

## Chapter 9

### From Highlife Jazz to Afro-Beat

#### *Getting My Shit Together*

From England I went back home in 1963 and worked for Nigeria Broadcasting as a producer. It was a terrible job. A stupid job. Unprogressive work. But I got into records and heard African music, the music I love. I had my band called Koola Lobitos. The NBC gig didn't last. My appointment with them was terminated. I had to resign. Why? Uncountable reasons, man, like: "You're always coming late to work." (Yeah, at eleven o'clock instead of eight.) Or: "You're not recording new bands for new programmes?" (Yeah, true sometimes.) Or: "You insist on playing your music rather than what is programmed!" (Yeah, I wanted to play jazz, man.) My boss wanted jazz too, but straight jazz. I wanted to play highlife jazz, as I called my music at the beginning.

In '66 I was playing highlife jazz with my Koola Lobitos band. Eventually I dropped that name too. Because my mother had told me: "Start playing music your people understand, not jazz." So those were years of experimentation, man. Even with... grass.

How did I get into grass? You may not believe me, man. But it was a girl who started me 'smoking' in Nigeria. Her name is Eunice. I'd always see her eyes red and a friend said she 'smoked' a bit. So one day I asked her: "Do you smoke?" She said: "Tell me, man. Tell me, make him try some too."

So I tried it. I'd tried it before in London, but you didn't get it in London so much. I tried it once or twice in London. I liked it in London. But my brother professor told me a long time ago that if I 'smoked' I would go crazy, so that is why I ran away from it. But when this girl gave me the smoke and I had sex with it... Ohhhhhhhhhh, it was fantastic! I'd never had sex with it before. That was '66.

When did I start calling my music Afro-beat? Let me tell

you. I was playing highlife jazz when Geraldo Pino came to town in '66 or a bit earlier with soul. That's what upset everything, man. He came to town with James Brown's music, singing, "Hey, hey, I feel all right, ta, ta, ta, ta..." And with such equipment you've never seen, man. This man was tearing Lagos to pieces. Wooooooooh, man! He had all Nigeria in his pocket. Made me fall right on my ass, man. Ahhhhhh, this Sierra Leonian guy was too much. Geraldo Pino from Sierra Leone. I'll never forget him. I never heard this kind of music before-o, I'm telling you. Only when I went to Ghana shortly after that did I hear music like that again, soul music. Shit! If you could have seen him, man. And his equipment... something else!

When that guy Pino came to Lagos in '66, he came in a big way: in a convertible Pontiac. You know, one of those big American cars, man. Flashy, new equipment. Lots of bread. He was doing his thing, man. He had everything I didn't have. He did a three-day show in Lagos. Then he went up country to the North for a month, then came back to Lagos again for five days. After that, he was to go back to Ghana.

What worried me was that he was going to come back again to Nigeria. I'd seen the impact this motherfucker had in Lagos. He had everyone in his pocket! That was my mind, you know. I wanted to split town, leave, disappear. Go far away. To America. Find my own way, in any case. Make it myself. 'Cause I saw I couldn't make it with this man around, even in Nigeria.

In '67 he came back to Nigeria for a tour, then split back to Ghana. Ouuuuf! After that motherfucking Pino tore up the scene, there wasn't shit I could do in Lagos. So I went to Ghana in '67 with Zill Oniya, a trumpeter from Nigeria, to look for work, because at that time I didn't have funds in Nigeria. I was even giving up the music-o! I swear, man! I was so fucking discouraged. Then Zill came to me and said, "Let's try and find work in Ghana." At that time that's where the action and the bread was. So we went to Ghana. And one day in Accra we entered this club, Ringway Hotel. The place was

packed, man! Geraldo Pino was playing there. Ohhhhhh, come and hear this music-o! See this guy's equipment! I'd never seen such equipment before.

In Lagos, I was using this old equipment... museum antiques, man. I had only one microphone for the whole band. One microphone! This motherfucking Pino had six! The whole place was jumping. The music carried me away completely. To me, it was really swinging music. I say, "Look the drummer, how he play drums!" Ohhhhhh, I say, "Whaaaaat? This is heavy-o!" I was saying to myself, "I need equipment like this, man!" Oooooooooo, I was enjoying the music! Can you understand my situation at that club that night? Needing to find a job myself, but enjoying the music so much that I even forgot I myself was a fucking musician. I was there digging the music, thinking about all that.

Finally, I did get my own job at a club in Ghana. I stayed there for a year. That was in '67. After seeing this Pino, I knew I had to get my shit together. And quick. I went back to Nigeria, but soon after returned to Ghana in '68. One day I was with a friend sitting down in a club in Accra, listening to soul music. Everybody was playing soul, man, trying to copy Pino. I said to myself: "This James Brown music. This is what's gonna happen in Nigeria soon-o." I saw it so clearly. That's why I said to myself, "I have to be very original and clear myself from shit." I was still hustling. Hustling to make bread. "I must clear myself from this mess. I must identify myself with Africa. Then I will have an identity." That's what I was thinking to myself. Raymond Aziz, a Nigerian-Ghanaian who was sitting next to me, looked at me kind of pensively.

"You OK, man?" he asked. I said: "Raymond, you see that my music. I must give it a name-o, a real African name that is catchy. I've been looking for names to give it. And I've been thinking of calling it *Afro-beat*."

He said: "Yehhhhhh! That's a good name." I said: "Thank you."

So when I got back to Lagos, I called the press, gave them money, and told them I was changing to Afro-beat. I had to

JUNE 3, 1967

### Lagos Orders Blockade of Seceded East

General Mobilization  
Begins in Nigeria

British, U.S.  
Interests Hit  
By 4000 Bombs

### Ojukwu Leads Ibo Tribe Out of Nigerian Federation



### Nigerian Easterners Declare Independence



### Arabs Say U.S., U.K. Planes Aid Israelis

JUNE 12, 1967



### Arrest of Carmichael Triggers Alabama Riot

## Egypt Breaks Relations With U.S. Israel Captures Gaza

Arabs Say  
U.S. Aids  
Israel

Arabs Ban  
U.S. Jewish  
Consulates



### 23 Deaths in Newark Race Riots

JULY 23, 1967

Established 1887

## Racial Violence Breaks Out In Seven Cities Across the U.S.

'dash' the press, bribe them, have a press conference. All that shit. Then I started a club: Afro-Spot. It gave me some of the prestige I needed. Even if Geraldo Pino came – I was thinking – I had Afro-Spot. But then he arrived and started to take Lagos! Ohhh, waooooooooooh!

All the while, terrible things were happening in Nigeria. Atrocious things, man. The Biafran war had started in '66 and was now fully under way. I was in Lagos, playing music. I didn't like the Biafran war though. I thought the Nigerian government was wrong. I thought the Biafrans were right. The Yoruba are not Ibo. I thought the Ibos were right. I said to myself, "This whole thing is a cheap, big hustle to put the Ibos in a bad light in the world." And, in fact, what was happening was the beginning of corruption in Nigeria. That's evident now.

The Biafrans were fucking right to secede, man. If it was secession, it was good secession. Because secession is what could have brought Africa together at that time. From secession we could come together again. But by not seceding, we're put together by force. Uhuhhhhhh! That's what's happening in Nigeria today. The Ibos don't understand why they're in Nigeria. The Yorubas don't know what's happening. And the Hausas, they want to dominate everybody. The whole thing is fucking confusion. I don't even know myself why we're in Nigeria; how we all got to be together in this country, in the first place. No politician has ever gone into that. If Ojukwu\* had seceded, we would have started our own history. We would have known why we seceded and what happened. How did we get together in the first place? Uh? That's the real question. Why don't any of the politicians ever ask that question? Eh? Anyway, at that time, when the war was going on, I wasn't politically minded at all. I made my comments as a citizen. I was just another musician, playing with Koola Lobitos and singing love songs, songs

\* General Odemegwu Ojukwu, Commander-in-Chief of the secessionist Biafran army and President of the short lived Republic of Biafra.

about rain, about people... What did I know? That's when I split to America.

The idea to split to America came suddenly. One day I was in this club when this guy came and told me he wanted to take me to America. He said he would give me tickets and everything. So we started to plan America. We went and got our passports, then went to get visas. We had already told the press we were leaving that same Friday. So when I went to the American Embassy for a visa, they said, "Where are your tickets?" So I went and asked this guy for the tickets. He started to scratch his head and talk shit, saying that they were with his brother, and that we'd reimburse him when we got back from America. The motherfucker didn't even have bread to buy the tickets. So I went with him to see his brother. Of course, he had no tickets either. Anyway, this guy told his brother we would refund the money to him when we got back, that we would work, do African music, make shows, and send him back the money. You know, he was trying to convince him. Finally, his brother said, "OK," and he went to the bank to borrow the money. So he didn't have money either.

Anyway, I went to America and when I did come back, I only had \$10 in my pocket. I was completely broke, man. I didn't even dare go to see the man at all. I was saying to myself, "I can't see you-o, 'cause your brother fucked me up in America." You see, man, this guy had advanced us £2,400 sterling for the tickets of the whole band. We'd left on three-month excursion tickets. Imagine that, three months! And, man, we stayed there ten months instead. When I got really popular in Lagos though I paid this man back from what I got off the records released. That's how I paid my debts.

All the while I'd kept in touch with JK, who'd been living in London, Paris, then in London again. I used to wonder, "How is that motherfucker doing?" We'd keep in touch, but irregularly, off and on. I was convinced that together we could pull off whatever motherfucking shit we wanted. "If I make it in America," I was thinking to myself, "then we could get together and really do our thing!" Finish.



Brown Calls President  
A 'Mad Dog, Outlaw'

JULY 1967

DETROIT, U.S.A.

# Riots Simmer in Detroit And 20 Other U.S. Cities

*33 Dead in Auto Capital*

Rep Brown arrested.

## The Toll

**DEATHS:** 36, one more than  
White and the worst death toll in  
modern U.S. racial disturbances.

**INJURED:** 127 officially, includ-  
ing 38 policemen, 79 National  
Guardians, 29 firemen, 128 ar-  
rested protesters, 69 civilians. Un-  
official injury estimates range up  
to 2,000.

**BURNED:** 1,204.

**ARRESTED:** 2,023 plus 200 to 400  
not yet booked.

**DAMAGE:** No official estimate,  
Unofficial estimates around \$600  
million. The Detroit Board of  
Commerce estimates that the city's  
total economic loss may hit  
\$1 billion.

City's Calm  
Broken by  
Sniper Fire