

## INTERVIEW BY JILL TAYLOR AND ANTHONY BRENNAN


**Q:** What kind of man are you?

**A:** ...Well, I was born in Kingston, Ja. in 1952 in a place called Franklin Town in southeastern Kingston. That's the constituency of Michael Manley, the leader of the opposition. I grew up in eastern Kingston until 1970. In 1970 I was arrested and subsequently convicted and sent to prison where I spent 7 years. I was released in 1977, I was reprieved in 1977 by popular demand. When I say popular demand, people started to write into the prison authorities and the governor-general askin' that I be reprieved. This came about because of the works, the poetic works that I was doin', and also the interest that people like Mervyn Morris, Leonie Forbes, and P.E.N. (Poets, Essayists, & Novelists) took and the people in the street. Petition came from all walks of life, y' know, youth man, old man, obeah man,...and so eventually on the 1st of September, 1977, I was free from captivity.

**Q:** What jail were you in?

**A:** G.P., Fort Augustus, ...majority of the time was spent in maximum security in St. Catherine District Prison, because I had escaped twice before actually startin' to serve the sentence and I was regarded as a security risk... It wasn't until 1976 when dere was an attempt on my life an' other bredrin, about eight of us, which caused a three-day riot in St. Catherine District Prison dat I was moved. This riot was caused through our activity in tryin' to get the prison authorities to implement some serious reform measures, because we had fought some bitter battles before to bring about change in the sanitary conditions and to implement a literary program in the (prison) school because most of the people who were in prison den and who are still in prison and who go to prison even now are people who are normally illiterate or semi-illiterate, y' know? The prison authorities, some element, not all, conspired to discredit us and to kill us and it erupted, it backfired. So in 1976, I was moved to another prison, in fact most of the people (that) were involved were moved to various prisons. I was moved to Fort Augustus and in 1977 as I said through popular demand I was released from prison.

**Q:** Tell me what it was like inside G.P...I've driven past it and seen how bad it looks

 Oku Nagba Ozala (the fire in the desert) Onuora (the voice of the people), is the only dub poet. By that we mean he is the only poet who does not resist the title of dub poet. Oku himself describes his work as "...poems with the music dubbed into dem..." and he is credited with being the first to record dub poetry in Jamaica. (*Reflection in Red*, 56 Hope Rd., 1978). He has since recorded a 12" single entitled *Wi A Come/Wat A Situashan*, and an lp, *Pressure Drop*, both on the Heartbeat label. The latter has been hailed by listeners and critics alike as a modern classic. One reviewer stated, "His (Oku's) words not only strike straight at the heart, they seem to burn away the flesh and expose the raw nerve." With his band AK7, (Armageddon Knights, column Seven), Oku continues to infuse the music with his fiery, progressive style, his "dub poetry."

In an innerview conducted in Jamaica in 1984 by Jill Taylor and Tony Brennan for the *Beat*, here are the words of Oku Onuora.

# OKU ONOURA:

## "A POEM IS LIKE A BOMB"



from the outside and I can't imagine how bad it is inside.

**A:** All right, in General Penitentiary, the time I was at G.P., the condition was very, very primitive (and) it has not changed much since... The prison was built a hundred an' odd years ago, y' know, it was built right on the fringe of slavery wherein it was built to accommodate a certain amount of prisoners, it has far passed that use. It's housin' more prisoners than it should house now... The condition is filthy, I mean when I say filthy, *filthy*, y' know? I have a bredrin Muta who say, "If I had de key, de key to G.P. I woulda set all prisoner free..." I don't say dat, I no wan' no key, I'd wan' mash down G.P. cause, y' naw wha' mean? Flatten it totally, not even the building, not even the structure should remain, it's a sore to the eyesight. The corruption and the wickedness that manifest itself inside dat place deh it should just mash down, it's a symbol of backwardness. Any forward movin' people, people who are thinkin' consciously to maintain a prison like dat, it's a sad reflection of our society today.

**Q:** Were you a Rasta before you went in?

**A:** Well, all right, Rasta... like before I go to prison I did start... All right, my political education, right? My knowledge of what was takin' place in Angola, in South Africa, in Mozambique and in other parts of the world came through Rastafari. I had an elder teacher by the name of Negus, Bredda Negus... During the late 60's, we (Oku, Negus and others in the area) formed a school in eastern Kingston, a place called Dunkirk. That's a notorious name, an infamous name, the place where I born an' grow is called Dunkirk. We started a school where we provided education for the youths who were unable to get sufficient education. We had a little first aid center where we dressed sores an' all dat, and we'd provide one meal for the day, sometimes it wasn't much but den it dat. We were tryin' to do as much with the little we had. Our classroom was out in an open yard, dirt floor without any roof or anything. Members of the group who conducted the school would put whatever money they had together to buy books, exercise books, pencils an' all that. I used to teach but then after a while I got fed up of teachin' and writin' wall slogans, 'cause we used to go 'bout in a

'67, '68 and write a whole heapa wall slogans, y' naw wha' mean?, demonstratin' against police brutality, but den I man get tired of dat, I man get personally tired of demonstratin' and writin' wall slogans... I thought that, well the only way to topple this system, and to some degree I do believe it today, is to come and lick it down. So I picked up the gun, which eventually led to my arrest in 1970. It wasn't a matter that I was framed or anything in 1970 when I went to prison. I felt, y' know, this revulsion against the system. So I took up arms. I call that stage revolutionary adventurism.

The reason I call it that is because one cannot hope to bring about changes by just utilizing a small group of armed people. The major battle one has to win is of the mind, in the head, y' know? So you have to talk 'bout mobilizin' people, educatin' people as to the situation that they are in, as to what can be done to take them out of that situation. So I call that phase when I picked up the gun revolutionary adventurism, it was just, feelin' that the system cannot be toppled unless it's toppled that way. But I've learned more over the years since 1970, almost fourteen years now, I learn a lot more, y' know? This is why I started to write seriously because when I used to write before I go to prison, I used to write on a helter-skelter basis, jottings and all that. But then I went to prison, I escaped twice and I was shot the last time I escaped, I had time to evaluate what I was doin'. I found the road I was trodding on wasn't the right road. When I say wasn't the right road, I mean it wasn't bringin' any satisfaction to me, I didn't see a goal, y' know, the end in sight.

I've always been affected by literature, y' know, poetry, plays, the written word has always affected me. So I decided I would not come a part of that futureless army that I met in prison, youths marchin' to nowhere. They had nothin' to do, there wasn't any program or anything like that... The prison system is geared to destroy you, I mean mentally if not physically mash you down, y' naw wha' mean? I personally was fightin' against that. Bein' a rebellious person I naturally decided to do something positive as opposed to just bein' a part an' serve out my time. When I looked around one of the most influential medium of education to me

was poetry. There was this playlet, so to speak, I mean this, umm... I don't know fe describe it, funny enough comin' from a poet! Umm, this spring, a poem to me, it's like tension, you know it's like, a few words an' it explode, like a bomb, it actually explode. I mean like you hear of a poem and then you read it, or someone reads a poem and then (snap!) realization dawn upon a one. I wanted to describe what I saw, not to preserve the ugly scene,...(but) to hold up a mirror. I regard my poems as mirrors, holding up a mirror to society, I regard it as an echo, the echo of the sufferah, y' know, echoin' not only sufferation but hope and aspiration. This is what my poem is, an echo and a reflection.

*In 1974 the Light of Saba band and Cedric "Im" Brooks were allowed in the prison to perform. Oku was given the opportunity to chant his wordsounds to the prison population and he was received with great enthusiasm. However, the warden did not share the inmates' excitement. As Oku recalls:*

I can remember in 1974 after a performance all my poetry was seized by the prison authorities and declared subversive and I was banned from performing on any other concert. I was taken to the authorities' office and they said to me, "Why don't you write about birds and trees and flowers..." and all that, "Why do you have to write so much blood and all that?," and subsequently I wrote a poem called "I Write About." The poem briefly says:

*You ask  
why do you write about  
blood sweat and tears  
don't you write about  
birds flowers trees love?*

*Yes*

*I write about birds  
I write about trees  
I write about flowers  
I write about LOVE*

*caged birds strugglin'  
trees with withered branches and severed  
roots  
flowers on graves  
love for the destruction of oppression*