



Richard Olatunde-Baker Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 – 2024



Introduction

Sabrina

I guess if you want to start by telling me just a little bit about yourself and your background as well.

Richard

My name is Richard Olatunde-Baker. So, Yoruba-English. Brought up in UK, listening to African music at home, courtesy of my father, actually. Who is the English one. At a time when it wasn't cool and trendy like it is now. And we were in an environment where so as I was growing up in a very at home, we had that, but outside it was not friendly towards that kind of thing.

Anyway, so, yeah, I got into music via the guitar. I was a self-taught guitarist actually and then the African drumming thing came to me because I'd already had it at home.

But then I got into it because I went to see artists perform and I approached people to, you know, come and help me learn how to drum. I'd been doing a bit by myself at home. So, I joined groups and got trained by some of the people who were on the records that I used to listen to as a kid, funnily enough. So that was quite nice. And then obviously I did a little bit in Nigeria as well, in the Nigerian community in London. And then from being a performer working in African theatre, African theatre groups like IROKO. There's another one called SAKOBA. I then went to, into the sort of music production side. So, I also worked in sort of like quite big recording studios and expanding my network. Then I also have an instrument business, so I import and sell and make actually a lot of African instruments. So, I've kind of got this sort of my different strands as a performer, as a producer, as a teacher doing a lot of workshops, and also as a kind of like a retailer, but I don't just sell stuff. I like people to know about it. So, I put a set of education slash retail because I like to sell lots of instruments that people don't necessarily know about. So, to try and expand everybody's knowledge.

Sabrina

You mentioned it was your father who was the English one who kind of was listening to all these records and as your mom's the Nigerian one, like, how did you find growing up I guess in that kind of environment in the UK?

Richard

Well, that's my environment, so to other people, it's strange. It's not strange to me.

That's my environment, so.

How did I find it? Well, when we come home, our school friends don't want to hear that kind of thing. But it was nice because I love the music.

Sabrina

I guess was it your father's love of that music, that kind of broadened your own interests as well?

Richard

Yeah. I mean, he's not a musician. He can't even tap his foot. He couldn't even tap his foot in time. But having something that's really unique and special at home. So, it was kind of protected in that sense, I guess. Yeah, 'cause, if it'd been like, *oh, let's do this stuff out in society*, you would have been crushed. So, because it was in a sheltered environment. Yeah, that gave it safety.

Sabrina

When you started, when you were learning the guitar, was it more contemporary music that you're playing or was it still related to, like the African culture?

Richard

Yeah, a mixture of stuff. Yeah, 'cause obviously I was integrating with people, so we were doing stuff like kind of post punk stuff or so-called alternative and experimental stuff using lots of effects pedals and stuff like that. Which actually, that thing actually birthed another project I did much later on my own project called Eardrum where we had not guitar actually, but we had a lot of sort of electronic effects and stuff with African percussion or even the effects on the percussion.

So yeah, the guitar was a self-taught thing and then and I did try to copy some of the stuff that I had on the records at home. So that was there. But there was certainly no outlet for that style. So, I was doing like you say, the more contemporary stuff of the time that I was, you know, that was interested in.

Sabrina

I was actually funnily enough; I found the Eardrum project that you were a part of. How have you seen that grow over the time that you've been a part of it?

Richard

So that was my project, so it was actually just me by myself. And then I recruited people to make it a band. Well, it's dormant at the moment, but the good thing about it is because it's so kind of out there, I bring it back to life every once in a while, and call people we can do stuff together. So, when it first came out, it was definitely ahead of its time. And we got the sort of avant-garde album of the month. We had a really good label called the Leaf label who we knew at the time but had really good press. So, we actually did as well as it could have done for that kind of noisy kind of thing and it's interesting to see some of the people doing experimental stuff now have referenced it, which is really nice. But no, I'm not doing anything with it at the moment, but I will do. So, it will be in a new incarnation when it comes out.

Sabrina

What was it, I guess, that brought you into like taking on the more percussion instruments like the talking drum? Was it just through meeting people or did you always kind of have that desire?

Richard

Yeah, I only wanted to play the talking drum actually. Yeah, obviously interest in other instruments when you start meeting – it wasn't just, you know, I was playing with, I was playing with people from Trinidad. I was playing with all kinds of West African musicians and Congolese musicians and from everywhere and then obviously you just find more instruments. So, a mixture of the passion for it, but also as a musician, if you want to be a musician and not have a horrible job you don't like and then do your music, you need to expand your repertoire. So, it was a mixture of the joy of learning new instruments, but also, so that I can have a – so, I can survive as a musician, you know.

Sabrina

You seem so booked up with everything at the moment. I think I found your website is like, so many like touring dates and like workshops and everything. How do you find – with the teaching element in particular, like, how do you find, like teaching the younger generations as well?

Richard

Yeah, I do. Yeah, I do all sorts with the workshops. I mean, there's a nursery, the Busy Bees Nursery. They're a whole sort of network. I've been doing that for about 15 years, like once a month. So, I start, you know, I'll go from babies to adults.

Yeah, I like teaching the young people. Tends to be a visit to a school rather than a regular thing. So, the regular stuff is more one to one. For instance, one of my well, my best talking drum student, a young girl called Hessa. She's really amazing and it's really rewarding to see the progress. Obviously, it's the parents as well. I don't take all the credit. So yeah, I do get a lot of joy from seeing the progression. Even if I do a school visit and I'm not going to go back and see those kids for a whole year. I can tell in the day and the teachers can tell me, *oh, we saw this student, they're not normally like that, and today when they saw me with the drums or whatever, it changed them.* So, it's very rewarding.

So, group teaching involves, people can't just sit and watch. They have to watch for a bit and that we talk and encourage questions and play some games, have a bit of fun. But the aim is always that they will have a repertoire. You know, by the end of the session, I'll probably direct it a lot, but in theory can sit and watch. Or they could do a performance at the end of the day in front of their parents perhaps. Again, I'll be sort of leading it, but the idea is they do it themselves that you know, they have to remember what they've done.

Sabrina

I guess like you are you are a musician as well. How do you find touring has been with this kind of music and the response that you get from different people?

Richard

So yeah, I tour with different groups. I mean, it's always got some of that African element, but it's not always the same. No, I love it. I really enjoy touring and I always carry as many authentic instruments with me as possible. Even though when you do big touring, they tend to hire stuff for you. You know, because you can't carry a lot of stuff on the plane. But I bring as much as I can.

Having toured a lot, I now sort of get the gist of different cultural responses, should I say. You know, when we go to certain countries, certain regions, understanding how people are not expecting them to all be the same. So, without any generalisation, certain audiences are really musical and love clapping and expressing themselves. In other regions, the people appear not to have a response, but actually, when you talk to them afterwards, they're really excited. It's just they don't show it in the same way. So yeah, no. But touring is a lot of fun. It can be very tiring but it's a joy. It's, you know, 'cause, everything's paid for. You're just travelling around. But you do have to wake up at crazy times in the mornings sometimes too, so it can be hard. Yeah.

Sabrina

Do you have a favourite place that you like to go back to?

Richard

Yeah, I'm not sure. There's a lot of places I like going. There are some places that I've been once, like, Reunion Island. I've been to Addis Ababa once – that's in Ethiopia – that were just amazing. But no, I don't think. I've got a favourite. I just. I enjoy the difference of the of the different places. Yeah.

Sabrina

With the repairing and the selling of second-hand drums like you mentioned, like the education aspect is an important part of that as well.

Richard

Sorry, if I could fine tune that. What I meant was when I sell the new instruments that I've imported, I don't just sell them, I sell them with a background. So perhaps somebody – so, if I was to sell you a Yoruba talking drum, now I don't know. Maybe you do know about them, but I would give you a background on it. On what it's for, how

you're supposed to hold it. And just so that you don't just go away with this relic. And you sort of understand it, you know this is how it goes and you've got an idea of the sort of cultural context. You can now treat it as a toy if you want because you bought it off me. But the idea is that you get a background, and you don't just see it as this kind of funny thing from Africa or whatever. You know, that's what I meant about the education part of it.

Sabrina

Do you find, I guess when people come to like either repair or just buy for the first time, do you fix them up yourself or do you like work with other people to get that sorted?

Richard

Yeah, I do all the repairs myself. It is something I'm looking at employing people, but I've almost needed to, but not yet. These music services around the whole of UK that you know they come with like 50 djembes at a time. So, you know that it can suddenly mount up and I have a lot of work to do. But yeah, no, I do that myself and most of the shop is online. So, people, you know, watch the videos, see the picture. They can contact me if they need info. And occasionally, it's very occasionally I'll do one of these pop-up markets like the Africa Spitalfields event, where people can actually come to a market stall and pick stuff up and, you know, have fun with it. But generally, it's online, most of my store is online.

I was also going to say about the customers. It's quite interesting the span of people I've got is from people who just want something nice to look in their house, to quite a few, quite several many named musicians really sort of big, big musicians who I either know them or just have a lot of respect for them who buy stuff. So, it's quite a wide variation of people that buy this stuff.

I mean, it comes from – you see, traditionally a musician can make their instrument, you know, there are instrument makers separate from musicians, but there's certain aspects of it, particularly the Yoruba talking drum, putting the skin on the drum, for instance. You're supposed to be able to do that. But a lot of people have skipped that for various reasons and not blaming people, but – so, for me it's just like, well, *you're supposed to be able to do that*. So, I occasionally teach people how to do it themselves as well, because I feel like they should know.

But yeah, it's very pleasurable. It changes how you play an instrument when you can make it or you've repaired it, you play it with a different kind of confidence 'cause you're not sort of – particularly a drum. You're not worried about it breaking or anything because you know you can fix it. You know, you haven't got to wait two weeks for

somebody to repair it for you. And you feel more connected to it because you know every nook and cranny of that instrument because you made it.

Sabrina

Is there any particular genre or style of music that you enjoy playing the most?

Richard

There's many, but I do enjoy playing Fuji, which is a Yoruba talking drum music very fast, intricate rhythms. I actually enjoy playing Afrobeat. Which is very repetitive in terms of the rhythm, but it's got quite a bigger picture that sort of goes with it.

Now I enjoy every style. You know, I tend not to play stuff I don't want to, that I don't like anyway. So, because I know it's an obsession, musician, because I'm also that, you know, often get presented with stuff and it's just like, *oh, well, let's just do this*. I tend to steer a million miles away from being like that. Obviously, people have to pay the bills so, but I really do relish choosing different styles of music.

Sabrina

Lastly, is there anything that you're most I guess looking forward to? Whether it be touring or just performing again or like just what whatever that might be?

Richard

There's always something to look forward to. Oh, in July, I'm gonna go back to Japan. There's an artist I play with, Mulatu Astatke, who's an Ethiopian composer who's been going for an extremely long time. So that would be my second visit to Japan, so that will be very – though it's the second time I've been, but culturally so different, it makes it an interesting journey.

I'm literally looking at my diary, when people ask, *what are you doing next?* And I'm like, *Ummm*. So, I guess that's the travelling thing.

I've performed in Nigeria a few times. Morocco, South Africa – Cape Town Jazz Festival that is – Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. That's as much as I've done in Africa. So yeah, there's plenty more to do.

Sabrina

Do you find that like the reception you get when you play in like Nigeria very different to what you experience playing in like London or something?

Richard

Yeah, well it would depend on who the audience is 'cause if it's a Nigerian audience in

London, then I'll have similar response as I would in Nigeria, but if it's a sort of mixed or or even mostly white audience, then it will be very different. And yeah, I did something recently for it's called Nation's Rhythm Festival in Ibadan in Nigeria. But I had to send a video so I couldn't be there. Yeah, the thing is that I guess the element of surprise that somebody who's mixed and based in UK is able to or even knows anything at all about Yoruba drumming is yeah, it is that sort of pleasant surprise, I think.

End

All errors and omissions excepted.