

Justin Tchatchoua

Sanza goes beyond notes and sounds

Cameroonian born musician, Justin Tchatchoua lives in Spain since many years. Like some great country men (Vincent Nguini, Mekongo Président, Nkodo Si Tony, Jack Djeyim), he left his country for Nigeria where he released a single untitled 'Love me the way I do'. A single produced by Rogers All Stars. With 900.000 copies sold there and in Africa, he started going on tour with famous artists like Enrique Urquijo, Papa Wemba, The Waylers, etc. In this interview, he accepted to open his heart and to talk about his music, his researches in the field of music and the projects he is preparing for Cameroon and Africa.

Like Jack Djeyim Pierre Diddy Tchakounté or Jean Deboulon Namy, you are one of those musicians who have chosen sanza as the most important instrument. Can we argue that it is through sanza that you draw your signature in the music ?

Well for me, to own a musical instrument and play it to the rhythm of one's ancestors' love and joy of living, it's wonderful. The instruments of our ancestors take us to a place where we can experience their period and share their emotions. Sanza "long MAMBLA" is just one of those instruments that one can use without any need of being accompanied by any other. It's percussive, melodic and charming, warm sound is sufficient to provoke that nostalgic feeling, taking me back to where I belong. The Sanza like any other traditional instrument has the same power. I guess, it all depends on the song and how we feel it. So, I identify myself with all those that I'm used to.

What are the particular notes sanza allow you to get and that the classic guitars could not reach ?

There's just no way to compare these two instruments, Sanza and Guitar. A Guitar belongs to a group of instruments we call Cordophone while the Sanza belongs to a group called Membranophone. In my opinion, an instrument is more than just something that provides sound and notes. For me, the shape, how it's handled, the contact with our body, how it sounds, the stories behind it conditions are a

lot. In some way, we can produce the same melodies that a guitar has done on a Sanza, but then is not more authentic. The natural way will be to play both together, expressing in their different ways or language if you mind, to fuse together.

Looking in to your discography, we then see that most of your productions and compositions are related to the rhythms of the Nde Division in the western part of Cameroon. Rhythms like danzi or lali. How did you get involved into this rhythms ? How do you manage to convince foreign musicians to accompany you while improving those rhythms?

I think that I'm one of those lucky guys who was brought up in west Cameroon in the 70s. In those days, we were obliged to play traditional music in the primary schools; in fact we even had competitions where there were prizes for the winners. In many occasions when an important personality had to visit our province, they were always different traditional music and dances around and we as school children were invited to take part in these events. On the other hand, my aunt had a small palm wine bar and I was like the transporter who had to take these drinks to the meetings every Sunday. So on many occasions, I had to stay and watch how they sang and played all those instruments again and again, in different types of rhythms. For me it was ok. I didn't mind if those rhythms were from Bali, Bamendjou, Bamoun, Banganté, Barondo, Bakweri or Munshi. Well as you can see, these are today the users of my inspiration and I'm proud of it.

How far your work is known in Cameroon as you're now abroad since a long time?

To be sincere, I have done a lot of recordings that many of our country men and women are not aware of. In the first place, "Bala Vibration", 1981. I had this Cd from Rogers All Stars with Charlie Tamajong Ndumu and it sold 900,000 copies. One radio station in Cameroon used one of the titled 'Brand new Dance' as the signal tune of their program for 11 good years but we never received any payment for that. "Love Me The Way I Do" was the title of that album which was also used by an unknown producer in a film we only saw on the TV during our visit to Cameroon. After many years of absence, I visited home in the year 2006, and while I was sitting in the salon with my family, all of a sudden on the TV again, there was another song from my album produced in Spain in 2004. A song titled 'Giving me your love' was in another film. In the evening that same day, the rest of the music of this album and the one I also did before were all used with the images of Cameroon Tourism. I had never received any royalty for all these issues to date. We have documents in our televisions that can prove all these.



How do you manage to reach Spain in your musical path?

I have to say that I have been playing modern music for quite a long time. It's just a few years ago that I took the decision to do things the way I should, thinking of my people and my roots in especial.

As you can see, in 2004, I was recommended by a show promoter in Spain, called Nacho Scola to form a band with Rita Marley's repertory, to back her in some shows around Europe. So I did, and it was really nice playing with the wife of the best reggae man, "The one and only Bob Marley". I think that is very good to collaborate with other artists to do things together, dancers, musicians, stories tellers actors, why not. It enhances our soul and also is a way of viewing and feeling too. So I have been doing these with Jack Djeyim, Akin, Papa Wemba, Wiliem Onyabo, I. C. Arinze, Cris Ocoti, Enrique Urquijo, André-Marie Talla, Chantal Ayissi and many others.

How far is Cameroonian music now in Spain ?

Cameroon music in Spain actually has no great success because we don't really have a lot of Africans from the central part of Africa in Spain. But from time to time, they started to have some special interest after the show of the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relation between Spain and Cameroon, where I had to organize the backing section for André-Marie Talla and Chantal Ayissi, Apolo Bass with his Band, Parfait Ekani, and it was presented by Boniface Ofogo. For more information on this issue you can visit www.kolanuts.org. Actually, I have a project that I did in the South America and it has been institutionalized by the Ministry of culture of Panama. I did it last year with about 8000 children in 10 days and I was there this May also for the same program "The essential is in our roots"

As the head of the Kola nuts", can you tell us more about the activities of this association and how can it contribute to the progress of young Cameroonian artists there in Spain?

Kolanuts promotes and preserves African arts. For instance work of arts such as mask, African tales and ethnical instruments. These revitalize the African ratios in Spain to develop their professions and at the same time rescue the anonymity. 'Kola nuts' has a project to work things out and have a place back home where the youth can come along and play any traditional instrument when they feel like. The association also provides the knowledge of manufacturing instruments. Because if they don't know where they come from, they will never know where they are going to. The essential is in our roots, let no one forget that.

Have you any plan of touring in Cameroon?

That's my dream, to be back home where I have never had even a single concert. I started playing when I was too young in school like I said before, and just before I could even handle a guitar in 1975, my friends and I were crossing the Atlantic ocean to Nigeria: Biada Black, Boniface, Charlie Tamajong, Jacob Nguni, Christopher Abongwa. Time will tell, now that we should be in contact, I'll surely let you know when: I was once invited by the Ministry of culture in the 50th anniversary of Cameroon Independence where the contract was signed and later, there wasn't any more information on this. It was a very big deception for me because I had to cancel the projects and performances because my country has all the priority. To verify this, I'll not hesitate to forward documents relating this event.

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