



**The year was 1958—a decade after E.T. Mensah brought highlife to Nigeria—when 16-year-old Orlando Julius Ekemode blew his first notes on the saxophone. Nigeria's music scene was bubbling. Pop bands multiplied; gramophone became a household word. And there was talk of political independence.**

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**AFROBEAT**

# ORLANDO

**By Gary Stewart**

O.J. was born to a Nigeria shackled by British colonialism. Coerced by foreign occupation and cajoled by missionaries of Christianity and Islam, Nigerians adapted in self-defense. Music, the vernacular of daily life, reflected the cultural accommodation. New forms for religious songs developed as Christian hymns collided with Nigeria's tonal languages and Islam's lack of melody ran up against local musical tradition. School marching bands mimicked those of military brigades. Dance bands entertained colonial elites with highlifes, waltzes and foxtrots. Percussion dance bands sprang up playing kokoma, apala and sakara—styles derived from traditional music. Juju was born of the encounter between Yoruba music and a flood of imported guitars. Radio and records bombarded the country with new sounds.

Jazz Romero was a highlife musician of some note living in the western Nigerian town of Ibadan. Romero was actually Ade-



mola Haastrup who, like his contemporaries, exhibited a flair for coining stage names to rival that of Hollywood's most imaginative press agents. O.J.'s encounter with him was brief but memorable. O.J. had left his birthplace, Ijebu-Ijesha, after dropping out of school, and despite his parents' objections had come to town to be a musician. He began to hang around Romero in hopes of getting some free lessons. "By

to sell his trumpet to settle a fine soon after arriving in Ondo. The band then moved on to Akure where Romero provoked a fight with the nightclub owner who had hired him. In a fit of anger or embarrassment he walked out on the band in the middle of the night. At the club owner's urging O.J. took over as leader. "The guy who only knows two keys want to lead a band, gosh," he chuckles. "This boy who plays guitar and

that have horns. Just put it on, and play it by ear." Ghanaian records were especially instructive for highlife which, thanks to the Tempos, had made its debut in Nigeria 10 years earlier.

The 1948 visit of E.T. Mensah's Tempos had been a turning point for Nigerian music. The Tempos' mixture of sweet sounding horns and African rhythms was captivating. By the mid-50s highlife had become the rage. Many a trumpet player developed as Nigerian musicians rushed to emulate the great Ghanaian. Colonial elites and their Nigerian counterparts danced the highlife from Lagos to Calabar in clubs like Ambassador's, Wayfarer's and the West End Hotel. A correspondent for *West African Review* summed it up in 1959: "If you want an exhilarating, if somewhat exhausting, evening of uninhibited dancing, where no one looks askance if you muddle up the waltz with the tango, where women aren't looking each other up and down with catty eyes, and where anyone can excuse-me anyone else's partner, then a Night Out in Lagos is for you."

Highlife invigorated the Western-style dance bands; it also transcended ethnic differences. The juju music of I.K. Dairo and his Blue Spots, Ayinde Bakare and his Rhythm Dandies, and the others was based in Yoruba culture. Highlife, on the other hand, incorporated rhythms and languages from the entire country. Efiks like Rex Williams, Ibos like Rex Lawson and Yorubas Bobby Benson and Victor Olaiya all played highlife and staffed their bands based not on ethnic origin but on musical skill and talent.

As O.J.'s playing improved, the word spread until it reached bandleader Eddie Okonta. Okonta and his Top Aces were one of Nigeria's best highlife bands, rivals of Victor Olaiya and his Cool Cats and Roy Chicago and his Abalabi Rhythm Dandies. In 1960, the year Nigeria gained its independence from Britain, Okonta offered O.J. a job—an offer that was irresistible. "By that time Eddie Okonta is a top band, a top-rated band in West Africa," says O.J. "We even played so many gigs with (American jazzman) Cozy Cole. We opened for Louis Armstrong when he came to Nigeria."

In the old days a good band could labor for years in the relative obscurity of its own geographical area. But the spread of cheap radios and record players in the late '50s and early '60s changed the situation considerably. Critic Albert McKay observed in 1957 that "West Africa seems to be sharing in the great post-war boom in gramophone records, and the highlife has arrived as a

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# JULIUS EKEMODE

that time I used to come to his house to do laundry, cook and do all kinds of cleaning," O.J. recalls. "So from there he got more interested in teaching me."

O.J.'s eagerness and his work with local juju and kokoma bands won him a job playing trap drums with Romero's band at the Modupe Hotel in Ondo, a hundred or so miles southeast of Ibadan. Romero taught him two keys on the saxophone, and O.J. graduated to playing second horn. Unfortunately, Romero was almost always in difficulty of one sort or another. He was forced

sings, Shadow Abraham, he knows (only) one chord."

The band soon fell apart. O.J. returned to Ibadan and managed to catch on with Rex Williams' band. Williams was a trumpet player from Calabar who composed highlife songs in the Efik language. O.J. found refuge in the horn section where he could practice his craft without the burden of leadership. "There was no school of music," he says, "so I decided to buy records. Listen to Ghana records and listen to John Coltrane and listen to all kinds of records



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Left: Album cover for *Super Afro Soul* from 1967, containing his hit "Jagua Nana."



Below: O.J. and his Modern Aces on stage circa 1966. Like *Jagua*, O.J. had style in everything he did.



valuable commercial commodity." To get close to the source, foreign record companies like His Master's Voice, Senafone and Decca set up shop in Nigeria. A hit record could suddenly catapult an unknown to national prominence. Recording and radio airplay became essential means for artists to sustain their popularity.

O.J. recorded several songs with Okonta's Top Aces and freelanced with other musicians. Recording sessions resembled life performances since the musicians were recorded all at once. Studio mixing boards could accommodate only eight microphones, so singers and instrumentalists were grouped to produce the best balance. The live sound was mixed to a monophonic tape recorder. No overdubs were possible on this single track setup; a mistake by one meant the entire band had to be re-recorded. Mistakes sometimes led to creation

of a new style that surpassed the original.

Playing and recording with a top highlife band was wonderful experience, but O.J. was a traditionalist. "From late '58 to '60, I'd gone through many changes," he says, "you know, many bands. And I didn't really like playing too much highlife music by that time. I liked to learn, (but) all my goal was just to play Afrobeat. Just to put traditional that I started with, add a little bit of horns and guitar, and then do my own thing." His own thing turned out to be the Modern Aces.

With help from his cousin, juju guitarist I.K. Dairo, O.J. acquired some instruments and began to recruit musicians for his own band. O.J. remembers it was 1962; liner notes from one of his albums say 1964. Whatever the year, Orlando Julius and his Modern Aces made their debut at the Independence Hotel in Ibadan. The band

walked a fine line playing highlife and popular Western styles while gently nudging the music closer to African roots.

A 1965 recording session for Philips West African Records produced O.J.'s first hit, a single called *Jagua Nana*. "Jagua" was a slang term lifted from the British Jaguar sports car and satirically applied to Nana, a mythical female. Novelist Cyprian Ekwensi explained it in his story of the same name: "She was Jagua, which meant that she had style in everything she did....It was girls like her who started fashions, and when these frivolities swept like angry flames to Lome, Bathurst, Freetown and Laos, other girls would emulate...."

*Jagua Nana* gave the Modern Aces a tremendous boost. Invitations for the band to perform came from as far away as Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The band began to tour and released another hit record called *Topless*. When the soul sound of James Brown swept Nigeria, O.J. didn't miss a beat. He recorded the single *Ijo Soul* and later released an album called *Super Afro Soul* that featured an up-and-coming singer named Joni Haastrup who would go on to become Nigeria's "soul brother number one." For a bandleader, keeping abreast of swiftly changing styles was vital. As the Modern Aces grew and soul came and went, O.J. changed the group's name to Evelyn Dance Band and again to Afro Sounders.

Civil war broke out in 1967, and Nigeria splintered along ethnic lines. Many of the country's bands dissolved or regrouped as their Ibo members retreated to the secessionist Eastern Region proclaimed Biafra. Some observers have declared that the war killed highlife and fostered the popularity of ethnic styles like juju. That may be partially true, but the invasion of foreign music clearly shared responsibility. The technological leap in production of Western music gave it a solid edge over the rough creations of Nigerian studios. Payola was widespread; disc jockeys developed a "you pay we play" policy. Western music began to dominate the airwaves.

When the war ended in 1970, the country started to rebuild, but O.J. and the other musicians continued to be battered by foreign competition. International record companies that controlled the Nigerian music business profited most by importing records of their British and American stars. They did little to upgrade their Nigerian production facilities. O.J. remembers: "You can tell records that they produce over here and records that they produce over there, they sound different. I didn't know the reason why. I know that there must be some better equipment, but I don't know, so I was really (curious)."





**Left: Orlando Julius fronts his Evelyn Dance Band, 1970. Right: O.J. today. His concerts with the Nigerian All-Stars have garnered rave reviews. Photo by Ade James.**

As O.J. saw it, substandard production facilities were hardly the only problem. The record companies' attempts to market the music internationally had failed. Records alone inadequately conveyed African music's visual and participatory spectacle. Film and television, he felt, were the missing ingredients. He decided to go abroad to learn more about record and film production.

O.J. traveled extensively through Europe in the early '70s with stops at Philips' studios and factories in West Germany and Holland. Along the way he jammed with musical members of Europe's burgeoning Nigerian communities. But it was a 1973 visit to the United States, with its abundance of recording and film production studios, that captured his imagination. He wound up business in Nigeria and moved to America.

Bluesman "Wild Child" Butler once said: "I been got and I have paid so many dues....I don't know when they'll stop. I'm still paying them. I don't know what's going to come out of it." Paying one's dues is the musician's lot and the musician's lament. In America, O.J. paid his all over again. He settled in Washington, D.C., and formed a band called Umoja. Most of the musicians were African, but a few Americans caught on. American musicians were difficult, says O.J., because they were into funk and messed up the music.

For most of 1974 Umoja played a D.C. nightclub circuit, entertaining the cosmopolitan capital. Late in the year good fortune appeared. South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela—fresh from a falling out with his touring partners, the Ghanaian band Hedzoleh Soundz—was in search of African musicians. He dropped in on a re-

hearsal where Umoja was polishing O.J.'s ode to time, "Ashiko." Impressed by what he heard, Masekela invited O.J. to tour with him. A new band was formed with Umoja and a few holdovers from Hedzoleh.

Masekela's tour went on for most of '75 and part of '76. The band opened for Herbie Hancock, the Pointer Sisters and Grover Washington, playing venues like the Spectrum in Philadelphia and Carnegie Hall. It was great exposure for African music. They recorded two albums, *The Boy's Doin' It*, that featured O.J.'s "Ashiko," and *Colonial Man*. But O.J. was dissatisfied. He received no royalties for his compositions; Masekela made promises but failed to deliver. O.J. decided to strike out on his own.

He did session work for a while in Los Angeles and landed a small acting role in the television series *Roots: The Second*

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**Generation.** In 1978 he moved north to Oakland where he enrolled in film school. A number of African musicians including the Nigerian "soul brother" Joni Haastrup, Hedzoleh Soundz and Cameroonian guitarist Jean Koh Elong were in the area working on their own projects. Along with O.J. they gathered occasionally at a local bar called Michael's Den for some legendary jam sessions.

Public response to these sessions renewed O.J.'s hope that African music could eventually break into the American market. He began to teach local musicians to play his brand of Afrobeat and formed a band called Ashiko. The task of developing an African band without Africans was formidable. Personnel changed constantly; competition from funk and disco was fierce. Nevertheless, Ashiko developed a strong following. The struggle took its toll, however, and O.J. grew weary. He longed to work with African musicians who shared his culture and understood the music. In 1984 he decided to return home.

Back in Nigeria, O.J. was liberated from his teaching role. Working with the best Nigerian session personnel, he went into the belatedly modernized EMI studios to record the tracks for *Dance Afro-Beat*. The recording project led to formation of the Nigerian All-Stars, and with the help of Shanachie Records, the album's distributor, a U.S. tour began to take shape. As part of the promo-

tion, O.J.'s dream of presenting the full spectacle of African music came to fruition. He hired a video crew and traveled to Osogbo in the heart of Yorubaland. With the sacred shrine of the River Goddess Oshun as a background, he shot the *Dance Afro-Beat* video.

Tour dates were booked, and in October 1985 the 18-member Nigerian All-Stars band landed in New York. Shanachie backed the tour intending to feature the All-Stars and their other Nigerian artists, the Lijadu Sisters. Incredibly, through misunderstanding which seems endemic to the music business, the Lijadus never arrived. After one performance the tour collapsed.

Since then the road has been uncertain. Several of the All-Stars split off to work with other bands. But for those who persevered with O.J., success once again seems imminent. New York promoter Paul Trautman has signed on as the band's booking agent. A new album titled *Sisi Shadé* is in the can. Recent performances at New York's Queens Festival and the New Orleans Jazz Festival generated rave reviews. A national tour is planned to coincide with the album's release on Trautman's Melanie label.

The battle has been arduous, but when O.J. goes on stage he is transformed. "My music is very healing," he says. The pain subsides, and the soul is resurrected. Audiences soak up the salubrious energy. "That's what we're gonna be doing worldwide. Playing healing music and teaching people more about our culture." ★

## LTD

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nearly to death, obscure funk like **Joe Quartermain and Free Soul's** "So Much Trouble in My Mind" is the next logical choice for DJs and rappers alike. That's one of the tracks on the compilation **Got to Get Your Own — Some Rare Grooves, Vol. 1** (Charly lp) featuring early '70s rare groove hits from the English scene reported on last issue. Some of this stuff is deservedly obscure; others, like the Quartermain track and the **African Music Machine's** "The Dapp," are as hip as any post-James Brown funk that did make it. Some of it is even hipper than what made it, if only because it's more rootsy, more street, more folk-art innocent. Check **Moody Scott's** vitriolic "I Don't Dig No Phony, Part 2," the **Continental Showstoppers'** "Goo Bah" or once again the twice-mentioned Joe Quartermain for grits and groceries

(Jimi Hori can be heard on *Land of a Thousand Dances* on KCRW, 89.9 FM, Santa Monica, CA, Sundays, 3-5 p.m.)

## FIVE SINGLES

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terpart to the mushy stuff on the other side.

Tosh's recordings went downhill in the 1980s: Lawsuits and burnout were the main culprits, but in concert Tosh was as much the fireman as ever; check the *Captured Live* album if you need proof. The main thing about Peter Tosh was that he always kept the faith, uncompromising and erect, and he never got soft. When he was assassinated in a massacre at his Kingston house in September, he was probably past the prime of his musical life, but he left enough anger, guts and inspiration to last his fans into the next millennium.

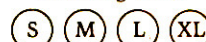
Peter Tosh didn't believe in funerals, and he wouldn't have listened to his own eulogy if he could have helped it, but I just want to say that everyone who knew him feels richer and better because of it, and he will be as sorely missed as his old friend Bob. Think of them as a pair of spirits alighting somewhere, pausing to fire up a big bomber of celestial herbs, laughing about destiny and old time and how strange the runnings seem to be going these days. ★

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