

## 'Drums of Passion'

### World-renowned musician Taiwo plays an Ashiko beat for Austin to march to

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Eyes closed, Thomas Taiwo Duvall rubs the calf-skin head of his drum with wrinkled mocha-colored hands. He rubs slowly and methodically at first, gaining speed.

"When I rub the drum it reminds me of the ocean - the waves coming in, the water rushing out," said Taiwo, 72. "It helps me prepare for what I'm going to do."

What Taiwo does is play the Ashiko drum. The drum is native to Nigeria but can be found today in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Jamaica - a legacy of the slave trade. Taiwo is one of the few remaining masters in the United States of what he considers a dying art.

"This drum here is different," Taiwo said, patting the side of his wooden Ashiko drum like the back of an old friend.

Taiwo, who was born in Washington, D.C., and moved to Austin in September, is one of the prominent figures in the history of African and Afro-Cuban drumming in the United States. He has collaborated with an impressive roster of musicians - from The Grateful Dead, Santana and John Lee Hooker to John Coltrane, Ray Barretto and Mongo Santamaria. He even played at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City with his longtime partner and Nigeria native Babatunde Olatunji.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Taiwo recorded four albums with Olatunji on Columbia Records including the 1959 album *Drums of Passion*. The album's importance in the rise of world music cannot be overstated, selling more than 5 million copies as the first-ever studio recording of African drumming in the United States.

Though the album was a huge success, Taiwo only received a few hundred dollars for the recording session. He and Olatunji never received royalties either. Until the Texan interviewed him, Taiwo had no idea the album had sold so well.

When he was told about the wide popularity of *Passion*, for a moment, Taiwo thought wistfully of a life of potential riches but the notion soon passed without care.

"I could have been a millionaire," Taiwo said. "Anyway, what the hell."

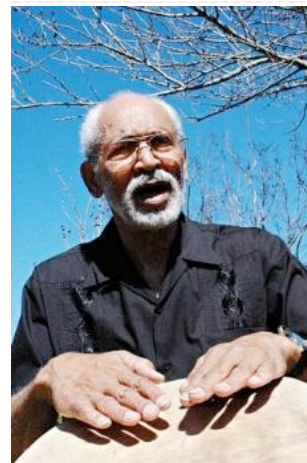
Taiwo met Olatunji around 1955 when they each worked for publishing companies in New York City. Taiwo was doing illustrations and coloring for Spider-Man comics at the time.

The two often ate lunch at a nearby cafe called The Shadow Box. They recognized each other from their lunch hour where the two would watch Zsa Zsa and Eva Gabor run their Madison Avenue boutique, but had never spoken.

On one particularly crowded day, the pair was forced to share a table. Olatunji told Taiwo that he was president of an African student association at his university and had to deliver a speech at a convention of African students. When Olatunji said he would much prefer to play drums than give a speech, the two realized they shared a common passion. He invited Taiwo, a skilled conga player, to play at the convention with him. It was their first of many performances together.

"Olatunji wanted to play his drums, and I was crazy enough to go along," Taiwo said.

After achieving some success, Olatunji quit his job and asked Taiwo to do the same. Before hitting the road, Taiwo - who went by Tom at



Thomas Taiwo Duvall, 72, sings while playing the ashiko drum outside his RV near Lake Travis. Taiwo is one of the few remaining master ashiko drummers in the United States.

the time - gave himself an African name, Taiwo. Like Thomas, Taiwo means "twin" in the Yoruba language of Nigeria.

"Olatunji and Tom - who the hell is going to pay to see that?" Taiwo said.

### **The Mama Drum**

Taiwo likens the Ashiko to a matriarchal family. Ashiko is traditionally played with three drums of various sizes, the largest being the mother of the family.

"The drum is a family, and the head of the drum family is always mama, that's the African structure," Taiwo said. "When she says jump, papa and the children all jump."

The range of the Ashiko drum is what sets it apart from other drums of African origin, Taiwo said. It can produce deep bass sounds as well as higher-sounding slaps.

"The most popular drum now is the djembe but it doesn't have the same tonal quality as the Ashiko drum, this mama drum," Taiwo said, gesturing toward the waist-high instrument sitting between his legs. "They have to use a bass drum with their drum whereas the Ashiko can play all the parts herself. The youngsters like the djembe and I know why - because it's loud.

"But there is more to music than just being loud."

Taiwo has been playing drums for more than 50 years but remembers with clarity when he first heard the distinctive sound of Ashiko in 1953. He had recently finished serving as a paratrooper in the military stationed in Fort Bragg, N.C. He was living in New York City, unemployed and unsure of what to do next in life.

"I was standing on the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in New York City and I heard these drums playing," Taiwo said. "I had never heard anything like that before in my life."

There was a warmth to the sound - it was deeper and more resonate than other drums he'd heard.

The man playing the drums that day was Moses Miannes, a Nigerian immigrant who first brought Ashiko drumming to this country in the 1930s and Taiwo's future mentor.

### **The Papa Drummer**

Miannes arrived in New York City from Nigeria in 1933. He and his two cousins were approached by a man in a limousine who was looking for "African-looking Negroes" to play drums at the 1934 World's Fair in Chicago. The cousins felt insulted and wanted to fight the man. Miannes convinced them that it was an opportunity to get paid for what they loved to do. They had no drums but Miannes had an Ashiko built to his specifications by a Trinidadian carpenter.

He soon came to be known as "Machine Gun Miannes" in the music community because he played the Ashiko at such an incredible speed.

Taiwo recalled a time when he was late for a rehearsal with Miannes. Showing up late for a rehearsal was a good way to get fired, so Taiwo hopped in a cab and rushed to the studio.

"When I got there I heard all these drums playing, and I thought, 'They must have already found a replacement for me,'" Taiwo said. "I opened the door, and it was just the old man playing - he sounded like three drummers."

The drum was passed on to Taiwo when Miannes was hit by a cab and killed in front of the Apollo Theater in 1964.

### **Son of a Machine Gun**

Taiwo moved to Austin last year with Bunny, his wife of 28 years. The couple bought an RV and spent 10 days driving here from Washington, D.C. The two now live in their motor home in a quiet spot near Lake Travis and hope to move into Austin soon.

"You have to really be crazy about someone to live in an RV with them," Taiwo said.

Taiwo was attracted to Austin by warm weather and friendly people.

"Everyone here always seems to have a smile on their face and that makes me smile too," Taiwo said.

Taiwo first came to central Texas more than 50 years ago with the 82nd Airborne Division on a training mission. At the time, black and white regiments of the army were treated very differently. While the white regiment flew to Texas in a number of hours the blacks rode for more than a week in the back of an army truck.

A group of area locals threw a party for the black regiment before they returned to Fort Bragg, N.C.

"I've always had a place in my heart for Texas people," Taiwo said. "They made me feel like I was a human being."

Taiwo played his Ashiko drum during Austin's First Night celebration at the end of 2005. He also performed a set opening for the legendary Sun Ra Arkestra last November at Ruta Maya International Headquarters in Austin.


"If the people don't like us here we might have to drive all the way to Australia," Taiwo said with a laugh. "But we're very much enjoying our stay in Austin so far."

He doesn't perform often but it is always a treat for audiences when he does.

"I have found that it's something that should be heard everywhere at all times," Taiwo said. "It's good for the soul - it's good for mine at least."

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