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Mensah, one of Africa's foremost musicians passed on early in August, 1996. By his demise the West African subregion which he influenced more directly and indeed all of Africa lost yet another giant, an innovator, composer, singer, multi-instrumentalist and band leader.

Born in Accra, Ghana where he also died at 78, E.T Mensah was directly involved in the pioneering and formative processes of highlife music. His earlier years were spent in the vortex of the cross-cultural currents which pervaded colonial Ghana and the west coast of Africa and thus helped to forge these influences to develop a trado-modern African musical expression that became highlife.

His music career started in 1932, when he played piccolo in school with a vibrant big band formed and led by Joe Lamptey, ET's school master and mentor. Called the Accra Orchestra, the band played imitative foreign music that was in vogue at the time - ball room, ragtime, swing and rumba. ET developed a burning passion for the sax and learnt to play it alongside the piccolo, and by 1936 moved to collaborate with drummer Guy Warren, one of the most resourceful of Ghanaian musicians of the time, ET's alto being one of the fiercest and most proficient of the five saxophones that the fifteen piece band paraded. Much as Guy Warren's drums were prominent, the music saw the beginning of African flavoured dance music.

Mensah qualified as a pharmacist in 1943, a profession which interfered with his music for some while. 1940 however had been the beginning of his musical accomplishments, the year he joined the Black and White Spots, a highly professional band led by a Scottish soldier, Jack Leopard who acquired dance band musicianship at the professional level in London. Sergeant Jack Leopard led by far the greatest, most promising band at the time and playing with the Black and White Spots was like training in a college of music. Here ET had his first induction to harmonic progression and big band arrangement. Successful though this turned out to be in terms of musicianship and financial reward ET still thirsted for a popular music type based on African rhythms, an alternative to the foreign dance music that was prevalent. 1947 brought Guy Warren and ET together again, this time under the leadership of pianist Joe Kelly, thus, the original Tempos band was born. The band played sophisticated and adventurous Ghanaian songs. The band was a musical success but lacked commercial viability.

ET realised himself in 1948 when he went his separate way and founded his own Tempos band. By now he had the experience and musical ability to accomplish his dream, that is, evolving a popular African-oriented type of music in a scene dominated by Western dance music later to be popularised in America by pianist Randy Weston.

Mensah became highly elevated when Ghana attained independence in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah. Ghana extended the territories of highlife firmly to Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Highlife was played before heads of state and African musicians were influenced across different national borders. ET Mensah was proclaimed the king of highlife, and his recordings were instant hits selling beyond West Africa.

The top musicians in Ghana in the Fifties and Sixties were graduates of the Tempos Band sticking out on their own after serving their various terms of apprenticeship. King Bruce left the Tempos Band to form the Black Beats, Joe Kelly deserted for the Red Spots. In 1961, Jerry Hansen left to form the Ramblers Dance Band. The list is very long, and even though some of these individuals often deserted with prominent members of the Tempos Band, it was not difficult for Mensah to regroup and maintain the same Tempos sound that was unique and easily identifiable.

A major landmark in the life of Mensah was the visit of Louis Armstrong to Ghana in 1956. As the foremost trumpet player and band leader, he performed with Satchmo's all stars and received standing ovations from large audiences who held them both in high artistic esteem.

The highlife music era began to decline in 1969 when ET Mensah took the Tempos Band to England. Most of the
The odd which conspired against highlife in Nigeria was the civil war. For reasons that are not easily recognisable, the east of Nigeria paraded more highlife exponents than other parts of the country. Bands were concentrated in Lagos and Port Harcourt, so when the war broke out in 1967 the musicians went home to be recruited into the Biafran army. By 1970 when the war ended, only one highlife band survived in Celestine Ukwu and the Philosophers National.

In Ghana, the economic recession of the late Seventies and the Eighties led to a mass exodus of Ghanaian nationals abroad. Mass emigration and economic recession thus weighed heavily against the development of highlife and also contributed significantly to its decline in popularity.

Also the late 1960s saw soul music invading the entire West African region and gave highlife a tough competition. James Brown and his imitators like Geraldo Pino played the music with great finesse employing the showbusiness techniques as well as multi-micro and stereophonic sound devices, a modern facility that was new to West Africa. Consequently, a great number of musicians travelled abroad and converted to pop-oriented music, namely Joe Mensah, Eddie Kwansa, George Lee, George Dako, all of Ghana; and Remi Kabaka, Donald Ameschi, Mike Odumosu, of Nigeria; among others.

We were yet to see music in Africa as a vehicle for propagating culture despite the foresight of leaders like Kwame Nkrumah but whose vision unluckily did not survive to their successors. African media policies did not protect African music and as a result the electronic media gave preference to American pop.

Highlife’s future lies in its strength fulfilling a vital cultural role as one of the first examples of a fusion, a marriage of foreign and African forms; it remains as the genre that has helped to forge an African popular music form to which all musicians in Africa can relate. Highlife can also be said to have influenced the popularisation of other African musical forms.

The credit for this achievement goes to ET Mensah’s pioneering work and enduring vision - hatched in the Thirties, developed in the Fifties and Sixties, evolving into the future.