

WANDERING STAR

EMERGING FROM THE UNDERGROUND, KEZIAH JONES, THE CONTINENT-HOPPING CREATOR OF BLUFUNK, IS GETTING THE CHANCE TO SHINE

WORDS **ROSE SKELTON**
PHOTOGRAPHY **ANDREW DOSUNMU**

B

orn in Lagos, educated in London, loved in New York and adopted by Parisians as one of their own, singer-songwriter Keziah Jones

has crossed three continents with his guitar strapped to his back, collecting fans along the way. Now, with the full release of his fifth album, *Nigerian Wood*, he's about to turn his underground success into a global one.

The sound that has won the troubadour fans around the world is a distinctive blend of African-American blues and jazz mixed with Yoruba funk and soul, something he calls Blufunk. It's a mix that matches his international approach – and look. Every inch the boho-hobo, Jones looks the part with a pork pie hat tipped nonchalantly to one side of his head. His shirt – made by a friend using striped Adire cloth from the Nigerian town of Abeokuta – falls open to display a chiselled chest. "I don't follow any particular fashion," he says, relaxing with ARISE in a Paris café, "I make it up as I go along."

Real name Olufemi Sanyaolu, Jones was born in January 1968. The son of a Yoruba chief, he grew up in Abeokuta, Ogun State until he was sent to boarding school in England, aged eight. He felt stifled by the education he received there – being taught a colonial history that was "totally upside down" to the one he'd learnt in Nigeria. The young Jones' reaction was to retreat into books and music. He discovered Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix ◀





and older blues, jazz and funk artists – “people who use all these ideas of space as a metaphor for being alienated.”

Against his parents’ wishes, Jones left school at 17 and moved to London, where he lived in squats and busked for a living. Despite this apparent emancipation he still felt frustrated: “I didn’t see my reflection in the music and the artists that were being sold to me,” he recalls. “Where could I go?”

Following in the footsteps of African-American artists such as Miles Davis, James Baldwin and Thelonious Monk, who all took refuge in Paris, he soon found himself in the French capital. “Paris embraced me like it’s embraced all these other musicians and writers in the past.”

THE AFROBEAT GOES ON

It was while busking on the Paris Metro that the singer was noticed by an A&R from the French label Delabel, which he subsequently signed to. His debut album, *Blufunk Is A Fact*, was released in 1992 to critical acclaim with the percussive, guitar-slapping track *Rhythm Is Love* becoming an international hit. Along with subsequent releases such as his 1995 offering *African Space Craft* and his experimental third album *Liquid Sunshine*, released in 1999, it has established his unique musical identity, which sees him flip from Paris to London to New York and back to Paris again.

“Blufunk incorporates the music of Africans, taken from the west coast by slavery to America and then brought back by an African to Nigeria,” he explains. “I’m a product of these

historical forces, which were outside my control. So I use my music to put myself back in sync, much in the way Fela Kuti did.”

Kuti’s life and works have had a profound influence on Jones. They both hail from Abeokuta, a town that has spawned many artists, musicians and political leaders, including two-time Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo. “It’s a vibrant place with a lot of history,” Jones affirms. As a young child in Lagos, he remembers how he would walk past Kuti’s compound, the Kalakuta Republic, and marvel at the barbed wire around the fence and the sight of Kuti standing in the front yard rehearsing his frenetic Afrobeat music with his band. The place evoked thoughts of legends, of friends and cousins running away from home to join Kuti’s band, and gave the young Jones his first dose of cultural dissent. Jones finally met his hero in 1996, when Kuti granted him an interview. Among other things, they discussed music, revolution and the true meaning of democracy. It was to be Kuti’s last public statement before his death in 1997.

“Afrobeat, as a vehicle for social commentary, is the most powerful thing,” says Jones. But, as a contemporary artist, his struggle is how to make a statement within an industry that celebrates and commercialises rebellion. “Dissent is also entertainment in the Western world: the more you dissent, the more they’ll sell it. How do you get around that, how do you actually do anything effective?”

Much like its predecessor *Black Orpheus*, *Nigerian Wood* has strains of Kuti’s political rebukes and draws heavily on Yoruba musical traditions. The song *1973 (Jokers Reparations)* talks of the introduction of the naira, the Nigerian currency and, in a few funk-driven lines, rails against the foreign wealth derived

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from Africa. The short song is rounded off with a Nigerian radio recording announcing a military coup, with machine gun fire audible in the background. African Android points a finger at failing African technology, while the title track takes a jab at the Beatles and their sexually uptight lyrics.

But there is humour too. The latest single, *Lagos Vs New York*, is an upbeat ode to the two cities and their residents who, in Keziah’s opinion, consider themselves “a very special breed”. It comes from a love of the cities and is a celebration of the cultural flourishing that went on in both in the 1970s. “There was a lot of creativity, a mixture of classes, a breaking down of a lot of barriers,” says Jones, with misty reverence.

HOME REMEDIES

For a man who’s spent a lifetime searching for a place he can be himself, New York (Brooklyn specifically) has been a refuge on and off over the years. *Nigerian Wood* was recorded at the city’s legendary Electric Ladyland studios and Jones still keeps his bicycle collection (including a beautiful one-speed *Electra Jeremy*) in NYC, as well as his wardrobe of stunning outfits. “When you’re there,” he says, “people allow you to be. There’s all kinds of freaks doing their thing.”

At present, Paris is where he lays his hat, which is perhaps why he chose to release *Nigerian Wood* in France first, back in 2008 – the album had its global release last month. It reached number four in the French charts and sold 100,000 copies, aided by the single *Long Distance Love*, featuring Nigerian singer Nneka. Since then, Jones has been constantly touring the globe, even co-headlining *Fête de l’Humanité* in Paris with Manu Chao last September in front of a crowd of 100,000. Right now, though, he wraps himself up in a scarf and heads out onto the Parisian winter streets – following his own path, as ever. ●
□ *Nigerian Wood*, Keziah Jones [*Because Records*] is out now