normally associate with bands like OK Jazz, but at the same time there's this African rythm especially in the introductory instrument playing.

CHARLES EASMON

Well, I think the Zairians and the Congolese have always stuck more truly to African music than some others and there are so many hundreds and hundreds of really good musicians in Zaire that the competition is really quite considerable and for people like Les Quatres Etoiles who are a new generation, their music is still distinct. Zaire music is always moving and changing and what I like about them is that definitely as a West African I can hear influences of West African music in it. So this is much preferable to hearing influences of American music and so on and I think this is a new movement that's going on now of different types of African music integrating with each other.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I could hardly distinguish between them actually and Prince Nichol Mbagha from Nigeria. They seem to be producing the same sort of sound which is extremely rich and very pleasant indeed.

CHARLES EASMON

That's right. Prince Nichol, he comes from eastern Nigeria and Cameroon is next door and so he has the Zaire influence from Cameroon and then the High Life influence from eastern Nigeria, he mixes the two.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A wonderful mixture. Now another star from the concert has been Nana Ampadou and the African Brothers. Now what do you have to say about him?

CHARLES EASMON

Well, I think if you mention High Life which is the best known of all African music originating in Ghana, you can't mention High Life without mentioning Nana Ampadou. I think he's the leading innovator of High Life in Africa over the last two decades. They started in 1963. They've made over 70 albums which maybe have not really been marketed outside West Africa before. He is one of the most well respected musicians there are anywhere and a great, great I think a genius really.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Let's end with some music from the Senegalese band Youssou N'dour and the Super Etoile de Dakar. What do you have to say about them Charles?

CHARLES EASMON

Only that they are great. Their music is based on one of the traditional musics in Senegal called Mbalax and they have modernised it. It's a wonderfully rich music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well here now then is 'Jaambar'. Until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC - Youssou N'dour and the Super Etoile de Dakar