



AN EVENING WITH RICHARD SMITH

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After confirming that we had come on appointment, the information officers at the University of Lagos Guest House lobby showed us the way to the room of Richard Smith. Upon knocking on the door for some time, a distinct, almost dulcet voice answered from the other side of the door. Then he opened and we were ushered into the presence of the classical-African musician. He greeted us warmly after we had identified ourselves and the purpose of our visit, even took it upon himself to pull out chairs for us. Now, you have to remember that we are talking about a blind man without any aide.

Richard Smith, African-American, of an average height, was dressed in casual top and trousers. The air-conditioner hummed in the background creating an

atmosphere completely distinct from, and shielding off, the hot dusty world outside. Packed suitcases and boxes on the ground around the room prompted the first question, more on the informal off-record tone: 'Are you getting set for a journey?' To which he replied in the affirmative. The following week he would be at Nsukka, a university town in eastern Nigeria. Today, however there was enough time for an interview. And in spite of the fact that Richard Smith no longer remembers our earlier appointment, he unwinds easily, responding with remarkable zeal.

Perched on the edge of the bed, Smith spoke to us on his music from many different perspectives. Judging the exact location of each one of his visitors, he turns to face us in turns as he answered the questions.

Richard Smith was in his fifth month in Nigeria, having arrived Lagos on September 28, 1994 on a dual purpose trip. The first, he told us was to 'help develop music education in Nigeria and Africa. But I chose Nigeria to be the base... The other part is to develop curriculum and special activities in African music and culture for use in the US.' This, although the longest so far, was not his first visit to Africa or Nigeria for that matter. In fact this was his ninth visit during which he had come on self-sponsored trips in order to interact with African musicians and to learn about African music.

A Fullbright scholar - he would tell you it's not easy to be one - Richard Smith studied classical music and music education up to the Masters level at Temple University in the United States

and in England. He is currently pursuing a doctorate at the former. He teaches at the United Nations International School in New York.

Richard Smith told us how he got into music: He grew up in the ghetto, born into a family of music lovers. Jazz, African and African-American music were favourites in their household. 'I was musical,' he said, 'but it is my voice. I used to be a boy soprano.' That was at the church. 'I used to sing solo in the church. But when I was eleven years old, something happened, my voice changed. So, I went from being a very good singer to being a no singer. Undaunted however I taught myself to play the fife. It's just like flute, but it has six holes. Someone suggested that when I got to high school I should learn to play the flute because I used to play the fife well. So, I learnt how to play the flute in my first year in high school.' Today, he is a flutist of renown. He performs all over the world, some of his arrangements have been recorded by a number of people and he is planning to do his own recording.

Apart from the ghetto, it was his visit to Africa in 1974 that redefined his musical world view. This was during 'what people call the Civil Rights Era. And so, it was Black consciousness that brought me to Africa that first year.' But on getting to Ghana, he met an American musician who was spending a year in the country. It was the man who took him around and introduced him to local musicians. Richard Smith did not only enjoy African hospitality, he got introduced to the rich, pulsating heartbeat of Africa. Since then he has

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not looked back. He spends his own money to fund trips to Africa to get to know more about the music and the musicians. For example, he told us of his first encounter with the folk musician Mamman Shatta driven to Funtua in northern Nigeria to meet the legend.

Richard Smith also shared with us his experience with different musical forms in Africa. Nigeria he said is unique because of the wide variety of musical forms available in the country. This is more than could be said about other African countries, he said. His knowledge of the music forms is astounding. Fuji for example he likes. But he prefers older musicians like Yussuf Olatunji and Haruna Ishola, both late.

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Not only is Richard Smith familiar with highlife, he even simulates their styles on his flute. His favourites include Stephen Osita Osadebe, Oriental Brothers, Sir Warrior, Nellie Uchendu,

Christie Essien and Oliver de Coque. He loves the music of late Rex Lawson and Tunde Nightingale and has friendship ties with I. K. Dairo. 'I. K. Dairo I like very much. And I have visited his house at Ilesha.'

He drew parallel lines between the highlife and calypso, the old highlife and jazz and African percussion that is heard all over the New World. He spoke especially about the Yoruba drums he found all over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti and the US. The African performers of Cuba and Puerto Rico, he said, 'are more into Yoruba religion than I see in Lagos.'

In February, Richard Smith gave a very impressive performance and demonstration of various Nigerian musical forms on his flute at the United States Information Service (USIS) offices in central Lagos. This he interspersed with talks. The programme was held to celebrate the African-American History Month. His musical accompaniment consisted of no more than a pianist and a *sekere* (maracas) player. **IGR**