MUSIC MAGAZINE

ON A SOLID ROCK, RESTS A BEAT OF ZION

ROCKY DAWUNI

THE INTERVIEW

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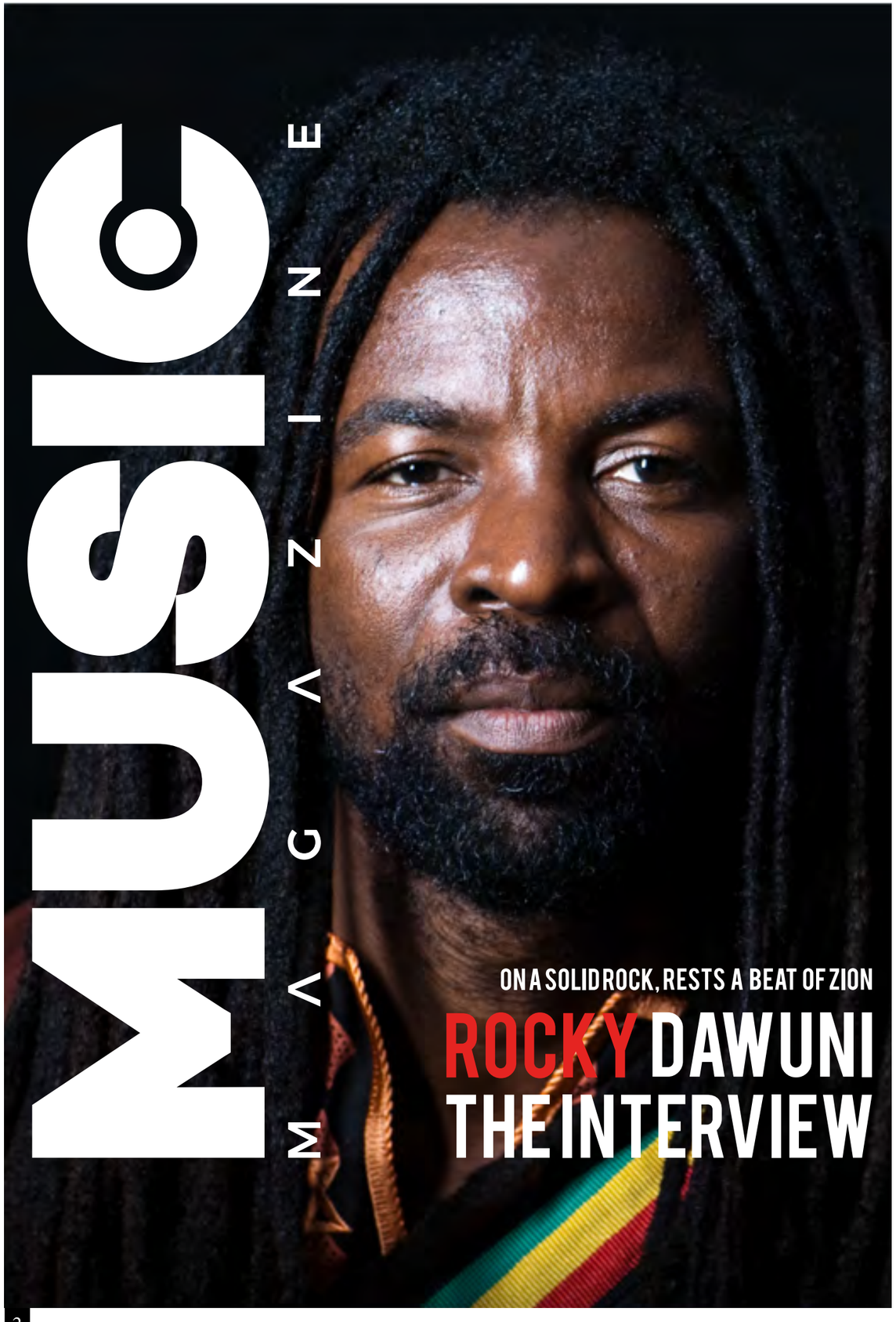

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Rooted In Africa:

Dawuni Serves Global Reminder On

‘Beats Of Zion’

GABRIEL MYERS HANSEN

From my waiting spot (a porch swing behind him), I watch the dreadlocked Rocky Dawuni bite into the tender slice of plantain that is his choice of break-time snack today, his 50th birthday. Roasted golden brown and enjoyed with peanuts, ‘Kofi Brokeman’ (as the chow is nicknamed in these parts) ranks high among the true Ghanaian’s many little pleasures.

When he’s done chomping, I’ll ask the 2015 Grammy nominee and ‘Afro Roots’ maestro about the following verses from the song resonating in the compound: “Na master come house today/ e no be easy for them/ the thing we na dey bring, na im dem go know say eno be joke oh.”

Those words are taken from “Wickedest Sound,” a yet-to-be-released Stonebwoy-assisted number off Dawuni’s forthcoming ‘Beats of Zion’ album, for which a video is being shot here. Recalling Alhaji K. Frimpong’s ‘Kyenkyen Bi Adi M’awu’, the joint — possessing gentle earworm groove — has been on replay all afternoon and, as I suspect, it will continue to play till late in the night when the sweaty, dark director yells a final “cut!”

I also take in the compound proper: this Dansoman address, where the video is being made, is homage to nature, colour, and music. It houses lavish greenery accentuated by the canopy of two enormous country-almond trees, a large red door, garden furniture, and metal wind chimes rendering peaceful melody in the breeze. Samuel Nukpese Quist, who owns

> **The African sound may currently be taking global centre-stage, but Dawuni has been universally acclaimed…"**

this house, is a pioneering name in Reggae from these parts. Lead member of the defunct Roots Anabo band (the first Ghanaian Reggae band to play at an international concert in Jamaica in 1984), he is, in journalist Elorm Beenie's words, "a big pool of history." Also a producer and instrumentalist, Anabo, who just emerged from behind the red door with a majestic smile, is widely referenced as a pivot in the growth and sustenance of the genre in Ghana.

"Many Jamaican Reggae artists don't come to Ghana without touching base with him," Beenie would add in our WhatsApp chat later.

Indeed, when Dawuni discusses his music as a potpourri of traditional African sounds and Reggae, he cites 'Civilization', a Roots Anabo album, as a model, and calls Quist "mentor" and "teacher."

The bespectacled Beenie (head crowned in dreadlocks, too, only shorter), a diminutive and budding Reggae historian, arranged this sit-down. It is also to him the director refers when he yells "music!", "cut," or "from the top!"

At these instructions, Beenie would feverishly tap the screen of his iPhone, either to stop the song or resume its play.

Before he was asked to take a break, Dawuni, in stately kaftan over black boots, was before the red door, too, proclaiming towards the hi-tech camera pointed at him the "master come house" line with happy sway.

"Who's in trouble?" I finally get to ask the singer after repeating the words to him when our dialogue commences. The song has ceased playing, and the wind chimes are what provide background melody now.

Dawuni nods attentively at my questions. His responses are extensive, sprightly, and highly philosophical – much like how spiels are packaged. Also, by his elocution of words like 'teacher', 'nature', and 'iconic', he emits an occasional American accent.

Nobody is in trouble, he assures me, even if only with his smile. And it's got nothing to do with him recently relocating to Ghana either. Rather, the lines speak to Afrobeat's ongoing global renaissance; a "metaphorical statement about how African music has really influenced a lot of the music around the world, right from the inception: Jazz to Reggae, Hip-hop, to Rock."

Sounds from this side, he opines, are the bedrock of those from other parts of the world. Currently, to his mind, African music is gaining global notice in a massive way, not only via "allowed" mediums like radio, but through the internet, which has become the ultimate catalyst in the democratization of music distribution. Hence, the phrase aims to "let them know that our music has always been there, but we have not had the clear path to showcase our music globally — only because there had been gatekeepers. Now, though, we are jumping over all the gates through authentic means, and bringing that music in a very powerful way."

To conclude, he recites a line from the hook of 'Wickedest Sound': "ready or not, we are coming with the wickedest sound."

Point made.

The African sound may currently be taking global centre-stage, but Dawuni has been universally acclaimed since the start of his career, courting praise from taste-makers and colleagues across the globe (he's been named by the CNN among "Africa's Top 10 global stars") and sharing stages with fellow greats as Stevie Wonder, Peter Gabriel, Bono, Jason Mraz, Janelle Monae and John Legend.

He first published an album in 1996, backed by members of Local Crisis, the college band he led at the time, and immediately set his sights overseas. It was what he had been advised to do, because of the music form he had chosen to pursue. Reggae music was not prevalent locally when he started and, as he recalls being told, "to succeed here, I had to succeed outside."

And so, with music as his sole ammunition, he set out into cities unfamiliar to him. Cities, I suspect, are his way of making sense of the world, for he seems to be in a never-ending conversation with several of them: he's sung about Nairobi and Jerusalem, name-drops multiple megalopolises in his best-known anthems, and his music videos constantly see him strolling through the streets of Bali, New Orleans, or Accra's Jamestown,

usually strumming his guitar.

He concurs with my observation.

“A city is a place of agreement. So whenever I go to a place and I feel that there are divergent viewpoints -- or opposing ideologies -- and there’s a need to bring people together, the city becomes the elevating factor.”

For instance, ‘Jerusalem’ was born out of the city presenting itself to him as a paradox.

“The religious differences going on there, but at the same time, the harmony that everybody was living in: the mosque was right next to the church, with the synagogue next in line. The more you left that central location, the more the conflict expanded; the closer you got, though, it was all one nucleus.”

A similar image predicated ‘Nairobi’. A few years ago, Dawuni visited Kenya during a time of political unrest as an African emissary tasked with peace-building. There, too, he discovered deep-seated division which had been enlarged by politics. But when the conversation went beyond political colours to Nairobi, the capital, his interlocutors’ faces lit up.

“Nairobi is like the centre of the world,” they told him with glee, adding that “Nairobi is where everything happens.”

Suddenly, the friction was dispersed, replaced by warmth; again, the city had become a “staging point.”

“My connection to cities has always been that I recognize them as a concept that is undeniable; that things falling apart is in itself a means of bringing it back together again,” Dawuni says.

He’s visited many cities, and every destination has something to teach him. Aside those mentioned earlier, the Asian cities of Bangalore and Jaipur are also close to Dawuni’s heart because of the incredibly beautiful culture they house.

His forthcoming 13-tracker does not offer any full-length odes to a

> **For us to have our music to be relevant around the world, our identity has to be fully represented in there."**

city, however; for a city to inspire an entire song out of Dawuni, a subject there must strike him severely. Still, we can expect references to cities (or large suburbs, at least), as has become characteristic of him, starting with 'Wickedest Sound': "from Nima to Labadi, we ah go kill 'em with the wickedest sound."

On the joint, Dawuni and Stonebwoy offer scope about Accra, which is "metaphor for a bigger scope, from one place to another."

The new album also represents his perspectives on the "beautiful music scene" playing out here. Dawuni sources "a lot more Ghanaian elements" than are present on any of his previous works, because there are "snapshots of Highlife music, Afro music, traditional stuff, Hiplife, Hip-hop, and Ghanaian dancehall."

On the record, he also taps into contemporary A-listers: Sarkodie on a "beautiful opus," with Wiyaala on a joint that celebrates both authentic sounds and Ghanaian female talent. One cannot exactly call this move novel. A critical observation of Dawuni's career's work swiftly reveals a pattern.

Indeed, the reason he defines his style as 'Afro Roots' is specifically this: the music is not a single sound—there's Reggae, Highlife, Afrobeat, Soul, etc.

Records like 'Shine the Light' experiments with Samba, 'Wake up the Town' channels Dawuni's inner Fela, and so forth. He's remained keen on marching to his own tune, following his heart and crafting fresh sounds, standards, and ideas.

He confesses that walking these fine lines is a "tricky balance," because its acceptance then becomes political: the Reggae establishment thinks it falls short, while World Music connoisseurs say it's 'too Reggae' for that category. This has rendered Dawuni's journey long and lonely, but he maintains that, for music to truly break borders, it must be unique. It is at this point he recalls the Roots Anabo project, after which he explains that it is in an artist's own interest that he works without a box.

"For us to have our music to be relevant around the world, our identity has to be fully represented in there. For me, it was being truthful to my artistic instincts, and not at the same time subscribing to the market's interpretation of what the music should be. So I never saw genres — I just saw music!"

He wrote to whatever stirred him creatively, whether it was 'approved' or not. Years later, Rocky's 'Crusade' album, which saw him infuse the Afro style and Pidgin, would also become a "watershed album" to disciples including Blitz the Ambassador and Wanlov Da Kubolor. Despite his influence, however, Dawuni is reticent about bearing the label of trendsetter, because he "never really thought of it that way," instead focusing on "following his own influences and knowing that there's so much inspiration here."

Dawuni continues to recollect his earlier days and later taking on a global listenership.

"Things have changed," he says. "When I started, we didn't have the Internet, so the global audience was very limited to their geographical area of influence. As an artist, too, I had to go out there. I had to breach walls. I had to travel to other countries to push my music and forcefully get audiences to get a taste of what I represented.

"So for me, it was challenging, but at the same time, I knew that, for every artist, your dream is not only to cater to your own. Your dream is to let the world have a snapshot of your culture. That challenge, for me, was the motivating factor that I had to reach an audience which had not heard my music, and I was constantly trying to find new Borders, new areas to conquer, and new territories to bring my music to. It was really the objective of my mission to keep promoting my music until the whole world really accepted it."

Dawuni believes, though, that his method of being decidedly blind to genres was also key in securing him Grammy acclaim, explaining that the identity of 'Branches of The Same Tree' -- the 2015 album that won him the nomination -- "stood out among the lot" and serenaded "the ears of taste-makers around the world."

It's an approach that has taken him on a longer path, Dawuni concedes, but one which promises long-term fulfillment.

Now back to his latest offering, 'Beats of Zion', which doubles

as a global declaration “for the drumbeat of awareness that Africa is waking up!”

Dawuni asserts: “Everybody is waking up to Africa. Everybody is coming to get a piece of Africa.”

That realization is as good as it’s bad, implying both opportunity and vulnerability. Affliction must not befall the African twice; if you know, you know. Thus, “unless those forces are coming to create a renewed partnership base model, we are not going back to any of the old models whereby it’s been about exploitation and taking everything we have. This is a new Africa that is strong and resilient; an Africa that will write its own history in its own ink, and is going to use its own language and culture to define its future.”

I ask him one last question about ‘Beats of Zion’. Its predecessor set a significantly high standard by earning a Grammy nomination. Must the newborn also be draw such recognition, then, to attain a sense of fulfilment?

To that, Dawuni initially pauses, after which he really begins to grapple with the thought.

First, though, a recap and reminder: “I’ve been nominated already.”

Then he offers me a new angle: “like every artist, when you bring out a new body of work, yes, you do expect some form of validation.”

A third sentence arrives, though, and reconciles the preceding two in textbook style: “you rather focus on the work — what the work stands for, rather than the awards, because it’s through the resonance of the work around the world that it’s going to pique the ears of voting members for awards. But, yes, I do think this is a body of work that deserves another nomination.”

Few musicians achieve soul in their music like Dawuni has. Whatever topic he chooses to explore, whatever emotion he targets, there’s an element in his artistry that is profoundly moving. But how does an artiste achieve soul?

Is it in the strings? Perhaps the lyrics? Or the vocals?

None, says Dawuni; it’s deeper.

“Soul is honesty — when you feel what you are talking about.”

Then he gets into Dalai Lama mode: “there’s something deep within the human spirit—within the human nature -- that when you tap into it, takes you to a very deep place; a universe that is bigger than the outward space of your body. Tapping into the soul is

tapping into the bigger universe.

“So when I’m singing, or when I’m in the process of the music, I have to get into that space — that space of expression — because it makes me more expressive and enables me tap into my truth, so I can share it. From that place of honesty, too, everybody who’s listening will also have a level of resonance and feel the music before they even understand what I’m talking about.”

Here’s another feature about Dawuni’s records, though: they typically arrive as anthems, rallying points for all voices. Anthems abound in his catalogue, and they’ve been constantly latched upon not just as theme songs for social movements, but also within sport (‘African Thriller’, ‘African Soccer Fever’, ‘Download the Revolution’, ‘The One’, and ‘Wake up the Town’ have all featured in video games by American company EA).

He doesn’t set out to construct anthems, though, Dawuni points out, but he does admit to approaching the creative process with an “anthemic” spirit, resulting in a personal resonance with different peoples. Anthems have their use. Dawuni observes that they function as “signposts,” “beacons,” and a “nucleus to revolve big ideas,” demonstrating that last line by holding one hand up, and orbiting the other around it.

“I’ve always viewed my music as a soundtrack for movements, for social change, for overcoming the challenges of the time, and embracing the joys and victories of the times. Because I approach the music with that spirit, I feel that the songs always take that identity.”

My mind goes to other Reggae greats: Bob Marley, Joseph Hill, Buju Bainton and Lucky Dube. Maybe it’s something about the genre overall. A proven apparatus for social change, Reggae music has perpetually protested injustice, preached peace, and emphasized social harmony. The essence of the music has been committed to positive change — a better world. UNESCO recently designated the music form as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” As a young man in Michel Camp, the military barracks he was born in, Dawuni was drawn to the noble motive of the genre, sourcing the latest playlists from music that trickled out from the windows of soldiers in the camp and from neighboring Ashaiman because it “stood on the side of social justice,” and “approached issues that were important to society, highlighting them,” and uplifting the voiceless. “Its intention wasn’t only to entertain; its intention was to change,” indicates a passionate Dawuni.

> **Keep doing the work, but keep doing it through quality and learning — when you have that kind of mindset, it's what will get you through trying times for you to continue to be relevant"**

"For me, I'm an agent of change. I believe that our time on earth is to do the best that we can to create the best that we can," as well as to "leave a legacy that is one of love, upliftment, and also one that generations can follow to elevate themselves." The pursuit of this calling has led him to be recently designated UN Goodwill Ambassador for Africa. An ardent social activist, over his career, Dawuni has also been associated with Product (RED), ONE, UNICEF, The Carter Center, Clean Cooking Alliance and the United Nations Foundation.

Something else drew Dawuni to Reggae: that it always linked back to Africa. "The DNA of the music is African—it's why that music resonates in Ghana and around the world.

"The rhetoric and subject matter is always about Africa." Therefore, it's safe to conclude that the sound's "evolution and purity has to include the sounds of Africa to expand it more. Afro Roots, African Reggae is the purity of Reggae Music."

That today, Dawuni ranks as the country's most prized export is largely due to his talent, innate technical understanding of the components that constitute musical structure (which, growing up, he erroneously assumed was natural with everyone), and commitment to premium musical ethics. But also essential to his staying at the top for decades is "humility and the tenacious spirit to continue pushing and elevating the heights you've achieved."

Also, honesty to one's self: "It all boils down to being true, and understanding that if you keep innovating and keep learning, you're constantly gonna grow; you're gonna evolve because you're constantly taking in new ideas; you're constantly being taught by the world.

To younger colleagues aspiring to his accomplishments, the age-old solution, which is an attitude of dedication remains just as valid today: "keep doing the work, but keep doing it through quality and learning—when you have that kind of mindset, it's what will get you through trying times for you to continue to be relevant."

Dawuni's break is over and has to return to his set, this time a live band set. Stonebwoy will come too, together with fellow dancehall practitioner Epixode for a cameo appearance. This particular video, like the album, is due in March. In the meantime, in two days, the title track for the album, together with Lex McCarthy-directed accompanying visuals, will drop.

For his final thoughts in the sit down, Dawuni recounts again an aspect of his come-up. Right from the onset, he knew that it was up to him to see his vision through; to see his style succeed—not detractors nor skeptics. As long as he continued to perfect his craft, "there was nothing for me to worry about." Time itself would vindicate him.

It has.


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