

JONI HAASTRUP

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall in the dancehalls of Lagos, Nigeria in the early 1960's when Victor Olaiya and his Cool Cats were packing them in with his highlife sound. Bands like the Abalabi Rhythm Dandies and Eddie Okonta and his Top Aces with sax player Orlando Julius Ekemode were basking in their country's newfound independence after years of British colonial rule. O.J. yearned for a more traditional sound, and that idea became the Modern Aces- "playing highlife and popular Western styles while gently nudging the music closer to African roots" writes Gary Stewart in *Breakout*. At the same time, a young singer named Joni Haastrup was making his debut in his brother's band Sneakers at a 1964 New Year's gig in Ondo.

Joni (pronounced "Johnny") Haastrup came of age in a royal household in the waning days of colonial Nigeria. His grandfather was a King in the Yoruba town of Ilesa in Western Nigeria and he grew up surrounded by, and soon playing, music. Local drummers would come perform for his grandfather, and old American 78's and calypso discs were heard at the local record shop. His brother taught him to play the recorder, but who could resist the sounds of Chuck Berry and Little Richard blaring from the streets? The kid was hooked, and a born entertainer- Sneakers was formed and the gigs soon followed. In 1965, Victor Olaiya was morphing his Cool Cats into the more modern All Stars Soul International, and 18 year old Joni was tapped to sing.

Re-enter O.J. Ekemode and his Modern Aces. 1966 saw the foundations of Afro-Beat with the release of their "Super Afro Soul" LP featuring- you guessed it- Joni Haastrup on vocals. (an unknown Fela Ransome Kuti used to sit in on trumpet with the Modern Aces, before taking up sax and forming Koola Lobitos) James Brown was all the rage at this point, and the young star tearing up stages across Western Nigeria soon became known as his country's "Soul Brother Number One". Later that year, the cover band Clusters International, seeking a dynamic stage presence, snagged Joni as their front man- a role Joni flourished in for the next few years.

Imagine a hot African evening at the Sunday Afternoon Jump parties in Lagos- sweat and beer and sex and funk hanging like a dusty fog in the twilight club. Bodies electric shake and grind under the hot lights. Farm kids and city-slickers and the occasional foreign hipster mingle loosely- seemingly oblivious to the bloody civil war raging in the Igbo lands to the East. The band plays blistering versions of American soul and British pop hits as their singer struts and writhes across the stage, living up to his moniker. It is into this scene that Cream's legendary drummer Ginger Baker walks one night at the Kakadu nightclub. An invitation was quickly extended and Joni Haastrup was soon on his way to London to join Baker's Airforce project- a rock band with strong African influence in rhythm and drumming. A singer, of course, by trade, Joni was expected to take up organ for the departing Steve Winwood. Two days of frantic practice sessions later, he was onstage with the 10-piece Airforce band, singing and playing guitar and electric piano before an audience of thousands. The band then toured the British Isles and France, an eye-opening experience for the young Nigerian. In February of 1971, he was onstage for the epic "Drum Battle" concert at London's Lyceum between Ginger Baker and Elvin Jones- "It was a very important opportunity for me as a performer to be a part of that gig" he says of the heavyweight match-up. Indeed, throughout his stay in the UK, Joni was fomenting the sound that was to be MonoMono.

Returning to Lagos in 1971, Joni formed MonoMono with his friend and bassist Baba Ken Okulolo, guitarist Jimmy Adams and percussionists Candido Obajimi and Friday Jumbo. The band recorded seven original tracks for their debut LP- a drastic departure from the soul covers of the 60's groups, but a logical progression from the jazz-rock fusion saturating the London scene. Joni's keys on the lush, meandering title track "Give the Beggar a Chance" reminds one of Ray Manzarek while on "Kenimania" he wails like an Africa counter-point to the Skatalites' master organist Jackie Mittoo. "Ema Kowa Lasa Ile Wa" has a traditional sound but also long rock interludes, as do the two versions of "Find Out"- did the Dead ever get their hands on this? "Lida Lou" is perhaps the most telling track from these sessions- a pulsating six minute Afro-funk workout perfectly suited to it's time & place. Written in London and recorded in Lagos, the album was released in 1972 on EMI, a relationship forged after the label put out Joni's debut EP, "A Dele" in '69.

Now if MonoMono happened to be an American band at this point, they might have recorded with the Muscle Shoals boys down in Alabama or been jamming with Tower of Power in some East Oakland shithole dive. Amid the OPEC oil embargo, Watergate and IRA bombs, the sound of their follow-up record, 1974's "Dawn of Awareness", took on the bluesrock grooves of Santana and Hugh Masekela, but with their own unique Yoruban flavor. Indeed, one hears echoes of the Allman Brothers' "Revival" on MonoMono's "Awareness is What You Need" and after listening to "Plain Fighting" you could easily imagine the band sharing the stage with the Doobie Brothers at an EastSide San Jose street festival. This is Afro-Rock, and Mono Mono was one of the most popular bands in the land.

Of course, countless fans and blistering live shows don't always translate into album sales, especially when your label won't promote your record, so the mid-70's found Mono Mono without a home, and Joni ended up in the Bay Area of Northern California, settling in Santa Cruz to recruit and rehearse a band for an ill-fated Hugh

Masekela tour that never happened. Back in London in 1978, Joni recorded his solo gem- "Wake Up Your Mind" for the Afrodesia imprint. Laced with funk basslines, swirling keyboards and screaming guitars, this is Joni's most "Western" record, but at the same time unmistakably of the African diaspora. From the slow-motion disco of "Imokiraria" to the stone cold groove of "Laila Ilala" to the Rueben Wilson-style funk of "Free My People"- Joni is soaking up the sounds of the times and blending them with the music of his roots into something original and new and very, very good. (Which might explain why the record can fetch over \$450 among collectors!)

In 1979 Joni returned to the Bay Area where he resides to this day. Riding up to Joni Hastrup's apartment in East Oakland, I was a bit nervous to meet the guy known in his homeland as Nigeria's Soul Brother Number One. The kind, soft-spoken man who met me in the hallway wearing a San Francisco 49ers turtleneck and sandals immediately put me at ease. I entered a small living room dominated by several African drums and a large Buddhist shrine; CNN flashed mutely on the t.v. as we made our introductions and settled in for a chat. "I've done music my whole life," he says with obvious enthusiasm despite his shuffling gait, the residual effects of a series of strokes over the last decade. He's taught West African dance and drumming for the past 30 years; organized the San Francisco Carnival celebrations; worked with the Oakland Youth Chorus and Mission Cultural Center (SF); gigged with bands in smaller clubs and bars throughout Northern California and appeared on a couple Chris Isaac records- "I don't know how to say no!" Joni laughs about his many projects. But the single overriding facet of his remarkable life is probably his deep involvement with Nichiren Buddhism. "My spirits guide me every inch of my life," says the chapter leader, who spends much of his days communicating with novices and studying the Lotus Sutra. He has no doubts about a full recovery from his health issues and plans a return to teaching and the stage- "I miss the kids!" Indeed, Joni Hastrup is earning his teaching credential from USC as this is being written, eagerly awaiting an afternoon outing with his 11-year old son, and dreaming about the next phase of his long musical career.

-TophOne

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