

Oku Onoura - Dub Poetry's Grand Master

These days self proclaimed dub poets are a dime a dozen, but the work of the true stalwarts are classics which stand the test of time. The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission's Annual Festival of the Performing Arts, has many youngsters each year performing in the category called 'dub poetry'. Many however are clueless about the father of dub poetry – Oku Onoura.

'Prison a nuh bed a roses' – is a line from a song by popular Reggae artiste Jah Cure. Currently one of the hottest tunes is Busy Signal's 'Nah Go A Jail Again'. Over the years several entertainers have done successful songs about prison life, either from personal experience as in the case of Jah Cure, or vicariously as in the case of Busy Signal.

Going to prison can give a PR boost to people who lead public lives and many people get famous or increase their popularity after being behind bars. From Don Drummond to Peter Tosh to Martha Stewart, many public figures have prison stories that make their biography more interesting. Jamaica's Minister of Labour Parnell Charles, even wrote a book 'Detained' about his brief sojourn behind those prison walls.

Jamaican comedian, master drummer and author Blakka Ellis who now resides in Toronto, recalls chatting to a youth who proclaimed that Jah Cure is his hero because his story is inspiring, and demonstrates how the arts can transform, elevate and rehabilitate people. The young man then went on in his ignorance to declare that Jah Cure the first artiste in Jamaica's history who became popular while in prison.

Of course Blakka calmly told him that he was wrong and he became quite animated, demanding that the 'little' comedic giant tell him about another artiste with a similar story. When Blakka asked him if he knew about the revolutionary bare-footed Rastafarian who spent time in prison, and is the undisputed pioneer of dub poetry, the man who actually coined the term 'dub poetry', he quickly blurted "Mutabaruka!" Muta, too is a barefoot Rasta, but has only been to prison to perform for inmates.

For all you who think you know dub poetry, if you've never read or heard one of Oku's poem, that's sad. And worse yet, if you claim to be a Jamaican performance poet and don't know about Oku, Go do some research. Here's a kick start: Oku Nagba Ozala Onoura (formerly Orlando Wong, AKA 'Fire') is unquestionably the grand master of dub poets. Oku was dubbing poetry when Mutabaruka was still known as Allan Hope, and he was walking barefooted before Muta!

One of his earliest poems 'Reflections In Red' was set to music in 1979 creating the first dub poem, but it was not until 1984 that his landmark album 'Pressure Drop' was released. The album is a compilation of poems from his book ECHO, set to rhythms by the AK47 Band.

As Blakka told the young student, Oku and Jah Cure have some similarities and few differences. Interestingly, they both went to prison at age 19. But unlike Jah Cure, Oku openly admitted to and candidly discussed the reason for his conviction. He held up a Post Office to raise funds to start a basic school, and was sent to prison in 1971.

Unlike Jah Cure, Oku twice attempted to escape, and has a few scars from police bullet wounds to prove it. Yes, and like Jah Cure, Oku's work came to prominence while he was still an inmate. His book ECHO has been translated into French and Dutch and was published while he was still in prison. In fact, such was the power of his work that he was allowed out of the prison to perform. Blakka recalls that the first time he saw Oku read publicly was in 1977, and he was actually accompanied to the event by two prison warders.

Oku Onoura may not be as popular in Jamaica as in the period of the 70s and 80s, but his poetry is good and timeless. Not like some of what passes for dub poetry these days. But for those of us who know poetry, including Blakka, Oku's album Pressure Drop is absolutely the best dub poetry recording of all time. Source : Blakka Ellis blakka.ellis@gmail.com
PRESSURE DROP by Oku Onoura

hunger a twist man tripe
jus sey "eh" man fight
man nerves raw
man teck a draw cool
man jook up a tek in de scene
garbage dead-dawg fly
"cho! but dis nu right"
man ready fi explode man cyan bear de loadpressure drop
dawta sigh"lawd! hear de pickney dem a cry"

man a pass sey dawta fat
dawta smile but dawta cyan check dat
dawta haffi check fi food fi put ina pat
dawta sey all man want fi get im han unda skirt
bam! she sey she a breed
im vanish like when yu bun weed dawta wan wuk dawta willin fi wuk but is like sey dawta nu have nu luk
or dem nu have enough wuk?
dawta sey she naw ketch nu men
she sey she naw fa1la nu fren
dawta confuse
too often dawta get use
dawta bawl
"lard! wey mi a go do?" pressure drop
man flare
ina de slum man haffie live mongst rat, roach, fly, chink "cho! de place stink"
man willin fi wuk
man nu wan fi bun gun ina man gut
man nu jus wan fi jook up an chat
man nu wan fi pap lack
but when hunger a twis man tripe an pickney bawl
time dred
eart tun red
curfew
man screw
gun blaze
knife flash
man run hot when pressure drop