Obo Addy (1936-2012)

Obo Addy, a celebrated Ghanian drummer and dancer, lived in Portland for over thirty years and taught at Lewis & Clark College. Addy helped popularize a genre known as worldbeat, a combination of European and African musical traditions.

Born in 1936 in Accra, the capital of Ghana, Addy was the son of a Wonche medicine man, and by the age of six was designated as a drummer. Addy's family was part of the Ga ethnic group, and he was raised playing in the musical traditions of the Ga people.

Addy got his professional start in Ghana by playing with the Joe Kelly Band, the Ghana Broadcasting Band, and the Farmer's Council Band, which played popular American and European music. In 1969, he was hired by the Arts Council of Ghana as a Ga master, and he received his first international exposure at the Munich Summer Olympics in 1972. Addy lived in London and spent six years touring internationally until 1978, when he and his wife Susan moved to Portland, where they resided until his death.

Addy maintained two different ensembles: Okropong, which means "eagle" in the Ga language, and Kukrudu, which is Ga for "earthquake." Okropong relies on traditional instrumentation, using hand and stick drums, bells, and shakers to create a layered rhythmic effect. Dance is also an important part of the performance, along with singing. Kukrudu is an eight-piece African jazz group that relies on a mix of European and African instruments. Addy was both a percussionist and singer with these ensembles.

An active supporter of world music, Addy had been extremely active in bringing that style of music to Portland and Oregon. In addition to teaching at Lewis & Clark College, he hosted weekly drumming classes at Lincoln High School in Portland. He and his wife Susan created the Homowo African Arts and Cultures, a not-for-profit organization that hosts an annual festival. Addy also toured with his music, performing at the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Town Hall in New York, and universities around the country.

In addition to performing with his ensembles, Addy collaborated extensively with musicians. In 1992, he was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet to write "Wawshishijay" for their album, *Pieces of Africa*. He also wrote for Saxoforte, Third Angle New Music Ensemble, and modern dancer Mary Osland. His music has been performed widely by chamber groups across the nation.

Addy received many accolades, including the Oregon Governor's Arts Award (1993) and a Masters Fellowship from the Oregon Arts Council. In 1996, he received the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the first native African to receive the prize. He passed away of cancer in 2012.

Written by Zeb Larson

Further Reading:

Obo Addy: Master Drummer. http://www.oboaddy.com/about.html.

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