



His Masters Voice

# ONCE UPON a Luster

by Andy Frankel

## When

I was invited to contribute an article to this special issue, I was both delighted at the opportunity and overwhelmed by the possibilities. With so much going on in Africa, let alone Nigeria where I spend much of my time, where to focus was a broad question. In trying to consider what was the most significant chal-

lenge facing Nigerians today, I had to conclude that it is the erosion and evaporation of the rich legacy of musical history of the last half century. I want to reflect specifically on Nigeria here though I believe the story in Nigeria is the same as in almost every country on the continent.

The great musical legacies of the past and the achievements of the last 50 years are under threat and about to vanish from our lives. Yet little, if anything, is being done about it. This legacy is not being stolen, but rather rotting slowly away in the form of old tapes, discarded vinyl and aging shellac.

*Nigeria is a giant in musical expression. From its hundreds of distinct ethnic groups have come seemingly limitless musical expressions over the course of the last half century. Recordings of everything from pop to traditional music have chronicled the political, cultural and stylistic history of a colonial nation, the struggle for self-determination, an emerging nation and the boom and bust of an African giant. Literally, tens of thousands of recordings have been made by record companies, scholars, amateurs, social clubs, broadcasters, cultural centers and a variety of other organizations. And yet in all of Nigeria, where is an archive, which chronicles this legacy in any systematic or sustainable form? None!*

The fact is that in all of sub-Saharan Africa, there are only a handful of sound archives, woefully underequipped, understaffed and underfunded to even begin the task of preserving this legacy. At a more prosperous time in the 60s, regional cultural centers were set up to fill the role of archives, chronicling the artistic achievements of Nigeria's people. Many of these centers remain in business, but without resources to do an adequate job of archiving. Little by little Nigeria's musical history and all the cultural history it contains are fading away.

What is causing this crisis? Outdated technology and the inability to preserve materials, which were never designed to withstand the test of time, are some of the causes. As early as the 1920s, wax cylinder recordings were being made of popular and traditional music in Nigeria. By the 1950s, recording, pressing and distribution of shellacs (the earliest 'records') had become a booming industry. By the 60s, the record industry had migrated to longer-lasting and more versatile vinyl. All of the source recordings of this era were made on magnetic tape. Like the tape in common cassettes, the tape used for source recordings generally came on large format open reels. The tape itself was made of plastic or Mylar and had magnetic oxide powder coating its surface through an industrial adhesive formula. The sound recordings themselves were stored in form of magnetic signals recorded on the metal oxide. Early recordings were in Mono (one channel) and by the late 60s in stereo or multiple tracks. This magnetic tape was never designed to be a long-lasting material; at its best it had an anticipated life of 30-40 years. This made sense for an industry which was geared towards making commodities (records) and selling them. The intent was never to preserve the music. And yet, the music was, is, and shall remain one of the most powerful records of the history of the nation and its people.

But now those recordings have an altogether different value. Who could argue the power and historical importance of the recordings of Bobby Benson, Tunde Nightingale, Inyang Henshaw, Dan Maraya, Tunde King, Ojoge Daniel, J.O. Araba, Stephen Amechi, and hundreds of seminal Nigerian artists? What important political event, significant deed, birth, marriage or death of an eminent Nigerian was not chronicled in popular music?

Much of the early recordings were created at Nigeria's major studios, Decca, EMI, Polygram, Shanu Olu, and Rogers All Stars to name a few. The earliest Master tapes of these recordings were stored as property of the record companies in sheds on the properties of the studios. Most of these storage areas are little more than concrete sheds without any temperature and humidity control. Even in a milder climate than Nigeria, this would pose a challenge; but in the extremes of hot and cool, dry and humid that pounds Nigeria annually, it is a certain disaster. To start with, the adhesive which binds the sound-bearing metal oxide to the plastic tape first begins to lose its flexibility and eventually falls off the plastic, taking its treasure of sounds with it. I myself have experienced playing original recorded reels of the music of both I.K. Dairo and Haruna Ishola, and even the recent recordings of King Sunny Ade, and watching in horror as the metal literally fell off the tape taking the music with it, never to be heard again. Many great recordings are already lost forever, but many more remain in poor but salvageable condition.

In the last decade, developments in the realm of digital recording technology have made it not only easy, but also relatively inexpensive to make permanent (or at least long-lasting) digital copies of these important musical works. The challenges of daily survival and rebuilding the nation, which face all Nigerians, are formidable ones. It is easy to see why preserving a pile of old tapes would not seem like much of a priority, and yet this is the history of the nation. We are at the end of an era where the opportunity to save this material and the history that it preserves is passing us by. Some small efforts are underway. Many of the great works of Fela Kuti have been preserved and reissued on Compact Disc through the good work of the Kuti family. Ebenezer Obey has digitized and re-released many of his finest works on Compact Disc as well. I have also had the good fortune to launch an historical record label called 'IndigeDisc' where we have begun to reissue the works of Haruna Ishola, Osita Osadebe and many others. And yet this is just a drop in the ocean.

Time is short and the task is large. Unless a systematic effort is made to face this challenge, these crucial pieces of history may be gone forever. I believe it may require bringing together a broad coalition of interested parties, such organizations as the Ministry of Culture, Nigerian Broadcasting Service, The Performing Musicians Association, The Musical Copyright Society, The Nigerian Copyright Commission, record companies, artists and more, to put together their combined efforts toward a comprehensive solution. We stand at a crossroads in time, the turn of a millennium, the dawn of a new era for Nigeria and for much of Africa; and in the moment we begin to move forward, I pray we will take a moment to look back, recognize our history and its values and take the timely action that will bring it into the future with us.GR