

Kenya's golden oldies on collector's new CD

Afro-rock stars of 1970s Ishmael Jingo and Steele Beuttah honoured

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

album at a sale," Brooker wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper of London. "I spent the rest of my spare time as a teenager rooting through the bargain bins in second-hand shops looking for soul, jazz and funk.

"When I was 16, I found an album by Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, which seemed much deeper and more spiritually and musically complete than anything I had heard before. I knew there must be more: you don't get one amazing album in isolation."

The find was to be the start of a long journey for Brooker. For as he was soon to discover, information about African music of the 1960s and 1970s was hard to find.

Re "The tracks I was looking for were mostly put out on small independent labels, usually for a local market and sometimes only 500 copies were being pressed. The master tapes were being destroyed — sometimes they had simply been recorded over — the musicians were dying and people's memories were fading.

"There is no record of much of this music ever having been made. Most countries in Africa have nobody that deals with music copyright. Where musicians' unions exist, they are too corrupt or inefficient to be effective."

So Brooker started his long search alone.

First he had to track down the records themselves, which he did by searching through old markets, cassette and other electronics shops, and even by getting himself invited to people's homes to look at their old record collections.

Most of his search took place in Kenya and most of the records he found were too badly damaged to be of any use.

Records played hundreds of times

Records had been played hundreds of times, often with very old needles and had been played with by children. Those which he found had been thrown out and had become warped in the sun or covered in layers of dust.

One of his best finds was Karim's shop, Melodica, which was founded by Karim's father, Daudia Karim, who was a serious force in the Kenyan music scene in the 1970s.

It took Brooker weeks to persuade Karim to let him look through the tiny store upstairs which contains hundreds and hundreds of records.

"The room is half-height, so you have to bend nearly double to walk around, and it's pitch black as there are no lights. The floor is covered with the debris of another era - old gramophones, album covers, bits of broken vinyl, even a stuffed gazelle.

"Over the years the shop has picked up enough dust from one of Nairobi's busiest roads to pile six inches deep on the racks. I guess there are around 18,000 records there and I spent weeks rooting around in the dark, taking records out into the sun to read their battered sleeves and labels, checking and listening to every record of interest."

The weeks search made the young Briton ill in



Photo/Said Wabera

Abdul Karim holds the CD *Afro-Rock Vol 1* in his Melodica Music Store in Nairobi's Tom Mboya Street. Collector Duncan Brooker found hundreds of old records in the shop's store during his search for Afro-rock music.

the end and Karim took pity on him and offered to buy Brooker a face mask. But still his search went on until finally in July 1995 Brooker returned to London with a trunk full of singles and bags full of hundreds of records.

It was when he finally got home that Brooker realised what a treasure trove he had found. "If I'd believed that Africa had produced a lot more original music than Fela Kuti, I now had the evidence: hundreds of albums and singles of material unheard of in the west."

Brooker then knew that he wanted to put a compilation together of the material. "I knew that if I didn't do it, nobody else would and the music would be lost."

But Brooker then faced his second dilemma. How to get the artists involved permission to use their material.

He says that in the early days he seriously

considered bootlegging the material.

"I could just put it out and most of the artists would never find out," he wrote. "I began to look into it then changed my mind...Partly it was because I was beginning to find out the poverty most of the musicians were living in.

Money sent back to Africa

"If I could get the music over here and get people to buy it, I could get the money sent back to Africa and they could do what they liked with it. Hopefully, it would get these musicians working again and encourage new young musicians."

It was to be the start of a new series of visits to East Africa every November, December and January for Brooker, who now works as a sound engineer, to try and track down the Afro funk stars of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

One of the bands he was most interested in was

Steele's Air Fiesta Matata, which produced some of East Africa's finest funk music of the period. They had played with Miles Davis in Germany in 1969 and he had invited them to America. Two years later they were crowned Best Band in Africa by the BBC World Service.

Karim helped him find Steele in 1998 at Simmers bar, where the musician worked.

"We walked there and Abdul introduced me to him, a short, stout, grey-haired man but with an extraordinary level of calm about him."

Star was not in good shape

The 1970s star was not now in good shape. He had been addicted to heroin for 25 years, although he had now given it up. He and the band had never recovered from the fact that their manager had walked off with their money and instruments during their return from their world tour in 1974.

"Beuttah said he would introduce me to the Matata guitarist Sammy Kangenda and sent a message to him," Brooker wrote. "I awaited at the appointed place for several hours before he turned up. He apologised for being late and said he didn't have the money for the bus fare — and he had walked for three hours from his village outside Nairobi to get here.

"Kangenda wasn't in good shape. He had also been addicted to heroin and seemed unable to remember the songs he had written. I sang one to him, humming the baseline, but he couldn't remember it. Digging through the Camerapix library later, I found a previously unseen photograph by Mohammed Amin of the band on Kenya's Rainbow television show. I showed a copy to Beuttah. He couldn't remember the moment or even the show and he cried. He had had all his possessions stolen in the 1980s."

Brooker's search for other Kenyan stars went on. He tracked down Slim Ali in a village north of Mombasa and the family of Ishmael Jingo.

In all Brooker now has around 20,000 records and has set up a label, Kona records, on which his first volume of Afro-rock was released on August

"The plan is for me to go back to Africa and now that I have something concrete to show, find even more musicians and more music. I also want to start a register so that foreigners who want to trace African musicians can find them without having to search for as long as I did."

Brooker in particular wants to get the 1970s stars back on the road. He had hoped to do so with Steele Beuttah and Matata with several UK venues interested. But sadly, Beuttah died before he could realise this dream.

"I'm not sure if he ever got to see and hear a finished copy of the album," Brooker wrote. "The next volume will be dedicated to him."

For Steele, who a few months before his death had steadily made a return to live performances, featuring at the *Golden Oldies Nite* session at the Panafric Hotel every week, there can be no greater honour.

THEATRE

Teachers and students behaving badly, on the stage

By ANTHONY NJAGI

Slow Down My Teacher, JPR Ochieng's latest play is showing at the French Cultural and Cooperation Centre. It premiered on Wednesday night (when the published play was also launched) and opened to the public yesterday. The play will show today at 3pm and 6pm. On Sunday at the same time.

The play, inspired by the controversial song — *Ndari ya Mwalimu* (the teacher's darling) — by Joseph Kamaru, explores the relationship between a girl and her teacher at the various stages of her development.

The powerful script, which is a harsh indictment of society, addresses a vice that is rampant, yet rarely discussed — the issue of teachers having love affairs with their pupils and students, some as young as 12 years. It looks at the consequences of such affairs, especially for the student. Unfortunately, the playwright does not make the teacher pay for his ills. Even though the girl triumphs emotionally over her teacher lover at the end, we don't see the teacher getting punished by society or the law in any way. Perhaps Ochieng's intention here was to portray the situation as it is today — the student gets pregnant, gets expelled from school, has an abortion and deals with the resultant trauma as the teacher gets away, unscathed.

The production by ProperArt Creations, directed by Jacob Otieno) is a commendable effort with a strong cast. The script is not easy to put on stage as it has very little action and too much talking. But some of the cast members, particularly Rayana Githae who acts

as the young Jullietta, brings life to it. She has a strong stage presence, powerful and convincing voice, and perfectly fits the role of a Standard Seven pupil which she plays with all the innocence of a 12-year-old. Her costume (a purple tunic for a school uniform) enhances her character.

Zippy Kimundu (teenage Julietta) also performs her role superbly, especially the scene in which she is drunk.

The rest of the cast members include Doreen Rukaria (Adult Julietta) Gilbert Lukalia (Mr Henry the teacher) and Rebecca Balongo (Jullietta's grandmother).

The good use of flashback and changing actors to show the different stages of Jullietta's life is also commendable. But Mr Henry could have done with a change of clothes and outlook to reflect his stature in society. He remains the same throughout the play, yet he too has developed from a primary school teacher to a secondary school teacher and finally a college lecturer.

Slow Down My Teacher is a play worth watching, especially if you are looking for serious drama. The script, published by Acacia Stantex is on sale at the same venue.

Meanwhile, the Kenyatta University Cultural Week, which started yesterday, will be officially opened by President Moi tomorrow at 2pm. The Grand Finale is to be held at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre on September 22. The festival has attracted teams from Uganda, Tanzania, Egypt, China, Iran and Finland.



Gilbert Lukalia (Mr Henry) and Rayana Githae (Jullietta) in *Slow Down My Teacher*.