

# Echo and Bomb:

## Oku Onuora's Explosive Dub Poetry

By Glenn A.E. Griffin

**B**y the time Orlando Wong was arrested and sent to Jamaica's notorious General Penitentiary in 1970 he had already been party to the near decade of political radicalism that followed Jamaican independence. Born, as he notes, in the constituency of Michael Manley, he was for years a dissident player in the struggle against Jamaica's postcolonialist ruling class and their policies which resulted in dire consequences for the poor, the sufferers. He sat at the feet of Rasta elder Negus, "wrote a whole heap of wall slogans," and demonstrated against police brutality until he came to the fateful conclusion he reported in an interview with this magazine in 1984: "The only way to topple this system was, and to some degree I still believe this today, is to come and lik it down. So I picked up a gun." He refers to this as a "stage," a period of "revolutionary adventurism." He spent seven years in the penitentiary for the armed robbery of a post office where he hoped to get money to fund an alternative school.

Jamaica's premier dub poet is first a known criminal and a legendary prison escapee, jumping from a second-story courthouse window, remaining on the run for days, surviving five police bullets in his chest and arms and leg. In

prison he was a "security risk," an agitator for prison reform. His poetry emerges almost seamlessly out of his wall slogans. They came out of his prison time as a determination to voice the ordeal of the "futureless army" of inmates he knew as an overflow occupant of death row, men on whom he had seen the pressure drop. His poems are an extension of his revolutionary adventurism. When he performed in prison for the first time in 1974 his work was seized, declared subversive and banned. The poems were smuggled out and *Echo* (Sangster Books, 1977) was published while Wong was still in prison. It is the reception of this work that fostered his name change to Oku Onuora, the fire in the desert, the voice of the people.

Oku has provided two dominant metaphors for understanding his poems, echo and bomb. A poem, he says, is a mirror, an echo, a reflection of the sufferer's hope and aspiration. It is also therefore a bomb, "like a bomb it actually explode." Oku defines his dubpoetry as "poems with music dubbed into them." By extension, we can suggest that dubpoems are bombs set to music, "word-bullets."

It has been more than a decade since the release of *Reflection in Red* (56 Hope Road, 1979), the historic debut of dub poetry on vinyl which bound the power of the reggae riddim as anticolonial language with the "red beat" of violence and unrest of Kingston gang activity. There has been almost a decade of near-virtual recording silence since Oku's first full-length album, the widely regarded classic *Pressure Drop* (Heartbeat, 1984). Clearly Oku has been busy as a playwright and a drama company director as well as touring and performing. But for nine years no new poems have been released. In 1990 came *New Jerusalem Dub* (ROIR), a dubmusic album: No poems, not one single moment of his legendary baritone or of his distinctive vocal signatures. *New Jerusalem Dub* confronts us with the enigma of what Oku terms "poetry without words."

The album is titled like a biblical journey, a

sacred Omeros. Section one is titled Genesis, section two ends with a Revelation track titled *The New Jerusalem*, all quite odd coming from a man who has gained no notoriety for his orthodoxy. *New Jerusalem Dub* was produced without the Armageddon Knights Column Number 7, or any band for that matter. It boasts 21st-century technology, including drum machines, ATARI computer technology and Creator software. Oku remarks in the liner notes that this is a new age, "we have moved into an age of technology." All the markings of roots reggae are there, the one-drop, the snare drums (made hollow by the technology), and an echoing chorus, but Oku stretches the boundaries of reggae. Clearly he was seeking

a broader musical foundation for his work. With this effort Oku made it clear that the dubpoet must be synesthetic, able to crosswire the sensory modalities of word and music. In his poetry, "the music comes from the words." In *New Jerusalem Dub* the music is to speak in words. I could not hear Oku in this pure music poetry, the tracks did not evoke or compel like his spoken word at all.

The 1991 release of *I A Tell . . . Dubwise and Otherwise* (ROIR), a valuable collection of previously recorded or never-released poems and dub versions thereof, was a move in the right direction.

The 1993 release of *Bus Out* (Zola & Zola-Holland) ends Oku's decade of silence with 19 tracks and 65 minutes of dubetry. The album is thematic, focused on its central concern and it is this concern that gives the best answer to why the silence ends now. The album is rich, complex and

nicely varied in its styles and track arrangement. The variety of poems and their dub version are held together by five short, poignant a cappella pieces, the first of which is titled "Words," which is both an ode to the power of words and a demonstration of that power. He both shows us and tells us that words are "petal soft, hard, hard like diamond/iridescent/cold/explosive/incendiary/bitter . . ." It is a reminder at the start that "wordsound have power."

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Track two, "How Long," is an echo poem. In the hold of reverberating horns, it tells sufferers what they already know, what they have already said, it tells them again what they have felt. It agitates:

*Day after day! you burn with rage! you curse and swear! when the stench! from the overcrowded tenements! and shanties stifle you! Day after day! you grow hungry! you struggle! to contain the burning! rage.*

The poem holds up the already visible to the stubbornly suggestive question "how long?" The net, and I think desired, effect is the amplification of the rage, the kindling of a fire already burning.

"Trouble," the third track, begins with the quite ominous bursting of a rain cloud and a harmonica screams or mourns through an otherwise seemingly innocent utilization of an old Jamaican adage, a saying from the old-time people; "trouble no set like rain, but when it come it tumble down." Using fully that characteristic Jamaican linguistic capacity to cloak and reveal at the same time Oku threatens imminent trouble: *Like lightning from the clear blue sky! it takes you unaware! even when you're prepared! you never know where and when it will come.* By the end of the poem there is no music and Oku entones the weather observation now become a promise: Trouble will come suddenly, and "when it come, it tumble down."

"Tears," title five, is delivered sadly and resolutely and entirely without accompaniment. The poem is economic and declarative, relying on a single refrain:

*Tears cannot. They cannot materialize revolutionary dreams! win struggles! vanquish a foe! topple the racist regime of South Africa! avenge the death of Steve Biko! wash away the painful memories of childhood Soweto.*

The matter of pointless, passe tears is picked up again in the album's title track, "Bus Out." Here Oku explains that it is "Useless we bawl/ 'cause years and rivers of tears to no avail." There is only one way out of this racist regime and it is not via tears and not through talks:

*No more talks! about talks! no more round table talks! no more talks about sanctions! one way out! Bus out! (Rage rebel! fist! smash dem armaments to bits! blacken di sky! turn di earth red! if needs be! to be free! bus out!! it's almost too late.*



Bust out, as if from a giant prison, not to do so is to become one of the futureless inmates. Track 14 is titled "Can't Wait." In a fashion reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham Jail, written when asked by moderates to "wait" for benevolent forces to work, Oku declares that "Our freedom can't wait." The poem is intriguing in that its stylistic innovations clearly elicit the rhetorical devices of the great orators of black liberation while also declaring that we cannot wait for their replacements. The poem is a speech; it repeats, shouts and crescendos: *We can't wait! for another Garvey! Malcolm! another Eleanor Bumpers! another Sam Sharpe! another proclamation to wait! Our freedom can't wait! too much pain waiting.* He echoes himself, his voice comes shouting as if from an impassioned member of the crowd, "No more talks!"

By the time one has arrived at the title track the central theme of the release is clear. Oku's seeing, keen revolutionary political consciousness is at work again and this time his central target is the apparent progress, the slow non-progress in the liberation of South Africa, the seemingly endless talks in which one might have to negotiate away the legitimating power of taking back one's freedom and be left with the permissible, if compromised, signifiers of oppression.

*Bus Out* is a fitting redebut for Oku Onuora and of this political art. It is a restatement of

the roots of dubpoetry as revolutionary work. Oku, dubbed FIA, has given us the view from what Kenyan novelist Ngugi might call the barrel of a poem. *Bus Out* is a restatement of the distinctive revolutionary power of the form given to it largely by Oku, i.e., by the political history, grass-roots passion, rage and freedom-loving sentiment which he channels, voices and puts to the King's music. In his silence Oku has been listening to history and to the evolution of the art. Here and there he sounds like Benjamin Zephaniah, more often he evokes Mzwakhe Mbuli and incorporates him into his own exceptional power to evoke. We can, from time to time, hear the voice of the late Michael Smith, of whom Oku can hardly speak without crying.

From his home in Jamaica Oku remarked that *Bus Out* is "the hardest thing I have ever done." It is also among the best work he has ever done. He has revamped the defiance which turns "dirge into song of protest."

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