

# The African artist deserves recognition

BY Benson Idonije

Bernard Olabanji Benson popularly known as Bobby Benson died fourteen years ago. He will for ever be remembered as one of Africa's greatest artists, show man, musician and band leader of repute.

History cannot forget the pioneering efforts he dissipated and the valuable contributions he made towards the development of highlife and dance music in Nigeria.

Born in 1921, Bobby had a good secondary education, but the urge for adventure sent him abroad in 1944 as a sailor, and he eventually found himself in London where he made his debut with the Negro Ballet with which he toured the whole of Europe.

He returned to Lagos in 1947 and established his first band - the Bobby Benson Cassandra Theatrical Party with the wife he married in England, playing guitar and saxophone while his wife danced. This colourful collaboration later became the Bobby Benson Jam Session, an aggregation, which settled down to professional music, leading the way in the performance of jive, samba, calypso and all forms of dance music.

But because of competition from kokoma groups of that period, he often introduced African material into his repertoire. He also resisted competition from ball room dance music for which sophisticated Lagosians had a preference, until the early fifties when E.T. Mensah's Tempos Band introduced highlife which became popular, and Bobby Benson changed the direction of his music and that of the Nigerian scene.

As the first popular band, the Jam Session attracted the cream of musicians on the scene. The eleven piece outfit included a remarkable trumpet section which featured at various times Victor Olaiya, Zeal Onyia, Roy Chicago, Chief Bill Friday, Eddie Okonta and later Rex Jim Lawson, all of whom eventually became individualists and superstars, influencing generations of trumpeters over the years.

In the same way, trombonists, saxophonists, drummers and all the instrumentalists who played with him at various times also became major sources of influence to musicians who are today in the vanguard of our contemporary forms of music.

Some of Bobby Benson's songs are being internationally acclaimed as possessing rhythm and melodic inventiveness. "Taxi Driver," his biggest hit and the one that paved the way for Nigerian highlife and "Niger Mambo," an African melody with the Latin beat, have been exploited and reshaped by American's Randy Weston, Stanley Tarantine, Jackie Mclean among others.

All this is a measure of the dimension of his influence, the quality of his leadership and the genuineness of his acclaim which all speak volumes for a colossus. But unfortunately, Africa and in particular, Nigeria has no serious regard for her artists who are daily

striving to enrich her cultural heritage. They are denied all the recognition and acclaim they rightly deserve.

In essence, the 14th anniversary of Bobby Benson's death was on May 14; about two weeks ago but up till now no tribute or mention has come from the media, especially radio.

It is a shame that some of our stations now devote a hundred percent of their air time to music, and they cannot spare a fraction of this percentage to honour an occasion like this in the life of an innovator who is regarded as the god father of popular dance music in Nigeria.

It is over a month now since Eddy Okonta died, but only last week I received two invitations from producers of radio programmes for my contribution to memorial programmes in Eddy's honour - long after the thrill has gone.

Much as I blame this generation of broadcasters for idolising foreign artistes to the detriment of African artists, I also sympathise with them because some have complained that they have no source to fall back on for residual knowledge.

I want to put the bulk of the blame on PMAN and NUM the two unions who are supposed to be catering for the interest of the musicians. They should be able to document the biographies of all the musician in this country as a permanent record for general reference. Information should include life history, births and deaths which they should fill in and update continuously.

If the secretariats of the union are functioning properly, they should be in a position to send handouts to the media for publication and broadcast as and when events and occasions fall due. I am sure the newspapers will be ready to publish, and the deejays who are bereft of ideas and residual knowledge will be too glad to have something to say.

Rex Lawson, Tunde Nightingale, I.O. Araba, Haruna Isola, Ayinla Omowura, Roy Chicago, Charley Iwegbue, Adeolu Akinsanya and more are gone but the unions are doing nothing to immortalise their names so that this and the next generations will know them. The musician should not lose confidence in themselves.

International focus is now on Africa for its multi-dimensional rhythms which abound in various idioms. As it is, African musicians are more appreciated abroad than at home. Things can get better if only we reverse this trend.