



The Creative Independent is a vast resource of emotional and practical guidance. We publish Guides, Focuses, Tips, Interviews, and more to help you thrive as a creative person. Explore our website to find wisdom that speaks to you and your practice...

October 27, 2022 -

As told to Jessica Dore, 2255 words.

Tags: Dance, Music, Performance, Identity, Mental health, Multi-tasking, Success, Process.

On the joy of learning new things

Performing artist Kingsley Ibeneche discusses creating healthy boundaries, working through grief, and balancing tradition with innovation.

You were born, raised, and currently live in Camden, New Jersey. Every time I've seen you perform you always say on stage, "I'm from Camden." Why is it so important for you to say that, when you're performing for a room of people?

[When] I'd just joined Pilobolus's Dance Theater, the first dance company I joined out of college, we had a gala with the new members for the new season of the theater in Connecticut. We all know Connecticut, all these funders were there, beautiful, pristine, clean people. And this is my first time out of Camden, really. They would introduce me and be like, "This is Kingsley, our new dancer, he's from Camden." That's how they would introduce me to all the funders. "He made it out. Look at that, he made it out."

I was 22, 23. But I understood, even then, it was not that I was their pet, it was...I was an orphan. That's what it felt like. "We helped this guy get out of Camden." And then the people would be like, "How is Camden now? How does it feel to still live there?" And to me, I'm just like, I'm there. This is my home. It made me feel I need to always be proud of where I'm from.

A lot of your recent work—including your debut album *Udo*—centers on this theme of community. How do you balance the needs of your community with personal and creative needs? What have you been learning about boundaries?

The truthful answer is, I haven't created boundaries. I love to help. Even if I grunt and moan, I like to do the most. I like to go overboard, maybe so I can complain to myself later. I love to just be a part of things. FOMO, but in a very helpful way. But a lot of my detriment comes from people believing they have access to me.

If I can be stern about the thing I love, which is art, and really lock myself away, I can do that with people I love. I can be stern and lock myself away from them and say, "I need this time for myself." But I have not. And that's the truth, I have not been doing that.

I've learned that I have to set boundaries because I want to stop complaining. I want to fill my time with other things. With prayers, maybe. I want to fill them with chants. Stuff that'll motivate me.

How do you know when it's worth it to sacrifice your peace or time or energy?

It's hard for me to think about that, to be honest. My last name, Ibeneche, means, "my brother's keeper." It is an obligation. It's like it's in the contract, you have to. I can't think about [was it worth it]. If I think about that, I would never help. The American side of me is like, "No, I don't feel you're doing for me what I am doing for you, so I'm not going to do this." And that's real truth. And it's not to hurt anybody, but it's just sometimes, I don't see it back. And it hurts.

But the African side of me says, "This is grace." This is what it is to lay grace. You learn that lesson. You have to bow down constantly through the day, and to protect and help your family. And sometimes your King is not good to you, but it's all right. You bow anyway, and hopefully it gets better. Tough.

Also the American side really doesn't even exist. I am a Nigerian in America. That's what I feel and that's what I am, so I'm happy to help my brothers. We're poets and so we have to talk heavy. But I'm always happy to help them.

Your debut album is named after your father's village in Nigeria. He passed during the finishing stages of the project. What was it like for you to put out *Udo*, with his death still being so recent?

I have different realities with the album. One, it's a manuscript for whoever's trying to be free. There's another reality where I feel like I'm my father, writing in his village. I picture him in Udo writing these songs and building these worlds. He's writing these songs, and I am him. In another more literal world, it's a bunch of love songs, songs about breaking free.

I guess it's hard for me to think about his passing. I'm really good at running away from the subject. I like ambiguity. So that's how I would speak on his death too. Sometimes I know enough details for me to know. And I don't dig deep in my mind to think about it, it's something I have to obviously dig through on my own time. But I don't even want [the album] to be a tribute. It's just, "Dang, look. I'm your son, be proud. Be proud of something I created." Very simply. There's no poetry for that. I want him to be proud.

How do you get creative about grieving?

I got to keep going. That's how I grieve. Keep creating, keep making things I don't even think about. I don't even know what grief is. I don't know how to formulate it in my body yet. I feel I need somebody to teach me, almost. I feel stuck. It's a space I don't really expound on, in my heart and in my body.

When you set out to write something or to make a piece, what is your process?

I need some type of sound wave. The feeling is in the beat, and that's the truth. I've always needed to write to something, or to be writing while making sound, or to be dancing while there's sound playing, or while I'm making sound I need to dance and maybe shout or create a groove. I guess it starts from feeling. It does start from feeling. It starts from feeling. Keep it at that.

How do you determine if something you've made is good?

I know it's good when I can confidently show it to someone, or when I impress myself. I'm a hard critic, and I don't lie. I try to live my life unbiased as possible. With myself, I'm like, "This sucks." I wouldn't talk to anybody else like that. "This is trash. Try again."

I love basketball, I compare a lot of things to basketball in my life. When you play basketball, you know when you're good. You can be good in many ways. Rebounding, shooting, passing, creating a play, defense. You lean on that, and you're good. I live my life like that, too. I know when I'm not having a good game, or I'm not having a good writing session. I know I need to break or to find a different way. All that pours into knowing, after I create the piece, or while I'm creating it. I can just tell, "you're trying too hard." I know it's good when it happens naturally. When I know for a fact, this is going to hit other people.

Being Nigerian and a dancer you practice an art that's deeply rooted in your lineage. How do you balance reverence for tradition and being an individual in a different time and place, putting your unique touch on things?

It is deeply rooted in me. That's a lesson we learned as kids: Honor who came before you, honor who is here, and honor who will come after you. I think my dad is the best dancer I've ever seen. Maybe not the best, but the most creative. And I've seen a lot of dancers. I always admired that about him, how he had traditional movement but then put his own twist on it. That balance has always been an intention for me.

Even when I didn't know I wanted to be a dancer, I always felt I stood out because I was able to connect from a root, where others couldn't. I think it's important for me to hold onto that, because that information is sacred. To be able to filter that information and transform it into something is sacred. Not everybody can do that.

You are a performance and a recording artist, which require different skills. Is there a difference in how you approach them?

Everybody I know knows I'm in love with performing. That's what I want to do. Hands down, I know that's my strong suit. I'm really, really good at it. I always say I'm a man of the people. I really am. I know what will make people smile. I've always been like that, even as a kid. As a writer, I also know. I care so much about people. I'm thinking, "What will make them smile? What will make them feel safe? What will make them feel seen or heard?"

While I'm dancing, I don't care. I really don't. The pure performer Kingsley is like, "I don't care about y'all, this is for me right now." That's the difference for me, [when I'm performing] I try to let go. That is my goal. To let go so much that I can do whatever I want. I don't care. And I want to lean into that more. I really do.

What is your philosophy when you're learning something new?

I only learn things enough to enjoy myself. I never take on the burden of... "I am going to be the greatest at this." Being a dancer, it's "you need to be the greatest at this thing." And so that does build a lot of insecurity because you aren't. You never can be. It's literally, highly impossible.

When I go into things now, I don't have an expectation to be the greatest. I have an expectation to really enjoy myself. I want to flourish in my own light, and not in anybody else's light. If I were to tell

somebody about learning something new, I would tell them to look like a fool.

When I first started dancing, I did this competition, the NAACP Axio Competition. I didn't win, but I was killing it. This guy, Obediah Wright, who is a prolific choreographer and dancer, was one of the judges, and he saw me and he's like, "I want you to train with me in New York at my theater." And I'm like, "Yo, this is crazy." I've never, I didn't even...

So I go there. I'm spending three days. He wants me to learn a piece, it's a five to six minute piece. So he's just teaching me the movement and the sequences, talking me through them. He's... "All right, you're going to do a double turn into an arabesque, you're going to do a pas de chat," and I don't have... I'm a good faker. What he'd seen on stage was me just expressing myself, but this guy has technique. I was so exhausted from trying, and so nervous I didn't remember one move. I would learn eight counts and I would forget because I was so scared.

He got frustrated, and he's like, "Oh man." The days pass, it's [the third day] now and I'm in rehearsal. And he looked at me and had a smile on his face and was like, "You don't give up. Anybody else would just call for a bus home. You don't know one step. You've been here eight hours, I know your feet hurt." And I'm just like, "My feet are not going to stop me from this opportunity. I get to learn something new. I'm here."

That's the story I would tell someone. You really gotta see your joy in the thing you want to learn. Really. Even if you are embarrassed. I'm telling you, I was sweating. It was three days of dancing. But then he told me, "You're a soloist."

Does doing something that you love for money change things for you?

Definitely. My insecurities grow every day. When I first started doing it, it was pure joy. It was like, "I'm good at something, finally." I was always aware that other people did not know what they were good at and so I was very grateful. But then you get older and you realize it's not enough to just enjoy this thing. Now you have to make money off of the thing you've studied and spent \$80,000 on in college. You have to make money now. How are you going to do that? And that builds a lot of insecurity and questioning yourself.

I don't like to say that I'm the best at what I do, but I'm so aware of what I can do. I know I could establish myself and make money off of the things I love, but I don't know if I would love them anymore. That's what's changed for me, is thinking of ways to make money instead of thinking of ways to heal myself through expression. It's tough. But I know there is a balance.



Photo by Wren Rene

Kingsley Ibeneche Recommends:

Sweat at least once a day, if you can

Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower

The Last Dragon by Motown Productions

Touch earth at least once a day

"This too shall pass."

Name

Kingsley Ibeneche

Vocation

performing artist (singer, dancer)

Fact

Marcus Branch

Related to Performer Kingsley Ibeneche on the joy of learning new things:

■ Musician Bongeziwe Mabandla on following an unconventional path

■ Kiani Del Valle on being a multi-disciplinary dancer

■ Composer, musician, and educator Angel Bat Dawid on holding onto wonder

The Creative Independent is ad-free and published by [Kickstarter](#), PBC. See also: [Terms](#), [Privacy Policy](#).



↑