

Distinct Voices: Tunde Olaniran (Interview)



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leave the margins or everyone else step into the margins and be comfortable there and have a party there.”

Tunde Olaniran’s thunderous dance music travels within a canon of R&B outlaws. The Flint, Michigan native moves through some of the aural byways previously laid down by [Prince Be](#), [Kelis](#), [Jermaine Stewart](#), [Ebony Bones](#), house music and hip-hop. David Bowie and science fiction inspires his stage show and videos but there is also some semblance of Rick James’s outré ghetto swag. Olaniran’s dauntless approach to what some may call maverick R&B is guided by a humanist vision that has no use for compartmentalizing sounds, people and expression. He questions any kind of Black music hierarchy by taking those various styles and synthesizing them into alluring but subversive pop. He released his *First Transgression* EP last year and has been performing regularly throughout Michigan and the United States. The man with a press and curl that’s better than most lacefronts worn by your favorite R&B singers talked to Kickmag about his

influences, his vision and future musical plans.

How did you become an artist?

I feel like in a general sense Iâ€™ve always been a creative person. As an only child I lived in not a complete fantasy world I had my own imagination making scenarios for myself and I feel like Iâ€™m getting a chance to create those on a larger stage.

[youtube]sooJVIHmT6U[/youtube]

I saw in an earlier interview where you said you wanted to be David Bowie in “Labyrinth,” could you elaborate on that?

I felt like David Bowie, Jareth as the Goblin King was really misunderstood because he just wanted the love of Jennifer Connellyâ€™s character. So he did all these things to bring her to him and I feel like not that Iâ€™m desperate for everyoneâ€™s love but I feel like itâ€™s what every artist does but kind of communicate my feelings and thoughts to other people I want to really envelop them. He really was about kind of sharing his joy and he didnâ€™t really understand how to express himself. I loved that movie growing-up so I used to watch it all the time.

Tell me about your EP *First Transgression*?

The song “Cobra” was one of the first songs I did. I did an album in â€™06 and had been kind of working around that and worked on another project with a friend of mine in L.A. So was just kind of sitting back thinking about my own music and what I would want to do again and “Cobra” was one of the first I made around that. I wanted to do something that had a narrative with it because Iâ€™m also influenced by film and science fiction. So I wanted to do something that had an ongoing narrative that didnâ€™t have to end. It wasnâ€™t like “Ok that album came out” they would be kind of building on each other. Itâ€™s kind of about a personal, political and

social revolution at the core but one is not prioritized over the other. That's kind of the concept behind it as well as the video and visual aspects behind it.

Yes because I wanted to ask about the video for "User Manual"?

It's looking at the reality of relationships and sometimes we have to admit certain things to ourselves and a lot of times we don't take time to look at ourselves critically we'll blame other people. I think especially younger people like my age a little bit younger even older. We'll reduce it to some simplistic ideas around why the relationship didn't work. So with that song it was like let's me an anti-love anthem just be upfront and honest from the get-go about what you're like. In the video we wanted it to be a narrative that goes along with it and the dancers and model represented ghosts of relationships past the people you might've hurt in the past but there's still like this complex connection between you two especially if it was a serious relationship. So it's not like one person is to blame it's actually like a tangled up web. Then Korona comes in with her own side of the story and then at the end I wanted it to be kind of a mixture of images it was kind of scary kind of like vaguely religious or angelic you learn from it you're better for it. I wanted it to look like I'm open I'm a blank slate my eyes are white I'm open for something new after going through this and learning from it.

Besides "Labyrinth" who and what are you inspired by?

Film inspires me a lot and I would say that a lot of the traditional artists like African-American artists in general I didn't really have them as influences so I never really listened to Stevie Wonder or Prince or Michael Jackson or anything like that. I think a lot of times film inspired me movies like Firestarter with Drew Barrymore as a little girl who is like pyrokinetic like that really inspired me because

she had an internal power and it really came out when her emotions took a hold of her it was kind of like performing this weird experience you feel like you have a deeper power you have this kind of hidden ability that gets to come out so that always inspired me. The imagery from film inspires me a lot the images I invoke in video or onstage. But as far as musical influences I actually was really influenced by Sade and traditional pop music like Madonna's Immaculate Collection was one of the first albums that I ever had when I was 7 or 8. My mom listened to a lot of older jazz and I think it informs my vocal style without me really knowing it.

You've lived in Nigeria, London and the states, how has that fed into your art?

I haven't really been explicitly an artist making music and writing my own songs until more recently so maybe after 2006 is when I wrote my first actual song around that time so I haven't been a songwriter for a really long time but I think just in terms of my life experience it really gave me a much broader perspective as you would expect of anyone who lived in different places and also kind of track different relationships with family in Nigeria who are Nigerian much differently than you would interact with a family that was African-American that was living in Michigan. You interact differently with having really close friends who are just German so there was a lot of shades of gray and I think that kind of bled over into how I present myself as an artist. It's a lot less of a binary a lot less of an either/or situation and I think that's why it's hard for me to be in a specific genre because there are just so many different kind of influences not only from wanting to get more diversity in my life so kind of like exploring classical Indian music and song structure and chord progressions it kind of pushes what kind of melody I would normally come up with. It's a lot different than I think it would have been if I hadn't been able to have different experiences that spurred me to learn

more about the world around me.

[youtube]oVTZ-REx9uQ[/youtube]

Who do you feel is doing something analogous to what you're doing?

The two closest are probably *Ebony Bones* and I bring her up a lot and I wish she had more exposure in the US because it's hard for me to point to even a music video but she performs a lot especially in Europe but her show her songwriting and her DIY ethic I think is analogous to what I do. *Santigold* is also someone that kind of blends in with what I do. I try to write songs that are somewhat memorable in terms of lyrically I do think that *Santigold* might be parallel. People kind of take their own impression away they give me "You remind me of Kanye West mixed with *Kraftwerk*" or "You remind me of a Prince in a way" it really depends on where you're coming from.

What is your vision?

You know to answer your question referencing *Don Cornelius* and "Soul Train" and it's very to me because "Soul Train" is like the "Soul Train" line specifically is that space where no matter who you are it's about enjoying yourself and everyone loves you. You can be silly with no rhythm whatever and you're all just like dancing and it's just like a space of joy. Especially in the work that I do I also try to include when we're doing activism or engaging in social work we always try to include a party or a dance component because that's where real connections are forged. So I'd love to see a world where everyone can play a role in that because the sad part about social activism is that it was a revolution but at the same time it was a revolution of commodifying Blackness. I feel like in the '80s and '90s you really saw it more and more commodification even on "Soul Train" itself. I'd like to see a return to real

true authentic expressions of people's art authentic expressions of personal relationships and real spaces for dialogue about society about our experiences. Your skin color your perceived economic status what kind of music you're doing how you perform how you look how you dress like all of that, it can matter, but it shouldn't be a barrier to connections with other people. That's what I try to do with my performances we just had a show at the Magic Bag Theatre in Ferndale and it was like a lot of white suburban '20s-'40s type people and everyone was like "I'm really a progressive metal person but I loved your set." No matter who it is there's this common denominator that I'm trying to get to and I think a lot of artists are doing that. I'd love to see them all leave the margins or everyone else step into the margins and be comfortable there and have a party there.

What's next?

I'm really excited about the Second Transgression because I think it's going to have so much more to offer musically. I've got some great remixes from some great folks for that and I'm doing some collaborations with some European artists so there's going to be a bigger song coming out in May. And I'm working on a new video for the second Transgression.