

ART & LIFE



Choc City stars' 2015  
compilation album:  
The Indestructible  
Choc Boi Nation

Music

Legends of

By **Eromo Egbejule** in Jos

**T**hey call it J-Town or Tin City. Jos, a city of just over a million souls, is situated at the heart of Nigeria's Middle Belt. For decades work here has been in mining, steel, biscuits, cereals, brewing - and tourism, as its high-altitude climate brings relief from the heat of Lagos.

Jos also has a remarkable roll call of musical talents who have once called it home, including heavyweights 2face Idibia and Asa, regarded as two of the best to ever hold a microphone, and P-Square, the identical-twin singing and dancing duo. Rapper and producer Jesse Jagz, his elder brother Jude 'MI' Abaga and close associates Ice Prince, Chopstix, Endia, Yung L, E-Kelly and Ruby Gyang also hail from the city. In Nollywood, too, actors Desmond Elliot and Saint Obi are among several who lived in the town long before their ascent to stardom.

But just how did a relatively small city far from Lagos or Abuja, known mostly for its mining ores, come to be a cradle of talent for the entertainment industry? The album cover of Jesse Jagz's *Odysseus* (pictured overleaf), showing a sepia image of three white children sitting on a picnic rug with an older black girl, offers some insight.

In 1966, the year in which two bloody coups heralded a 30-month-long civil war that shattered the young independent nation's fragile harmony, two missionary families from the Sudan United Mission-Christian Reformed Church arrived in the state of Gongola (now known as Taraba), an eight-hour drive away from Jos.

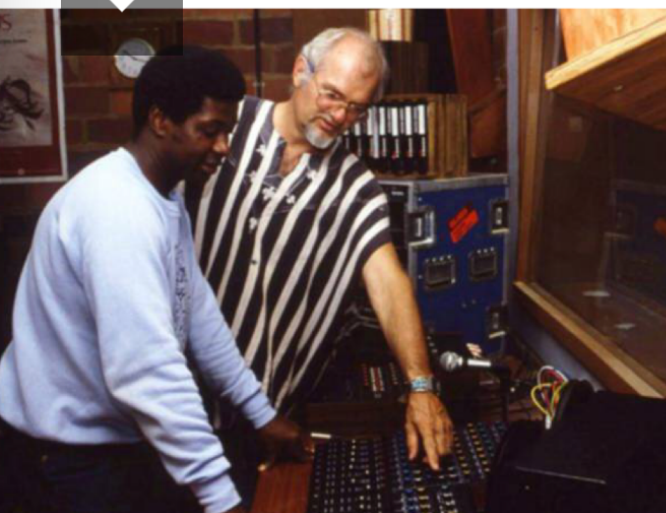
#### GOSPEL ROOTS

The missionaries were William Evenhouse, a Dutch-American musician and teacher, and Reverend Jan Boer, a Dutch-Canadian preacher. Both men eventually resettled in Jos a few years down the line. The cover photo of *Odysseus* was taken in the grounds of Boer's idyllic Jos home. It shows his three biological children with their adopted sister Lydia Abaga - the daughter of a local Junkun preacher and future mother to Jesse Jagz and MI.

As a young, passionate musician and producer Evenhouse set up a studio in the mid-80s with help from a young man called Panam Percy Paul, ●●●

Sometimes it just takes a spark to ignite a musical generation. This is the story of Jos, the Plateau State city that birthed a galaxy of stars for the Nigerian recording industry

# J-Town

BILL EVENHOUSE  
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●●● who would go on to become one of Nigeria's most popular gospel musicians. The studio provided the backdrop for many of the young children born to the clergymen and their converts in the city to launch a music platform under Panam's guidance. When Evenhouse left mission employment in Nigeria to take up a role at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, he sold the equipment to Panam, who relocated it to Tafawa Balewa Street and created the record label Panam Music World. He has also set up a music college in the city.

"The Evenhouse studio is where Panam used to do all his work," reminisces Jesse Jagz. "[He] is a demigod. I used to record albums as a producer for a lot of artistes. There's nobody below the age of fifty that did not grow

up listening to Panam's music, there's nobody that doesn't know him. He was what everybody who was the musician's musician listened to. There's no artiste in the north, whether in church or not, that has not been influenced by Panam."

Panam still leads congregations in the city. From his church he reflects on how far the young musicians he watched growing up have come: "All these boys are my children," he says with pride. "P-Square used to record demos at my studio. Jeremiah [Gyang] would come around a lot and those Abaga boys produced albums for people there too. Their parents are my good friends. It's a thing of joy to see them progress and become top musicians."

Panam's concerts were the first major introduction to the showman life for

the young, impressionable kids of Jos. "Panam was the everything in Jos, in terms of music," Lydia Abaga tells *The Africa Report* from her sitting room. "The whole town would shelve every programme and attend his concert. [He] would go to churches and sing and we would also take the boys to Hill Station Hotel, where he held most of the concerts. Jude would go to sit so close to the stage so that he could see Panam very well and almost touch him."

#### LABELS ARE BORN

Also at those concerts were children of other pastors and fellow Christians including Jeremiah Gyang, the son of a local pastor. In 2004, the vocalist, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist was the first artist signed to the Chocolate

## Sounds of the suburbs

FOR MANY, THE TOWN OF TEMA in Ghana represents infrastructure and development, with its harbour, oil refinery and urban-planned communities. But for those in the know Tema is also a hotbed of musical talent. Singers Becca, Nana Boroo, Criss Waddle, R2Bees, rappers Sarkodie and Yaa Pono, and dancehall artist Stonebwoy, all cut their teeth in this suburb of Accra.

In the early 2000s, hiplife was catching on as a brand

new music genre styled by Reggie Rockstone, blending hip-hop with the traditional highlife sounds.

But by early 2006, a funkier version of the new sound was emerging from the suburb, spearheaded by new age producers like the now famous producer Killbeatz, who keyed into new sounds from Nigeria. There was a tectonic shift, and the area formerly known for its factories now chalked up popular musicians to its list of exports.



Ace broadcaster Isaac 'Doctor Duncan' Williams aided the shift. As a radio personality on Adom 106.3 FM, he anchored rap freestyle battles on his Saturday night show *Kasahare Level*, named for the Twi word for rap.

This unearthed artists like Sarkodie, Yaa Pono, Stonebwoy and Guru, whose single 'Alkayida' popularised a dance that went viral. Doctor Duncan was Sarkodie's first manager, signing the bearded tongue-twister to his Duncwills Entertainment label in 2009.

Continuing its musical legacy, Tema now has a school of the arts helping cultivate new performers in the visual arts, music and theatre. ● **E.E.**





**Below: Jesse Jagz pays homage to his home on the album cover of *Odysseus***



EROMO EGBEJULE

**Above, L-R: A young Panam Percy Paul in the studio with William Evenhouse; Jesse Jagz; Jos-born Endia, one of the new generation musicians now based in Lagos**  
**Right: Bola Adebisi's bungalow, where Loopy Music began**

City record label, co-founded by Audu Maikori and Paul Okeugo, two graduates of the University of Jos.

Chocolate City grew from a regular evening hangout, the Guild of Artists and Poets, with young intellectuals and creative folks from the university and its environs, and went on to become one of the country's most dominant labels to date.

Around the same time, there was another Jos clergyman also inclined to music. Bola Adebisi was at least 10 years older than the eldest of the young musicians but they all trooped to see him. Younger – and trendier – than the orthodox ministers and more liberal, he sported dreadlocks, danced on stage, and, as a youngster, had been part of a two-man gospel band that performed at various secondary schools across town.

Circa 2003, when he was leaving for the United States, he paid the rent on his three-bedroom bungalow and handed it over to the Abaga boys to use as a studio. Jude, whom he had met first, was designated studio manager and Jesse, who had produced a couple of albums for him, was the studio engineer. The rest of the kids began to frequent the place, with some moving in fully, and thus Loopy Music, an alternative hip-hop music collective



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popular throughout the 2000s and a breeding ground for several of Nigeria's superstars, was born.

Almost 15 years later the landscape has changed. Hidden in one of the crevices off Lamingo Dam Road, the bungalow where Loopy Music began lies abandoned. As their popularity grew, the Abaga brothers, like many other musicians, left Jos for the bright lights and big city of Lagos. Today MI is the CEO of Chocolate City Music, now relocated to Lagos, which merged with Loopy Music in 2015. In the aftermath of their exodus, a new line of artists filled the vacuum left behind. But some, like sultry singer-songwriter Bella Alubo and popular audio engineer Suka Sounds, are also joining the conveyor belt out of Jos.

Gyang has returned home with his young family to tend to his strawberry farm. But despite his move into agriculture he has still found time to release his third studio album, holding the fort in the absence of his missing comrades.

"Lagos wants to dilute your sound and control things. I make music that I'm comfortable with and not for a crowd," Gyang says. "Have you seen how me and the Zumutan Mata (women's fellowship choir) go around performing? That's the distinct music I want to be known for, not what Lagos thinks I should do."

For young would-be stars coming up in Jos the allure of Lagos and Abuja will still draw them in, but though the town's heyday as a musical melting pot may have passed, Nigeria owes much of its musical reputation to J-Town. ●