

FRESH CALL PERSONALITY

How Thieving Record Execs Frustrated Me Out Of Music Industry

-Nigerian Soulful Songstress; Oby Onyioha

•Contracts Lemmy Jackson to Produce Comeback Album

Oby Onyioha, one of the doyens of the Nigerian music industry, made her first musical statement with the heart-purring and chart-busting "I Want To Feel Your Love" album that took the Nigerian music scene by storm in the 1980s. This was followed by the equally powerful "Break It" around the same period. She left the shores of Nigeria to further her education in 1989, most especially when the bottlenecks in the music industry then made it impossible for her to reap where she had sown. After over a decade sojourn abroad she is back to continue to take African music to world stages where she stopped. She spoke to *Azuka Mardy*, *FreshCall* Newspaper's News Editor on her new album in the pipeline, which she simply titled *Heritage*, amongst other issues: Enjoy.

Can we meet you formally?

My name is Oby Onyioha, but people normally call me Oby. That Oby was actually a mistake in the first album, the man who designed and printed the album thought the spelling of my name was Oby instead of Obi, so he went and put Oby. The two spellings are pronounced differently, but before we could do anything about it, I was told it was too late. So that is how the name got stuck with me. I am used to it now, that is what people know me as: Oby. I am from Abia state. My dad is from Nkporo, in Otuofia Local Government Area of Abia state, my mother is from Delta state, Ahiada precisely. I have a lot of cousins in Akwa Ibom, that is why I am here at the moment. I went to school in various places because my dad travelled a lot. I began my educational pursuits in St. Stephen's Primary School in Umuahia, Abia State, from where I went to Queen's School Enugu for my High School Education. Later I travelled to the United States of America for my University education where I obtained a B.A. in History and Business Management respectively. I went on to obtain a Doctorate degree and a Masters Degree in Social Anthropology from SOAS, University of London.

Aside your educational laurels, what are your other accomplishments?

I was once a triple beauty queen: Miss Bikini, Miss Imo State and Miss Nigeria (Bata). I have also authored two novels: 'A Woman's Journey', 'The Hangman' and a compilation of Poems: 'Looking Beyond', which are all still awaiting publication. I am the Vice-Chancellor of African Continental University, Georgia USA, an online institution, still undergoing process of registration.

Let's discuss your debut album, before you finally disappeared from the music scene

The first album we released was titled "I want to feel your love". It was an album that almost didn't happen because at the time I was in school, I have just come back to Nigeria from American on Holidays, my brother had written some songs that he wanted to take to Odion Iruoje in Phonodisk and he went to the gate but they won't let him in, so he said to me, oh please why don't you come with me, if they see a pretty girl they will attend to me, I too want to be a star. I told him he had to be crazy. I told



him to get away from me, but he begged and begged and begged, so a friend of mine, God rest her soul, late Ogbeyanu Chiosa, one time head of the National Theatre said to me, oh he has begged you enough, why don't you just go. So I said okay I will go and finally I went there. We got there. I saw Lemmy Jackson, Laolu Akins and Beckley Jones, all members of the defunct BLO band. They were all there. I said to them, my brother brought these songs. So they looked at each other. My brother gave them the songs.

What is your brother's name?

Onyioha Onyioha. I think Lemmy and Iruoje made some eye connection. So Lemmy invited me downstairs. He said he wanted to show me the recording room. So we went to the recording room. He sat behind the Piano and said can you sing. I hesitated, but he said go ahead, sing something. I sang something, but he didn't say anything. We went back upstairs, so Lemmy said to Iruoje, she is dynamite. Iruoje said to my brother, well in that case, we will take your music if you can persuade your sister to sing it. I told them I was in school, that I had no time for what they were suggesting. We left and in three days time, I went back to school in America. My brother kept calling me on the phone telling me they are serious, that they want me to

come and do something. I didn't pay any attention to them. It wasn't until a month later that I came back to the country and got back in touch with them. They said could I do backing vocals for somebody, so I went there and did the back-up vocals and from there I met Paul Aifuwa of Time Communications, where the late Tina Onwudike worked as well, that is how I got to meet Tina Onwudike. Before I realised it, we were doing a demo. We cut a demo, we went to London. That is how "I want to feel your love" happened. We recorded it in January of the year. But it was not released until September of same year. It took that long. We just felt it was a good album and that was it, so we never really thought much about it. I remember how excited I was when I heard myself on the radio for the first time. The first track that was played on radio was "Nne nnye ezidi", the African track. I was telling everybody, that's me, that's me singing on radio.

That album was a hit, because it was something simple, fresh but unique, which made it easily identifiable amongst other works in the market then. What was the income from the sales like?

Nothing much? That is why I left.

Why? Was it not properly promoted?

It was promoted properly, it was just corruption.

People in the industry and people who were marketing it. It was a combination of factors. Financing and bootlegging took a toll on it. It was very difficult to actually get real figures. It was an absolute mess. It was a very unhappy period for me. So you had all the noise but nobody gave you royalties. They will lie and lie about how much you sold. How we actually knew how much we were selling was when they sacked the accountant. The accountant then came and said well, let me tell you what you've been doing. What you have been doing has really been fantastic. At that time, either in two days or a week, I had sold 150,000 albums, yet these people told me that in six months I have only sold 5,000 copies. This is a record album that everybody had, most people had "I want to feel your love" album in their houses. Tell me, in almost a year, all you sold is 5,000 copies and yet you were buying big cars and houses. It was so disheartening.

Which records company released the album?

Phonodisk. After that I did a follow up album titled "Break It", but it wasn't happily done because by the time it was even finished, the person who was supposed to be producing it in Los Angeles, stole the tapes, came to Nigeria and released it without it being completed.

On what Nigerian label was it released?

It was on Sunny Ade's label. But Sunny Ade didn't know about it. The man went and stole it and brought to Sunny Ade. It was Sunny Ade who was going to sponsor it. I went there to meet the man to do the album. We have just gone in the first day, so he gave me what I was supposed to sing. So I told him the songs he gave me were not my songs. I told him that normally I do my songs. He told me, well you are here now, it's either you do this or you go back to Nigeria. What in the world? So I said okay, let me just humour him. That I wasn't seriously going to do it, and then I would complain to Sunny about it, so I just did that the first day. He gave me a paper and I was reading the songs. I was trying to get myself familiarised with the songs. I did six tracks and went back to the Hotel room because I was asked to come back the next morning. I went to the studio recording the next morning to find that the man was not there. The recording company told me, oh! He is coming. I and the man who owned the studio waited the whole day, he did not come. We waited for days but he did not come. He later called the studio and told them that he was in Nigeria to raise more money to finish the work, then we relaxed. We waited up to six weeks for him, but he did not come, so I called Sunny Ade's office and I said where is this man? He said oh! Oby what are you doing in U.S. We are about to release your album. I said what do you mean you are about to release my album. He said Victor brought it and said it was finished. I say no, the album is not finished. Then he said you better hurry because the album is about to be released. So I got on the next plane to Nigeria. Later we tried to salvage the work because the man was not a qualified producer. We brought in Lemmy Jackson who make it sound decent. Luckily it sort of hit



the market as well. It got quite popular. Again I did not make any money out of that one. There and then I decided to concentrate on my academia. I moved away to do something else.

When did you finally leave Nigeria?

I left in 1989.

What have you been doing since then?

I went to get my Masters in Social Anthropology and a Doctorate as well from the University of London. I did work in a health industry. I worked so I could have money to pay my school fees.

Why have you decided to make a comeback?

When you are abroad and you say you are an African Artist, everybody expects you to write African Songs. I thought I should bring to live the beautiful African songs that I have been writing. I particularly like ancient African songs like some of the songs my mum used to sing, and my great great grand mother used to sing. What really got me into thinking seriously was these songs. I did demos in London. I accumulated them over the years, and I will put them in tapes, so I could listen and develop them. I have this British guy who I gave the tape to convert into CDS for me. When I came back to collect it, he said those are some pretty good songs there. I said oh! They are African songs, you could not understand the Africanness in them. He said I love those songs, beautiful songs are beautiful songs no matter in what language. So that is how I started doing serious demos. When I decided to start recording, I thought it was best I come to Nigeria because abroad, no matter how you try doing a good job, you can never get the African feeling. So I started making arrangements to contact Lemmy Jackson and that is why I am here. My new work is African music with a bit of western twist.



Since you came back, have you learnt anything from listening to 'Naija music'?

The works here are very danceable and very commercial, but they are not my kind of music. But you can't help tapping your toes when the 'Naija music' comes on. I love Davido's "Aye". The first time I heard it, I could not stop singing it. I always go tapping my feet and shaking my head each time I hear it. But it's not my kind of stuff. They do what they do very well. I can't do what they are doing and they can't do my kind of music as well as I can do it. I enjoy listening to it. I enjoy dancing to it.

Has the local industry improved by your reckoning?

Wao! The videos are mind blowing. They spend this astronomical amount to make videos these days. I remember when I was around what we used to spend to make videos where the only outside shooting would be on top of Eko bridge (LAUGHS). The music here has improved and the production has improved too. They are not entirely without technical faults but you can only notice (his faults if you are a producer. People don't notice flaws in Nigerian music because they are so danceable. People are always carried away with their commercial qualities, not their technical qualities.

What is the title of the upcoming album?

It is titled Heritage. It is my heritage. I want to propagate my African Heritage.

How many tracks are in the upcoming album?

I have twelve tracks and each one is fantastic. Though I have been advised to reduce the number because they are all so good, but I said no because I have so much bubbling in me. Except for two songs, the rest are in my African dialect.