

Elder's Corner

Adesiji Awoyinka (Director)

Skinnyboy Productions 2020, 98 mins

It's no secret that African popular music since the Second World War has experienced an enormous surge in popularity over the last 20 years. The reissue industry has relentlessly mined the golden era of West African music, bringing exposure and appreciation to a plethora of artists and sounds previously little known beyond the region. But catering for the fickle tastes of a market – in this case, one initially driven by a fashion for Afrobeat twinned with the mystique of African vinyl – rarely produces an even account of a time or place. Important musicians and whole styles get overlooked. Capitalism doesn't really do history.

But film making can, and Adesiji Awoyinka's able feature length documentary *Elder's Corner* elegantly fills some gaps. The film traces developments in Nigerian popular music alongside the political history of postwar Nigeria,

covering the shift from the classical highlife of the 1950s through to the sounds of Afrobeat and juju in the 70s. Awoyinka, himself a musician, is now a New York resident, but his family moved from Lagos to London in the early 70s, before moving back again when he was a boy. The film begins with him explaining how he became captivated by the sounds of old highlife records brought from Nigeria to New York by a crate-digging acquaintance. The through narrative is provided by Awoyinka's return to Nigeria to find the musicians he had discovered through those records, to hear their stories and record them playing again.

With wisdom and eloquence, musicians tell the story of their changing times. Over several years, starting in 2010, Awoyinka located and interviewed some of the biggest stars of Nigerian music, from highlife pioneers such as EC Arinze and Victor Olaiya, to the greats of the 70s and 80s, including Chief Ebenezer Obey, Sir Victor Uwaifo, The Lijadu Sisters and

Mary Afi Usuah. This alone makes the film an outstanding document, and the fact that so many of those he interviewed have now passed away emphasises its importance: the dedication at the end of the film includes a significant amount of the musicians we have been watching. Equally special are the studio sequences which feature Jimi Solanke, Monomono and an especially beatific appearance from Ebenezer Obey, among others (one unanswered question is what has happened to these recordings, which sound captivating).

The historical line takes us from the high colonial era through the optimism that came in the wake of independence from British rule in 1960 toward the horrors of the Biafran war and the oil boom and government corruption of the 70s. The film draws to a close at the vast and celebratory Festac 77, the historic festival of global Black and African culture that was hosted in Lagos and paid for by the country's oil wealth. Perhaps

surprisingly, it is only at this stage that we hear anything about Fela and Afrobeat, in the context of Fela's notorious refusal to participate in the festival on political grounds. Far from being an oversight, the absence of Fela from the main narrative is in fact a useful corrective to the Afrobeat-heavy rewriting of history that has emerged through the reissue market. The negative space quietly and rightly underlines Fela's places as an outsider and rebel.

Instead the main stage is occupied principally by highlife and juju, and by the musicians whose music was the broader popular backdrop to an epoch. It's an important work of restoration and remembrance, made all the more poignant by the death of some of the main contributors. From Victor Olaiya to Tony Allen, a generation departed during the decade it took to produce *Elder's Corner*, and it is a privilege to hear them speak here.

Francis Gooding



EC Arinze



The Lijadu Sisters

Adesiji Awoyinka