

AYO

Family background may not count for everything in the world of music, but that of Ayo is original to say the least. Judge for yourself, she was born near Cologne on 14 September 1980, the product of a union between a Nigerian father who had come to Germany to study in the 1970s and a mother who is a gypsy. And her rich cultural background stuck with her, leaving her partial to diversity and distrustful of purists and cliques. *"I'm definitely somewhat Bohemian by nature, preferring a nomad lifestyle. Not having a home? That is freedom,"* Ayo says playfully. Her rather unusual name can be translated as "joy" in Yoruba. And this attractive musician of mixed-race, with delicate facial features set atop a slender body, is radiant with joy, as she invites music lovers to listen to the world of music rather than the music of the world. *"I was bottle-fed by my dad, who worked as a DJ from time to time. He had quite a collection of vinyl albums."* As a young girl, Ayo grew up amidst Pink Floyd and Fela Kuti, the Soul Children and Bob Marley, and with Bunny Wailer, *"a powerful flashback to my early years"* and Prince Sunny Adé, *"the hero of Juju music."* Ayo refuses to choose a favourite of all the various types of music that she was surrounded with as a child.

To fully understand her music, we need to go back in time and take a look at her somewhat tumultuous life, which was marked by several moments of bad - and good - luck. Just a wee child, she left for Nigeria, a country that still inhabits her spirit and always will. *"My grandmother wanted to keep me, but my father refused to follow custom. That's why I haven't been back since - my father was afraid he'd lose me."* That was the first blow to her spirit. *"But I know I'll go back one day. It's in my blood! Incidentally, my middle name - Olasunmibo- in Yoruba means: She who is born elsewhere, but who will come back full of prosperity."* A few years later, her mother turned to drugs. A second bombshell. She was barely 6 years old and had to go live with her father, sister and two brothers. But she never lost contact with her mother, whom she describes as *"a strong woman, despite all her shortcomings."* It was during this period, in the mid 80s, when she took to playing the violin for a short time, before turning to the piano between the ages of 10 and 14. It wasn't long before she taught herself to play guitar. *"I needed an instrument I could be at one with...It's more direct, more aggressive, and I mean that in a good way. But I've recently started composing songs on the piano again. I wrote "Neva Been," which is on the album."*

She was trying to find her calling...and ended up in London, where part of her Nigerian family was living. She was 21 at the time. *"It was an important period in my life - the first time I really expressed myself. I needed to leave Germany to find myself."* This may be true, but once she left, Ayo was ready to pick up and move again. *"Moving around the world has allowed me to develop who I am. I'll never be happy with being sedentary. I'm too spontaneous and I care too little about material things to plan the future. But I know I'm able to start from scratch wherever I end up."*

That was how Ayo, an official resident of Germany, went to live between Paris and New York, two capitals that accurately sum up her musical identity. *"New York is a genuine melting pot...It was there that I met the producer I was looking for, someone who was able to draw out the best in me."* In the States, she held several sessions that lasted a few months and produced her first album. And in Paris, where she periodically set up house near Les Halles, she felt *"at home."* It was there that, in less than two years, news of her talent started to spread among experienced amateurs. Word got around fast, and she held initial solo concerts with her guitar, opened for Omar, the British "soul brother" and improvised alongside Cody Chesnutt, whom she jammed with on the stage of the Elysée-Montmartre. And she dreamed of doing the same with Stevie Wonder.

In the meantime, everyone was talking about her, and many people were sure she had already recorded. At the time she'd merely produced a few sketches, with a 5-track that circulated among well-informed and eager listeners. She took her time and gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. *"Being a mother has opened up so many possibilities. For a long time, I saw music as a sort of therapy. It was my way of speaking to others about myself. Now I have my son I can confide in."* Nile was born in late 2005 - Nile, a historic river, so symbolic for this young woman at the crossroads of different cultures and inspired by such diverse influences. Nile helped her grow. In early 2006, things started to speed up. She knew she needed to take the plunge. *"We'd been talking about this album for a long time and in the end we recorded it really quickly. When I was pregnant, I learned to be patient. Now I know I'm ready."* In just five days, it was a wrap. The entire album was recorded under live conditions. *"I need to feel the musicians to really thrive...I feel at my best when I'm performing live. Whether you're solo or accompanied by a group, you can't lie."*

The result is a collection of bittersweet songs, with twelve tracks filled with all her various experiences and the people she's encountered along the way. She cries, laughs and moves us with her simplicity. To accompany her, producer Jay Newland put together a group of musicians who are in tune with her goals. They are open-minded and, with a note on a B3 organ or a harmonica beat, with a stroke of slide guitar or a stream of percussion, they melodiously enter this unusual world, which is studded with a few words in Pidgin, the street language of Lagos, and unveils recollections of gypsy life. It's her way of paying tribute to her father, her "reference," and her mother, her "muse." Two other influences helped her set the tone of this album, which very well could have been recorded some 35 years ago. Firstly, there's mentor Donny Hathaway, *"a singer who goes beyond words to really make you understand what he's singing. He held such a powerful emotional force! Such a deep spirit that it still makes me cry...It was written over thirty years ago, but it still rings true."* This is surely why she wants to hear nothing of new soul: *"it doesn't mean anything...And anyway, I prefer music from the sixties and seventies."* Her other reference is Jimmy Cliff. *"It has to do with my dad's vinyls. Whenever I hear "The Harder They Come," I think about him and his life."* The Jamaican musician taught her the art of story-telling, the desire to share stories and spin tales without compromising her aesthetic demands...Because more than anything else, that's what Ayo speaks about with her music. She strives to naturally and sincerely share her stories and touch others, boosted solely by her life experience and her dreams. *"Even if you've gone through the hardest time, it's important to remember how to enjoy life - don't lose track of what motivates you and keeps you going. You can survive on the outside and cry on the inside."*

TRACK BY TRACK

"Down On My Knees"

A cool reggae rhythm, a simple folk melody, an elegant production with a voice that is 100% soul singing and crying out its love, nothing more. *"If people interpret something else, hidden between the lines, by all means, they're free to do so."*

"Without You"

A regular gumbo of music, this composition combines various musical origins to produce a subdued soul quality, which evokes the third man in her life, without whom nothing would have been possible: her father, to whom this mother pays tribute, in style. *"The whole album is dedicated to him, and this song in particular. He's always been there to listen, has always believed in me and known how to guide me. This is my way of saying thanks."*

"Letter By Letter"

Behind an authentic voice, singing intimately and kindly, lies a sophisticated production, in which each instrument discreetly punctuates Ayo's mellow tone. To start with, there's the harmonica, which seems light but is actually quite profound if you know how to listen. *"I wrote this song because there are people you want to get to know but who never open up."*

"How Many Times?"

The accordion plays a melancholy tune, evoking the gypsy universe... To the tune of sensitive guitar strings. Ayo wrote this trusting, confiding song for her mother. *"I evoke my relationship with her and my feelings after all these years... I'll always be her baby, in spite of life's ups and downs."*

"And It's Supposed To Be Love"

Ayo's only cover is taken from the repertoire of jazz singer Abbey Lincoln. Jean-Philippe Allard had slipped her the album before she left for New York. *"I had already recorded a version of "A Song For You" by Donny Hathaway, but I didn't dare..."* And yet she takes up the challenge of giving "And It's Supposed to Be Love" Hispanic undertones and a hint of Caribbean spice... *"Abbey Lincoln came by the studio and she loved this version. And I fell in love with this woman and with this song, which deals with domestic violence... to a light, almost cheerful tune, in spite of it all."*

"Watching You"

This song was one of the first that Ayo composed. Her style is already evident, with her soul sister elegance offset by her more mellow folk and her vibrations that hit deep down... *"I wrote this theme quite a long time ago, right when I got back from Tanzania. And yet it seems like it could be speaking to my son - That's my frame of mind when I sing it."*

"Only You"

A simple melody that strikes you right to the core of your mind and heart. It's like a hymn to the joy of living, and Ayo gives herself over to almost spoken word for a few verses, not giving into

the sensuality of her song. *"It's a love song I wrote recently. It's dedicated to two men in my life - My son and his father."*

"Help Is Coming"

Straightaway, the rhythmic style sets the song's bittersweet style apart. And when Ayo takes the mike, so discreetly, her language seems harsher, direct, with a hint of rock between the lines of this ballad that verges on reggae. *"While this song might seem sad, it is above all meant to inspire hope. It speaks to all those people who struggle with life and are even blamed for their troubles. I try to tell them to believe, in the face of all obstacles, because that's the only way to keep going...because I believe in the universe's spiritual force."*

"These Days"

There's a scent of nostalgia in this blues song written in Paris, and the song's voice is indeed imbued with blues. Its emotions are shared by the strings of a guitar that plays the melody's notes one by one and by a violin that seems to cry...There's no doubt that this theme benefits from arrangements that are as precious as they are precise. *"I speak of the strange feeling you get when you're in the depths of despair. You want to be someone else, to become a baby again, or even die...that's what I say, but it's just symbolic. In reality, I just want to be myself."*

"Life Is Real"

An expanse of percussion, a warmly funky bass, church-style keyboards, a variety of rhythmic accents that are subtle as they are decisive, carrying the message of a young woman who takes stock of her life, without pretence and with a rapid tempo. *"Live your life: that's really my motto. While people talk a lot about good and not-so-good advice, I want to live in a way that feels right to me."*

"What Is Love"

It's hard not to listen to this song, which switches between fragile percussion and graceful strings. Ayo closes in on herself and then raises the tone... She speaks about her topic of choice: *"Love, just love. Who knows what love is? Everyone has his/her own recipe, but there are certain ingredients we all have in common."*

"Neva Been"

This piece immediately brings to mind the great folk-soul classics, as Ayo's voice soars toward the skies, accompanied by a gospel-inspired keyboard and then a choir that sounds like it's straight from an African American church. The song could even be exalted as a form of prayer. *"It's for my baby - my son. A brand new emotion for me. Thanks to him, the musician I was before turned into a woman."*