



BABA AYINDE ONILU

THE MUSICIAN HIS MUSIC HIS INSTRUMENTS



Baba Ayinde Onilu : His Biography

By Alana Rajah

Baba Ayinde Onilu is an organic percussionist whose music is a symphony of sounds that capture the essence of the slender Caura River. As it takes birth atop the Northern range and meanders through the abundant Caura Valley, this ecosystem is the sacred home of the Onilu tradition. His beautiful name is of Yoruba origin; 'Baba' meaning Father, 'Ayinde' meaning 'we give praises and he came' and his title 'Onilu', given to him by his Father, meaning 'drummer'. "Father we give praises and he came drummer of the Yoruba origin", is the full meaning of Baba's name but what stood out to me the most is the way he leads a life honoring the power of each of those words.

Organic percussion was a concept derived from Baba's father, the late Jajah Oga Onilu's innate ability to make instruments to mimic the sounds of nature. He was phenomenal in leaving behind a rich legacy of exquisite craftsmanship.

Imagine growing up nestled between an ecosystem that responds to every spark of your creative thinking. You pluck a gourd from its tree for instance, or what we call a 'Calabash' here in Trinidad, clean out the inside of it and allow the outside shell to dry and harden until it becomes wood-like. You then use it as an instrument to play natural rhythms. This is just one example of the different types of instruments that Jajah Oga Onilu created, specific to our beautiful island of Trinidad.

You might ask how did he then play these instruments? For Jajah Oga Onilu, the rhythmic scale begun with what he called the 'dopsion' which is the rhythm of the breath. Traditionally, this was present in the Shouter Baptist faith as they would play the drums from their mouth. Using the mouth to play the drum was a result of the banning of the drum during the period of the transatlantic slave trade. Slaves could not play any drums so their genius and creativity manifested by taking the rhythm of the drum, putting it on the breath and singing the 'dopsion'. That rhythm was then put onto Tamboo Bamboo and since Trinidad is an oil country, biscuit tins were used followed by the steel drum. This eventually became our national instrument.





Knowing the rhythmic scale is considered the doorway into knowing how to play alongside any other genre, any other time signature, any other vibe, feel, pulse or beat. The rhythmic 'dopsion' carries you into a rhythmic scale of understanding all the different beats, patterns and counter patterns. These different types of rhythms can be used to influence any genre. Different tones exist and knowing how to blend these tones create a natural vibe.

Baba Ayinde Onilu says, "For my father, it was connecting to destiny and self. How does one come up with these ideas? It is immersing oneself on that journey and that is what he did by connecting with nature. Anything you connect with, will feed you. It will feed you knowledge and fill you with inspiration to be creative. We all have that creative energy."

Guided to realizing his purpose, it is without doubt that a divine rhythmic flow within brought life and energy to his music. Baba Ayinde explains that nature is considered the first musician. It is in this state that nature is considered sacred, organic and paid homage to as our sustainer. Organic music is immersing oneself into the sounds that nature provides. Nature is responsible for gifting us different types of frequencies. Our body is composed of energy-producing particles, each of which is in constant motion. So, like everything else in the universe, we are also vibrating and creating energy in response to those frequencies.

We all connect to a natural element that we like, be it a river, the forest, a flower, a plant or an animal. We all have a connection to that natural aspect of our environment. With music however, there is a universal connection that we all have irrespective of race, creed, color, or age. In order to pay their respects to nature, and honor their father's legacy, Baba Ayinde, as well as his brother Modupe, use organic music to connect and bring that consciousness and patriotism especially here in Trinidad and Tobago.





Baba Ayinde expressed his gratitude for growing up in the world of nature and sustainable living. He and his brother understood the value of passing down this way of life to future generations. He believes strongly that the knowledge and understanding of a natural way of life will contribute to one's life and the longevity of one's art form. "The more we take care of ourselves and the environment is the more we could experience this realm." This allows the brothers to work profitably not only financially but with their main focus on being environmentally profitable through nature conservation.

"We are living in a time which is 'go- green' and 'sustainability' driven. Life itself is going down that path especially coming out of the pandemic. Everyone now has an opportunity to capitalize on that and make it marketable because organic music coincides with an organic lifestyle. This is simply eating properly, doing yoga, taking care of yourself, exercising, for example. If young individuals adopt these habits they could benefit holistically. This is an investment in self and your time. Learning and putting thought into it, who knows, you can come up with a grand idea that can make you a millionaire. That could help your entire community and ecosystem around you. It's fun!"

Baba and his brother successfully run a program called "Make and Play" in which I believe every child should be exposed to. Through this educational initiative, young children are introduced to the concept that nature is a part of them. They are able to go into nature, explore their surroundings, find raw materials and make an instrument in which they then learn how to play. This process creates an important outreach to youths. It peaks their interest and captures their attention especially when they hear a flow of certain tones and melodies. Apart from music they also conduct arts and craft workshops, tutoring and percussion classes. Modupe also runs a successful rhythm section that has been instrumental in taking this art form to international borders.





This creates an opportunity to be influential to younger children. They understand an integral concept explained by Baba. “Human beings are created and evolve through a natural process; if we observe that process we realize that we are a huge part of it. Just as things flow, we have to understand how we too should do the same. We have emotions and we have energies that align with that flow. Teaching becomes a beautiful medium to talk to children and open their minds to something new. It is like a new door gets opened in their minds and you were the key. Children never forget those learning experiences and that shows how impactful that exchange can be.

Although challenges may exist Baba confirms that being an organic percussionist is very rewarding. Barriers are minimal as he is not dependent on anything and could simply play. “Lack of inspiration may come from the fact that a lot of people may not grasp or respect the concept. Some people might say a tree is just a tree but what about the people who say no, that is considered our lungs? If we can get more people to understand that that is not just a tree but that is your lungs, it will have a greater impact. Some older folks may conform but what about the ones who do not care. They are like the branches that are already bent and cannot be straightened. It’s bringing back that understanding that yes it is a consciousness.”

Baba beams with national pride as he appreciates the fact that Trinidad is indeed a magnificent place abundant with different cultures, races and ideologies all existing in this space. It is the perfect place to try to keep as the gem that it is. He laments that there is a generation now where the respect for life is not there so it’s easy for them to take another life. “A space within the minds and hearts of the younger generations must exist. We have to contribute positively to their upbringing so that negativity would not influence them. That space would have already been filled with good thoughts, morals, loving nature, respecting their friends and loving life. If you instill certain values at a young age, I think we might have a solution.” ■

