

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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First b'cast: 11.9.87

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today in 'Arts and Africa' the accent is on music. That isn't a cue for music - it's a cue for a book. But I can promise music before too long.

Regular listeners will know that John Collins has spent most of his life in Ghana playing and recording popular Ghanaian music. He's also taken a great interest in its origins. What I didn't know was that in the early to mid '70's John used to play in jam sessions with E.T. Mensah, and his band The Tempos. John has written a book called 'E.T. Mensah, King of Highlife'. It's a racy, modestly produced account of E.T.'s life as one of Ghana's - and one of West Africa's - leading trumpeters and bandleaders. It's also clear from this conversation John Collins has recorded with Andy Norton that E.T.'s career reflects the development of highlife music in West Africa this century. So Andy begins with the most basic question of all.

ANDY NORTON

The book is called 'E.T. Mensah, King of Highlife': what is highlife, how would you describe it?

JOHN COLLINS

The nearest thing that I could say, in a nutshell, is that it is the West African equivalent to calypso - a cousin to calypso, there is even a lot of feedback between the two. It grew up about 100 years ago from the brass bands, the military bands and sailors groups - black and white sailors on the coast. Two different types of highlife emerged, one on the sort of elite instruments with the brass band dance orchestras which E.T. Mensah's music comes out of and one through the sailors instruments which has evolved into the guitar bands.

ANDY NORTON

Where does the name 'highlife' come from?

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JOHN COLLINS

Well what happened is that in the early days these were local types of music that had their own name; there was 'Ashiko', 'Adaha', 'Timo', 'Gome' and so on. When these local tunes were orchestrated in the 1920's the people outside who couldn't get in because they couldn't afford top hats and tails, they said that once the orchestras started to orchestrate their own songs that they knew - the street songs - they said: "Oh, they're now playing the highlife", because inside they were high-time or high-class people.

MUSIC - 'Nkebo Baya' by E.T. Mensah and his Tempos Band.

ANDY NORTON

That was E.T. Mensah, what was the track called?

JOHN COLLINS

That was a Ga song called 'Nkebo Baya'.

ANDY NORTON

Would you say that was a fairly typical highlife sound?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, very.

ANDY NORTON

Let's talk about E.T. Mensah himself now. What sort of background did he come from?

JOHN COLLINS

Well he is a Ga so he comes from an Accra family, not with any particular musical background but he was lucky to go to the James town Elementary School where there was a teacher called Teacher Lamptey. Teacher Lamptey had a fife flute band. Then it developed into a sort of dance orchestra, with maybe 60 schoolboy members. Practically all of the big names in the dance-band highlife of the 1950's passed through Teacher Lamptey's school.

ANDY NORTON

And what sort of music would they have been playing in the dance-bands?

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JOHN COLLINS

Well in fact, in those days they were really dance orchestras, they used violins - the whole works. They would play ball-room music, waltzes, fox-trots, ragtime music plus what was by then called highlife in the 1920's but they were local songs. Teacher Lamptey's band became the Accra Orchestra which was one of the most important dance orchestra of the 1930's.

ANDY NORTON

In your book you mention the impact of British and American soldiers on Ghanaian music during the Second World War. What was E.T. doing during the war?

JOHN COLLINS

He was training as a pharmacist, in fact. At that time he had been playing, with his brother Yebuah Mensah, with a band called 'The Rhythm Aces' which was a band split from the Accra Orchestra - a sort of a child of it. When the foreign soldiers came there were two in particular who influenced the development of the dance band highlife, one was a Scottish Sergeant called 'Sergeant Leopard'...

ANDY NORTON

Was this his real name?

JOHN COLLINS

No it was his stage name. He had been a professional dance-band man in Britain before the war. So he formed a band called 'Sergeant Leopard and His Black and White Spots' with African and European musicians. E.T. was in that band for a while then, I think, he was transferred on some course, came back, and then joined another band set up by an English man called Arthur Harriman. Harriman was a sax player and set up The Tempos with a Ghanaian called Adolf Doku who was a pianist and later they recruited people into it like E.T., Joe Kelly, Guy Warren now called Kofi Ghana Ba, who is the famous drummer. Later on when Harriman left in about 1946/7, the Tempos passed to E.T. In 1948 was when he took it over.

ANDY NORTON

'The Tempos' is the name that we now associate with E.T. Mensah's band.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, although funnily enough E.T. didn't actually create the band.

ANDY NORTON

What sort of styles were these soldiers bringing in?

JOHN COLLINS

They were basically bringing in swing music. Swing was the music of the war. Their bands were a little bit smaller, they used more jazzy forms of intonation, so in fact The Tempos were modelled on a small swing band of about twelve members.

ANDY NORTON

Now, throughout this period E.T. is working as a pharmacist and playing music in the evenings and in his spare time. How did he make the transition to becoming a band leader because it is really in that role that he is important?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes. Mind you he always remained as a pharmacist right through his career as a musician. What happened was that when he took the band over in 1948 he fused highlife with swing and then he had the good luck to have Guy Warren or Kofi Ghana Ba as his drummer. Ghana Ba had gone to London and played with the Afro-Cuban bands in London and had also done some work on the BBC - actually he was a disc jockey who was presenting calypso. So they brought this Afro-Cuban and calypso idea into The Tempos and it was an instant success - it was the whole fusion of calypso, highlife and swing.

MUSIC - 'Inflation Calypso'ANDY NORTON

Well that was the 'Inflation Calypso'. What developments were there in the 40's and 50's in the types of instruments that were being used in highlife?

JOHN COLLINS

If we are talking about the dance band variety, before the war it was based on a sort of orchestra with violins, violas, woodwind ... and after the war with the influence of swing a lot of the instruments dropped away completely leaving basically a rhythm section and the front line was trombone, saxophone and trumpet.

ANDY NORTON

Now from your book we get the impression that the 50's was very much the peak of E.T. Mensah's popularity in Ghana. What sort of work was the band doing during this period?

5.

JOHN COLLINS

Well they became a band that was associated with the C.P.P., the Convention People's Party, of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. They played at C.P.P. rallies and then they began touring, particularly in Nigeria and throughout the 50's he was going there once or twice a year. What happened in Nigeria was that although swing music had come in and they had swing bands, they hadn't started playing their own local songs. Their equivalent to highlife was juju music and they didn't orchestrate the juju music in the dance-bands. So when E.T. arrived with West African orchestrated music they took it up and all the bands in Nigeria started to follow him - all the dance-bands that is. People like Bobby Benson, Victor Olaiya, Rex Lawson who are well known highlife musicians now, they sort of got their inspiration from E.T. in the 50's.

ANDY NORTON

And as well as E.T. travelling out, there were also influences coming in weren't there?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, like Cuban percussion. But this goes back to the origins of highlife, back to the 1880's when West Indian troops had a regimental band based near Cape Coast in Ghana. In their spare time they were playing calypso so the Ghanaians who were also in brass bands thought that they could do the same and they started swinging brass band music and it produced the 'Adaha'.

ANDY NORTON

You describe in your book the visit of the American sax man, Louis Armstrong, in a much later period.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, that was in 1956 and I think he came back in 1961. He toured Africa and went to Ghana and I think that he believed Ghana was his homeland where his ancestors came from. He had a big influence and worked at E.T.'s club where they were filmed together.

ANDY NORTON

And he has become associated with the famous E.T. song, hasn't he?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes. What happened was that when Louis Armstrong got off the plane with the All Stars band, there was a group - let's say a combined group of musicians, Ghanaian dance-band musicians - who played 'All For You' which they thought was an old popular highlife number in English from maybe around the turn of the century. So they made it 'All For You, Louis, All For You' but Louis Armstrong said that he remembers his grandmother singing the song. It was an old Creole song from Louisiana.

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MUSIC - 'All For You'.

ANDY NORTON

A traditional melody that wasn't written by E.T. but taken up by his band. In his own songs what sort of things was E.T. Mensah singing about?

JOHN COLLINS

Just about everything under the sun. Some of his songs were in favour of the Independence struggle, he wrote songs commemorating things like Independence Day - 'Freedom Highlife'; he would sing about social problems like the inflation one we've heard, talking about 'Money Palava'; women problems but usually not about love - they weren't romantic songs, not usually. He has even written a song about a newspaper in Ghana - The Ghana Mirror.

MUSIC - 'Sunday Mirror' by E.T. Mensah and The Tempos.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

'Sunday Mirror' ... but as we all know the BBC doesn't allow advertising perhaps we'd better stop here. Talking to Andy Norton was John Collins, author of 'E.T. Mensah, King of Highlife' published in paperback by 'Off the Record Press' and costing £5.50 in the United Kingdom.

E.T. is still very much with us. He's taking things more quietly these days but he was able to give me his own account of his career last year which we broadcast in 'Arts and Africa'. E.T. and his Tempos Band 1961 recording of "Me Da Wo Ase" - "I Thank You" rounds off the programme. From me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye until next week.