

# Bayo Martins: Voice of the Drum

An insider account into popular music in Nigeria.  
A biographic interview with Dr. Wolfgang Bender.

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## Introduction



Bayo Martins with his drums, congas and traps at the National Theatre. Lagos.  
Photograph: National Theatre 1986

The History of popular music is bound to be sketchy and full of gaps. This is the case in Europe as well as in Africa. In the case of one of the most important and influential musical styles of West Africa, the *Highlife*, here another attempt is made to fill some of the open spaces with the instrumental help of an autobiography. The Nigerian musician *Bayo Martins* remembers many details of the peak of the Highlife period which parallels his own career as a maracarisist, trap drummer and conga player. Highlife was not only a musical style, it was the expression of a decisive political area, the pre- and post-independence period.

Definitely it is not music just being the mirror of politics. It is music itself which has been part of the political and societal changes - here - in the anglophone West Africa. This is something that is commonly ignored by historians of all fields. In many aspects Highlife provides a key to open questions. Music and all that is connected with it, like the lyrics and the social scene surrounding it cannot be valued enough. The autobiography *Bayo Martins* presents us comes from the perspective of one musician involved and therefore stresses one of the possible views by active participants in contrast e.g. to the view a producer or bar owner.

For anybody having some interest in Nigerian or African music this text will provide useful informations. The scholar will be delighted to find many detailed descriptions which cannot be found anywhere else. The socialite as well as the music lover will dwell in nostalgic memories of a period gone even though Bayo Martins is not the one to present a romanticised picture of the past.

The interviews were conducted over the past two years and have been jointly edited by Bayo Martins and myself.

Wolfgang Bender, Sunday, 14 March 2004

# 1 Childhood and adolescence in Nigeria

**B:**

Where were you born?

**M:**

I was born in Calabar and my first musical impression comes from there. I listened to the Efik inhabitants and Igbo settlers there. And of course you know, in that area they play a lot of drum. I had mostly my drumming impressions from there as a little boy. But in 1946 my father returned to Lagos where he originally came from. I was 14, I hadn't gone into music, I was still at school. But I would like to say my real influence came from my father because as a little child, 10, 12, 14, my father was very active in Calabar as a social music organizer and sometimes he acted as *MC* (*Master of Ceremony*) and at home we listened to him sing and do all those things they did at ballroom dancing.



The Family of Pa Abiodun Gregorio Martins, Calabar, Nigeria, 1938  
Standing in the middle *Ajayi* 1st child, next to the right *Adeniyi* 2nd son  
Next line: *Bayo* 4th child standing, *Ladipo* 5th child sitting on Papa's lap, *Omolora* 3rd child,  
*Mother Lucy* holding 6th child *Adekoya*

**B:**

What type of ballroom activities were these?

**M:**

They had social evenings in those days where black African civil servants from Sierra Leone, Ghana and Lagos got together for their repass twice monthly. On such evenings brass bands were invited to perform and entertain them. They played *Itembe* music and *Native Blues*, *Itembe* predated what is today's *Highlife*. Its lyrics were in Efik and sometimes borrowed Krio derived English which had spread all along the coast from Gambia to the Congo. Of course Calabar, you know, had the first motion sound film studio in Nigeria, and my father went to cinema a lot. He listened to radio and he used to sing songs like the *Alexander Rag Time*, *Bye Bye Black Birds* and other such tunes. I listened to him sing in the house.

**B:**

In school, did you have music lessons, and which school was it?

**M:**

I went to *Sacred Heart School* in Calabar, we had no formal music training but we had side drum and bass drum to play during a school march at *Empire Day* parades and bazaars, but essentially no music lessons were given to the pupils.

**B:**

And the *Sacred Heart* was catholic?

**M:**

Yes, mostly we were taught hymns and religious choir, that of course they did (laughter), and I even served as a sachristan at masses. But then we went back to Lagos. There I continued schooling. *Bobby Benson* and my elder brothers Ajayi and Adeniyi Santos-Martins came back from London in 1947. Bobby was going to start his *Bobby Benson and Cassandra Theatrical Group*. My brothers, because they knew Bobby and were well aware of my interest in music, thought I ought to see him (Bobby Benson). When at last I was brought to see Bobby Benson, he took a look at me and said to me I should continue a while longer at school and come back a year later. I said okay and then went back to school. In 1950 I was selected by my family at the request of a colonial administrator, Mr. Harper, in Lagos, to study poultry at the Agege-Farm. So I went there, I was 18.

**B:**

After finishing your school?

**M:**

No, I left it in class four.

**B:**

Which school was that again?

**M:**

*St. Peters Cathedral School* on Broad Street, Lagos, okay. So I went and did this poultry thing. The course was three months, because my father then had this grand idea to set up a poultry farm, he bought a big land and I went out and did that course. When I finished and I came back from Agege to Lagos, which at that time, in 1950, was like going from Lagos to Ibadan, I didn't know what was going on at home until I got back from Agege and to find that my father was no more in Lagos. He had moved to Enugu to join my elder brother who was then working there. So I went to Enugu myself to meet him and to tell him that I had successfully done the study. But I didn't like poultry, the faeces of the chicken and all that smell. I didn't like it so I made up my mind right from the farm that I wasn't going to pursue poultry.

So when I got to Enugu, one evening I was just strolling and then I heard the sound of music coming out somewhere. I decided to pop in and see what was happening, and this turned out to be the *Enugu Weekend Inn Orchestra* which one *Mr. Francis Brodricks* was starting up. And who did I find! *Inyang Henshaw* leading the group. Of course coming from Calabar himself and having lived in Lagos and worked with Bobby Benson right from the beginning, he knew my family and who I was. So he said: "Oh, little Martins, what are you doing here in Enugu?" "I just heard this sound and decided to look in." I said. "Good, and what is your impression?" he asked. "Oh. I'm so fascinated by the smell of these instruments." I replied. You know, they were all new brass Instruments and smelt so fresh and nice. I continued: "Can I join the group?" I asked. "The only thing we have left is the maracas." He said. "Yeah. I'll play the maracas." So they started me on as a maracarist with one pound ten shillings per month and Mr. Brodricks gave the orchestra members rooms in the hotel. To me, 19 years old, one pound ten was a big sum of money. "It is nice." I said. That's how I got my start, I played with them for six months. While there I set my eyes to see what the Henshaw was doing, how he played the drums and all that. That was the year 1951.

**B:**

What kind of drums did Henshaw play?

**M:**

He played the trap drums. Henshaw was a drummer, singer and fabulous dancer in the *Bobby Benson and Cassandra Theatrical Group* and was later to become the first drummer of *Bobby Bensons Jam Session Orchestra*. So after six months I had to go back to Lagos with my father. Because I had been playing in Enugu with Henshaw now, I knew to go out to the night-clubs and see what was happening in the Lagos night-club scene. One afternoon I met *King Roberto*, who was

also a drummer with Bobby Benson. So I told him, I was just from Enugu where I was playing with Henshaw as a maracarist and I would like to further my music career in Lagos. So he said. "Good, why don't you come with me to see Bobby Benson?" And so we went to see Bobby Benson and when Bobby saw me, he remembered that he had seen me 4 years before. Now he asked me: "Are you ready?" I said: "I'm ready." "Okay," he said, "but I can only offer you the maracas to play." I said: "Good, that is what I was playing in Enugu with Henshaw." And so they got me on the maracas the second time. Bobby made my salary two pounds fourteen. I played maracas 1951 to 52. Suddenly there was an opening in the band for a drummer when *King Roberto*, *Bill Friday*, *Jubril Issa* and *Dele Bamgbose* broke off from Bobby's band to form the *Delta Dandies*. They were unhappy about their pay, condition on one hand and on the other there was a general rise in the demand of bands to fill the new night-clubs that mushroomed in the early 50s following the *Rex Club* experience! But there was this other guy, *Ajayi (Ajax) Bukana*, there before me. He played the bass and sometimes doubled on the drums. I wanted the post, but Bobby decided that I could not go straight to play the drums, there has to be a competition between Ajayi and myself to see who really has the flair to play the drums. And so he set up this grand contest for that beautiful evening in 1952; I played and the people around thought I had more flair for the drums, and that I played better than Ajayi. That's how I became the drummer with *Bobby Bensons Orchestra* in 1952.

**B:**

And you have not played drums before?

**M:**

No. I've never played drums before except I had been practising at home on tables using forks and knives to play. All that was my own thing which I had instinctively in me. That test was the first actual time for me to sit on the drums and really play and I made it beautifully because I had it in me, you know. I've always been curious as a child and loved to move things. I remember when I was 12 years old in Calabar and there was this ugly incident in my home. Our lavatory bucket had filled up and was overflowing with maggots invested excrements which flooded the lavatory floor. The whole place was in a mess and unusable. The night soil people had gone on strike abandoning their job. Everyone was uncomfortable and uneasy about the situation, yet no one was prepared to do anything about it for fear of being soiled or something. Seeing such distress and helplessness around me, I could not remain passive like the rest of them, singlehandedly I removed the bucket, dug a pit behind the compound and into which I emptied the waste and covered it up. I washed both the lavatory floor and the bucket and replaced it to the amazement, relieve and comfort of all. Some of my friends call me a reformer. I believe human beings make things happen and that one person can make the exception. For me it is a way of life. Few months after that we had to go to Accra because Bobby had a six month contract there. From Lagos to Accra in those days unlike today was rough and we had too many bridges to cross and two or to three rivers upon which the car is ferried across. Like from Lagos to Idiroko. On getting to Togo there was a place called *Grand Popo*. I am not sure if it exists anymore. I think its been swept away by the sea. There was a tug boat used to ferry the trucks and passengers from one end to the other before one could drive into Togo. And after Togo there was another crossing on the Volta-River before getting to Accra where we disembark and get into the pontoon to be ferried across. Sometimes, we slept in the middle of nowhere in the bush. Nothing around us but us. The car parked, we made camp fire besides the car and everyone climbs to the top to sleep. That was on our own risk. It was fun and we enjoyed doing it.

**B:**

Were there any roadies?

**M:**

The closest thing to roadie I heard was in Accra. *E.T. Mensah* had hands who packed and loaded the instruments when the band was going on tour. These guys were called *Gongardin*. We have traced the origin of that word to a film that was made in India. In that film there were Indians who carried the loads of the British Army and these men were called the *Gongardins*. So I suppose the

Ghanaians got the name from there. In Bobby's band however, myself and *Babyface Paul*. Laterly *Eugen Pit* packed the instruments. I remember occasions when Bobby would be driving on the highway and Paul and I would climb on to the roof of the car to check and make sure those instruments up there were secured and safe.

**B:**

Where did you play in Accra?

**M:**

We played at the *Weekend in Havanna*, owned by a Nigerian. His name was *Mr. Herbert Morrison*. He came to Nigeria and contracted Bobby to come to Ghana, then Gold Coast, and work in his club. He was the first guy who took Bobby's band to Accra. And there of course other people got interested in the band and so we were able to play in other places like the *Kitkat Night-Club* owned by a Lebanese, *Mr. Ashkar*, and *Lido Night-club* of the *Shambrose Brothers*. Then we went to Kumasi and played at *Hotel de Paris* and *Wilben Hotel*. *Hotel de Paris* was owned by a Ghanaian and not a Syrian.

**B:**

You were put up by them?

**M:**

Yes, or apartments in the town. They were responsible for accommodating the band. Some of the Hotels even at that time were high class hotels, comparable to those I saw later in England in 1958.

**B:**

How was the name of the club?

**M:**

*Hotel de Kingsway*, Kumasi.

**B:**

Was this an open air spot?

**M:**

No, the *Kingsway* was not. It was all enclosed unlike *Weekend in Havana* and *Kitkat* and the *Lido*.

**B:**

How was the reaction to a *Nigerian Highlife* band in Ghana? Because people saw *Highlife* as a Ghanaian invention?

**M:**

This was 1952. In 1952 Bobby Benson was still playing Jazz. Calypso in minor, Merengue, Mambo and Samba. We were not playing what was known as *Highlife* and as it was played in Ghana. It was while we were in the Gold Coast, that we learnt to play Highlife, the way it was being played there. E.g. when we went to Accra we did not have Bongos or Congas. We had set drums, fiddle bass, guitar, trumpets and Saxophone. We played in unison, there was only first part. From imitating and seeing what E.T. Mensah was doing, we had to progress along that line. When we got back to Nigeria other bands copied the new pattern. But really we were influenced in the Gold Coast! But E.T. Mensah says that he was influenced in the Congo in 1949 where he first heard the sound that he later developed to become Highlife. Also in Accra I saw advanced drummers like *Tom Thumb* and *Guy Warren*. so I put my ears down, watched and learned more until eventually I became a master drummer myself.

**B:**

Did you ever talk with *Ko Ghanaba* (Guy Warren) about him bringing the Latin instruments from London to Accra? Did you hear that story?

**M:**

No, it sounds like another time. Because *E.T. Mensah's Tempos Band* was not the forerunner. There

was the *Gold Coast Tempos Band* with Guy Warren, *Joe Kelly*, a clarinetist, very good. The bass-player *Papa Amatio*. They had two guitarists: *Tricky Johnson* and *Bebop Aggrey*. Guy Warren played drums and Bongos, E.T. Mensah on trumpet and doubling on tenor-saxophone. They came to Nigeria in 1951. I am not sure if Guy Warren had already been to England or not, because when they return to Ghana after that tour, Guy Warren left the band and went to Liberia with a few others.

**B:**

Which other tours did you do with Bobby Benson?

**M:**

With Bobby I did many trips to Ghana. There were the immigration border posts to contend with. Starting from Nigeria you have the Nigeria-Dahomey border. Dahomey-Togo and Togo-Ghana. Even between Dahomey and Togo both under French rule there were some political or constitutional differences that allowed for such borders to exist between them. Obviously, this was the result of the post World War I arrangement whereby the French inherited the former German territory. We usually encountered problems at the border checkpoints, especially at those of Dahomey. The gendarms were so strict that sometimes they slapped people and finally Bobby Benson devised means of appeasing their hostility and the delay. When we would arrive at the border we get our instruments set to play music for them. They liked it. After 30 minutes or so they would stamp our passports and off we go. There would be lots of lorries waiting to be treated but we would be gone.

**B:**

You paid with music?

**M:**

Yes, we paid with music. One beautiful morning like that we were returning to Lagos from Ghana and an owl, you know this is the bird associated with wisdom, crushed onto our windscreen which almost caused Bobby to lose control of the car. Bobby stopped the car and told us that was a sign of bad omen, witchcraft. From that moment he cautioned everybody to sit tight and to be careful because something might still happen on the way but we got to Lagos safely in spite of that incident.

**B:**

There seemed to be very close connections between Ghanaian and Nigerian musicians?

**M:**

There is, because Nigeria and Ghana shared a common colonial experience. West Africa was constituted as a confederation by the British colonial power. We had the same law, the same government and there was free movements of goods and people. We spent the same currency from Nigeria to the Gambia. The economy was very large. And many Nigerians trading in the Gold Coast brought what they had to Nigeria and there was this unofficial cultural exchange between Nigerian musicians and Gold Coast musicians. There was a constant flow of ideas and musical interaction.

**B:**

But there has not been so much with Sierra Leone? Why?

**M:**

No, Sierra Leone seemed a bit far and you had to cross the sea to get there. But Nigeria and Gold Coast was motorable, you could drive there. It is the shortsightedness of the politicians - by now there should be a railway connection from Lagos to Ghana, its only 332 miles.

Today we have cultural treaties signed with almost every country and nation in the world yet it has not impacted on popular music in West Africa. Right now, I cannot accept engagement in Ghana because nobody, not even the bank is prepared in Nigeria to accept the Cedis. The same applies to Ghana and the countries in between vice versa. What is then the sense and logic of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) without economic and monetary integration? Immigration restrictions especially as applied in Nigeria, is a great obstacle to easy flow and

exchange of ideas with other peoples in and out of Black Africa.

Another exciting tour with Bobby I like to remember was the one to Kano. That was a beautiful ride. On that trip we encountered antelopes, other wild animals and lots of birds. Occasionally some of the birds will fly against the windscreen and be knocked down cold. For a while we ignored those birds as they fell dead to the ground. Then after a long time Bobby Benson thought, oh, these could feed us. Why don't we stop and pick them. We stopped and then Paul and Bobby had devised the idea to tie those birds on to the engine. Surprisingly after a few hours we stopped again to look at the birds and they were well roasted from the heat of the engine and we could eat them. We got to Kano where the band was to work for six months. I enjoyed Kano. The Hausa were enthralled by my drumming. They called me *Serekin Ganga* (King of the drums). The set-drums was new there and they were for the first time seeing one person executing four, five drums at a time. It was really sensational because usually it was one man to one drum or at the most two drums a man could play as with double headed *Kanango* drums. The *Colonial Hotel* where we were resident was packed full nightly.

However the stay in Kano was cut short three month earlier, because of a political riot which erupted there between the Hausa-Fulani against the Igbo and Yoruba in protest against the alleged humiliation of *Sir Ahmadu Bello* the *Sardauna of Sokoto* in Lagos. On the night of the outbreak of that riot we were forced to abandon the tour and fled back to Lagos.

**B:**

Do you remember when that was? Was it spring or Christmas?

**M:**

It was in May, it lasted for three days, 16th to 19th May 1953.

**B:**

That was during the rainy season.

**M:**

Yes, but it wasn't raining in the north. Bobby drove non-stop to Lagos. We were extremely lucky to get away unscratched as many people lost their lives in that disturbance.

**B:**

So nothing happened to any of you?

**M:**

No, but we saw them with their machetes cutting down what and whoever stood on their way. It was horrible. Bobby saw that and realized the danger that we faced and did what was best. Those three months we were working between the club and the circus. The circus was called *Alpha Carnival* and was more like a "luna park" (fair ground) owned by a South African white. This was the first of its kind that came to Nigeria.

**B:**

What was the set up?

**M:**

We had a bandstand in the fair and played to entertain the people on the fair ground that appreciated our kind of music and it was also used by the organizer as a means of attracting the crowds to come to the fair. People could dance to our music. We played Highlife, Jazz, Blues and Waltz. it was a mixed grill thing.

**B:**

How long did you stay with Bobby Benson?

**M:**

I worked with Bobby from 1951 to 1955. Then I decided it was time I branched out and do something of my own. I left his band and went back to Accra. At the time Accra was more progressive than Nigeria and musically there was more opportunity there. The *Delta Dandies* were

the only Nigerian band resident there at the time and played at the *Weekend in Havana*. But they could only offer me a job as a conga player, so I left trap drums to play conga drums because my mentor *Roberto* was there a drummer for the *Delta Dandies*. There I learned to play the conga drums and at the same time I worked as a bongo player with the *Gold Coast Radio Band* under the leadership of *Ralph Blagooee* and *Adolph Dogu* as his assistant. The vocalist was *Pack Solomon*, he was great. My association with the *Radio Band* in Accra taught me music reading and notation. I was getting on fine with them and enjoying myself.

**B:**

What was the *Weekend in Havanna* like?

**M:**

The *Weekend in Havana* was one of those corrugated iron sheet roofed buildings one sees in James Town, Accra, with a beautiful hall. It had a bar and sitting accommodation for guests like a saloon. It was stocked with all sorts of imported drinks and beverages, Club beer, Heinekens, Becks, Gordon Dry Gin and Johnny Walker Whisky. Orange squash, Lemonade etc. European and Ghanaian food could be had. The courtyard was the dancing space which was bare concrete floor and a makeshift bandstand, it was beautiful in the summer when it was dry and at night we enjoyed the moonlight. The only problem was that when it rained we had to move into the saloon. It was attended by the urban elites, private business men, politicians, all of whom had been to England and were used of this kind of night life. They were dressed in evening dress or in Ghanaian national dress. Like *kente toga* the men and the women with their wrapper or skirt and blouse and some in plain frock. Few Europeans and many Syrians and Lebanese frequented the place. One fine evening *Chris Ajilo* arrived from Lagos, he was looking for a drummer. He said I was recommended to him in Nigeria and that I was in Accra and "so I am here to get you". So we talked and he eventually contracted me to play the drums for his band, the *Chris Ajilo Cubanos*. So I packed my things and said good bye to Accra, though reluctantly, because I loved the place and still do today. Ghana for me is a cultural place, totally different from the tradition in Nigeria.

**B:**

And what kind of of music did the band play?

**M:**

Oh, we played Jazz. Latin American music, Afro-Cuban and western Pop music.

**B:**

Did you not play Highlife?

**M:**

No, we didn't play Highlife. *Chris Ajilo* was a western trained musician and he was Charlie Parker oriented. He didn't play music before he left Nigeria for the UK. It was later on in Nigeria that *Chris* started to learn Highlife. Indeed *Chris Ajilo* came home with two other musicians, *Samy Lartey*, baritone and alto sax and clarinet and *Dennis Lawal*, drums. Together they teamed up in 1956 with *Bobby Benson* and formed a Jazz quartet known as *Bensagil*.

**B:**

And where did you play?

**M:**

The band had no permanent base. It was a touring band, we moved from place to place. In those days in Nigeria it was the hoteliers and club owners who got bands together. When musicians formed their own band they had to initiate and look for engagements and where to perform, like in the town halls and hotels and clubs without resident bands.

**B:**

Were you invited to social functions as well?

**M:**

Exactly, we did. We were invited to play at weddings, social launching of business, opening ceremonies and Student carnivals at university. We travelled the whole of Nigeria, later we went to Ghana, played all around there too. I was with Chris as his drummer from 1956 to 57. Other members in the group with me included: *Tony Obs*, alto sax; *Marco Bass*, trumpet; *Tex Oluwa*, fiddle bass; *Landa Sashore*, bongos; *Candido Ajayi*, congas; *Victoria Akaeze Peters*, maracas, singer and dancer.

So at this time I was with Chris. I had been thinking on my own that some time I would like to go to England and study music myself. My friend *Zeal Onyia* had left for England in 1955 so we all had this ambition, that to go to England the moment we can make it and to learn more. But that chance did not come to me until a few years later, so in the meantime I left Chris Ajilo because I had a disagreement with him.

**B:**

What was the disagreement about?

**M:**

Well, we had gone to Accra and I met a beautiful woman, named *Ekuwa Kakraba*, whom I decided to take with me to Nigeria. And Chris was not happy about it. He would not have the woman travel in his van, consequently the woman had to travel by herself to join me in Lagos. This, I felt, was very cruel of Chris. That brought my disagreement with him and when we got to Lagos I left the band, and joined the *E.C. Arinze and the Empire Orchestra*.

**B:**

You said already Henshaw payed you a monthly wage. Bobby Benson payed you monthly...

**M:**

...monthly, yeah, sure...

**B:**

...also Chris Ajilo payed you monthly?

**M:**

Yes. yes.

**B:**

Was it always that way?

**M:**

Yes, it was the way, this was the beginning of music professionalism in Nigeria which Bobby Benson had set in motion. The fact that you worked and earned a monthly salary put it apart with any other profession. With Bobby Benson I started on two pounds twelve shillings as against the one pound ten I was paid in Enugu. But by the time I left Bobby in 1955 I was earning fourteen pounds twelve shillings a month. And when I started with Chris I earned more salary and with the *Empire Orchestra* it had risen to twenty seven pounds monthly. So you can see, it was a steady and progressive rise trying to build up the image of professional musicianship in Nigeria. In Nigeria at that time this was a substantial amount which even some civil servants did not earn. My father e.g. worked in the civil service for over twenty years. At the time he was pensioned his salary was nine pounds per month.

**B:**

As what were you employed with *E.C. Arinze and Empire Orchestra*?

**M:**

The *Empire Hotel* management in Idi Oro had three sets of orchestra fully equipped with all the latest instruments at that time. *Mr. Kanu*, the owner was a business tycoon. He had several hotels in Lagos island and the mainland. Among others was the *Lagos Arcade* in Obalende. I was very lucky to have been offered a job as a vocalist since they had already a drummer in the band. As you know it is difficult to have two drummers in a band. So I was really happy to have that opportunity. That

helped me also to become more versatile in the business. This was 1956. During my stay with the *Empire Orchestra* I was offered a recording contract with *DECCA* that same year to do some Calypsos and Highlife music.

**B:**

What Calypsos were these?

**M:**

Oh, my first Calypso I recorded was titled *Lord Deliver Daniel*, a biblical story I sang to Calypso arrangement. In *Santos Calypso* I explained there how I came to singing Calypso.

**Santos Calypso**

Speaking candidly to you fellows  
How i come to sing what they call calypso  
It all came up one morning in lagos  
As i was listening to a friends radio  
Series of calypsos took the air  
And so i became inclined  
Oo blie yah  
I heard people like the great Kitchener  
Lord ganda, beginner and the lion  
It is now for lord santos  
To join in swinging calypso  
To bring you more calypso  
To bring you more calypso

**B:**

Were all these your own compositions?

**M:**

Yes my own, yes. I got the musicians together and did this record on my label, I mean on my name.

**B:**

You were singing?

**M:**

I was singing.

**B:**

And you also wrote...

**M:**

...wrote the songs, yes. I did.

**B:**

How did you come about to choose that biblical topic?

**M:**

Well, my father was a proselytized catholic Christian. So it followed I was born into that religion and baptized. I had learned about the story of 'Daniel in the den' which impressed me a lot. So when it came to my recording I felt it would be nice to popularize that myth. And you know that Calypso sold the most of all my recordings, and was *Cyprian Ekwensi's* favourite (the writer and then a broadcaster with the *Nigerian Broadcasting Service* - NBS - in Lagos, as it was called then).

**Lord delivered Daniel**

O' lord delivered Daniel  
Good lord delivered Daniel  
Lord delivered Daniel o

Why cant you deliver me  
I know my lord is great  
Redeemer of mankind  
I'm standing here before you o  
For lord to deliver me  
Adam and Eve in the garden  
They had no clothes  
They picked the leaves of Eden  
To cover their nakedness yes 'o  
Lord you delivered them all 'o  
Why cant you deliver me  
Lord 'o. lord 'o, lord 'o, lord 'o

**B:**

These songs you said were published under the name *John Santos Martins*. How come you are now *Bayo Martins*?

**M:**

I had changed my name since Nigeria became independent. I thought to do away with that colonial hangover, which I believe to be a slave name given to my father in Fernando Po. But it is interesting that you ask this question because it has bothered some other people. There was this guy with the NBC who played my records on his program a lot and had no idea that John Santos Martins is a Nigerian and someone he knew. Until the day we met at a conference in the *University of Lagos* and he was talking and mentioning one of my records, *Mama Maria*, and I said, oh, do you know that's me? And it was really exiting for him to make the connection that it was me, who sang those Calypsos he played.

**B:**

What was the name of this guy?

**M:**

The name of this guy, he is a popular Nigerian ..... aha, his name is *Segun Sofowote*! My friend.

**B:**

How were you discovered as a Calypsonian?

**M:**

Because I was singing with E.C. Arinze's band and this French talent scout that came to Nigeria that time, his name was *Gerald Jacques*, he heard me and liked my voice and offered me this opportunity. It started very ordinarily but after my first Calypso it became a major thing and in the course of the two years 1956 to 1958 I recorded twelve songs.

**B:**

Were they all Calypsos?

**M:**

No. They were not all Calypsos. Some were in the Highlife medium. I recorded *Taxi Driver*, a Highlife, *Mr. Devil's Calypso*, another Highlife was *Ema to ri mi* (Don't on account of me - fight to death), *Anna's Tricks*, *Calypso-Highlife*, *Mama Dorothee*, *Calypso and Mama Maria*, as well a Calypso - all on 78 rpm shellac discs. On DECCA, yellow label WA series. W-A. 1924 to 1926 were recorded in Lagos. K.W.A. 3001-3003 were recorded in a makeshift studio by DECCA in Accra in 1957. I was accompanied on that session by *Bill Friday*, *Jubril Issa* and *King Roberto*.

**B:**

Where did this talent scout come from?

**M:**

Gerald Jacques was a Frenchman and he was commissioned from there by the *DECCA Gramophone Company* in Paris. It is interesting to mention here that Jacques was an ex-serviceman. Also the guy, *Major Kinder* who had set up the first DECCA Studio in Accra was himself an ex-soldier. So somehow there must have been a connection between these two men. Before Gerald Jacques came to Lagos, *Mr. Badejo* was recording privately. There was no studio in the conventional sense as we know it today. He recorded in his garage with a small reel-to-reel Grundig or Telefunken taperecorder - and one or two microphones. Artists like Bobby Benson first had their music recorded by him. So it was DECCA with Gerald Jacques who actually built the first recording studio in Lagos on Atan Street Akoka, very close to the present Lagos university. The house was owned by *Dr. Ene Henshaw*, a medical doctor - whom *Israel Nwaoba* alias *Njemanze* from the *Three Night Wizards* sang about, and besides Henshaw was a nice guy, everyone who knew him loved him. Recording sessions used to be scheduled during which period British engineers were flown from England to record us. One of them whom I remember very well was *Mr. John Barnister*. There was a control room, a recording studio. It was 4 track, we had one microphone for the vocalist, one for the guitar and one for the orchestra. I always found the sessions interesting as this was new to me. Also what fascinated me most was how the engineers worked. Usually we got into the studio, they tell us how to set the instruments and where to place this or that equipment. Then the sound from the control room "Quiet in the studio- recording starts when the red light is switched on". And then we will begin to do our things. Sometimes the session could be very smooth and fast, and we are out of the studio, and at other times when things get sticky it could take a whole day, and we will continue the next day. It wasn't so tasking, because an artist was required to do one or two records, which was four songs biannually, two times a year. The financial arrangement was such that the artists got a retainers fee (of about 50 to 100) paid upfront, later they called it royalty advance, plus twopence on each record sold. From this humble beginning the recording business in Nigeria started and has today blossomed into multitrack and multibillion Naira industry.

**B:**

So you were also singing Calypsos with E.C. Arinze?

**M:**

Yes, I was, among other things! Also I sung in the Waltz and Blues mediums. Blues, like the famous *Star Dusts* or *Franky Lane's Answer Me, Oh My Lord*. These were mostly copyrighted tunes, ballroom classics, we imitated at the time. While I was with Arinze I was having steady correspondence with Zeal Onyia, who was in England. He had a plan to start a band of his own when he comes back to Nigeria, and would of course want me at the drums. So actually the job with E.C. Arinze for me was a stop valve while I waited for Zeal. Eventually Zeal returns in 1957 and then I had to leave *Empire Orchestra* and the interesting thing was I knew I was leaving and I didn't leave like I left Bobby Benson or Chris Ajilo. By now I had matured a little more and had developed integrity. I wrote a letter to terminate my appointment, I gave him one month notice that I was leaving. This was so new at that time as no musician did that ever before - gave notice of their leaving, they simply left stealthily without notice. That my action impressed Mr. Kanu so much that by time I was leaving they made sure that I got my money, I was payed and he even gave a little send off party for me. This impressed me a lot also and I felt I had initiated something new in the code of conduct and musicians ethics. There is something in being honest and being straight with people, you know. So I left to team up with Zeal Onyia who had just arrived from Britain and putting up a band. Zeal and I had been friends from the *Bobby Bensons Orchestra*. It was fun to work with him. We got along very well and I believed in him. Six months after his arrival we got the band together it was called *Zeal Onyia and his Band*.

**B:**

When and where was that?

**M:**

It was December 20th 1957 that the *Zeal Onyia's Band* was launched at the *Ambassador Hotel*

*Yaba*, Lagos. That night was very special, because at that time Zeal had just come back from the U.K. and the Nigerian music scene was going through some radical changes. We were experimenting with voicing, harmonics and instrumentation. For example in Zeal's Band we had alto-saxophone, trumpet, trombone combination. There was no tenor-sax nor clarinet, nor guitar only a fiddle bass. Zeal was on trumpet. That set up was kind of new. People of all walks of life, the civil service, the new elites that were springing up in Nigeria at the time, all came that night to hear and see the band perform. The *Delta Dandies* were already doing something in that direction. Band Leader Jubril Issa was terrific with the clarinet, he was sensational with his rendition of *Benny Goodmans Concerto for the Clarinet*. *Bill Friday*, one of the finest trumpet player of his time, had jammed with *Louis Armstrong* in Accra during the great man's first visit to Africa in 1956. And *Dele Bamgbose* played the tenor Saxophone solo on *In the mood* like *Tex Benegie* played it with the *Glen Miller Orchestra*. But Zeal was exciting and dynamic with the trumpet. "The iron is hot," the Conga drummer Arthur used to cry out when Zeal blew the trumpet. The equipments we had then, compared to the infinite variety of what is available today, ours was very poor. Imagine an eight piece band with one microphone and one Vox amplifier and two small loudspeakers. Talking about guitar one should be specific here about what we are talking about. Prior to 1947 there was no electric guitar in Nigeria. What guitar there was, were acoustic guitars otherwise known in Nigeria as *palmwine guitar*. Musicians such as *Ayinde Bakare*, *Israel Nwaoba* alias *Njemanze*, *Eshie Brothers* and the rest of them performed with such guitars. Electric guitar was rare. Bobby Benson had the only one in the nation he brought back with him from England in 1947. Chris Ajilo introduced the second one in 1956 when he bought an electric guitar in a music shop in Lome and contracted *Chritian*, a Togolese, he met there into bis band, the *Chris Ajilo's Cubanos*, while on tour that year. Then followed in 1957 by the *Empire Rhythm Orchestra* which imported a guitarist from Ghana. His name was *Longman Akwa*. At the instance of Mr. Kanu this author was sent to Accra to scout and contract a guitarist for the *Empire Orchestra*. And I found him playing with the *Shambrose Band* at the *Lido Night-Club*, Accra. The use of electric guitar did not become widespread in Nigeria until the mid sixties. As for pianists there were only a few namely *Olu MacFoy (Obetutu)*, *Adewale Oshin*, *Akinrinde Cole*, *Syd Moors* and the late *Aboyade Cole*. These were a different breed of musicians who played in the churches and established European hotels and halls like the *Forester Hall*, *St. Georges Hall* and the *Island Club*, which had a stationary piano in the house. There were *Mr. Crapie* and *Mr. Carena* who taught music in Lagos and most of them had had their lessons there.

**B:**

Do you remember some concrete persons or friends of yours present at that launching?

**M:**

There were so many of them like *Kojo Alakija*, *Kule Maja*, *Azikiwe Junior*, I think *Emeka Ojukwu* was there, and *Austin 'Drape'* a great Jazz aficionado, *Kid Lari*, and *A.C. Nwapa*, lot of socialite were there to see what Zeal had come back with from England.

**B:**

Were they all Yoruba?

**M:**

No, it was mixed: Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Efik, Nigerians. It was a big scene, a cross-cultural gathering. Apart from the English language, popular music was another great rallying point for all Nigerians. Like we say Highlife was the melting pot of the various ethnic musics. In fact it is for me the first Nigerian culture that evolved. Before then if one was from another ethnic group it was difficult to understand or to dance or even appreciate the music of another ethnic group. But with Highlife every Nigerian could dance: Be they Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa or whatever, Highlife was one thing that crossed beyond the traditional specialized mould. It was something every Nigerian could identify with because it was 'detribalized' and de-ethnicalized. And then we did not only play Highlife, we played classical ballroom music too, Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, Blues etc.. The great *Prof. Chike Obi* was there too that night. He made a great impression on us, the musicians. A

mathematician he had such talent in dancing, e.g. when we would be playing Waltz, he would be dancing Swing and be on time and exact. We on the stage were thrilled to watch him do his thing. It was wonderful. All that happened that night made such impression on me. In fact it set me thinking about drumming and the effect of music on human beings.

**B:**

Can you just describe when you came in to see the venue or to the place, how it looked?

**M:**

That's very hard to remember now. I think it was around ten in the evening that we started.

**B:**

How did you come there?

**M:**

During that time in Lagos night-clubs didn't start till about ten. We all got there separately, individually from our respective homes. I think I got there that night at about 9 pm. I was living in Suru Lere, so I went by bus to the *Ambassador*.

**B:**

Where was *Ambassador Hotel* situated?

**M:**

*Ambassador* was situated between King George Avenue now Herbert Macaulay street and Commercial Road, Yaba. opposite the Sabo police station. That police station is still there today.

**B:**

How did you take your instruments there? By bus?

**M:**

No, earlier in the day, Zeal had collected the instruments in his car. He had a Chevrolet-car his father gave to him to start the business. With that he collected all the instruments. We had all gone there earlier in the day to set up our instruments and had everything ready. So in the evening we came already dressed from home.

**B:**

What was your dressing like?

**M:**

We were wearing black suits, white shirt and black tie. The whole band dressed in black suit. That was the tradition Bobby Benson set with his *Jam Session Orchestra*. So at that time we were pretty much like gentlemen dressed up in black suits, unlike what you have today where people can even go on stage hardly without any clothes on. It was unknown, in those days so we wore suits and were well-dressed.

**B:**

Had everyone arrived by 10 o'clock?

**M:**

Yes, everybody came. I think we were all there half an hour before the starting-time.

**B:**

What was the set up of the band?

**M:**

There was myself on drums, then *Humphrey* who played the alto-saxophone, the base player whose name I can't remember now, the trombone player *Bata Hanger*, the conga-drummer *Abel Abu*, he is now dead. And those are the 4 names I can remember now.

**B:**

Did the instruments belong to everybody?

**M:**

No, the instruments were Zeal's. Though at that time in fact Hotel proprietors owned instruments, but Zeal had bought his own to show his independence and a breakaway from the proprietor-band-ownership. Although this was a welcomed departure from the past when proprietors owned musical instruments and musicians were employed to work without their own instruments. This is still so today except that now it is the musician/band leader owning the instruments. We did not think anything much about it in those days. Today I can see this as exploitative and something bad. It is the bane of the profession and one aspect why professionalism is not well rooted and properly grounded with musicians in Nigeria. There was no formal musical training nor institutions around for us to draw from. Yet those musicians of my generation, the fifties, were notwithstanding this handicap able to create their music and perform nightly. One can only marvel at the talents there are.

**B:**

What about you and your drums? Did he leave them with you?

**M:**

No, I never had drums at home. Usually after the night's performance all the instruments are gathered and taken back to the place of the owner.

**B:**

How could you rehearse?

**M:**

We rehearsed at the proprietors or the bandleader's place. But individual rehearsal at home was impossible, there was no incentive for them to practice, therefore creativity was stifled. In my case when the band was not rehearsing I listened at home to a lot of records and learn the drum breaks I heard on the jazz records. by *Louise Belson* and *Gene Gruper* and others on my HMV wind up gramophone. That's how I prepared myself.

**B:**

Did you ever rehearse during the week?

**M:**

Yes, we rehearsed three times a week or sometimes daily, during the grooming of the band. But as time went by we rehearsed once a week as the band grew busier.

**B:**

At his house? Was there space enough?

**M:**

In Nigeria it didn't matter, you can play in your room. Everybody can play and make noise do what they want to do. Nobody stops you. Instead of people being disturbed, like they do in Europe, they rather participated, and admired what we were doing.

**B:**

Did Zeal have a house of his own?

**M:**

No, at that time he had not. We rehearsed in his sitting room. Back to the club each night we were roundly applauded with shouts of encore, especially when we played *Prim Pre Yah*, a Jazz tune Zeal has composed in Igbo telling the story of Jazz as having come from Igboland. People really appreciated what Zeal was doing. I was billed on the posters as Nigeria's model drummer with the Zeal Onyia's Band. The band got a good review from the press some days later. It was the first time since the visit of E.T. Mensah in 1952 that the newspapers seriously reported anything about popular music and musicians, it wasn't until the early sixties spearheaded by writers such as *Sam Amuka (Sad Sam)*, *Peter Enahoro*, *Victor Dogu*, *Frank Aig Imokhuede*, the late *Lai Mabinuori* and *Mr. Onobule* of *Drum Magazine*, that popular music became a permanent feature of the newspapers

in Nigeria.

**B:**

What newspaper was that?

**M:**

The *Day Times* or the *Day Service*, I think. Before then there was not much reportage about us in the newspapers. The prevailing public opinion regarded popular musicians as rascals and drop outs. But we thought differently. We saw ourselves as contributing to the society and did not mind the put down. Indeed for me being a musician and in the music scene at that time was unique. This was the period that the modern elites those who were to become permanent secretaries, solicitors' general, prime ministers and presidents were returning home from Britain and the United States, and congregated in Lagos. The night-club, apart from the billiard tables and tennis courts, was a social outlet where they freely integrated and interacted with others. Dancing was a favourite past time of most them. And what marvellous dancers most of them were! I still remember a few like *Bayo Braithwaite* (the insurance and assurance magnet), *Sunny Adewale* (Chief, lawyer)'the boy is good', T.OJ.), *Benson* (Chief, lawyer, former Federal Minister of Information in the first Republic), *Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe* (first President of independent Nigeria), *Fani Kayode* (Chief, lawyer former Deputy Premier of the now defunct Western Region), *Freddy Benson* ('Baba Kayode', an automobile engineer of *Benson Transport Service*), *Bode Thomas* (Chief, lawyer and nationalist), *Shola Macauley* (business man) and *Tommy Rose* (our taylor) among others. *Chief Awolowo* was the one man who hardly danced and betrayed emotions at such gatherings he attended in which I played with a band. I used to wonder often about that. So I was pleasantly surprised when he formed a band in 1979 for the *Unity Party of Nigeria*. However for the smart ones in the band to meet and talk with these eminent and distinguished men was a great privilege. Therefore the night- club for us was a great institution of learning and of assimilation: ideas and knowledge floated freely from both black and white audiences.

**B:**

To get an idea of that club's activities. Were these on weekdays or a saturday night affair?

**M:**

We played nightly. Saturday of course was the big night, and the monthly Fridays in *Island Club* or the *Yoruba Tennis Club*. The colonial governors, *Sir John MacPherson*, *Sir James Robertson* came at one time or another during their tenure in Nigeria.

**B:**

What was the club like, e.g. the *Ambassador*? Do you remember how it looked like from the outside and inside?

**M:**

Yes, I think I can try to picture it. *Ambassador-Hotel* was one storey bulding, longer by the breadth and curved by the length, shaped almost like a crescent and painted white inside and outside. Upstairs were the bedrooms for the Hotel residents. The ground floor held both the restaurant and the saloon bar. When one came in from the outside the restaurant is to the right and to the left is the bar. The furnishing was very European. The building itself served as the fourth corner of the wall built to it. So that from the building one descended straight on to the spacious court yard. The dancing floor was in the open space. Beautiful and well groomed flowers formed a ring round it. Entering the courtyard to your right was the stage. Tables and chairs were set in a horseshoe shape around the dance floor. It was an enterprise owned by a Lebanese, *Mr. Rosek*, who had also the *Gondola* at Yaba.

**B:**

What about the unattached women in the clubs?

**M:**

In those early days the night club was really an exciting place to be in. The whole scene and

atmosphere was like an open university. Everyone that matters was there and all kinds of things happened. Sitting on the band stand you can see and learn just by observing the goings on. E.g. one learns to be thrifty and witty and how to manage the exigency of daily economic life, like the stewards will teach you how to exchange the beer and other drinks offered to the musician for cash money. This was a sideline musicians loved it and it was fair and good because at the end of the evening one had enough money to play around with. Then the women, prostitutes, as they call them, I liked to refer to them as liberated women. These women for one reason or another love the musicians perhaps because of the territorial proximity with the musicians we were dose and regulars at the night clubs, we meet there every night. So I guess it was natural for people who meet and see every night to develop some kind of affinity and interest in one another. These women, God bless them, were of tremendous help to the musicians. But for them many of those who made it in those early days would never have survived the ordeal. And man, it was tough and difficult to keep up the appearance and looking clean and shining at the engagements. The salary was not enough to keep up your wardrobe expenses, like ironing your suites nightly, clean shirt and polished shoes, all these were extra expenditures that the salary did not cover. Again being in the club one needed to entertain others, besides most of the musicians smoked grass and money was needed to have their supply daily. Those women provided these extras. Besides they cooked for you and bought things for the musicians from their own money and they never asked you for anything in return except for love and trust. This made life easier for most of the musicians. So it was supposed to be a beautiful relationship between us and them. This many on the outside could not see nor understand so they branded these women *orchestra wives*.

**B:**

Did they continue their work as prostitutes when they became friends of the musicians?

**M:**

No, they continued with their interest. Though some musicians moved in with their girlfriends, it was seldom the other way round. They come together to the club each taking care of their business. One did not disturb the other. It was in a way a sort of pimping or gigoloing. Those who had the guts for such cohabitation did it.

**B:**

What about other expressions for prostitutes like *waka-waka baby* and *ashewo*?

**M:**

Yes, *waka waka baby* like *Rex Lawson* termed it. *Ashewo* is the Yoruba word for prostitute. *Waka waka* is Pidgin English or colloquial for a women that goes from one setting to the other. She was a walk-about woman, thats what *waka waka* means in short.

**B:**

And that expression in Yoruba could have other meanings or is it a traditional expression? Or is it a common place in Yoruba?

**M:**

Well, *ashewo* itself means exchanger of money.

**B:**

It doesn't mean more than that?

**M:**

No, it implies that you exchange money for your body.

**B:**

What women were these usually? What training did those women have? Where did they come from? From the city, from the country?

**M:**

They belonged to various categories. Most of them had been married some time in their village to

men they did not like or something like that. Some just wanted to experience life in the city and to get away from the villages. Others simply wanted good time. There were some fresh from the schools who didn't actually know what to do but throbbed with the music, the modern music and they loved it. They liked the socialization in the club. Then there were educated women who were ambitious and seeking opportunity to further enhance their lives. So it was a mixture of all these interests and backgrounds that one sees in the night-clubs. Not all of the women that one saw in the night club were dedicated prostitutes. Some were there just for the fun of it and satisfaction.

**B:**

That reminds me of the argument that Highlife provided liberty or that kind of feeling to men and women in a way. Not to say that these women were prostitutes. Some of these were women breaking away from their traditional bondage and tyranny?

**M:**

Right, exactly so!

**B:**

Would you agree with that as well?

**M:**

Yes, it is true because there were many like that. Some even got married to professors, to high civil servants, Africans and Europeans and they were well educated women. Take someone like *Maud Mayer* who frequented the night-clubs at that time and yet she was not a prostitute and she is still there in Nigeria. We call her Nigeria's *First Lady of Jazz*. She sings Jazz music. There was another woman who was associated with the famous *Nelson Ottah*. Nelson Ottah is a well known Nigerian journalist. Before Biafra he was editor and director of *Drum Magazine* and after the war served in the Federal Ministry of Information. He wrote one of the first books about the Biafran war: *Rebels Against Rebels* (Lagos 1981, Manson and Company). And that woman she was a highly intelligent woman. I think she went to university later and became something herself. There were many like that. Some became nursing sisters. From the night-clubs they were able to find sponsors to make their dreams come true and to go to England, like *Babi Martin*, *Bessi*, *Anji* and *Cicilia James*.

**B:**

Were they not discriminated by the men?

**M:**

No, they were not. It was really a social happening that was free of discrimination. The anti-colonial struggle dampened that. People mixed freely. Until 1960 that was when the whole trend turned around again. It was a big turn around after the 60s. People like myself and others who were playing European ball room and popular music, suddenly became alienated. Nationalism changed the whole trend. Anything without its ethnic roots was termed colonial mentality. Ballroom dancing completely disappeared, people were not dancing Waltz anymore, nobody danced Foxtrott, nobody wanted to dance Swing. National pride overtook everything. People wanted something authentic they could identify with as Efik, Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo. Those of us still playing European music just found ourselves a cultural and social outcast. This resulted in the experimentation that came about from the middle sixties - *Basseya Ita* talked about in his book -, and why Highlife as a title had to die.

**B:**

How long did you work with Zeal?

**M:**

I played with Zeal for one year during which period we travelled back and forwards to Ghana and Nigeria. By this time my records were selling good, I had become very popular in the country. Other vocalists recording at that time were *Godwin Omobuwa*, they call him the *Calypso King* in Nigeria and *Sunday Eze*. The first women solo singers included *Ekua Cathlin Garland*, *Alice Eyo* and *Conny Ajilo*, the sister of *Chris Ajilo*. They recorded with the DECCA studio band. *Ekua*

*Cathleen Garland* recorded a song in English hailing Ghanas independence, the title of that song was *Ring the victory bell aloud*, a Calypso. I think she was backed by *E.C. Arinze* and his Band. This was far back in 1957. Alice Eyo recorded a love story about Calabar in Efik, a Highlife tune. These women later got married and left the business and created a vacuum which was later to be filled by new female artists such as *Joyce Obong*, who sang with *Bobby Benson*, *Marie Afi Esuha*, the *Lijadu Sisters*, *Nelly Uchendu*, *Martha Ulaeto*, *Dr. Joyce Lo-bamijoko*, *Onyeka Onwenu*, *Funmi Adams*, *Christie Essien Igbokwe* and *Evi-Edna Ogholi*. I recorded with my Christian name *John Santos-Martins*. There were DECCA artists posters of me as their artist all over the place, and I had become popular and well known and was making money.

**B:**

Were you paid royalties?

**M:**

I collected a handsome royalty of eighty pounds. With this money I said, "Oh, eighty pounds. Well this is my time to go to England". Finally I could go to England, I had the money now, and I was ready to go. But then what motivated my going was the idea to compete with European drummers. In Nigeria we read about *Gene Krupa*, *Phil Seaman*, *Stu Martins*, *Kenney Graham*. All these British and American drummers were being propagated in West Africa as the world's best. I thought, why should all these people be called the best in the world and none had come to Nigeria to play or compete with anybody in Nigeria, I felt that was a little bit overbearing of them and so I decided I will go to England and play drums and compete with those people there and see where I can get. See, this was what motivated me at that time, so, I decided to apply for passport. The colonial government of the day refused to give me a passport, because the man said, he cannot see how I would maintain myself in England since I was not going as a Student. As a drummer they were not sure I was going to be able to maintain myself. I felt a little disappointed and wondered what to do next. Then one night in my sleep I had this vision and something spoke to me that I should not give up but take the matter to the highest man in the country. And of course in that dream I didn't know immediately who the highest man in the country was as Nigeria was still under the British colonial rule, there was the Governor General, the Colonial Secretary and the Prime Minister, but when I woke up the next morning I meditated again and then it dawned on me, who the highest man in Nigeria was and to whom I could take my problem to. The Prime Minister *Alhaji Tafawa Balewa* should be the one to see. And I said, "Okay, thats it, I have to write a letter to the Prime Minister and complain to him , tell him what had happened". So I did and to my surprise the Prime Minister replied that I should come and see him. I was afraid, said "Wow, oh, now I'm going to see the Prime Minister". I went to see my father and told him what I had done and that the Prime Minister had asked that I should come and see him, and asked my father if he would be kind enough to escort me there. Because I was afraid to go on my own. And he said, yeah, he would do that. The day came and we went and saw the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister said to my father, oh, he is very proud that there are young Nigerians like your son, who want to go to England, and to compete with white men. He said he believes when I come back, I should be able to inspire more Nigerians to do the same. So in the end he asked me to go home and that he would get in touch with the Immigration Department and see that they give me a passport. He dashed my father five pounds and thanked him for coming along with me. And so I went home, in two weeks, the Immigration called me and gave me my passport. And this was how I was able to get my passport, a British-Nigerian passport.

**B:**

What did Zeal Onyia say to your intention to go to England?

**M:**

Oh, he knew I was going to go to England. I talked with him about it and he too wished me to go to England, because we, myself, Zeal Onyia and Baby Face Paul were the youngest at that time, growing up as musicians and we lived together in the band hostel, Bobby had for his musicians rent free. So we had a common ambition in mind. When he knew I could pay my fare he was happy for

me to go to England. Everything set and came the day november 30th 1958, I was ready and eager to commence the long journey to Europe, he white mans land, *Uu Oyinbo*, as we say in Yoruba. From my room at No. 10 Daniel Street, Alakara, Idioro I drove in a taxi to the Marina wharf. Along the way in the taxi I had smoked a little bit of grass. Happy, I exuded inner joy and satisfaction as I bordered the ship that day. Standing on the deck I watched the ship sailing inch by inch into the open sea until Lagos was lost to my sight. For the First time I realized how beautiful Lagos Island looks from the sea.

**I have never forgotten that moment and the experience to this day.**

## Voyage to England

**M:**

The name of the ship is *General Leclerc*. From Lagos the ship stopped in Cotonou, then to Lome. In Lome, a lot of Black African French-speaking students boarded that ship and we started this great journey the next stop being Abidjan and then Sassandra. At Sassandra at that time there was no port with a quay. The Kru people who came on board and passengers were lifted on board in mammy chairs and monkey ladders.

On December 8, 1958 the ship arrived in Conakry. It was shortly after the country's independence. The ship was in port for 10 hours. The *Camara* family were host to my Dahomean friend and I. They took us on a tour drive round the city, we had a good time. In Conakry I saw for the first time an eleven storey (skyscraper) building in West Africa.

Before we got to Dakar I was discussing with some of the African students that were going to France. Some of them had been there before. I was thinking to stay on the ship after Dakar instead of disembarking and just mix with them and go on to Bordeaux. But one of the students, a Dahomean fellow, he was very kind, I cannot remember his name any more, advised me not to do that. "When we get to Dakar", he said "I know somebody there with whom you could stay until you could raise enough money to continue to France." When we got to Dakar, he disembarked with me and we met some of his people who were there to meet him. He introduced me to his people and pleaded with them to put me up for two weeks or so while I raised my fare to proceed to England. After we did that and I had gone back to collect my suitcase from the custom shed I noticed that my suitcase had been opened and for the first time in my life I was robbed. However on getting home with his friend, actually a relation of his, and we started discussing and I mentioned the name *Johnson Aliyu*. "Do you know Johnson?" "Yes, he plays tenor saxophon." I intimated. "I heard he is here in Dakar." "Oh yes, Johnson Aliyu is the most popular musician in Dakar and if you like I would take you this evening to see him." "Yes, why not!" I intoned.

**B:**

How did you know Johnson?

**M:**

We were friends from Lagos at that time he was working with *Willey Shola Payne and his Squadronians Orchestra*. But Willey Payne had to go back to London after a while to continue his acting career in British theatre. He is one of the influential Black African actors in England today. So that evening I was taken to meet Johnson in the club where he played.

**B:**

Do you remember the name of the club?

**M:**

No, I don't remember the name of that club. But as I recall, it was the the best clubs in Dakar at that time.

**B:**

Do you remember the name of the band?

**M:**

*Johnson Aliyu and his Orchestra Africaine* or something like that it was called. "Oh, Martins, you are here, I am happy to see you!" He said. "Yes Im here " I said "But I don't want to stay in Dakar, my plan is to go to England " I told him. "I am here and would like to raise some money to continue my journey to London." "Don't worry, now that I have seen you I will take care of your feeding and lodging until you are ready", Johnson assured me. The next day he took me to play with his band at the *University of Dakar* and introduced me as coming from Nigeria and one of the best drummers in that country. Later that evening I wrote to my brother in London explaining my situation and where I was. Within two weeks my brother sent me 20 pounds which I had requested for my fare to London. And so after two weeks in Dakar I was able to leave for Europe. This time on board the

ship *General Foch*.

**B:**

Did you play in Dakar regularly?

**M:**

No, I played two gigs as guest artist with his band.

**B:**

On what?

**M:**

I played the drums, the trap-drums.

**B:**

Can you recall your trip from Dakar to Europe?

**M:**

From Dakar the ship stopped in Madeira. On an exploring walk of this Portuguese colonial coastal port I wandered into a brothel. There with a hostess and for the first time I had intimate contact with a European woman. After four hours in that port we left for Lisbon. From Lisbon four days later the voyage terminated in the French port of Bordeaux on December 29, 1958. From Bordeaux I went by train to Paris. From Paris, I journeyed again by train to Calais, from Calais I took the ferry to Dover. From Dover I caught a train to London, it was a crowded train. A lot of Indians and Pakistanis and Jamaicans were on that train. I was wondering how I would find the way to my brother's place. But as I sat in the train contemplating, there was this little Indian girl who was playing and suddenly fell down. I rushed forward and picked her up and started caressing and coaxing her. When the parents of the little girl saw what was happening they came to me thanked me. We talked about London. By now I had two Shillings and sixpence in my pocket. They asked me where I was going. I gave them my brother's address in London. "We too are going to Hackney", they said. We will take you in our taxi to your brother's place." "Really?" I asked. "Yes, I am living in number 63 Sandringham Road and if your brother is in 62 there is no problem." The first thing I saw as we approached Victoria Station was a black man working on the rail tracks. He was sweeping actually, he looked ragged in his blue overall and that didn't make me feel happy at all. I was very disturbed. The whole railtrack and the countryside looked greyish and damp. I didn't like it one bit and that black man.

**B:**

Why didn't you like it?

**M:**

Doing that menial job, I suppose. I don't know, but that was my immediate reaction. And then the track was somehow dusty and it was December, a dry winter morning. There had been snow the previous evening, I guess. What also disappointed me was because I had this idea in my head that somehow the streets of London were paved with gold coins and that money grows on the trees. However the train pulled up the Indian family made sure I stayed by them, as we alighted in Victoria. They collected my things, and we got into a taxi and drove to Sandringham Road. As the taxi drove along I started seeing beautiful things, big houses such that I had never seen before. This quickly changed my perception. I thought: "Oh, this is really something different."

Eventually we got to Sandringham Road and we got off the taxi. The guy took me by the hand and we went across to number 62 and rang the door bell. Luckily my brother was in, he opened the door and when he saw me, he exclaimed: "Ah, Bayo, you are here!" I said, "yes, I have arrived." He said: "Good. Today is New Year's eve. I'm just dressing to go out. And if you clean up, we can go out together." That first night, the very night I arrived in London, he took me out first to a club in Archer Street, called *Rehearsal Club*.

When we got there there was this tenor Saxophone player called *Lucky Thompson* playing in the club. My brother, *Adeniyi Santos-Martins*, as a professional boxer, he was very popular in London and he knew most of the musicians around. "You play drums", he said to me. "Yes", I replied. He

says "Good, would you like to play in this club tonight with this people?" I said "Yeah, that's why I'm in England, to compete with them." He said, "O.k., I will talk to Lucky Thompson and see if he would call you to have a jam-session with them." I gave him the o.k. So he spoke to Lucky Thompson and then I was called to the band stand, I played a Jazz number with the band. After that we went to *Hammersmith Palace* were I jammed again with the *Tommy Dorsey Orchestra*. I got applause and ovations from the audience in both clubs. It was a moving experience for me, something I had never expected to happen on my first night in London.

**B:**

Why is the first club called *Rehearsal Club*?

**M:**

That I don't know. It was however called *Rehearsal Club* and was situated on Archer street. Archer Street to musicians in London was like a labour exchange. Musicians looking for gigs or wanting to know something about fellow musicians, who is in town and appearing where, went there for information. I stayed with my brother for a few days and his wife started nagging, alleging that she is not getting my brothers attention since I came to the house. That was a cultural shock for me, because in Nigeria at that time no wife would say such or try to come between two brothers like that. However, my brother decided to look for a room for me to rent, so I could move to a place of my own.

**B:**

Is he your real brother?

**M:**

Yes, my immediate elder brother. He spoke to one *George Davis*, a friend of his who had a room in an apartment in West Kensington that I could have. The rent was two pounds twelve a week. And here I was with two Shillings and six pences in my pocket. So my brother said I should look for a job and if I get a job, two pounds twelve would not be a difficult sum to pay weekly. He paid the first rent for me to move to West Kensington, 42 Perham Rd. The next day I started looking for a job. Two days later I found one with a firm in Angels. The name of the firm is called *Harris Tweed*, makers of fur coats and tweed jackets. I was engaged as a packer. I had never done anything of that kind before in my life other than playing drums. So anyway, I took on that job, they promised me nine pounds a week, I think. I worked for two weeks after which I was sacked for being "too slow", he said. The method of working was totally new to me and I worked the way I knew how. But Mr. Harris thought differently and said that they could not retain me on the job. So I left. When I got home later that evening I told George Davis what had happened. He said not to worry that he knew some place else I could work and I might get a job if I go there. The next day I went to *Walls Ice-Cream* and talked with them. They said: "Yes, sure we could give you a job". I got a job there, now for nine pounds to eleven pounds a week, if I worked overtime. Sometimes I could earn up to eighteen pounds a week. So I stayed with Walls for nine months. At Walls I met many Nigerians, many of whom were students and working to pay their way through. Amongst this were *Alex Duduyemi*, *Yinka Rhodes*, *Fred Egbe* - they are all big time lawyers now and *Femi Jaiyeola*.

**B:**

What did you do there?

**M:**

I was a *sixer*, what they call a sixer. When the ice-cream comes out of the wrapping-machine wrapped I took them off in sixes into the packing machine, you know. That is how this job derived its name. During this time I was able to save enough money to buy my drums and to pay the fare for my wife to join me in London. After nine months I left that job. *Babyface Paul* arrived a few weeks before from Lagos. We decided to form my band which I called *Bayo Martins Band Africana* and so it was that the first African *Highlife* band was started in London. A week later, *Fela Kuti* came up with his *Koola Obitos*.

**B:**

Who were the other members of the band?

**M:**

The *Band Africana*? I had now professor *Adams Fiberisima* on piano, a Jamaican fellow called *Baby Coleman* was on guitar. A Ghanaian called *George Hammond* on bass, *Beckett*, a Jamaican, played trumpet. *Tunde James* as the manager. Later *Sol Amafi* of the *Osibisa* fame came in as conga drummer.

**B:**

What was Babyface Paul playing?

**M:**

He played tenor-sax.

**B:**

How did you get them all together?

**M:**

I talked to them through the phone.

**B:**

Were they already playing with other bands?

**M:**

Yes, they were playing with other bands before. But *Adams Fibensima* was there two years before me. He had been in England since 1956 as a full-time music-student.

**B:**

What brand of music?

**M:**

He was doing Classical Music at the *London Royal Academy*. For him it was a welcome opportunity to get involved with us and play. Finally we found a Jamaican agent who was able to get us gigs.

**B:**

Where did you play?

**M:**

We played at Nigerian students dances in *St. Pancras Townhall*, *Slington Townhall*, *Kings Cross Townhall*, Fulham, Paddington. Stoke Newington, Watford, all in London.

**B:**

How did you get the gigs?

**M:**

Our agent *Eric Conor* took care of that.

**B:**

What about he fees, how did you disburse them?

**M:**

Oh, we shared, it was not on a salary basis, we shared the money as we worked, you know. So after each engagement whatever fee was payed, we shared it amongst ourselves. And as the leader I got time and a half the union rate. So like if they all get two, three pounds, I get four pounds ten. So we did it for that first year and by 1960 I had become pretty well established with the Nigerian people and other African organisations that came to the Nigerian dances and seeing what we were doing they too started their own activities and engaged us to play at their functions.

**B:**

What type of music did you play?

**M:**

We played Highlife. Highlife was the main thing at that time. We played Merengue, one or two western tunes, but we were strictly playing Highlife.

**B:**

How did you get the compositions together?

**M:**

We remembered the things we played back home and played them. But sometimes on the stage Adams might start something on the piano and Paul and the rest will pick them up and I put the rhythm and we played. So we did our thing. Fela was also coming up very strongly with his *Koola Obitos*.

You know Fela was also studying music full-time. He was versatile and a trained musician. We were doing very well and getting on when Paul (Baby Face) Isamade died suddenly on September 5th, 1960. This was a big blow and a set back.

**B:**

How did Babyface Paul die?

**M:**

He died in a car accident. He was travelling to Grantham, that's in Yorkshire. He collided with a lorry and was killed on the spot. But no sooner Paul died, *Peter King* arrived in London and took his place on the tenor-saxophone. Then a few month later *Bob Edwards* came, he played the clarinett. By this time I got a contract to play in a night-club.

**B:**

What night-club?

**M:**

... that night-club was called *Amazo-Club*. It was owned by a Nigerian called *Jack Amazizi*.

**B:**

What does *Amazo* mean?

**M:**

*Amazo*? I don't know what it meant. But I think *Amazo* was something from his name he had put together. The club was situated on Holloway Road, Islington, in London.

**B:**

At the bottom or at the...?

**M:**

At the bottom, yeah. So we were in that club and from there I got to meet many people and became to know London, the yazz-scene, musicians union and all that. Now I was earning regular money and could go to music school to learn the theory and rudiment of music. I went to this school which was called *Central School of Dance Music* on Shaftesbury Avenue and was owned by *Ivo Mirand*, the founder of that school. Ivo Mirand was a one time great Jazz guitarist or pianist in London, I was going to that school in the day and at night we played in *Amazo Club*, 1960-61. There I met this Liberian gentleman. In 1961 the Oueen was about to visit Liberia and he contracted my band to play at the *Savoy Hotel* in Strand for her Majesty's impending visit to Liberia. The *Anglo-Liberian Society of Great Britain* organized that show and it was very big. I got payed 500 pounds. That was a big money at that time. After the gig I decided to return to Nigeria. On that gig *Art Alade* played the piano. Adams had gone back to Nigeria so Art Alade was on piano, *Kin Ella*, who is late now, danced and Peter King on tenor-sax. Willy a guy from Barbados, played the alto-saxophone and *Harold Beckett* on trumpet. So at that gig I met also the first editor of *West Africa* *David Williams*. We got into a conversation during which he suggested that I go to Nigeria and that he would arrange for the *Day Times* in Lagos to do a feature article on me to show what I had been able to accomplish in London.

**B:**

Doing so well in London, why did you want to return to Nigeria?

**M:**

Nigeria had become independent in 1960 and I wanted to be home. I played with my *Band Africana* at the Independence Gala in the *Royal Festival Hall* in London and was fascinated with all the glittering and splendour of freedom.

**B:**

The *West African Rhythm Brothers*, *Ade Bashorun* and *Ambrose Campbell*, what were they doing at the time?

**M:**

*Ambrose Campbell* was an established institution. He had a band and a permanent gig at a place called *Club Afric* on Wardour Street. The club was owned by a Nigerian, Mr. Ola Dosumu, an Ijebu man. The *West African Rhythm Brothers* could not leave the club. *Club Afric* was by that time the in-thing for black Africans visiting Britain and whites wishing to assimilate Black music and dances.

**B:**

Was the club there before you got to London in 1958?

**M:**

When I arrived in London of course I did work in it. I did a stint for them for about two weeks. And they cheated me, they payed me three pounds a week, you know to work for them. This was another exploitation of Nigerians by Nigerians. Of course at that time I didn't know. But as I got to know the country and know what musicians earned I saw it for what it was.

**B:**

Did you see them immediately after your arrival in London?

**M:**

No, I didn't see them right away. I think I was one month old or so in London when I knew of their whereabouts and dropped in on them. They were a permanent resident band and all the sophisticated people or afrophils all knew that *Club Afric* was there for them it ran from midnight to dawn. It was always a packed house. And nobody could pay them to leave the club because of their tight contract with the proprietor.

**B:**

Do you know how long this place went on for?

**M:**

*Club Afric*? *Club Afric*, when I left England in 1962, it was still running so I guess it must have ran until about 1970. So with the *Savoy* gig I ended my stay in England and returned to Nigeria in January 1962. Now I had my drums which I never had before I left Nigeria.

## Back in Nigeria: Afro-Jazz



*Afro Jazz Group*: drums: Bayo Martins, bass: Candido Ajayi, sitting behind Bayo Martins: Agbada Sola Lala, standing on the right is Kunle Maja. At Wole Bucknor's mother's house, Ikoyi, Lagos, 1962.

The fact that I now owned my own drums and I had been to England just automatically put me in a new frame. I was looked upon differently and no longer as a side man. Nobody offered me a job. Tacitly I was expected to form my own band. My intention was not to form a band. I was willing to work for anyone who offered me a job. I was embarrassed and the whole thing didn't make sense to me.

**B:**

You probably did not fit in that system anymore?

**M:**

Yeah, they thought so but I saw myself as the drummer I was. But they kept telling me: "No, you have been to England and back so you should form your own band and let's see what you have brought back from England." So this was how I came about forming the *Afro Jazz Group* with Zeal Onyia, trumpet, Wole Bucknor, piano, now retired navy commodore, Ayo Vaughan on bass and myself on drums. Apollo Aramide, talking drums and bata. The five of us started the *Afro Jazz Group*. My contribution to the Nigerian music scene was bringing the drums to the forefront until then they had relegated the drum to the background. That was something inherited from the colonial hostility to drumming I suppose. If you remember there were several attempts to stop drumming in West Africa completely during the colonial times. The British were so afraid and frightened of the drums. Why I do not know. So many Nigerians today have a nonchalant attitude towards drumming. They too, like the colonial overlords before them, look at it as something evil and negative. But I sat in front with my drums in that formation. The other instrumentalists stood behind the drums. So in that manner I brought the drums to the fore and since then the drummers that are coming on today have picked that up, they no longer are put behind.

**B:**

You didn't mention *Highlife* in the connection with the *Afro-Jazz Group*. Didn't you play that music?

**M:**

The *Afro-Jazz Group* as I said earlier was started in 1962. Already we were in the transitional period in the Nigerian music at that time and many of us like me have started rejecting the term Highlife. We played a music that was similar to that rhythm wise, which we didn't call Highlife. *Afro-fazz*

music as we defined it is a mixture of traditional African rhythms and American Jazz phraseology.

**B:**

What about the Latin element?

**M:**

The Latin element has always been there and it is still there.

**B:**

How long did that formation last for?

**M:**

As a group of that first five founding members, we stayed together from 1962 to 1963, then Wole got this offer to start a band for the Nigerian *Navy*. When he got his commission and invited me I went along with him. He said there was a future in the *Navy*. Twelve of us started the *Nigerian Navy Band*. Today that band has several divisions with more than a thousand personell and a school of music in Apapa base.

**B:**

Did the band grow already during your time?

**M:**

Yes, when I left in 1965 the band had just grown to 30 men strong.

**B:**

What kind of music were you playing?

**M:**

We played military music in the British tradition and Ball-Room Music as well as Highlife for the officers at the officers mess on the *HMS Becroft*, the name of the base at the time. I played the drums when we had a dance performance and during parade I conducted and led the band as the assistant director.

**B:**

Speaking with you I could not fancy you in the *Navy*? What was the idea behind?

**M:**

Well, it will be untrue if I were to claim that I had no knowledge that the Nigerian military might involve itself in the political process of the nation. The indication that this was imminent was all over the place when I signed up for the *Navy* in 1963. I wanted to be there when that happened. It might surprise you to know that many Nigerians themselves tacitly wished for such an intervention believing that the military was the solution to the very serious and complex problems bedeviling the nation and the ineptitudeness of the politicians. But ironically when the *Army* eventually came in and the subsequent civil war I was out of the *Navy*

.

**B:**

You mean the Biafran war?

**M:**

Yes!

**B:**

What were your feelings and reactions to that war?

**M:**

Oh sure, I had a feeling alright. I was Pro-Biafran at the onset of the trouble because I understood what the fighting was all about and the principles for which the fighting was fought.

**B:**

What according to your opinion was the fighting all about and what were the principles?

**M:**

The fighting was to prevent the domination of one section of the nation by another. And the way the *Army* hierarchy was abused and usurped by the *Gowon clique* was not correct. *Ojukwu* stood on that principle which many Nigerians supported including myself, but secession was never the solution.

**B:**

After you had left the *Navy*, did you play with another band?

**M:**

Yes, I played for a while with the *Art Alades Jazz Preachers* and then started writing for the newspapers on music. I was freelancing for the *Nigerian Morning Post*. Occasionally I had opportunity to play on TV.

**B:**

Your journalism, was it general journalism?

**M:**

No, I was reporting on the music scene for the *Morning Post*. I wrote on the activities of the musicians and what they did. This was a period of adversity for me. Victimized and cheated to leave the *Nigerian Navy*, also my deep regret that I could not participate in the war either way, disappointed me greatly and was a setback in my life. For a while I was jobless and down. So I began to contemplate on what next to do to reshape and bring order into my life. From experience and studies I learnt one should not to give up in times of despair, what one desires and aspires intensely to accomplish. Steadfastness, consistency and self-confidence are the stuffs from which success is made. I was in this frame of perception when I unexpectedly met *Agu Norris*, a trumpet player, Highlife musician and band leader. There was the *Youth Solidarity Festival* in Sofia 1968 to which he invited me. I went along on that trip with him to represent Nigeria in Sofia, Bulgaria. On that trip was *Mona Finni*, a singer and *Sonny Okogu*, a vocalist too, now a multi-millionaire among others. At the end of the trip *Easy Kabaka Brown*, guitar, *Olu Igemona*, tenor-saxophone, *Don Amechi*, bass, and myself decided to stay behind and not return to Nigeria because of the war. The popular music scene having been thrown into disarray and dysfunction. The military was recruiting popular musicians to form *Army Bands* for the new divisions that were being created to meet the war's demands. There were hardly any good gigs around as most of the leading bands enlisted into the *Federal Army*. We got the blessing of *Agu Norris*, the leader who himself was in support of our decision. Besides that I wanted to experience continental Europe and get away from that British thing. So the four of us travelled to Hamburg by way of Yugoslavia.

**B:**

What about the musicians from the East who worked in Lagos, what happened to them?

**M:**

A few stayed back at a great risk of their life and many went back. Some joined the *Biafran Army Band*, like *Rex Jim Lawson*, *Ingo Chico* (who later played with the *Africa 70 's*, a great saxophonist who died in 1978) and others fled for dear life. The night life was paralysed because there were frequent blackouts and people were afraid to go out.

## In Germany

**B:**

What happened to you in Hamburg?

**M:**

Well, it was not easy at first. We had to go through the problems of accommodation and finding jobs. Some of us got help from the *Biafran Committee* (a German support organisation) and eventually we got settled in. The four of us began to think of what to do next regarding our profession. In the end we decided to set up a Nigerian band.

We started allright through the initiative of the *Biafran Committee* activities where we played on their social rallies. We could have really made it and become a successful outfit, had we concentrated on playing African *Highlife* music, because at that time in 1968 the African music was just beginning to catch on in Germany. But *Easy Brown* and the rest of the guys wanted to play *James Brown*, *I feel alright* and all those stuffs. And of course we didn't make it. Because there were white groups playing that and were more accepted than us. So I decided to leave the group and opted to do a diploma in journalism. I applied to the *Firilsham School of Journalism, Radio and Television* in Berkshire in England, I got admission and was there for nine months, got my diploma and came back to Germany where I met my second wife *Gerwine*, and we got married in 1968 having been divorced from my former spouse.

The war in Nigeria dragged on until 1970. One Sunday afternoon that same year my wife and I heard on the BBC broadcast that the Biafran war was over. I promptly decided to go back home and to help in the rehabilitation and reconstruction program that *General Gowon* had promised. So by May 1970 I was back in Nigeria. Now back in Nigeria I was equipped as a drummer journalist. I got a job with the *Daily Express* as supplement editor. Because of my journalistic training and the new horizon that was open to me I felt I could do something for the musicians. So after a few months with the *Daily Express* I left and founded the *Musician Foundation*.

## The Musician Foundation

**B:**

Founding a foundation is not easy. How did you manage to survive with the *Foundation* and the funding?

**M:**

Oh, yes, it wasn't easy. I had little money I had saved in Germany with which I started. Later the government gave the *Foundation* a grant of 2000 Naira. With that money I set up the centre, lobbied *Bobby Benson*, finally after one year, he eventually decided to be part of the *Foundation*. The *FESTAC* was approaching at the time. In retrospect I could see now that that was probably his motive for accepting my offer. The *Foundation* was started in 1971, by 1974 it had gained some grounds in Nigeria, we were the talk of the town and all that. Therefore I decided to go abroad to solicit for aids and musical instruments we could use to set up an academy for musicians, and also an instruments rental. In short to set up a system whereby musicians in Nigeria could procure instruments on hire purchase or even rent them. Until now no such facilities exist. *Bobby Benson* and *Victor Olayia* were the only 2 famous instrument dealers. But the cost of an instrument is so exorbitant that the musicians could not afford to buy instruments and pay cash because of the menial wages they earn.

**B:**

What do you think. Why musical instruments were hard to get in the country?

**M:**

At that time it was not hard to get musical instruments into the country, they were there, but the prices were too high and musicians were not earning so much. E.g. a saxophonist could not afford

to go to a shop and pay 800 Naira or more cash down to buy an instrument. They were not offering credit or hire purchase facilities to musicians. I felt that the *Foundation* could provide these services so that musicians could get instruments on hire purchase or could hire instruments to do what they wanted to do. So I travelled to England and America. In England, a British company by the name of *Rose Morris* finally decided to provide some instruments to the *Foundation*. Then I went to America. There I was not so successful as in England. But then I was invited by the *Voice of America* to do a program where I talked about the aims of the *Foundation*. *Lori Ross* had interviewed me on that program which turned out to be a bad omen. Because people like Bobby Benson heard what I said on the VOA they became jealous that I got such exposure. And before I got back from America they had started plotting to overthrow me as the founder and secretary general of the *Foundation*. In fact the *Foundation* centre was in an apartment block situated at No. 53, Oladipo Labinjo Street along the Ikorodu Road owned by *Bobby Benson* which allowed him the upper hand to treat the *Foundation* as his private property and because I made him the grand patron and chairman of the *Foundation*, out of respect for his role in spearheading the popular music profession in Nigeria, my opponents and many of the uninformed critics believed him to be the brain behind the *Foundation*. That was the beginning of my trouble. As I look back today. Had they only known the truth. Bobby had called a press conference denouncing my mission and saying that nobody sent me to go to Europe and America to solicit aids for Nigerians musicians. I was accused of using the *Foundation* to advance my ego without anyone bothering to look at the results. They said I was disgracing the nation, that I was making Nigeria look like a beggar country. That caused such a big scandal in the papers and the instruments *Rose Morris* sent, *Bobby Benson* confiscated them, and said he sent them back to the man in London. When I got back however, the *Foundation* centre was sealed up; and *Bobby Benson* had packed up all the equipments, the furniture, everything and said to me he had given them back to the government, because the government had given the loan to purchase those things. From then on the *Foundation* floundered and I had to start running around to look for new premises and fund. In the end I got fed up and decided to leave the nation for a while after running the *Foundation* from 1971, I have since been engaged in part running around to secure funds for the *Foundation* and part journalism and part drumming.

**B:**

What newspapers were you writing for?

**M:**

Yeh, I said I was writing for the *Evening Times*, I had a column, you know, *The Big Beat*. For the *Saturday Punch* my weekly column was called *Music World*. I worked as, what do you call it, a stringer, you know, writing part time, not being employed permanently with the press. The fees they payed could not keep me, my wife and my children, *Adesanya* (\*1965), *Modupe* (\*1966), *Adebukola* (\*1969) and *Maya-daMaris* (\*1979). We left in 1980 and came back to Germany.



*Bayo Martins and B.B. King, Press Centre, Ikeja Airport, Lagos, Nigeria, 1974.*

**B:**

Could you not have secured assistance from other sources in Nigeria besides Bobby Benson, friends of yours and others in favour of your mission?

**M:**

Yes, there were such people but they will not part with their money and also that Bobby Benson at press conference seemed to have biased a lot of them to the point that they could not understand and to make the distinction between *Foundation* and the *Musicians Union*. There was also this conflict and rivalry between the *Union* and the *Foundation*. They thought the *Foundation* was out to rival it. So I was always having trouble with them, accusing me of one thing or the other and that made it impossible for me to raise adequate funds in Nigeria. However I could not believe in my mind that that was the end of my effort. *Music Foundation* is a must if we have to have an institution to promote music as an established faculty in Nigeria, I'm still working at it and then planning to go back home and set it up again. I am still trying to foster this awareness and consciousness for the institution. Because it is not enough to have a professional body, without having the institutional side to aid and formulate policies and guidelines to how the professions should be practised. There ought to be something really to give musicianship an institutional orientation and a lobby power such as can advocate legislative motions in the governmental set up. I feel there is still a possibility for me to carry on with the work at the *Foundation* whenever I get back to the country.

**B:**

Is the situation different now? With all the very rich musicians around?

**M:**

Yes, now there are a number of very rich musicians.

**B:**

Don't they care about the fate of the poorer ones?

**M:**

They do because of what the *Foundation* did. Many of them saw it after I left. Some musicians like *Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Sonny Okosun* were able to rally themselves together and set up *PMEAN - Performing Musicians Employers Association of Nigeria*. They were luckier they had from the President *Alhaji Shehu Shagari* a ten-thousand Naira donation from which *PMEAN* started. And *Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey* also put their money into it, as well as the philanthropist the *Are M.K.O. Abiola*. So they were able to have a grander set up than the *Foundation* in terms of money and material. However the *PMEAN* is not to be confused with a musicians union as it seems to be doing at the present. In my view there is still the need to have a *Music Council* in Nigeria working side by side with both the *Union* the *Foundation* and *PMEAN*. There is room for all the four bodies.

**B:**

Did You never try to approach any of these rich musicians?

**M:**

Yes, I did approach them, but they were reluctant to help because they had it in their head that the *Foundation* was a rival organisation. They couldn't see it otherwise.

**B:**

Can you repeat the aims of the *Foundation*. You gave us some examples of what the aims of the *Foundation* are, but may be that is not all. (see: *Musician Foundation Memorandum - Aims and objectives, Lagos 1971, typescript prepared by the Foundation*).

**M:**

Right, to set up an academy for music, that musicians will have musical training, organize workshops and seminars on the music profession, ethics, bandleader/musician relationship and the role of the *Union* and the musician. Publish educational material and music. Publishing is another area the *Foundation* intends to exercise.

**B:**

Are there not such things yet?

**M:**

No, there are no such things in the country as up to this very moment. There is no legislation that recognises music as a capital intensive profession. Also there is the issue of civic rights of the musicians which is something the *Union* cannot do, because the *Union* is to deal with the collective labour bargaining for musicians, regulate their wages, take care of the contracts with employers of musicians. On the other hand the *Foundation* goes deeper than that, it can give scholarships to musicians to study, arrange promotion-management, agency and several other things like the writing of music, tutorial books, all which are outside of the scope of the *Union* or an employers association. These are the areas in which I feel the *Foundation* comes in handy serving music and musicianship, otherwise the whole set up will become like a house without a foundation.

**B:**

How were you able to perform during all those years being engaged with building the *Foundation*?

**M:**

When I founded the *Foundation* in 1971 I had to pack up drumming because I could not function as a secretary general of the *Musicians Foundation* and be drumming at the same time. It would have been too much a task for me to run the secretariat and still do practise. So I packed up drumming, again to my detriment, because the musicians were practising and making money while I was serving them and I could not practise because I did not drum for six years during the time the *Foundation* was running full-time. So it was after the centre was closed and the equipments taken back to the government as Bobby Benson claimed. For years there was litigation and police

intervention. I wrote to the government, protesting and talking. Nobody minded me because Bobby was there, a big shot that the government recognised, what he said was right and carried more weight than what I said and what was necessary to be done.

**B:**

When did you start to drum again?

**M:**

After the impasse, and the closure of the centre. At this time now I'm drumming solo, I never founded any new band, I occasionally have contracts to do television programs. On such occasions I arrange musicians together to do the programs.

**B:**

Was this a regular television program?

**M:**

At the time from 1975 to the year I left, 1980, yes, in Ibadan, Lagos, Enugu.e.g. *Artists Showcase*. *Music Makers* and *Band Stand*.

**B:**

What did you play then, when you got together musicians to play what?

**M:**

I got together musicians to play my songs which I call *Afro-Jazz*. The instrumental accompaniment besides my Jazz drums were usually congas, bongos, electric guitar, bass, sax and trumpet. Occasionally *Sharp Michae* - normally a trumpet player - will come in with his wooden *Dagomba* Xylophone. In 1978 I got employed at the *University of Lagos, Centre for Cultural Studies*. I was there as an assistant cultural officer till 1980.

**B:**

What was your job there?

**M:**

My job as a cultural officer was to help in guiding young students who wanted to become drummers and teach them how to drum and instill professionalism into them. And Professor *Akin Euba* was then the director of the centre, but after a while I found out all there was, was nothing really for me to do than to play with the *Centres orchestra* and act with the performing group. And that didn't please me because my idea of a *Centre for Cultural Studies* was quite a different thing from the actual practice of the institution, I thought as a Centre for Cultural Studies we were going to educate the people culturally and people could seat examens and have papers and the students could sit for examens and write papers on drumming or whatever aspect of the art they wanted to pursue. But this was not so, we were mainly been used as performers for the university, when people like *Bode Osonyin* and other playwrights at the university needed casts to perform their works. I was getting my monthly salary without really doing a job commensurating the title assistant cultural officer. I was not happy with that and so I left and returned to Germany.

## **Back in Germany**

**B:**

Then in 1979 I heard you, saw you playing in Berlin.

**M:**

Yes, exactly I had come from Lagos to do that engagement in the *First Festival of World Culture* with emphasis on Africa called *Berlin Horizonte '79* together with *Sylvie Kuma* from Ghana titled *citalin* which I accompanied Sylvie reading her poetry to my trap-drums.

**B:**

Did you do several of these type of poetry recitations?

**M:**

Yes, after the *Horizonte Festival* I was back again to take part in the *Berlin Colloquium*, the following year. So it was the culmination of these trips to Berlin that again got me interested in returning to Germany.

**B:**

How did *FESTAC* (Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture in Lagos 1977) affect you?

**M:**

*FESTAC* was a beautiful idea which lost its focus in useless bureaucracy. The organization and participation of popular music and musicians from Nigeria was hopeless and without foresight. Musicians squabbles and their lack of collective objectivity lent weight to the ineptitude and shoddiness to which they were treated. Consequently the hopes we had for *FESTAC* and what everyone expected would be the aftermath of *FESTAC* did never materialize for the Nigerians. *FESTAC* came and went. During *FESTAC* I worked not as an artist, I was the publicity liaison officer.

**B:**

*FESTAC* could have been a good opportunity for the *Foundation*?

**M:**

Yes, it could have been the greatest opportunity ever but backwards as the country is in terms of cultural matters, the opportunities slipped by and never turned out to be anything beneficiary to the artists. And of course as you could see *FESTAC* was to have been a recurrent thing that should have been happening every four years. Since 1977 there has not been another *FESTAC*. The whole idea seems to have gone to sleep.

**B:**

When you came back to Germany in 1980, in what area did you try to work?

**M:**

Oh, I wanted to go on playing my drums with established bands in Germany and eventually to teach. Unfortunately that did not happen. After working one year with the *Mombasa*, an *Afro-Jazz* group led by *Lou Blackburn*, an Afro-American I ended up doing workshop and lectures.

**B:**

Where and what did you do in the workshops?

**M:**

I play drums and teach ritualistic drumming and social drumming with emphasis on the Yoruba tradition. A lot of Germans want to play African drums. Frequently we have these organized workshops in the *Jugendherbergswerk* in *Rüsselsheim* and the *Breuberg Castle* and ballet dance Studios, *Volkshochschulen* (adult education classes), museums and universities.

**B:**

Why did you not teach trap drums?

**M:**

Because the Germans wanted bongos and congas. They never believed Africans play trap drums.

**B:**

How did you learn to play bongos and congas?

**M:**

I learned by listening and watching the drummers around me as I was growing up in Calabar and by imitating what I saw them do. I did not go through the traditional training because I am not from a family of drummers. So as I say at other times when people asked me this question my drumming represents the modern African experience.

**B:**

You wrote a play once, were you able to have it performed?

**M:**

Yes, that was the most beautiful time I had here in Germany interacting with the German youths during the performance of that play titled *Iroroloyin*. I wrote it in 1964 for *Ruth Lenz* whose *Comedia Theatre* performed it. It was a story based on the life of a Yoruba girl who disobeyed her parents foreboding of her choice of husband. It was great fun watching young Germans trying to play the Yoruba parts which included drumming, dancing and verbalization in Yoruba.

**B:**

You wrote a book on drumming? When did you write it?

**M:**

Yes, when I came to Germany, I wrote *The Message of African Drumming*, this was in 1982, I wrote the book.



Foto cover of the book *The Message Of African Drumming* by Bayo Martins: *Wole Soyinka* and *Bayo Martins* at *Horizonte Festival der Weltkulturen*.

**B:**

So you used that time in Germany for that purpose?

**M:**

Yes exactly for that purpose.

**B:**

Did you lecture and perform outside Germany?

**M:**

Correct. In 1983 I took part at The *World Music Village* in *Holland Park* and the *Commonwealth Institute* in London, where I lectured and performed in a workshop. 1984-85 I did more than a hundred performances at school assemblies in Los Angeles, I was invited for these performances under the auspices of the *Music Center*, *ICAP* and the *Performing Tree*. This was an edu-tainment cultural programme designed to introduce the cultures of other peoples to American school children. That same year I also performed at the *Hollywood Bowl* arena. Towards the end I took part in the film *Colour Purple* which was filmed in a location in Valencia, Los Angeles. Lecture at the *Afro-American Center*, Los Angeles.



*Reuter Haus* (Literarisches Colloquim, Berlin), right Prof. H'llerer (Germany), middle Sylvie Kumah (Ghana), left Bayo Martins, Nigeria, 1982.

**B:**

And your second publication was a result of those practical workshops?

**M:**

Yes, exactly, right: *The Manual for African Drumming. Bongos and Congas*.

**B:**

Did you find there was a need for this?

**M:**

Yes, a lot of people wanted something they could use as a reference and guide to their drumming, and the cultural background and the philosophy behind drumming in Black Africa.

**B:**

I attended once one of your lectures at *Frankfurt University*?

**M:**

Yes, in 1981 that was when we were newly here and in fact my first appearance in Frankfurt. Thanks to Prof. Haberland.

**B:**

And I see, you are still going forward and backwards to Nigeria and the *Musician Foundation* is it still functioning? What musicians or wich sector of the musicians are you still in touch with?

**M:**

The *Foundation* is still existing though without permanent premises at the moment, but eventually I will have a place soon that will be open to the public. It does organize conventions of drummers and I write in the papers articulating its concept. (see: the following excerpts of writings of the

*Foundation*). The *Foundation* does not have musician membership. It services demands from musician clients who want certain specialised functions done for them. If a musician wants to do a biography or resume or having problems in interpreting contracts, such specialized things the *Foundation* does and charge fees. I am in touch with all sectors of musicianship in Nigeria.



Bayo Martins handing over a cash award for the *Pacelli School Fund* to Headmistress Sister Carmel of the *Pacelli School for the Blind*, Lagos, Nigeria, *1st Drum Convention*, 1979. Standing to Bayo's right is Peter Abilogun of the *National Theatre* and in the middle Ghanaba, Guy Warren of the *Ghana Hausa Cap*.

**B:**

How often do these *Drum Conventions* happen?

**M:**

It is in theory to be an annual event. But so far we have had only three *Conventions* in Nigeria and one in Ghana at the *Dubois Centre*. So now we use the drumming platform for academic and intellectual discussions rather than just drumming for purely entertainment and recreational purposes.



Comradery Bayo Martins and *Remi Kabaka* at the *Second Drum Convention*, Lagos, Nigeria, 1983.

**B:**

What are you up to now?

**M:**

I'm working as solo drummer, and what I see as my mission is really to bring back drumming alive in the society because to show them that drumming has a place, there is a sociological aspect of drumming, which is an institutionalised art form in Africa. But in the modern society they tend to have renegaded the importance of drumming. And what I see as my crusade today is to refocus the importance of drumming in society. So each time I go, I do a *Drum Convention* I get drummers of all persuasion together to perform and talk about the sociological aspect of drumming in society, what the drummers mean to society and what use society makes of drum. This is what I'm working at with the hope to reintegrate drumming in modern society, its schools and educational system.



Bayo Martins at the *African Night Pageant* in Offenbach, Germany, 2002.

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