

Ekiti Productions presents

Elder's Corner



Written & Directed by Siji Awoyinka

Running Time; 96 min

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Log Line

From the colorful, celebratory sounds of Juju to the politicized urgency of Afrobeat, Nigerian musicians have spearheaded some of Africa's most prominent musical movements. Oftentimes, their work formed the backdrop against which the nation blossomed. So what happened to the pioneering artists who rose to prominence during the country's halcyon years - and continued to endure when it faltered?

Synopsis

Born in London to Nigerian parents, singer-songwriter-producer **Siji** spent his formative years in Lagos during the 1970s oil boom when the city was a bustling metropolis of bright colors and sounds.

Political turmoil in the 1980s, however, drove **Siji** and his family back to London once again and from there, propelled him into a global existence never returning to his homeland for 23 years. *Elders Corner* is a poignant story of return and discovery through memory and music.

The documentary film begins with an encounter in New York City with one of **Siji's** childhood friends, who is an audiophile and rare vinyl collector. Osita pulls out one of his latest finds—a rare classic by **Fatai Rolling Dollar** filled with swirling guitars, lilting melodies and the unmistakable rhythms of a bygone era—and **Siji** is instantly seduced. Beckoned by a wave of nostalgia, he begins planning a trip to Lagos to confront the past and find out what has come of Nigeria's long forgotten musical heroes.

Upon landing, Lagos feels familiar yet strangely foreign. Still he pushes ahead to journey deep into the country in search of its legendary musical pioneers. Chief among these is Highlife bandleader and trumpeter, **E.C. Arinze** who still has an unmistakable



twinkle in his eyes as he fondly puts his lips to his horn filling the screen with his classic, “Nike Nike”.

Although he claims to not have touched his trumpet in years, it is clear that his musical chops and his memory have remained intact, as he begins to wax lyrical about his humble origins, his decision in 1952 to leave his profession as a teacher to pursue a music career

in Lagos and his subsequent fortunes, traveling throughout West Africa performing for visiting foreign dignitaries.

Through Arinze's story and interviews with other living legends; **Victor Olaiya**, **Joni Haastrop**, **Fatai Rolling Dollar**, and **Jimi Solanke**, the film paints a picture of a jubilant time. In 1960, Nigeria gains its independence from Britain and Highlife perfectly captures the prevailing mood of optimism, hope, and national unity. **King Sonny Brown** and **Tony Odili** evoke this moment, by giving impromptu performances of music from that era.

The film then retells how many Nigerian professionals sought training abroad and then returned home to help build the nation. Singer, **Mary Afi Usuah** recounts how she was among the lucky few chosen to study as an opera singer at the prestigious **Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome**. Following her studies, she went on to tour with diverse acts such as **Led Zep-pelin**, and **Deep Purple**.

But with lines of disappointment on her face, she reflects on how she forsook a burgeoning international music career to return home to serve country and flag.

“I had to come home. I had to make a total break and I said well, if I am going back, then I must forget Italy, I must forget everything, everybody and that’s what it did cost me”



Through carefully selected archival footage and pictures, the film sets the context for understanding Mary's disappointment, by weaving an account of how power struggles, corruption, and ethnic tensions in the newly independent nation quickly led to a bloody coup and the Biafran civil war (1966-1970). Breaking out into **Eddie Okwedy's** bitter sweet 1972 classic "*Happy Survival*", musicians testify to how the cultural soul of the nation suffered.



The years after the civil war are marked by reconciliation and a desire to move forward. The oil boom years see the country awash in money, and *Juju*, a new style of music which fuses traditional Yoruba rhythms with western instrumentation. Popular among Nigeria's elite, Lagosians display their wealth by lavishly "spraying" Naira bills on artists like **Ebenezer Obey** (featured prominently) and **King Sunny Ade**.

The film culminates with a remembrance of **FESTAC**, the controversial, international black arts festival hosted by Nigeria in 1977. **Victor Uwaifo and Mary Afi-Usuah** recount how it was a joyous display of black homecoming and culture from all corners of the globe, while others reflect on how it was a pointless waste of money that kicked off a string of brutal military regimes and bloody coups that irreparably damaged the Nigeria music industry.

Woven throughout this denouement is **Siji's** personal search for reconciliation with the past. Through coordinated recording studio sessions with some of the surviving musical icons, the film conjures a way for everyone to savor once again, everything that is sweet about the past. The live studio performances reveal how their collective tragedies — **Siji's**, the musicians, the nation—meet in the present with music and sound as

vehicles for healing.



Elders Corner is not only a voyage of return and discovery, it's an epic tale of survival and the undeniable power of music to reconnect the present.

Director's Statement

I was born in London to Nigerian parents and taken to Lagos when I turned 5. I vividly recollect those 12 early years via the immersive presence of rhythms and sounds. From the celebratory percussion of Juju music to the cries of street hawkers peddling wares, Lagos' unique sonic footprint defies easy categorization.

The concept for Elder's Corner was born when an audiophile friend, who owned a prized collection of rare African music on vinyl, returned from one of his crate digging exploits and invited me over for a listening session.

That fateful evening, among the records he played me was a badly scratched 7", which featured a rare recording by the Nigerian singer/guitarist, Fatai Rolling Dollar called "Won Kere Si Number Wa". A powerful wave of nostalgia swept over me. Awestruck, I thought: who are these musical griots and what had become of them? Thus began my journey back home after almost 23 years away, to seek them out and to revisit my childhood.



At its heart, Elder's Corner is a voyage of return and discovery, an epic tale of survival, using music to reconnect the past to the present. In Nigeria's powerful oral tradition, vital historical information passes through generations by story telling, proverbial sayings and songs. Music forms an essential part of this tradition, a platform showcasing to the world who we truly are.

For well over a decade, I traveled the country and beyond, seeking out and capturing the stories of Nigeria's long forgotten music pioneers. Among them Juju maestro Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey and guitar wizard, Sir Victor Uwaifo. Their collective journeys mirrored that of the nation, through its triumphs and upheavals and put my own childhood into sharper perspective. Shockingly though, few owned any copies of their old recordings. So we had them recreate some of their old classics in the same studio where they were originally recorded (Afrodesia Studios, Lagos). These intimate sessions feature prominently in the film and help lend even greater weight to their moving stories.

Presently, the global recognition enjoyed by a new wave of Nigerian artists is contextualized by pervasive narratives of corruption, poverty, and Islamic extremism. Elder's Corner offers a rarely seen, home grown alternative vision of our culture, our joy, and our humanity by honoring the legacies of our musical forebears whose pioneering efforts paved the roads we now walk.

Key Characters

Given the wide diversity of Nigeria's people, language, music and culture, *Elder's Corner* features a number of the country's key music icons (both the living and deceased), many of who have to a large extent contributed significantly to the social and cultural fabric of the nation as revealed in their work.

E.C. Arinze

Trumpeter, bandleader, E.C. Arinze was one of Nigeria's leading Highlife music pioneers whose early efforts inspired and paved the way for countless others. His professionalism and versatility as a musician ensured he was the National bandleader of choice called upon to entertain visiting foreign dignitaries.



Equally adept at playing a Waltz, Native Blues or Highlife, his swan song “Nike Nike” has since become a classic among the nations marching bands till this day. His career as well as Highlife music's popularity waned following the bloody Biafra civil war (1967-1970) which claimed over a million lives and which sent all the nations Igbo's back to their homelands in the eastern part of Nigeria.

Mary Afi Usuah

Name checked by **Duke Ellington**, toured with the likes of legendary rock group, **Led Zeppelin** and **Aretha Franklin** as well as a graduate of the prestigious **Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome**. Opera trained, Afi Usuah was on the cusp of superstardom in Europe when she forsook all to serve country and flag in Nigeria during the early 1970's.

Super versatile and chic, she effortlessly blended indigenous Efik folk melodies with jazz and pop music and was a source of pride and inspiration to countless other singers who came in her wake. She remained widely admired by her peers both at home and abroad.





Lijadu Sisters

Regal, surreal and mystical, twin sisters Taiwo and Kehinde Lijadu burst onto the Nigerian music scene at a time when women were largely seen as wives and home makers. Their infectious brand of Afro pop blended traditional folk songs with Jazz, pop and reggae music. Touring all over Europe

with **Ginger Baker** as part of his super group, **SALT**, brought them worldwide attention in the early 1970's.

Monomono

Multi instrumentalist Joni Haastrop formed Monomono in 1971 with his friend and bassist Baba Ken Okulolo, guitarist Jimmy Adams and percussionists Candido Obajimi and Friday Jumbo.

Growing up in a royal household in Nigeria, Joni Haastrop began his musical journey performing for his brother's band, **Sneakers** and was quickly snapped up as a vocalist for **O.J. Ekemode** and his **Modern Aces' Super Afro Soul** LP, one of Afro-beat's formative LPs.

Soon after, **Ginger Baker** of Cream fame replaced **Steve Winwood**



with Haastrop on keys for **Airforce's** UK concerts in '71 and the success of the collaboration led to further shows with Baker as part of the **SALT** project before he returned to Nigeria to set up Monomono.

Joni Haastrop's time in London had exposed him to the cream of England's progressive Rock scene among them members of Cream, Blind Faith and The Who. He returned to Lagos with a wealth of musical ideas as well as tough new insights about how the world really worked. English bureaucracy had at times made this well-born Nigerian feel like a beggar, and that feeling became the inspiration for Monomono's first big hit, "Give the Beggar a Chance."

The album effortlessly fused distorted guitars and psychedelic organ riffs with traditional Yoruba rhythms. This was a radical departure from the soul covers of the 60's groups in Nigeria but a logical progression from the jazz-rock fusion saturating the London scene.

VICTOR OLAIYA – “The Evil Genius”

As one of Highlife music's brightest stars, Victor Olaiya's influence was cast far and wide. His biggest break came when he was selected to headline the inaugural ball celebrating the nation's independence from the British in October 1960.



The ball which was attended by a plethora of world leaders was memorable for a number of reasons, chief among them being the chorus of dissent that rang out loud and clear from his musical peers who didn't think him worthy of such an honor, not to mention his family's outrage at being kept completely in the dark about his burgeoning musical career in the first place.

Why Elders Corner?

In a country with a rich oral tradition where vital historical information is handed down from generation to generation in the form of poetry, praise songs and music, the critical need to capture and preserve the stories and journeys of these legendary, musical griots cannot be overstated. This was driven home during the early stages of the project when intensive research efforts yielded very little by way of archival material (aural, visual or otherwise) on any of them.

The groundbreaking efforts of these iconic figures helped define the sound of an era and that of the African continent. They collectively influenced a great number of musicians, artists, poets, writers, actors and music lovers the world over and represent the very last of a bygone era.



Elder's Corner will act as a noteworthy, modern day, oral and visual archival document from which the present and successive generations of music lovers the world over, can benefit and learn from for decades to come. By showcasing the rise to prominence and notable achievements of these icons, we can help to raise awareness about the urgent need to preserve their work and honor their legacies.

CHARLIE HOXIE (Editor)

Charlie Hoxie is a filmmaker and editor based in Brooklyn, NY. Originally from Evanston, IL, he studied geology at Amherst College before moving to New York in 2006 to pursue filmmaking. In 2011, his short documentary *Passive Passion*, about the Passive House method of energy-efficient building, premiered at the New York Architecture & Design Film Festival, and screened at the Princeton and Melbourne Environmental Film Festivals. As a staff producer for BRIC TV, a non-profit media company in Brooklyn, he has won three New York Emmy awards for his work.

In 2017, two short films edited by Hoxie, *Hairat* and *He Who Dances On Wood*, premiered at Sundance Film Festival and Hot Docs Film Festival, respectively. In 2018, Hoxie directed and edited the short documentary *Coach Nison*, which premiered at the 2018 Big Sky Documentary Festival. His feature directorial debut, *The Grand Unified Theory of Howard Bloom*, premiered at DOC NYC in 2019.

The Cast

E.C Arinze

Mary Afi Usuah

Monomono

Victor Uwaifo

Victor Olaiya

Blackman Akeeb Kareem

Jimi Solanke

The Lijadu Sisters

Chris Ajilo

Tony Allen

Paulson Kalu

Fatai Rolling Dollar

Ebenezer Obey

Dele Ojo

Vindo Ikenga (Ikenga Superstars of Africa)

Dan Satch Opara (Oriental Brothers)

The Film Makers

Written and Directed by Siji Awoyinka

Producers

Siji Awoyinka
Ade Bantu

Co-Producers

Tunji Ladoja
Abby Ogunsanya
Kay Hung
Edel Kelly

Editor

Siji Awoyinka
Charlie Hoxie

Sound Supervisor

Osita Anienwelu

Soundtrack Mixer

Bill Lee

Executive Producers

Siji Awoyinka
Tunji Olowolafe

Production Partners

Project Act Nollywood
Lucius & Eva Foundation
Brooklyn Arts Council
MTN Telecommunications
Spinlet Media
Kickstarter Backers