

Ultimate Maestro - Victor Uwaifo (1941-2021)

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Siwo siwo siwo
Siwooooooooooooooooooooo

He was Nigeria's closest instance of the Renaissance Man: musician, sculptor, inventor, sportsman, architect, scholar, mythmaker, lay philosopher, folklorist, and culture ambassador/impresario. A true Jack of many trades who strove so hard to be master of all, he was a man of many capabilities, with a voice that was admirably polyphonic. His impulse was both idealistic and relentlessly pragmatic.

Endowed with a vision that was acutely focused and seamlessly eclectic, he developed a practice that was proudly traditional and transgressively modern. This plural propensity, this borderless inter-connectedness are the defining characteristics of his vast artistic empire; for the rhyme and reason which power his music are but close cousins of the ones that energize his numerous undertakings, and the tempo of his countless dreams.

Victor Efosa Uwaifo was a doughty dreamer and daring doer whose operational philosophy was: *do it different, do it new, do it well....* An artist of boundless curiosity and enormous energy, Uwaifo has blessed our world with works which ply the delicate interface between surrealism and realism, the *doable* and the *done*. How can one ever forget that sitting-room in his capacious Benin estate, shaped like a 'sculpted' airplane with its small oval windows and imaginary cockpit; or that salon car in his driveway fitted with a plane engine's rotor blades instead of the usual automobile radiator fan - a feat which evokes telling intimations of the engineering experimentations of Professor Ayodele Awojobi, another Nigerian dreamer and doer?

From music to sculpture to engineering, and back to music again, and then you ask: where does Victor Uwaifo get his magic from? Just what is the secret behind his high-minded aspirations and

multifarious achievements? Whence comes his pluck, then his pride? The answer to these questions is as clear as the Benin sky on a cloudless day: exemplary family pedigree coupled with the enabling influence of Benin culture, without doubt, one of the richest, deepest, and most resilient of its kind in the world. On every Uwaifo sculpture are fingerprints of ancient, unforgettable ancestors. In his very voice are tone-marks, reverberations, and echoes of maestros who sang when time was young and silence was golden. In the very air which sustains his being are the intimations and breaths of forebears who left but never departed. Uwaifo's prodigious creativity had a soil to nurture its roots, a wind to spread its fame, a sky of limitless lore and sympathetic spaces to unfurl its wings. Our maestro never lost sight of his status as a vital link in this long chain of History and Culture, and his role as worthy legatee, inheritor, and propagator.

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Distinctively hearable in virtually every Uwaifo piece, therefore, is the riveting resonance of the Benin Song, its lungful laughter, its sorrowful tonality, its throbbing, threnodic intensity, its mythic memorability, its sombre reflectivity, the overwhelming force of its sonorous musicality that sometimes brings goose pimples to the listener's body and/or tears to their eyes, the call-and-response rubric of the song which turns casual listeners into enthusiastic choral participants. As my father, himself an accomplished drummer and singer, used to say, you do not hear a Benin song with your ears; you hear it in your heart and your stomach, on its way to your mind.

The performative power and affective magic of this music genre took the Nigerian music scene by storm in the 1960's, and many of us who encountered it in our early years have found it difficult to outgrow its stubborn 'addictiveness'. There is just something in the seductive sonority of Uwaifo's voice and riveting twang of his guitar that never leave the ears alone. Personally, a day hardly passes without my humming an Uwaifo tune, especially in the showers, or when I am at a knotty juncture in the creative process.

My first experience of Uwaifo's magic occurred around Christmas in 1965 in that most famous of all cities, Ikere - Ekiti, at a party hosted by a fellow 'Grammar School' student, who happened to be a lovely princess of the reigning Oba. The party began on a happy, lively note as we teased the air with tunes by the leading highlife kings of the period: Rex Jim Lawson, Roy Chicago, Victor Olaiya, Eddy Okonta, Dele Ojo, I.K. Dairo. But just as our pleasure was heading towards a premature plateau, in came two colleagues who had just returned from Lagos where they had spent the first half of the Christmas holiday. They didn't only come with a 45 RPM vinyl copy of a new Uwaifo record; they also came with a new way of dancing to it. As the stylus touched the glistening grooves, our overworked turntable erupted with *Do Amen Amen Do*. The atmosphere created by the new tune was nothing short of electric. The audience leapt to their feet, and the dance floor was filled to capacity. After three or four encores, the rave shifted to the flip side, and *Eralo Gbengigialo* took possession of the wind, then, the dancers.

The dance style imported from Lagos by my two colleagues was itself imported into Nigeria from Ghana. **Kpanlogo**, as it was called, was a drum-driven, gong-accentuated, rhythm-powered dance style thoroughly physical in its energetic joyousness and harmonious deployment of the entire body. Victor Uwaifo's early music fitted so serendipitously into the kpanlogo dance pattern as if one had been invented for the other. To this day, I have never stopped wondering whether it was Kpanlogo which found Uwaifo, or if it was Uwaifo that went in search of Kpanlogo. But one thing is sure: with its vigorous danceability and rapturous rhythmicity, Uwaifo's music demonstrates two of those characteristics so indigenous to Benin music in its social and spiritual realms. For over 10 years from the mid-sixties, Kpanlogo and Uwaifo's music promoted each other in an interesting instance of

mutual beneficence. Some of my colleagues still remember that bright afternoon in December 1965 when we encountered the Uwaifo magic for the first time, and how we became his lifelong fans and admirers.

Uwaifo's music grew and developed over the years as new numbers dropped from his stable with melodious rapidity: *Siwo Siwo*; *Oliha*, *Ebiss Ebiss*, *Sesese*, *Agege Ogigbo*. The Maestro went from the fast-paced beats of the early days to the genteel, dancehall-like tempo of the likes of *Joromi*, the dramatic, myth-making narrativity of *Guitar Boy*, and the light, many-voiced rally of the Ekassa and Akwete series. The tribe of Uwaifo fans enjoyed an exponential increase. Gold discs (about a dozen of them) poured in as rewards of his genius. The nation welcomed a song type so modern in its traditional virtuosity.

Then, with his music career all set and steady, the man who all along had taught us so much about culture decided to go back to school himself. A fortunate University of Benin threw open its door to the Kingdom's famous son and one of Nigeria's most valued culture ambassadors. Student Uwaifo snapped up the B.A. with a dazzling First Class, followed up with an M.A., and topped it all up with a prestigious Ph.D. Thereafter, the University wasted no time in offering him a place as distinguished academic. Thus the life of Victor Uwaifo was a chronicle of aspirations searching, constantly searching, for fulfillment. Ever before his engagements at the University of Benin, our Melody Maestro was already a university person in sense and spirit; and his university was one with its **universe** securely steady and intact.

I saw Victor Uwaifo many times from a respectful distance, and he and I met only once. That was at the 1994 annual convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) which held at the University of Benin. Facilitated by the scholar-writer Asomwan Adagbonyin, that meeting, short as it was, brought me up close to the wit, charm, and easy manners of Nigeria's Ultimate Maestro. Surprised and flattered by his open declaration before the ANA audience that he was dedicating his performance that night to me, I couldn't help the onrush of powerful memories of that bright afternoon in December 1965 when I encountered his music for the first time. When I told him how much I admired the largeness of his soul and immensity of his gifts, his response came sharp and direct: 'that admiration is mutual'. I was not sure if he ever knew how so deeply touched I was at his generous reply!

Siwo siwo siwo
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His personality was an example, his life story a parable. Here was a man with an unassailable belief that he could be whatever he chose to be. A practicing musician with a doctorate degree in Visual Arts; a practical philosopher who pondered the relationship between sound and light; a sculptor who conjured lifelike images out of clay and wood and bronze; a thinker who plumbed the deep structure of culture in tandem with its surface realities; a songmaster who deepened the mutual traffic between melody and memory; an archivist who never lost sight of the neglected Muse of the Nigerian museum; a proud man, ebulliently self-assertive, uncontainable by small spaces; a Guitar Boy who saw Mammy Water and never ran away; a Maestro who sang the endless song.

That was/is Victor Efosa Uwaifo: a culture-conscious, legacy- literate creative activist who has contributed so much to the restoration of our cultural memory and propagation of our music. We hope Edo State in particular and Nigeria in general will reward his incredibly valuable life of dedication by making sure that his achievements never die, that his legacy endures. Let Nigeria banish her famous addiction to willful amnesia and ensure that the world does not forget the life and accomplishments of this remarkable man

Rest in power, Victorious Uwaifo. Here below, that song which I sang for you many seasons ago when you were here with us on this side of the Great River:

For Victor Uwaifo

(In the background throughout, a medley of Uwaifo's songs)

Siwo siwo siwo siwo...

Your voice nestles in the eaves of my memory,
Its red-earth vigour tremulous
Between sappy laughter and a silence
Which left its echoes in the larynx
Of throbbing legends

Wafting past the lyrical beauty of painted thresholds,
Through doors which breast the streets
Like defiant sentries, and shrines where once
Gods swayed through the portals of the sky,
Leaving their word and wand behind

Do Amen Amen dooooo

You sing of Dawn and mysty Stars
When Earth was music
And Rivers danced towards the Sea
With a chorus of capering minnows
Your melody came before the rhythm of the First Rain

Oh that haunting sonority,
That mellow magic in the elbow of a voice!
The guitar's wailing incantations,
Rainbow drums which prompt
Every moment into an eternity of motions

Oserie....

So rivetting, the rhythm of your Red-Earth City
Rhythm of Clay, rhythm of Bronze
Rhythm of ancient hands proclaiming
Miracles of mask and meaning
Rhythm of the snail's millennial sigh at Siloko Market

Echoing forests, pulse of the Panther
Skirted undergrowths dense with daring
And when my Hunter-Minstrel charged
His lips with a flute
Trees broke into a dance beyond recounting

Melody Maestro,

The universe glows in the melody of your magic;
Your athletic virtuosity, the prodigy of your gifts
Unborn seasons thrive on the honey of your voice
The ivory sonority of your endless song

Joromi jo mi o, jo mi jooooooooooooo....

Niyi Osundare is a leading African poet, dramatist, critic, essayist, and media columnist. He has authored 18 books of poetry, two books of selected poems with several literary laurels to his credits.

