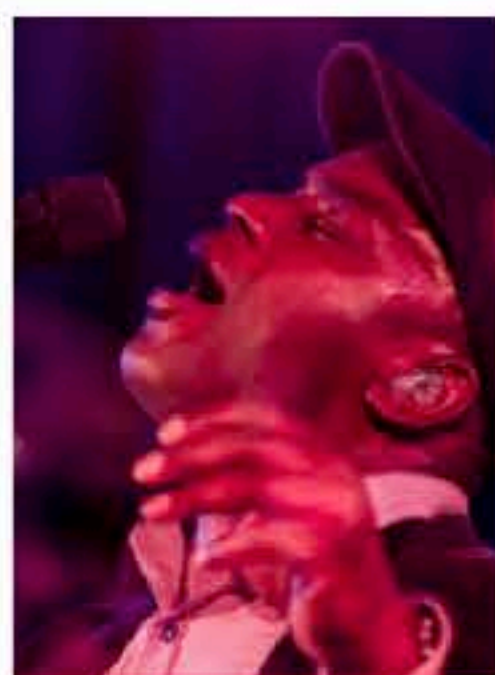


OLA ONABULÉ: IN HIS SHOES

Ola Onabulé is an artist that oozes with soul, depth and integrity. Ola's twenty-year career has seen him perform around the world at Jazz festivals, Jazz clubs and renowned concert halls to significant critical acclaim and having attended several of his performances, they are truly nights to remember. Having released his tenth studio album 'Pointless' in August, Ola's incredible artistry presents us with an album of extraordinary emotion and displays the genius of his storytelling. His music connects with so many people across the world and his masterful combination of embedding his narrative with such infectious rhythm, is something to behold. I caught up with Ola during his incredibly jam-packed schedule and asked him his thoughts on why music is such a powerful tool of communication. 'I imagine it might be a prehistoric, anthropological thing. Rooted partly in our obsessive and endless search for patterns to help us make sense of a chaotic world, as well as the fact that we are social beings who get the best out of one another when we are able to communicate our wants and needs most effectively.'



Ola Onabulé

Sound waves go way beyond hearing, some create vibrations low enough to rattle our skeletons, some are high enough to make our heads ring and many in the middle of the spectrum can illicit specific emotional responses. This is universally, physically true for all human beings. Imagine being able to harness such a force! To understand the power of arranging the elements of sounds into the complexities of rhythm, melody, harmony and silence. To be able to apply this knowledge such that it transcends language, culture and gender barriers amongst many others. To just make people feel, on a multitude of various and varying levels, from playful to profound, from romantic to political and beyond!

I have seen Ola perform live on many occasions and

his songs combine different feels and energies and have such an insane groove. Stunning vocals with a richness and range to die for. It is impossible to not be drawn in. It is clear, especially with his live performances that he feels rhythm in every bone in his body. I asked Ola how rhythm initially become such an important part of his life. 'When I'm writing, I am so inclined to nerd out on the beautiful puzzle that rhythm can sometimes present to the brain, I am playing with ways in which I can adapt it to express the intent in the words they support, but, I am also keenly aware that later on, when I'm performing the song, I want it to feel like I can just put all intellectualizing aside and just move accordingly! I don't know when it started but for as long as I can remember, I have always been fascinated by that dynamic and it's a balance I love exploring...'

Social injustice is a recurring theme in Ola's work and his recent song 'And Yet' was 'Dedicated to the memory of kin who expire under the callous knee of privilege and impunity' The importance of this track is clear. 'Very important indeed. What is most troubling about that song is that I wrote it and the album it appeared on 'Point Less', almost 2 and a half years ago.'

THE POWER OF ARRANGING THE ELEMENTS OF SOUND

Long before it became tragically prescient and poignant in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd.

The song and its fellow album mate, a song called 'I Knew Your Father' was adopted in some quarters as anthems that described the moment. Like so many people of Black African descent living out of Africa, we were once again forced to reflect on a neurosis that exists in the hearts and minds of others, the consequences of which only we would suffer. The abhorrence of a layer of melanin rich skin and the mythologies that have been piled on it for centuries.

'And Yet' is a testimony to my children, and others of the next generation of peoples' of African descent, that

this is an old story playing itself out anew but, one over which they will and must prevail'

And Yet

*Staring down a barrel again
Staring down a barrel again*

*Don't blow Mister, Big controller, do the rags bother
Maybe I could lose the hoodie for ya
Calm down will ya, Don't get triggered, Keep your cool
holstered
We all know you wield the rod of power*

*Just speak clearer, Never louder, I just want to re-
dress the balance in survival's favor
Drag breath deeper, stop, consider, how could we differ
If the past has bound our fates forever...*



Ola Onabulé

*studied and lettered... And yet
I'm staring down a barrel again*

*What's up with ya, Why so bitter, What's enough for ya
Where's the part where someone else gets better
Have no fear, You're in the clear, No one's coming for ya
If that's why you cocked that happy finger*

*I'm aiming elsewhere, what dya care, Please don't end
me here
Just so you fulfill that deadly quota
Exhale slower, then consider, how do we differ
If the past has bound our fates forever...*

*...more... than forever more,
like our bones of contention lining beds of the ocean
...more... to fade never more
Like stains on the cotton that enshroud the forgotten*

*I couldn't be braver, Faster or stronger... And yet
I'm staring down a barrel again
I couldn't be gentler, studied and lettered... And yet*

If I was a leader that never made drama, You guessed

*I'd be staring down some barrel again
And if I'd been falling, I shouldn't start rising, or foreign
and winning
Before way too long I'd be staring down a barrel again*
Ola's long-term manager Maria Avgoulis, has been by his side, supporting him for many years and his family also have a crucial role in his career. I spoke to Ola about how the people around him influence his work and how important it is.



Steve Munding

'Maria is amazing. Period! She is an exemplar of an 'Art First' music manager. Meaning, she wants to know that the artist is putting the art foremost in all their considerations because she believes everything else will fall into place if the work is being created uncompromisingly. Her favorite maxim is true art might not give you what you want, but it will always bring you all you need, always.'

My family are my backbone. My children are all creatives - a fashion designer, a fine artist/painter and a graphic and 3D arts designer. All three are great conceptualists and visualizers and I collaborate with them on many projects and place huge value on their opinion and suggestions.

But of the greatest importance is the support we all give one another. The Arts can sometimes be a challenging way to make a living. Its revenue streams are nothing like conventional jobs and its milestones compare even less favorably with that of traditional career paths. When any one of us is perplexed by the mystery of it all or are chastened by one of the curve balls that being in the Arts can throw you, we share the collective experience and knowledge that we have garnered and support one another'

Live performances are taking a different shape in this current - challenging - time, but Ola has been working hard and releasing videos and performing through live streams. His live streamed performances have been, as you would expect, incredibly high quality and demonstrate his versatility. We discussed the experience of performing to a virtual audience.

'You are so right Fiona; it has been incredibly challenging to come to terms with the surrealism of this moment. And there is nothing more surreal than putting on a gig in my own front room so to speak with the only feedback you get being in the comments section of your social media feed! I mean, It's just bl**dy nuts. But here we are, and I just don't feel like I have a choice. I can't bear the thought of all those music making braincells I've acquired over decades of hard work and the muscle memory of vocal cords, just atrophying away and degrading or being lost. In addition, I think this ties in nicely with your very first question about how music connects us all. Our audiences need us as well, they tell me that! ... And if they have to settle for getting their 'live gig fixes' online then they'll suspend reason and indulge their imaginations and together we can all try to fulfill the need for the sense of being with one another we get from music until such a time as we can get back to normal' Ola's strength, resilience and amazing talent has been an inspiration to many, especially during the current state of the world, so to end, I asked him if he had any words of wisdom or thoughts on how we can all stay strong and positive during these times.



Lunario

'Just that! I would implore everyone to please stay strong and positive. Support one another, speak to one another, ask after one another, get some exercise and listen to an insane amount of music and dance as if no one is watching'

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Written by Fiona Ross

*What we play is
life.*

- Louis Armstrong