



IndigeDisc

King Sunny Ade

Biography

Since the evolution of juju music in Nigeria in the thirties no exponent has made a more lasting impact in the genre than King Sunny Ade. As a singer, composer and guitarist, he has succeeded over the years in taking this Nigerian social music type to international heights.

Ade came on the scene in 1966 following his induction as a samba player in a small group led by showman and comedian Baba Sala, known in real life as Moses Olaiya. And with his own ten piece band, the Green Spots, Ade made his first record in 1967, playing the guitar solos himself. He however, blazed into prominence a year after with a hit single in praise of Stationery Stores football club which carved him a gold disc as a result of its massive sales. Since then Ade has been in the limelight.

The late sixties found Ade searching for a credible sound identity that tended to fuse the influence of Tunde Nightingale with the techniques of his mentor, Moses Olaiya in order to forge his own individuality and direction. Emphasis was therefore placed on melodic exploration, simple vocal themes and accompaniment based merely on social commentaries than clear-cut, definitive tunes.

But it was in the seventies that he really got himself together, trying to perfect a sense of direction within the juju format. Attention began to be focused on rhythmic integration, lead singing began to assume a more defined and aggressive pattern with such hits as "Ekilo fomo ode" "Esu biri biri," "Nitori awa wa", some of which were steeped in highlife.

In the mid-seventies Ade adopted a new cultural dimension when he was influential like every other musician by the cultural wind that began to blow through Africa. He was influenced by Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Afro beat, evidence of which was prominent in his instrumentation where the guitars riffed figures that were imitative of

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the Afro beat legend's creations. His guitar solos were also affected as he did not only include the tenor guitar which was Fela's concept, he actually lured Fela's famous exponent of this instrument, Sony Ohiri into joining his own aggregation which had metamorphosed from Green Spots to African Beats. And it was a new development for juju music. A typical Afrobeat influenced tune from this era was "synchro system" which was predicated mainly on an Afrobeat bass movement aside from the singing.

The 1980s experienced a consolidation in Ade's orchestral arrangements which now took preeminence over every other element. He began to play with the confidence and authority of a super star, developing a sense of melodic inventiveness woven around simple structures. He had established a sense of direction and reached the peak of his performing career with well choreographed steps and the professional stage act that was predicated on flamboyance and athletic movements.

Fortunately, for Ade, it was at this peak of his blossoming career that his popularity was scientifically tested and acknowledged by a hit parade that was being conducted by Research and Marketing Services Limited for Radio Nigeria 2, the then leading FM Station in the country. Ade often topped the Nigerian social music category of this chart with such hit albums as "Afefe yeye," "Check E," "Searching for my Love," "Juju Music" among others. This success gave Ade a kind of larger than self popularity which exposed him to the international scene.

Ade no doubt has brought a number of innovations to juju. His arch rival, Ebenezer Obey had succeeded in transforming the music from its neo-traditional status to an urban social music type with the introduction of the trap drums and three guitars. But Ade further revolutionized juju music by increasing these guitars, adding more drums, introducing flamboyance of a robust type, elegance and dignity to the live performance of the music.

His words: "When I met juju music musicians were still sitting down, with instruments arranged in front. I found it hard because I knew people were not getting full value for their money. So I started standing and dancing. I moved the instruments backwards to allow them enjoy their money and gave my boys a microphone each to dance and sing." Continuing, he said, "At that time too, they were playing only one guitar. I increased to two, three, four, five and the present six. I dropped the use of the accordion and introduced keyboards, the manual jazz drum and now the electronic jazz drum. I

introduced the use of pedal steel otherwise known as Hawaiian guitar, increased the percussion aspect of the music, added more talking drums, introduced computer into juju music and de-emphasized the use of high tone in the vocals.”

When Ade signed on with Island Records in 1982 as a result of attracting international attention, he was perhaps the biggest natural phenomenon on the Nigerian music scene where massive record sales kept him at the top of the charts. With the release of the album “Juju Music”, Ade was launched personally onto the Western pop scene, and his presence generated the kind of buzz associated with a big star. He was presented as a Yoruba prince and referred to as king. His musicians called him chairman.

Elegant, youthful-looking and courteous, Sunny Ade had the charisma to match his new status. He even had the air of regal candor to go with his title, “the king of juju music.”