

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And in today's "Arts and Africa" we're looking back with pleasure and respect to one of Africa's great musicians.

MUSIC

"Fire, Fire, Fire" by Calender and His Maringar Band.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Fire, Fire, Fire" is the recording made famous by Ebenezer Calender and his Maringar Band. A truly legendary figure and now, after his death last year in his home town of Freetown, Sierra Leone, there's every chance that his music is going to be heard loud and clear for many years to come. The preservation of many of his recordings of the 1950's on fragile 78's and the writing of his life story have been the task of a German musicologist, Dr. Wolfgang Bender who has been concerned lest the legend grew dim.

WOLFGANG BENDER

Everyone, virtually everybody, knew about Calender and so many people could quote many of his songs right off-hand that although he was such a well-known musician he's never been worked on. Maybe the reason is that because everyone knew his music so well, no one ever thought about studying the man and his music. So maybe it needed an outsider to come and realise that something had to be done.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What's being done is that Wolfgang Bender has been spending the early months of this year in the Gramophone Library of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service, SLBS, copying onto tape those early, precious 78's of Sierra Leone recording artists and especially those of Calender. That all adds up to hundreds of numbers that from now on can't get scratched or smashed. SLBS will be using them in their broadcasts and another copy goes to West Germany, to the African archives of the Museum of Bremen.

The project enjoys the patronage of the Director-General of SLBS and the West German Ambassador to Freetown and it's being sponsored by the West German government.

Wolfgang Bender went to school in Lagos for a while and returned to West Africa for his post-graduate studies but it was here in London that he first fell under the spell of Ebenezer Calender when he came across his music at the National Sound Archives. He's been telling Khalil Kamara how in 1984 he was able to go to Freetown and meet the great man face to face, uniform, wig and all, and got him to talk about his music.

WOLFGANG BENDER

We went through his songs, he even had - which was great luck - he had a repertoire-list of all the songs he'd ever composed and sang. We started to record all these titles on tape in order to bring out a proper Krio transcription of all these titles. I started to work on his whole life story and I chose a particularly interesting subject, "The Transport Problem and Calender", because he recorded a song on the Decca label called "Double-Decker Buses" which described the double-decker buses introduction into Freetown in January 1951.

MUSIC

Double Decker Buses by Calender and His Maringar Band.

KHALIL KAMARA

How many titles do you have, credited to the late Mr. Calender?

WOLFGANG BENDER

Up till now it has only been guess-work because there are no lists of records published by local record companies like Nugatone or Bassophone in Sierra Leone. Even from the Decca and HMV releases at that time it is not easy to establish an exact number but one can guess around twenty 78's that he might have recorded. They even took him to Ghana to record; they took him on the boat directly to Ghana which showed the importance they accrued to Calender.

KHALIL KAMARA

You spent quite a while with him and you should be able to say what sort of character he was.

WOLFGANG BENDER

I think he was really an exceptional and very impressive character. He seemed to be a very tough person in one way but a very sympathetic and cooperative person in the other way. He knew how to handle his band: for example, he would be very strict with his musicians and would not allow them any fussing about, he would do his programmes in the studio and be very clear about what he was singing and doing - that was quite impressive. As for the research I was doing with him, he was very modest and he was not an easy person to work with, he asked a lot of questions, we also had problems understanding each other because he would talk mainly in Krio with English whereas I don't speak any Krio.

KHALIL KAMARA

What about the Maringar Band which became his own hallmark, how many people were in the band and how many instruments did they play?

WOLFGANG BENDER

When we talk about the Maringar Band it is the band that he had in the 1950's which was recorded on those gramophone records, later on the music changed a lot. In the 1950's he first used his own acoustic guitar which was responsible for the Maringar tunes, then he would have a euphonium for the bass sound and a triangle and at least one or two drums for the percussive element.

MUSIC

Sierra Leonean music

WOLFGANG BENDER

But later on his music turned more into a type of Milo Jazz group with only percussion, maybe three to four drums and different types of shakers and gongs.

KHALIL KAMARA

Talking about the Milo Jazz, did you see him in action at wedding ceremonies and events like that?

WOLFGANG BENDER

When I came to Freetown two years ago I was unlucky because he had a bad leg at that time so he was not really going about too much. I only had the opportunity to see his band in action when they went to a funeral for a lady who was 109 when she died. It was said about Calender that he would not play at a funeral when the person was not above 100 years old. That shows how important he was, he would not go to anyone's wake unless that person was of considerable age. And that burial march that I recorded was also a very pleasant experience for me because there was such a lively feeling and everybody had such a good time.

KHALIL KAMARA

Were you here when he died and when he was buried?

WOLFGANG BENDER

That was a great pity because I only heard the news a few weeks after his death that there had been a huge funeral, one of the biggest there has ever been.

KHALIL KAMARA

Yes indeed, it was huge and perhaps the greatest one one can remember in this country. The old ladies and everybody came out to give him a rousing send-off as he would have loved.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ebenezer Calender made exciting and tremendously popular music, and made it at a time when recording companies and gramophones spread his music far and wide. Wolfgang Bender has made a point of tracing it from its source in Freetown.

WOLFGANG BENDER

Calender has been definitely of great influence on the whole highlife area of Western to Central Africa. Calender's music, for example, "Fire, Fire, Fire" has been taken up by E.T. Mensah and then he brought that song to Nigeria and from Nigeria it even went to Cameroon, "Fire, Fire, Fire" was known by virtually all the people in the 1950's in Western Africa. I think that he has really contributed a lot with his Maringar style to the music that was later merging into modern highlife sound.

MUSIC

"Fire, Fire, Fire" by Benson and the Chebby Jazz.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Benson and Chebby Jazz version of "Fire, Fire, Fire" recorded in 1968 as an example of Calender's influence. By-the-way, that's one of many songs that weren't Calender's original creations but it was his recordings that put them, as we'd say today, 'in the charts'.

Wolfgang Bender regrets that African popular culture, and this music is an example, is sadly neglected by the scholars who specialize in the arts of Africa. He regards them as amongst the most spontaneous and vital art forms. We can only hope he'll be given the opportunity to collect and preserve yesteryear's music from the record libraries of other African radio stations. There must be more treasures needing to be saved.

MUSIC

"Fire, Fire, Fire".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From the late Ebenezer Calender - and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.