

EMMANUEL Tete Mensah, one of Africa's foremost musicians passed on early in August, 1996. By his demise the West African subregion which he influenced more directly and indeed all of Africa lost yet another giant, an innovator, composer, singer, multi-instrumentalist and band leader.

Born in Accra, Ghana where he also died at 78, E.T Mensah was directly involved in the pioneering and formative processes of highlife music. His earlier years were spent in the vortex of the cross-cultural currents which pervaded colonial Ghana and the west coast of Africa and thus helped to forge these influences to develop a trado-modern African musical expression that became highlife.

His music career started in 1932, when he played piccolo in school with a vibrant big band formed and led by Joe Lamptey, ET's school master and mentor. Called the Accra Orchestra, the band played imitative foreign music that was in vogue at the time - ball room, ragtime, swing and rumba. ET developed a burning passion for the sax and learnt to play it alongside the piccolo, and by 1936 moved to collaborate with drummer Guy Warren, one of the most resourceful of Ghanaian musicians of the time, ET's alto being one of the fiercest and most proficient of the five saxophones that the fifteen piece band paraded. Much as Guy Warren's drums were prominent, the music saw the beginning of African flavoured dance music.

Mensah qualified as a pharmacist in 1943, a profession which interfered with his music for some while. 1940 however had been the beginning of his musical accomplishments, the year he joined the Black and White Spots, a highly professional band led by a Scottish soldier, Jack Leopard who acquired dance band musicianship at the professional level in London. Sergeant Jack Leopard led by far the greatest, most promising band at the time and playing with the Black and White Spots was like training in a college of music. Here ET had his first induction to harmonic progression and

big band arrangement. Successful though this turned out to be in terms of musicianship and financial reward ET still thirsted for a popular music type based on African rhythms, an alternative to the foreign dance music that was prevalent. 1947 brought Guy Warren and ET together again, this time under the leadership of pianist Joe Kelly, thus, the original Tempos band was born. The band played sophisticated and adventurous Ghanaian songs. The band was a musical success but lacked commercial viability.

ET realised himself in 1948 when he went his separate way and founded his own Tempos band. By now he had the experience and musical ability to accomplish his dream, that is, evolving a popular African-oriented type of music in a scene dominated by Western dance music.

later to be popularised in America by pianist Randy Weston.

Mensah became highly elevated when Ghana attained independence in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah. Ghana extended the territories of highlife firmly to Cote d' Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Highlife was played before heads of state and African musicians were influenced across different national borders. ET Mensah was proclaimed the king of highlife, and his recordings were instant hits selling beyond West Africa.

The top musicians in Ghana in the Fifties and Sixties were graduates of the Tempos Band sticking out on their own after serving their various terms of apprenticeship. King Bruce left the Tempos Band to form the Black Beats, Joe Kelly deserted for the Red Spots. In 1961, Jerry Hansen left to form the Ramblers Dance Band. The list is very long, and even though some of

A Time and a SEASON

A broadcaster's tribute to Highlife King, E.T Mensah

Benson
Idonije

Highlife immediately caught on and spread in influence to other West African countries which already were more than eager to be freed from cultural imperialism. Nigeria was the first to be liberated in 1949, through the late Bobby Benson, himself a leading band leader in Nigeria at the time playing the Glenn Miller - Count Basie - Benny Goodman type of swing.

Mensah's first visit to Nigeria converted Bobby Benson who eventually recorded 'Taxi Driver' the big highlife hit

these individuals often deserted with prominent members of the Tempos Band, it was not difficult for Mensah to regroup and maintain the same Tempos sound that was unique and easily identifiable.

A major landmark in the life of Mensah was the visit of Louis Armstrong to Ghana in 1956. As the foremost trumpet player and band leader, he performed with satchmo's all stars and received standing ovations from large audiences who held them both in high artistic esteem.

The highlife music era began to decline in 1969 when ET Mensah took the Tempos Band to England. Most of the

**E.C.
MENSAH**
HIGHLIFE KING



regular Tempos musicians had by then left and so the band consisted of new members whose orientation was different. Instead of sticking to highlife for which he was well acclaimed, ET succumbed to the pressures and demands of the time, and played a mixture of soul, reggae and calypso.

He was invited to Lagos, Nigeria in 1986 by some of his old friends, among which was club owner Victor Olaiya, himself a graduate of the Tempos Band. It was a fruitful and memorable visit, culminating in the recording of a monumental album, *Giants of Highlife*, a collector's item that brought him and Olaiya jamming together and evoking the memories of the Sixties.

ET Mensah was honoured by the government of Ghana in an appreciation ceremony in 1989. It turned out that the colourful ceremony was to be his last official outing. Since then old age has made him inactive, in the face of ill health. The overflow of tributes in Ghanaian and Nigerian newspapers as well as on radio and television which has allocated generous space and air time to vintage highlife hits stoked the memories of those of us who saw the glory and the ebb of highlife through the Fifties and the Sixties. Hopefully they will provide an occasion to rekindle interest in the music.

Highlife may indeed be enjoying a fresh popularity seizing on the topicality that the occasion of ET's death has provided. The odds against a highlife revival are many however. And they can be as fundamental as they are far-reaching.

Before the advent of colonialism, African music was singing and drumming - singing that is patterned along the call and response structure. A lead voice took the song, and a group vocal harmony session replied, thereby establishing a question and answer session. Drumming was done in various usual and unusual time signatures even though their exponents were totally oblivious of the rudiments of formal Western music.

Highlife was a product of Western cultural influences - a combination of ceremonial music provided by marching

bands for the continental colonial administrators in addition to church hymns introduced by missionaries, the guitar, brought to African soil by the Portuguese traders, swing and ballroom played essentially for the white and eventually, African elite.

Early highlife as played by ET Mensah was based on common meter hymn structures occasioned by the influence of church hymns whose simple chord progression was easy to adopt. Even though the songs were in African languages, the melodies were foreign. The non-Africanness of highlife origins and form has, to my mind, more than contributed to its failure to make a lasting impact within Africa.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti of Nigeria took highlife to America in 1969 with his Koola Lobitos band. His entrance point into the music was however through jazz. Back home Fela quickly established his brand of highlife because it was regarded as a revolutionary departure from the 'drab' nature of pristine highlife. He had a big band which struck a five-part harmony, establishing question and answer sessions with riffs but the music did not go down well with Americans who were looking forward to 'African music'. The tour was in consequence a failure and in order to save the day, Fela gave his music a heavy African feeling on the spot and Koola Lobitos became 'Africa 70' and highlife transformed into 'Afrobeat' giving birth to the LP *Jeunko Ku*, his first big hit.

In Ghana, the veterans including Guy Warren who collaborated with ET on the first Tempos Band, saw this odd against the music way back in 1948, and went abroad to play explosive African percussion, some of which were recorded for Columbia records, sessions for which he is still collecting royalties. Guy Warren is better known in Britain and American than Africa. He is more internationally recognised than Mensah who pioneered, played and championed highlife in Africa.

The odd which conspired against highlife in Nigeria was the civil war. For reasons that are not easily recognisable, the east of Nigeria paraded more highlife exponents than other parts of the country.

Bands were concentrated in Lagos and Port Harcourt, so when the war broke out in 1967 the musicians went home to be recruited into the Biafran army. By 1970 when the war ended, only one highlife band survived in Celestine Ukwu and the Philosophers National.

In Ghana, the economic recession of the late Seventies and the Eighties led to a mass exodus of Ghanaian nationals abroad. Mass emigration and economic recession thus weighed heavily against the development of highlife and also contributed significantly to its decline in popularity.

Also the late 1960s saw soul music invading the entire West African region and gave highlife a tough competition. James Brown and his imitators like Geraldo Pino played the music with great finesse employing the showbusiness techniques as well as multi-micro and stereophonic sound devices, a modern facility that was new to West Africa. Consequently, a great number of musicians travelled abroad and converted to pop-oriented music, namely Joe Mensah, Eddie Kwansa, George Lee, George Dako, all of Ghana; and Remi Kabaka, Donald Amechi, Mike Odumosu, of Nigeria, among others.

We were yet to see music in Africa as a vehicle for propagating culture despite the foresight of leaders like Kwame Nkrumah but whose vision unluckily did not survive to their successors. African media policies did not protect African music and as a result the electronic media gave preference to American pop.

Highlife's future lies in its strength fulfilling a vital cultural role as one of the first examples of a fusion, a marriage of foreign and African forms; it remains as the genre that has helped to forge an African popular music form to which all musicians in Africa can relate. Highlife can also be said to have influenced the popularisation of other African musical forms.

The credit for this achievement goes to ET Mensah's pioneering work and enduring vision - hatched in the Thirties, developed in the Fifties and Sixties, evolving into the future. **GR**