



PHOTO BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

Rhythm of paradise

Portland musician Okaidja Afroso releases his third album, 'Messenger'

BY SUE ZALOKAR
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Ghana is a long way from Portland, but to local musician, Okaidja Afroso, the gap is almost imperceptible.

Afroso grew up in Kokrobite, a small fishing village west of Ghana's capital, Accra. Though he came from a family well known for their singing, Afroso was a dancer first. He worked and traveled with the Ghana Dance Ensemble at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies, touring the U.S. and Germany and teaching about Ghanaian culture.

It was after a rehearsal one day that Obo Addy, a Portland-based musician who is also from Ghana, invited Afroso to be a part of his musical group, Okropong, in Portland. Afroso was in his early 20s when he packed his bags to make the move to the United States.

Today, Afroso is a vibrant and passionate performer and educator who combines the traditional music of his roots with where he is in the present. He teaches workshops and in schools across Oregon about Ghanaian music, stories, history, geography and language, sharing his culture, in the Ghanaian way, through music and oral tradition.

The idea behind his band Shokoto, he says, is to "find unique sounds." The band plays music with roots in Ghana, and blends ideas from parts of South and Central America — true to a consummate student of the African diaspora. The sounds incorporate the Ga music from the Southern part of Ghana and the Dagomba music from the Northern part of Ghana.

In his native language Ga, Shokoto means a place of no hardship — a paradise, "a place where we would all like to be," Afroso says,

describing it as existing only in the heart.

Shokoto will perform at the Alberta Rose Theatre on Saturday, Aug. 25 for the release of his third album, "Messenger."

Sue Zalokar: Tell us about the African diaspora and its impact on music.

Okaidja Afroso: The African diaspora brought so much music to the Americas. One might ask how they (slaves) were able to preserve that music for the longest time. It is through their drum language. Even though they were not able to play it, they could sing it. We practice the oral tradition. So many things that we know, many things that I know about my culture, I didn't read in books. It was actually told to me, it was taught to me. It is my duty to teach it to someone else by speaking it to them, by singing it to them, by playing it to them.

S.Z.: You have spent much time in rural and urban communities performing and running workshops. Are there any similarities between rural Ghana and rural United States?

O.A.: There are some similarities. For one, everybody knows everybody. There is something that is really strong about rural communities in Ghana. There is lots of togetherness in terms of how they do things and I think one of the main reasons is music and dancing. When somebody passes, or a baby is born, there will be tons of drummers. And they will be playing and everybody in the community will for sure be there and dancing or listening. Everybody comes together. Sometimes I feel there a bit of disconnect in some of the rural towns here. It is just cultural differences. It is not good or bad. It's just how we live differently.

S.Z.: You have lived, traveled and performed around the globe. In your opinion, is poverty universal?

O.A.: It is. Poverty can be looked at in many different ways. People who are very rich, but lack a strong cultural background are poor. Poverty doesn't only come in terms of monetary worth. Every country has a strong culture, but if you disconnect from that culture, then you are going to hurt your legacy. There is nothing to really pass on. That is poverty. The greater poverty is people who don't have money and don't have food. In many parts of Ghana, there are many people who don't have anything but they find time to enjoy life. I think they are rich in many ways.

S.Z.: How does Ghanaian culture and society address issues of homelessness and/or mental illness?

O.A.: You will see people who are mentally ill in big cities like Accra. I think the country could do better taking care of the mentally ill so that they are not in the street. In terms of homelessness, the rate is not huge. And in the small towns, families take care of each other. The town I grew up in, there was nobody who was homeless. There was absolutely no one. You're going to live with someone. There will be somewhere where you are crashing and you will be welcome.

S.Z.: Storytelling is a huge part of the traditions of your people. Do you have a favorite story that you like to tell?

O.A.: The folk tales, when it comes to that, in Ghana we have all the stories about Anansi (the prankster spider). When you go to a school room, you will find many books about Anansi. The story originated from Ghana and neighboring countries like Togo and Nigeria. We all have similar stories about Anansi the spider. Every school in America has stories about Anansi.

Many times when I was growing up in the evening, we would sit around and people would be telling stories. We do that until we fall asleep. I grew up in a town with no electricity. We used kerosene lamps. No TV. We never had TV. I never had a toy that I would say, this is my toy. But I never felt like I should have gotten a toy from my mother. It didn't matter. But at school, when we had lunch break, I could see the ocean. And I swam there everyday and I was able to catch the biggest waves.

S.Z.: You combine elements of the modern and traditional worlds in your dance, stories and music. How do the modern and traditional worlds interact?

O.A.: It is growing and growing. About three years ago I started to go to Fairbanks a lot and I met two gentlemen who play American roots music. Very good musicians. One is Raymond McLain and the other one a Canadian harmonica virtuoso Mike Stevens (he appears on Afroso's album, "Messenger"). We became really good friends. One day they asked me to play with them. I didn't know them, they were so humble. We went to play and I realized that these guys were crazy. Raymond plays the banjo. His family was the McLain Family Band. He is in the American books among the best banjo players. I was playing with them, and I was playing my Ghanaian music as I would play it and it locked like that (he locks his fists together). For three years, every year we meet and we play.

S.Z.: So maybe there is an Americana/Ghanaian album in your future?

O.A.: Well actually, yes. Mike and I are going to work on an album which addresses our backgrounds then meet in the middle to see the differences, but mostly the similarities. This is an album that we just started talking about that we are going to make. There are all of these ideas that really blend effortlessly.

S.Z.: "Messenger" is your third album. How does this work represent your evolution as a person, an artist and a performer?

O.A.: "The Traditionalist," my first album, was raw, untouched feelings of Ghanaian traditional music. Nothing else. No tricks, nothing. Besides, I don't like tricks on an album. I like the voice to sound like me. But "The Traditionalist" preserves my past. The second album was the beginning of thinking about the African Diaspora. You can hear me trying to blend different vocal ideas and cultures. It is a little bit adventurous. This album, "Messenger," is where I am now. I have evolved. You can think about the past and where you are from, but all you have is now.

S.Z.: What message do you hope to bring to your audiences?

O.A.: I think what I bring, and what American audiences are very hungry for, are fusions. I have been working on a song called African Cowboy. I played it a few weeks ago when I was in Alaska. Mike and Raymond were there too, and I said I want to play this song. We didn't practice, we just played it right there. The audience heard it, and when they came to buy CDs they were asking, "Do you have that song, African Cowboy?" I had to tell them, no. I think the American audience are really hungry for something like that, to hear the blending of musical genres. And maybe they think that there must have been a time when we were all one people. To really reconnect it back. That is really what I hope that when people come to my show or when they hear my music, they hear that. When I go to play in other communities, I always find someone to collaborate with. I am not only showing what I am doing, but I am showing that I want to know about you, too. Through music we can see our similarities.

S.Z.: When was the last time you were in Ghana?

O.A.: Three years ago. I am going back in December.

S.Z.: Do the people in your town notice any kind of change in the climate or the weather?

O.A.: There is no big talk. But I can tell you this: Global warming is happening. I remember where I used to play on the coast when I was growing up. The ocean is coming. It has traveled inland quite a bit. It has taken some land. But people are not really thinking of it that way. If you are not a scientist and you are a fisherman, you will notice those little subtle changes, but you are not going to know why. They don't think about it as global warming, but I can see it happening.

I remember when I was growing up, there were so many coconut trees, and I remembered places that we would take naps. I remember the fisherman had to pull their canoes so far up from the water. And it's not that far up anymore. The ocean is traveling. You don't see it if you are living there. But if you go back, you will notice many changes.

S.Z.: What words would you share with the youth of today in regard to the future of our world, be they American or Ghanaian?

O.A.: I say cultural preservation. I feel like there are a lot of Ghanaian musicians who think they need to advance so much. The only people who are preserving the culture of Ghana are the people who are playing the traditional drum. They will be the greatest ambassadors, not the people who went to the business schools, not the people who became lawyers, not the people who become even president. If we give them the platform, it is the people who learn about their culture who will be the ambassadors.