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Godwin Kabaka Opara: *The Guitar Virtuoso of Igbo Highlife*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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**Photo by Kabaka of The Oriental
Brothers Intl.”**

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GODWIN KABAKA OPARA

Godwin Kabaka Opara: The Guitar Virtuoso of Igbo Highlife

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe · Biography · Ozikoro.com

When people talk about Igbo highlife guitar legends, Godwin “Kabaka” Opara’s name always comes up, sometimes even first. His guitar didn’t just produce sound; it spoke. It laughed, cried, teased, and danced. Kabaka was one of those rare artists whose strings carried the entire soul of Eastern Nigeria. As a member of the iconic Oriental Brothers International Band, Kabaka helped shape the sound that many Igbo people still see as the true heartbeat of highlife.

01

Early Life: A Young Man and His Guitar

Godwin Opara, known as Kabaka was a Nigerian Igbo highlife musician, guitarist, and one of the original members and founders of the Oriental Brothers International Band. Godwin Opara grew up immersed in village rhythms, ceremonial drums, and the melodies of highlife pioneers. But the guitar was where he found his voice. Friends would say he could “hear music where others heard noise,” and from early on, he had a natural gift for riffs and melodies.

By the time he was a young man, Kabaka was already playing like someone twice his age. His talent would eventually lead him into one of the most influential band formations in West African music history.

Kabaka originates from Umuawara, Umuoye, Imerienwe, in Ngor Okpala, Imo State. Born into a big family where he is the second son.

His early education took place at Baptist Primary School, Imerienwe. His musical journey began early, playing the trumpet as a primary school pupil. Following his primary education, he ventured to Onitsha for secondary school. Later, he attended a commercial secondary school in Enugu, where his passion for music truly flourished.

02

Career

Kabaka moved to Lagos in the early seventies, after the civil war, where he played with a musical group owned by Mr Ikediala. Kabaka became a founding member of the Oriental Brothers International Band at Easygoing Hotel, alongside names like Sir Warrior, Dan Satch, Nathaniel Ejiogu, and Prince Ichita. Together, they revolutionised Igbo highlife after the Nigerian Civil War, giving the East a new musical identity.

Kabaka's guitar lines were instantly recognisable. They had that sharp, clean, effortless flow that made people want to dance even when the lyrics were talking about heartbreak, struggle, or life's challenges. Kabaka released multiple albums here. The band released a total of 39 studio albums, 7 compilations, and 4 extended plays. He received a gold disc award after the release of the 'Five Fingers' album. Also, his hit single 'Mangala' received a silver disc award. Songs like "Aja Enwe Nwa", "Theoma," and "Otu Uzoma" are classics partly because Kabaka's guitar gave them life.

People didn't just listen to Oriental Brothers; they felt them. In 1976, Kabaka embarked on a solo career, forming The Kabaka International Guitar Band. He continued to produce high-quality Highlife music, releasing fourteen albums and creating hits like 'Mangala Special'. He also experimented with Ezebongo rhythms, showcasing his versatility and creativity. Later, he joined forces with The Imo City Band, further solidifying his status as a Highlife legend.

With the support of Derda Promotions, Kabaka made a triumphant return in September 2023 with the album *The Return of Kabaka* after a long hiatus, which received over a million streams and ranked top albums worldwide. Kabaka's highlife music was heavily influenced by the late Rex Jim Lawson. Kabaka helped define what Igbo guitar music should sound like. His influence can be heard in modern highlife, ogene-fusion bands, and even contemporary Afrobeat artists who sample his riffs.

To many fans, he remains "the man whose guitar could talk." His work with the Oriental Brothers remains timeless, and his solo performances continue to inspire younger musicians who want to master true Igbo highlife guitar.

03

Kabaka's legacy is simple but powerful:

Play from the heart, honour your culture, and let the music carry your story. Some of his major albums with the Oriental Brothers are 'Uwa Atualamujo/ Ihe Chinyere,' 'The Oma,' 'Ischim nyara gi,' 'Five Fingers,' 'Oriental Special,' 'Osa enwe akwu,' 'Onyaoma nmadu eji egbuya,' 'Anam ele chi,' 'Hallelujah,' "Madu bu aja" and 'Abialam

04

Death

Kabaka was expected to release another album in 2025 under the Derda Promotion but, sadly the Veteran Highlife musician and co-founder of Oriental Brothers International Band Godwin Kabaka Opara died at age 77.

Kabaka's record label Derda Promotions confirmed his passing in a statement to Cable LifeStyle on Friday. Ammarachi Anyanwu, the chief operating officer of Derda Promotions, disclosed that the musician died on Thursday.

The cause of his death was, however, not revealed. "Derda Promotions is deeply saddened to announce the passing of our esteemed artist, Godwin Kabaka Opara, an icon who pioneered and revolutionized Highlife music, on March 21st, 2024," the statement reads in part.

SOURCES

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