

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying welcome to 'Arts and Africa'.

MUSIC: YE YE DE SMELL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Conferences on African culture spring up all over the place these days but the recent one held in Accra, Ghana was a little different. For one thing its subject was "African in the World of Popular Music". Taking part were academics from Europe, North America, Asia, from Nigeria and, of course, from Ghana. Klevor Abo a musicologist at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies was one of the organisers of the Conference for the International Association for the Study of Popular Music. Well, we all recognise popular music when we hear it but I'd be hard put to define it. Klevor Abo does it this way.

KLEVOR ABO

With the development of the Industrial Revolution - and following on it the revolution in communications - there is a new form of music called 'temporary popular music' that is mediated through the modern electronic mass media. Now because of the way in which this music is mediated and transmitted it's so very cross-cultural, (what has produced 'Live Aid', for example, was done on three continents at the same time) that you cannot shut the airwaves and the inter-action between the various cultures is getting more and more intimate. The type of music that is produced as a result of the availability of this technology is now studied in the universities and it is that type of music that, in a sense, links all the cultures of the world, and therefore, by studying it, you probably have a better grasp, a better understanding of the kinds of relationships that exists between various musical forms. I mean, in Ghana we've had Ghana's response to "We Are the World" for example. I wouldn't be surprised if there is a Chinese response to it. And by studying that record "We Are the World" there are many things that you can learn about several societies dealing with just one single end. It is phenomenal, if you look at it a little more globally - the Beatles songs have been sung all over the world - if you studied it you'd know what are the relations between the various musical cultures.

MUSIC: YE YE DE SMELL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The British drummer, Ginger Baker, playing with Fela Anikulapo Kuti in the 1970's. And illustrating another point Klevor Abo makes about present day popular music.

KLEVOR ABO

We must remember that popular music is also business, it pays million and millions of dollars. Once money is involved it is no longer a question of how competent you are but it is a question of what are the business and the political things at stake. So one can not answer the question: how popular is African music without dealing with the industrial, political and the cultural institutions that make it impossible for African music to get there. In the same way as the IMF makes it difficult for African people to get projected, that same way the international show-business machinery makes it impossible for the top artists from Africa to get to the top of the charts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Klevor Abo. The death earlier this month in Zimbabwe of the writer Dambudzo Marechera wasn't totally unexpected - he'd been ill for some months. But his fiery creative spirit has now been extinguished at the age of thirty five. I suppose Marechera is best known for his first novel, "The House of Hunger", which won him a notable book prize and fame, and in some circles, notoriety. He was also a poet - and he didn't mince his words in poetry either.

POEM EXTRACT FROM "THE COIN OF MOONSHINE"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dambudzo Marechera reading from his last book "Mindblast". And from Harare where he died, Fiona Lloyd has sent us this account of his life. Fiona interviewed Marechera several times, and memorably at length for us exactly a year ago.

FIONA LLOYD

Dambudzo is the Shona word for 'trouble', and for many people in Zimbabwe that's exactly what Dambudzo Marechera represented. He was always a controversial figure ready to speak his mind on the hypocrisy he detected around him. That meant that he was far from popular with those in authority, whoever they happened to be. As an undergraduate at the University of Rhodesia in the 1970's he was noted for his academic excellence but also his fiery temper and constant battles with white students just out of the Rhodesian army, battles in which he usually came off second best. Eventually Marechera was expelled from the University in 1973 and fled to England where two years at Oxford broadened his intellectual horizons and strengthened his commitment as a writer. But he was sent down for refusing psychiatric treatment and spent the next few years mostly in London leading a kind of subterranean existence. Paradoxically it was one of the happier periods of his life and there was literary success too, when his first novel 'The House of Hunger' won the Guardian Award for Fiction. And then suddenly in 1982, Dambudzo Marechera returned to Zimbabwe where he remained until his death. The homecoming was traumatic for he soon realised that despite the change in government he was still essentially an outsider. His outspoken opinions quickly landed him in trouble. He was arrested on several occasions and complained of other forms of harassment, and his relationship with other bodies like The Writers Union was always uneasy, despite his personal bond with individual members. He felt that the Union was merely a mouthpiece for those in authority, that it couldn't speak for people on

FIONA LLOYD CONTD.

the fringes of society, indeed Marechera himself was perhaps most at home in the bars and shabeens of Harare, where he spent much of his time. When he first returned home he was always broke and often hungry. He had few friends because most people found his brand of honesty intimidation and he had a reputation for heckling at public events, like poetry readings, often shouting abuse at guest speakers. Meanwhile local publishers continued to refuse his latest work complaining that it was elitist and obscure. But latterly Marechera's life did hold some consolation. There was a small group of friends who supported him financially and psychologically, and earlier this year he made a surprise appearance at the first colloquium on Zimbabwean literature at the University. A thin figure in khaki dungarees, he seemed to be weaker physically but the intensity, the anger, the verbal acrobatics were still there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This poem "The Undying Testament" is typical of Marechera at his most political and direct. He says this is the way the Soweto Uprising is commemorated at the University of Zimbabwe and points to the contradiction between fine words of support for the South African struggle and his country's economic dependence on the Pretoria government. Here he is reading the final part of the poem at that colloquium on Zimbabwean literature.

POEM EXTRACT FROM: "THE UNDYING TESTAMENT"

MUSIC: YE YE DE SMELL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Musa Zimunya is a fellow Zimbabwean poet of distinction and provided Marechera with a platform at the University of Zimbabwe where Zimunya teaches African Literature. He knew Marechera from their early days and these are his first thoughts on hearing of Marechera's death.

MUSA ZIMUNYA

He, in a way, was a writer of the future because he saw himself as a man not of Rusape where he grew up, not of Harare where he lived, but of the larger universe. That, as I said, had its own dangers you know, because it meant that people saw him as an insane person, as a man who was unpredictable, who appeared to be great, and yet you couldn't actually get to him because of this deliberate escape from Africa. And he himself made no bones about it; he said it, he wasn't a villager, he was a man of the wider world.

But also consider his problem: he left Rhodesia and went into exile and Oxford became home for a while. Then he was thrown out of Oxford and then he returned home and found that he wasn't happy at home, so he alternated in his last days between ill-tempered drinking bouts and very amicable drinking sessions. Well, with fellow writers as with publishers, in the end he always felt that since they were living more comfortably he wasn't very sure whether they went against him, just like the ill-informed, over-enthusiastic members of the law enforcement institutions. He had his own personal problems and he knew it but he had a genuine interest in Zimbabwean literature and a genuine support of all writers. You know, he might have moments where he couldn't stomach a bad writer but he was only expressing in public what we expressed in private.

MUSA ZIMUNYA CONTD.

He would simply tell a writer that: 'You are simply not a writer'. He pushed our literature through many centuries to the 1980's. I would say that this is his biggest contribution. Further than that, he made our public who didn't have any tradition of a writer being a public personality, he made them notice writers in a way that had never been the case before.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Musaemura Zimunya on the death in Zimbabwe of Dambudzo Marechera.

MUSIC: YE YE DE SMELL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The music we've been hearing you'll have recognised as the turbulent and dramatic number "Ye Ye De Smell" from Fela Anikulapo Kuti and his band.

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye while Fela plays on.