

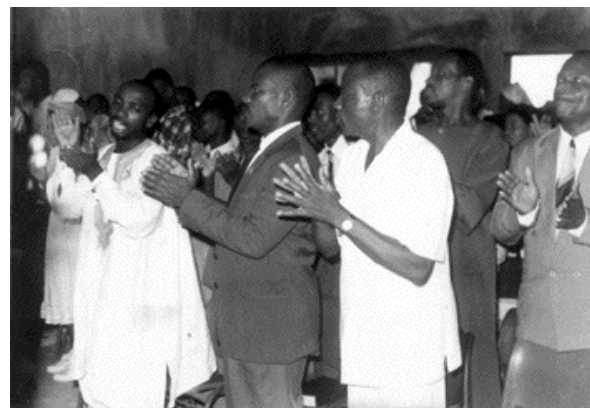


Chief Udoh Essiet believes in rhythm. “My music is natural, it's like eating organic healthy food.” He serves it hot and spicy on his latest album “Afrobeat Highlife Crossing.” He is a master percussionist, singer, composer, and bandleader.

ROOTS, SPIRITUALITY, CULTURE, IDENTITY

It is rare that Chief Udoh Essiet will give an interview without saying something about Christians and churches in Nigeria. His opinions are very strong, and he will not miss an opportunity to tell you that churches in Africa are duping people for their own gain. He is certainly in a position to know, as his father was the pastor of the first Apostolic Church in Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State, in southeastern Nigeria - an area that now boasts of having more churches per square mile than any other place on the planet. Born just one year before Nigerian Independence from Britain, Udoh was the seventh child in his family, which meant he was the one with prophetic vision encouraged to recount his dreams.

His first musical instruments, he says, were his mother's kitchen door, and tins of condensed milk, carried outside to play with. He was soon to discover the art forms of his native culture (music, dance, masquerade, festivals, arts and crafts) through his mother's family, running away at every opportunity from his father's church to his mother's family's compound to participate in it. For him, his preference was so clear that later, as a musician with Fela in Lagos, he permanently abandoned his Christian name, Moses, in favor of his traditional name, Udoh.



A typical church scene in Akwa Ibom State



Traditional Efik Dance Group

His first experiences playing in public were with a traditional cultural group with women dancers, as a soloist on the “abodom”, the instrument that “speaks” and directs the dancers in their movements. His maternal aunt had to be persuaded to allow him to practice and perform with them because he was so young. These experiences were vital for him, and continued until the outbreak of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war in 1967.



Abodom

A word about Akwa Ibom culture.....

“Akwa Ibom people have four distinct cultural characteristics that affect and direct their behavioral patterns. These include the following: pre-occupation with the supernatural; concern for good morals; rebellion against injustice, and belief in a strong family system. These four characteristics influence their music and dance. Therefore when music and dance is being talked about, in reality we are referring to the general role they play as instruments of social control. Culture is not just food or arts and crafts; it is the totality of the way of life of a people. In the culture of Akwa Ibom people, songs, dances and masquerades are basic media of individual and group expression.”

---reprinted from www.akwaibomstate.com

SWINGING LAGOS in the 70's

Udoh doesn't talk much about the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, but he still feels the pain. He was separated from his parents, swept away from his early life, and propelled into a new one. He migrated to Lagos, and though he was still very young, his survival depended solely upon himself. He learned to speak Yoruba, and sold chew sticks (for cleaning teeth) in the streets. One of his regular clients was the mother of the Highlife trumpeter and bandleader **Victor Olaiya**. This turned out to be a meeting with destiny. Soon young Udoh was living with the bandleader and his family. He would carry Olaiya's trumpet for him. Before long he was allowed to play maracas with the band. He wanted to learn the trumpet but Olaiya told him, "Play rhythm first." One day when the band's conga player was absent, Udoh filled in, even though he was so small he had to stand on a beer bottle crate to reach the drums. The conga player never got his job back.



Victor Olaiya, the "Evil Genius" of HIGHLIFE

"OLAIYA, Victor (b. Victor Abimbola Olaiya, '20s, Ijebu, Nigeria) Singer, composer, trumpeter. Known to his fans as the 'Evil Genius' of Highlife, he began with Bobby Benson, playing a mixture of waltzes, quicksteps, boleros, chachachas, highlifes, but following E. T. Mensah's influential tour of Nigeria in the early '50s left and formed his own Cool Cats, concentrating on Highlife. His fame grew with hits and he was asked to play at Nigeria's independence celebrations '60; by this time the band had been renamed the All Stars, Victor Uwaifo and Fela Kuti passing through in early '60s, the period reflected in compilation *In The Sixties*. During the decline in highlife late '60s, Olaiya, a Yoruban, was one of the few Nigerians who continued to make a living from it. By the '70s he had his own night club in Lagos, the Papingo, and also active in the various musicians' unions in Nigeria. By the '80s he was fronting the ten-piece International Stars Band, maintaining popularity with live act, LPs such as compilation *Highlife Reincarnation*, *Country Hard-O* and *Highlife Giants*, the latter with Mensah." ---reprinted from <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/>

Udoh has a lot to say about Olaiya, who he venerates: "First of all, Olaiya is one of the pioneers of Highlife Music, the oldest who is still alive and playing the same style, and he still has some of the same members of his band, after more than 40 years. I learned a lot of things from Olaiya. The first thing I learned from him was not to smoke or be in a bad society. Olaiya was a like father to me, and took care of me like a son. Many top Nigerian artists, even Fela himself, played and learned in Olaiya's band. If you pass there, you learn a lot about rhythm." During his years with Olaiya, he met and shared the stage with Highlife giants such as **E.T. Mensah**, **Rex Lawson**, **Rex Williams**, and many others.

"Cross-Cultural Inspiration: A brief introduction to African Highlife of Nigeria and Ghana

At the turn of the century New Orleans gave birth to Jazz, a quintessentially American melting pot of musical styles. One of its great influences was the African rhythms and call-and-response format of the music performed at Congo Square. This new music found its way back to Africa, where it was enthusiastically accepted. Jazz was more than enjoyed by Africa, however: her musicians picked up the new instruments and the transformed styles and integrated them back into their traditional music.

One of the most prominent new genres to come of this was Highlife music, a fusion of indigenous dance rhythms and melodies with Western sounds, which emerged in the 1920's from Ghana and Sierra Leone and has been a major influence on all subsequent African Music. The instrumentation included African drums, harmonicas, guitars, and accordions; and by 1920's was known collectively as Highlife. During 1930s three distinct styles emerged: ballroom dance style for the coastal elite, a village brass band style, and rural guitar bands playing a less Westernized style for a less Westernized audience.

During WWII big-band jazz became an influence and in '47 the most important post-war band emerged: E. T. Mensah and the Tempos Band toured widely with enormous impact, spawning hundreds of imitators. The introduction of highlife music to Nigeria in the mid fifties by Ghana's E. T. Mensah revolutionised the music industry and led to the proliferation of bands that played highlife music with a truly Nigerian flavor. Reaching full stride in the fifties and sixties, Highlife became popular in dance clubs throughout West Africa. Alongside love songs and daily life it's lyrics were often very political, speaking out against the indignities of colonial oppression from the British Empire. Some songs were banned and musicians occasionally arrested. Some of the Nigerian highlife artists who greatly influenced the direction of contemporary popular music in Nigeria include Bobby Benson, Roy Chicago, Eddy Okonta, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, and Sir Victor Olaiya. ---reprinted from <http://www.musicweb.uk.net>



Fela, playing his own solo congas

As he grew to young manhood, Udoh's reputation as a conga player in Olaiya's band attracted attention and offers from other rising bandleaders in Lagos. Tempted by the idea of travel and curious to try other musical styles (Olaiya's band played every week in his own night club in Lagos without touring), Udoh performed with various artists, including Crossdale Juba and Juju musician King Sunny Ade, before joining the band of the creator of AFROBEAT, **Fela Anikulapo Kuti**, as conga soloist. For three years he toured in Africa and abroad, performing and recording extensively with Fela (see DISCOGRAPHY). At the time when he left Fela's band "Egypt 80" in 1983, no one else was able to fulfill his role. Eventually Fela would just play the three solo congas (which are played with sticks) onstage by himself.

In recent years, Udoh has made appearances as a guest artist with Fela's Egypt 80 band, who are now backing Fela's younger son, **Seun Kuti**, and he played on Seun's debut album.

CHIEF UDOH ESSIET DISCOGRAPHY

- 2019 - CHIEF UDOH ESSIET: «Afrobeat/Highlife Crossing »
- 2008 - SEUN KUTI & FELA'S EGYPT 80: "Many Things"
- 1999 - CHIEF UDOH ESSIET: "Time For Highlife"
- 1991 - AFROBEAT BLASTER: "No Condition Is Permanent"
- 1990 - SALIF KEITA: "Soro"
- 1986 - GHETTO BLASTER: "People"
- 1984 - GHETTO BLASTER: "Preacher Man"
- 1982 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "Authority Stealing"
- 1981 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "ITT - International Thief Thief"
- 1981 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "Perambulator"
- 1980 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "Coffin For Head of State"
- 1980 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "Unknown Soldier"
- 1980 - FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: "Power Show"
- 1979 - ROY AYERS & FELA: "Center of the World"
- 1979 - ROY AYERS & FELA: "2000 Black"
- 1975 - VICTOR OLAIYA: "Oro Jesu"
- 1975 - VICTOR OLAIYA: "Aji Kemi"
- 1966 - NKAIMA TRADITIONAL DANCE GROUP recording