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Ben Okafor: Ex- Biafran, now a campaigner of righteousness and justice

When Ben Okafor set out to become a musician, little did he know that his father was going to oppose the idea. Earning your living from singing and writing songs was the least the old man wanted for his son. Ben himself could have been derailed when the Nigerian civil war changed his status to that of a refugee. But through all these, he has learnt to stay with both his dream and gifting.

As common with most Nigerian, African and other families, he was born into a modest family of eight. That is more modest by all standards, considering that a man of God from the Eastern part of Africa (but based in London) is still expecting his 12th child later this year. It is the Lord's doing, it is marvellous in our eyes. My ears tingled when a member of his church i gave a lift told me a couple of weeks back. That reminds me of another servant of God who made it a habit to impregnate his wife regularly.

His household was growing annually and all he knew to do was to pray that God should prevent his wife from conceiving despite all they dii at night . The Almighty was merciful and he sent him a marriage counsellor who told him his prayer would never be answered if he doesn't put his software in check. God's servant got the message and enlisted in a family planning clinic.That's by the way.

Mr Okafor (snr) couldn't understand why one of his children would opt for the entertainment world while the remaining seven are all graduates. But for Ben, he was only following in the footsteps of his parents (the father also played music in his younger days), the influence of the traditional music in his immediate environment and also, the godly music from the church. All these left a desire too strong to ignore.

But despite his desire and ambitions, he never had the opportunity to express himself fully until his older brother, Emeka, gained admission into the university. Unknown to Emeka, the guitar he gave as a parting gift to his younger brother would be a turning point in his musical career. From that time, Ben had only one option, that of taking his ambition to a new level. Not only did the guitar play a part in launching him to his future, from the moment his brother drew the picture of a guitar, Ben knew he was heading for the music world.

If Emeka approved of his younger brother going into music, his father never supported the idea. As far as his dad was concerned, Ben would be wasting his time thinking he would become a musician under his roof. That wouldn't make him give up: 'I just stayed with it, I stayed with it,' the fervency and resilience with which he told me as we sat facing each other at a popular club near Convent Garden was as fresh as about 30 years ago when he said the same thing to his father.

Both father and son were not willing to shift positions, but the turning point came when Mr Okafor saw his son playing on one of the very few television stations of that time while still in Nigeria. In his words:"After many years of staying with it, staying with it, my father saw me on TV in Nigeria and later asked if I was serious about it. That literally won everybody over." It wasn't until later that Ben knew that his father had also nursed the idea of being a musician in his early days, but his mother objected seriously.

Having made a success out of his life, Ben said he knew where his father was coming from. 'He made a success of his life and profession and probably assumed his mum was right, so he wanted to do same to me. But times have changed and things are different, it wasn't necessary for him to go to that length,' the dreadlocks singer and songwriter affirmed. "My mother was more supportive of what I was doing before my father came on board."

But for someone who bid farewell to his fatherland in 1980, one shouldn't expect him not to have been influenced by his new environment. After 22 years of living in London, Ben's style of music reflects the West Indian heavy concentration which is dominant among the ethnic minority. However, he still retains his identity and this forms the backdrop of his works. "I love Nigeria and Africa passionately," he told me at the venue of one of his appearances in the West End.

Although he is not a lone voice in the wilderness, but, "Nna," Ben is happy to be campaigning on the issues of righteousness, human rights and justice. This is his heartbeat: 'I hope we [Africans] can turn away from being the products of bad government to issues of righteousness and justice. We need to retain our identity in order for our contribution to the global family be unique.'

Having played in Nigeria a few times he still intends to do some nation-wide tours in future but circumstances have not allowed for this. Nigerians, he said: 'Are very afraid to step into areas of financial investment if its not going to yield money immediately, or if its not popular. When you begin to talk to people who have lived under military dictatorship for over 30 years about justice, its like you're trying to speak German to a Zulu native. But when you stay with it, people will open up to it. The fact that Nigerians embraced Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, Peter Tosh, etc., is a fact that they embrace the issues of righteousness and the things that matter most to us about our future.'

For me, one of the things i miss most about Nigeria and for which i got an overdose when i came about three months ago, was the sun. As for Ben, Nigeria has a lot of variety, this is one of the things he's missed the most. 'Nigeria is dazzling, you don't see everyone walking about in a grey suit, people are in different attires'. Another thing he must have missed which is for his good and that of Nigeria is the rumbles and shootings of war which he knew as a youth drafted to the youth army called "Boys Company," during the Biafran war. The bullets also missed him, come to think of it, he was in Biafra when the war started and when he finished training with the Boys' Army, their village fell and they ran off. The sharp shooters missed him, thank God.

To the Commander-in chief (CIC) of the Nigerian Armed forces, Chief Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, Ben admires you even if you still campaign for debt relief and despite the menace of armed robbers. 'At least, well done for being able to sustain the Nigerian government for as long as you've done. If you achieve nothing else, at least, that's brilliant.'