

Yabasi at Papa Benji's Pub

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Yabasi is Basket Mouth's debut album of 10 high-octane tracks that feature a variety of Nigerian artistes who bring their prowess to bear on the project, culminating into a medley. Even though *Yabasi* is his first full music project, Basket Mouth, an established comedian and actor, is not a stranger to music. He recalls in his recent Black Box interview with Ebuka that he started out from the University of Benin as a rapper but had to break into comedy when his musical performances kept getting booed. Initially intended as the official soundtrack for his self-produced Papa Benji Comedy Series, the commercial success of the album places it in the mainstream rating as one of the best and most talked about pop albums of 2020. Its success is largely due to Basket Mouth's proven ability to assemble a perfect team. He got the right individuals and the nuanced production shows that Basket Mouth has the attributes of a remarkable Artists and Repertoire (A&R) with an ear for good music.

Yabasi is an Igbo word for onion, a complex bulb of vegetable in the lily family with distinctive aromatic properties. The title is symbolic to Basket Mouth's artistic intentions in the sense of what he ended up achieving with the potpourri of artists he gathered for the project. But then, this is a suggestion for his evolution over the years as a comedian, businessman and musician. The genres of the songs and their distinct vocals set the melody in the right direction. The album is a breaker, retaining its uniqueness through its non-conforming structure. Yet the genres are not far from one another considering modern classificatory paradigms of pop culture. So, if one picks the album, the metaphoric import of the title descends on you as you mellow to pick out, track by track, the multilayered meanings, the hybridization of genres (ranging from the Pop, blended Highlife, to Palm Wine Music to Afrobeat and Dancehall), and the featured artists' depth of craftiness.

Basket Mouth is a master publicist as he has sold out comedy shows across the world. He understands the importance of timing and packaging. As Nigeria was recovering from the numbness of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, ethno-religious bickering, food scarcity and other attendant incidents that continue to stratify Nigeria's democracy and federalism. One of those was the

infamous declaration by the association of onion sellers which was constituted mainly by northerners that onions would no longer be exported to the southern part of Nigeria. Naming his debut album *Yabasi* then was buying into the socio-political discourse of the time, and indirectly making a political statement on the cost of onion (and other food items) in the market, and at the same time giving due hype to his project which must have cost a fortune to put together.

There are a number of the songs in the track list that should have our attention. "Pepper Soup" featuring Duncan Mighty and Ice Prince is one; "Myself" featuring Oxlade and Show Dem Camp; "Ride or Die" featuring Waje and Ladipoe; "Papa Benji" featuring Flavour and Phyno; "Hustle" featuring Bez, The Cavemen and Dice Ailes; and "Udo" featuring Peruzzi and Ill Bliss are equally weighty in the harmony they produce. The ten tracks were single-handedly produced by Duktur Sett, mixed and mastered by Tee-Y Mix and executive produced by Okpocha Bright (Basket Mouth) under his Baron's World label. We would return to the track list shortly.

The many times I've listened to *Yabasi*, the setting, mood, and tone smack me off an evening atmosphere. At Papa Benji's pub, the mood evoked is of the high spiritedness for which drinking bars are known. The tone, from the voices and language/word choices of the artists, is that of the assured attitude of an experienced teacher giving a Ted Talk to a Wannabe or 'Wanna Try'.

So we are led into a pub, Papa Benji's. The atmosphere is that of grooving and eating and drinking. The air is a hybrid of cigarette smoke, aromatic scents of pepper-soup (goat meat and assorted meat), *asun* and *mishai*. From the entrance, the neon lights on either side of the walls, a mixture of blue and red, splashes the 'Welcome To Papa Benji's Beer Parlour' sign. There are tables and chairs with guests on them, eating, drinking, smoking. By the far end of the hall is the counter from where food and drinks orders are obtained. Papa Benji is seated on an armchair behind the counter. He's on the phone with the band. He could be heard shouting at them to hurry up before the guests began to leave out of boredom. Benji Junior is on one of the stools, cross-checking invoices while the attendants take orders. Mama Benji could be seen from the backdoor that leads to the kitchen, supervising the dishing of the *asun* and pepper-soup orders. I manage to find a seat, as the bar is filled to the brim by entertainment hungry guests. The band arrives, led by Duktur Sett and Basket Mouth as the day's host. My order of Odeku and pepper-soup arrives, my inside turns in excitement as Basket Mouth picks the microphone.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen to this evening's music groove," begins Basket Mouth, "we have no time to waste on jokes this night. I'd go straight to listing ten strong performances that would come in rapid successions. Duktur Sett is on keys this cool evening and opening the stage is the legendary Duncan Mighty and Ice Prince with the song "Pepper soup." After that, we shall be having Oxlade and Show Dem Camp; then Waje and Ladipoe; followed by Flash and BOJ. The next set would be Chike, Zoro and Play; after which Umu Obiligbo would come on board, followed by Ceeza Milli; then the legendary Flavour and Phyno; before we call it a day with Bez, The Cavemen and Dice Ailes; and lastly, Peruzzi and Ill Bliss. Duktur Sett are you ready? Let's go." He drops the mic and steps aside as Duncan Mighty and Ice Prince ascend the platform.

"Pepper soup" begins by sampling horn loops and some traditional percussions before a thunderous drum raises Duncan Mighty's modulation from a near husky and melancholic abstract singing that only gifted vocalists can dare to gesture towards. The song hits the listener with a barrage of didactic proverbs on the imperatives of standing tall against all odds; "when life show you pepper, carry the pepper do pepper soup." Ice Prince delivers an impressive verse, even though the song sounds like the kind that would have Falz drop a killer verse, I disagree with Motolani Alake who in his review, believes that Falz would have done better. Falz and Ice Prince are good emcees, no

doubt, but the autonomy of talent allows for variety and unlike Nollywood films, the outcome of songs and collaborations must not always conform to our expectations.

Show Dem Camp and Oxlade teams up on "Myself" which thematically resembles Timaya's "I Can't Kill Myself," as both songs harp on the importance of doing your best without necessarily struggling to impress anyone or prove any point. Oxlade delivers a catchy hook and short verse while mesmerizing us with his classical use of falsetto. The strength and dexterity of Show Dem Camp's renditions are no doubt their selling points but in this song, only Ghost comes close to lyrically tailoring the centrality of the song. There are occasions when abstract reasoning can fly but Tec's verse sounded like he was coming from another studio session where an entirely different thing was discussed. Motolani made the same observation in his beautiful review, and I agree that Tec could have done better.

Each time I refer to Waje as the Nigerian queen of soul, many younger listeners of Nigerian music find my opinion erroneous but listening to her performance on "Ride or Die" with Ladipoe revalidated my opinion. Waje is always in her lyrical best, in her element, never to be caught off guard. She hardly stresses it anymore; when you master your trade excellently, there is hardly anytime you'd be found wanting. "Ride or Die" steps us down like an intermission in the middle of an energetic stage play and redirects the tempo and direction of the album by taking us away from the classroom of street philosophies to matters of the heart and while Waje urges the listener on with a soulful projection of emotions, Ladipoe draws the curtain of poetry and beautifies the performance with an on-the-spot verse that aligns with the song's primary aim.

In "World People" Basket returns us to the classroom of street philosophies with Flash and BOJ giving account of their perspectives on man's hypocrisy and double standard. The summary of the song is in BOJ's declaration that "dem no go see me finish," thereby putting a full stop to Flash's feelings of distress over people's tendency to criticize whatever he does in life. Flash, though an underdog, is a gifted vocalist and strikes me as one gifted with the perspicacity of ancient philosophers.

Basket Mouth recruits Zoro, Chike and Play in the next song "Life" which is reminiscent of the boisterousness with which Anambra men discuss their love affairs. This is manifest in Zoro's romanticization of his feelings for his woman. He and Chike could be seen bragging about how proud they are of their women. Chike tells his woman that he can't afford to keep quiet if his crush agrees to date him, noting that she will increase his lifespan if she becomes his; thus, "If you give me love, you don give me life." Zoro on the other hand brags about how emotionally and physically attached he is to his woman and informs us that his woman is with him wherever he goes; thus, "nwanne ifum ifugo asam." My only concern about the song is the same concern I have with "Myself", and like Tec, Play delivers an unconvincing verse; bland and hackneyed lyrics that does not quite match the beautiful performance of Chike and Zoro.

"One Bo" with Umu Obiligbo is not necessarily an appreciation of Papa Benji or his pub and pepper soup. Rather, the song is a reimagination of marital woes and how a beer parlour can substitute for the peace a bad marriage cannot afford. Umu Obiligbo, in the song, harps on their identity as Igbo, and their Africanity by preferring to go to a joint to douse themselves in alcohol rather than going home to face the tantrums of a vile mouthed wife. Thus, you hear, "After a stressful day/ I decided to go and cool my temper/ ... igbachaa mbo lulu ajo nwanyi debe/ icheta ila n'ulo nkwu aka gi mma/ Papa Benji wetalum one bo and a plate of pepper soup/ make we jolly de go." You could hear the laments of a man confronted by marital woes and has Papa Benji to thank for his readiness with one bo and pepper soup. "One Bo" is a commonly used phrase in Igbo neighbourhoods to mean a bottle of alcohol and a lot of Igbo listeners are bound to relate with the song's stinging familiarity. One of the song's strengths is that it samples the *Ekpili* sound, a variety of ancient Igbo folk music that is

similar to today's highlife only that it does not make use of guitars and pianos. It is instructive to note that Egwu Ekipili has Chief Akunwafo Obiligbo as its foremost commercialist. Chief Akunwafo Obiligbo is the grandfather of Umu Obiligbo. "Umu" is Igbo word for "children", you can connect the dots.

"December," is an affectionate song for most of us, especially an Igbo person like me whose people see December as a period of reunion, fun, marriage, and self-reassessment. It is even easier to connect to the song when the singer says, "Girl I go love you January to December." Performed by Ceeza Milli, the song exudes an electric highlife kind of groove, though with a distinct flavour, owing to modernization in sound making; it carries the intensity of Ebenezer Obey, Cardinal Rex Lawson and The Peacocks Highlife Band's materiality. It delights my heart that Basket Mouth chose Ceeza Milli as the lone voice on this record because it has given us more room to weigh and appreciate Ceeza's strength and craft. In the recent past, we have heard Ceeza on collaborative joints like "Soco" by Wizkid and the Star Boy crew, "December" allows us to underscore the talent of this highly underrated star. In my judgement, he did not disappoint. He attacked the progression of the beat head on, and the result is marvelous.

"Papa Benji" sits at track 8 and is performed by the legendary collaborators, Phyno and Flavour. It is the eponymous track for the Papa Benji Comedy Series and one can decipher the amount of energy invested on the laying of the beat. Rich in melody, rhythm and steady progression that is hummed by a background key, the song samples "Ebezina" by the iconic Osita Osadebe. Starting slowly, the song's tempo rises with Flavour's harmonization and the deep throttling of *Ikoru* in the background, accompanied by a shy bass line that cautiously progresses to accommodate other accompaniments like *Udu* and *Ichaka*. Flavour and Phyno are in their best form as they take us on an introductory and genealogical explanation of Papa Benji's personality, family, business, and aspirations. On this track, Flavour answered the true name of his gift; he adds flavour to the hook, like he does in all the songs he hops on, making the word both a noun and a verb. However, I slightly disagree with the song's eight track position. A song of this calibre; eponymous, introductory, and genealogical, should have been the opening song that tells us what to expect subsequently.

I have a serious bias for "Hustle", and I crave your indulgence if I score it as the best song in this album. I also crave your indulgence to allow me to regard it, without exaggerating, as a perfect and flawlessly done track. All the songs are good, but "Hustle" is sure to be repeated thrice at first hearing. Basket Mouth was in his selective best, his calculative best, when he assembled the acts on the album. One cannot really tell the artistes that possess strong working chemistry until they work together. Basket Mouth outdid himself when he assembled Bez, The Cavemen and Dice Ailes; these gifted acts possess almost the same somberly impressive vocal range that is devoid of force and hoarseness. They have the same tender approach to any song they put out; from Bez's almost effortlessness to the sobriety of The Cavemen and modestly diluted carriage of Dice Ailes - these qualities coalesce into a joint for which Oriental Brothers and Celestine Ukwu would be proud. The soft progression of the beat, the introductory playfulness of The Cavemen, their ancient-styled adlibs and falsetto, the gentle approach of Bez and that slightly pitched verse by Dice Ailes melt in the boiling pot of the clear philosophy and message in the song that man is born to keep working for survival and based on that "hustle no be beans", because it is endless, it is Sisyphean. Headies, Sound City and MTV Base, for whatever reason, must not overlook this track in their forthcoming awards.

Have you ever done something so well or worked so hard that even at the risk of being called arrogant, you give yourself a Hi Five for a job well done? This is not necessarily what the last track, "Udo" is all about. "Udo", in the context of this song, is a reaffirmation for the pursuit of happiness and contentment in one's endeavours and that's the ideology Peruzzi and IllBliss projects in this song that samples once again, Chief Osita Osadebe's "Agbalu Aka Azo Ani", and they did it so well

that the song is almost as perfect as “Hustle”, thanks to Peruzzi’s imposing talent and Ill Bliss’s ability to carry rap on his laps and pamper it to sleep. Suffice it to say that they ‘killed it’. However, “Udo”, in Igbo Street parlance, is suggestive of “peace out”, with two fingers raised in the air. When a conversation goes as planned between two or more Igbo persons, you’re likely to hear “udo” as an affirmation of agreement. When two persons engage in a heated debate and there is a threat or an overstatement that is annoying, the recipient can choose to end the argument by mouthing “udo”. But most importantly, when someone does exceedingly well in something and he’s been applauded, he acknowledges the applause with “udo”. This is exactly what Basketmouth did here; he knew beforehand that applause are oncoming, he acknowledges by ending the project with “Udo.” So, yes, “udo!”

There is hardly any piece or body of work that could be regarded as holistically perfect. When measured bit by bit, one could find perfect and imperfect ones, but the strength of art is in the collective judgment it enjoys, hence, the strength of others covers for the weakness of a few. In a work of art like *Yabasi*, there are high points and just a handful of low points which are not even visible in an entire track but in a verse or two like Tec’s and Play’s verses, yet they are good verses when compared to many lyrics of Nigerian artists of pop culture today, but they are being pointed out because of the strength of other lyrics in a project that is near perfect.

Duktor Sett has proven his mettle in production and one can imagine that he must have listened to a lot of highlife songs before laying his own ensemble for this project, yet Basketmouth’s influence is visible in all the tracks even when he says almost nothing, save for his signature on the tracks: “Basket”. Tee-Y Mix long established himself as a sound engineer with good ears in mixing and mastering, hence one is not miffed at the harmony that pervades the project. The sounds are clear, the vocals and adlibs came out properly, thanks to his genius.

Basketmouth has given us a timeless classic which many of us didn’t see coming. The success of the album has given him the needed encouragement to take on another project which he calls *The Scorpio Effect* which comes off like an acknowledgment of his huge talent and genius and he has nothing to prove in this regard. While we wait to feast on the oncoming project, we encourage him to organize an A&R Masterclass; a lot of musicians and labels would benefit from it.

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