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From Lagos to Palermo and Back Again: Chris Obehi Returns to his Motherland

6 years after arriving in Italy as a refugee, he went back to his native land. The trip was a first step in constructing “a cultural axis between Sicily and Nigeria.”



by *George De Stefano*

Feb 09 2022



Leggi in italiano



*Cu ti lu dissi ca t'haju a lassari,
megliu la morti e no chistu duluri,
ahj ahj ahj ahj moru moru moru moru,
ciatu di lu me cori l'amuri miu si tu!*

“Cu ti lu dissi” (“Who Told You?”) is one of the most famous Sicilian songs and perhaps the most beloved composition by the late folk singer Rosa Balistreri. A few years ago, a young busker with a guitar was singing Balistreri’s soulful lament in Palermo’s Ballarò market. That might not have attracted much attention except for the fact that this street singer was a young African man. Chris Obehi arrived in Sicily in 2015 as a teenager, after a harrowing journey that began with his fleeing Nigeria, being imprisoned in Libya, and crossing the Mediterranean in an inflatable boat packed with more than 100 other refugees, including children.

Obehi was born in 1998 in Warri, Nigeria as Christopher Goddey; at birth, his family gave him the traditional honorific Obehi (“angel’s hand”). At 16, he traveled from Nigeria to Libya to escape the violence of the terrorist group Boko Haram. But Libya had become chaotic and lawless since the 2011 assassination of Muammar Gaddafi. After four months in Libya, where he washed cars to pay for his passage to Europe, Obehi was kidnapped and thrown in jail. It was a terrifying experience, with prisoners being shot daily. He and another prisoner eventually escaped and, after several days at sea, a rescue ship found him and the other refugees and brought them to Italy.

In November 2021, Obehi returned to Nigeria for the first time in six years as a singer, songwriter and recording artist. His busking in Palermo led to his being signed to a contract by 800A Records producer Fabio Rizzo and the release of his first album, **Obehi**, in 2020. The album’s nine tracks are original compositions, except for the Rosa Balistreri song that stopped *palermitani* in their tracks in Ballarò. Obehi, singing in English, Italian, his native Esan language and Sicilian, is backed by a band led by Rizzo on guitar, with a guest appearance by one of Sicily’s leading musicians, trumpeter Roy Paci.



BY THE SAME AUTHOR



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Fela Kuti and Obehi, Kalakuta Museum (Photo Elijah Ikehua)

While in Nigeria late last year, Obehi was reunited with his family, whom he hadn't seen since his departure, he visited the Kalakuta Museum dedicated to Fela Kuti, the late Nigerian musician renowned worldwide for creating the Afrobeat genre, and recorded with members of Kuti's band Egypt 80. During the trip, the UK-based film director Shayo Three shot a documentary about Obehi's



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FIOL

homecoming, “Back to Motherland,” to be released this month.

I interviewed Chris Obehi about his return to Nigeria and his life in Palermo, with Fabio Rizzo also participating. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

Chris, when did you go to Nigeria, and how long did you stay? What was the purpose of the trip?

“I arrived on November 27, 2021 in Lagos. I stayed in Nigeria for three weeks. My first week was in Lagos, where I did some shooting for my documentary. I moved to my hometown in Delta State [one of Nigeria’s 36 states] to see my family in the remaining two weeks. The aims of this trip were to go back to my homeland and to see my family after six years; to document, from my perspective, how Nigeria has changed over the past six years and what I felt coming back after such a long time; and to give a taste of the African music scene to a Western public, and Lagos is the beating heart of Afrobeat.

What were some of the highlights of the trip to Lagos?

“I had a great time because I went to places like Nike Art Gallery, Lekki Conservation Center, The Jazz Hole, Bogo Biri and Makoko community. The Kalakuta Museum [in the three-story house where Fela Kuti lived] was an amazing scene for me. I saw Fela Kuti’s room, where they displayed his shoes, bags, his wardrobe. Everything was still intact, the way it was.”

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Obehi and Nike Okundaye, founder of the Nike Art Center (Photo Elijah Ikekhua)

“I came out with a single about the present situation in Nigeria, ‘Actions and Consequences,’ featuring Fela’s famous Egypt 80 band. It was a great honor to work with Egypt 80. We booked a session in the Diamond Studio in Lekki, Lagos. We did recordings of the drums, saxophone, percussion and vocals. It was an awesome Afrobeat recording session.”



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by George De Stefano



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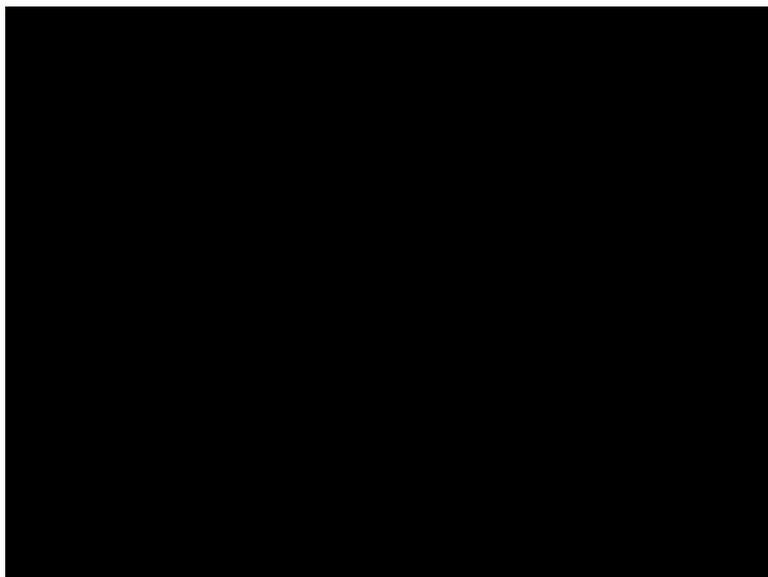
by La Voce di New York

Were members of your family and other Nigerians curious about your experience in Sicily? What kinds of questions did they ask you about it?

“Yeah, sure, a lot of people were curious about my experience, especially my life here in Italy. My family is so proud of me, especially about my communication skills in the Italian language. My mum once asked me, ‘Tell me, son, how is life out there? What about their culture, food, and music?’ Everyone was so curious to know how I learned the Italian language.”

After six years away from Nigeria, did your return feel like a homecoming, or, did you feel, as have other immigrants to other countries, that being away from Nigeria changed your relationship to your homeland?

“Well, I would say the feeling was so strong, I felt a lot of emotions. Sometimes I could hear people whispering ‘superstar’ as I walked past them, so I just turned and laughed. It was a great feeling coming back to my homeland because no matter where you go, home will always be home.”



You left Nigeria in 2015. Why did you leave, and how did you come to Sicily? Did you choose Sicily as your specific destination?

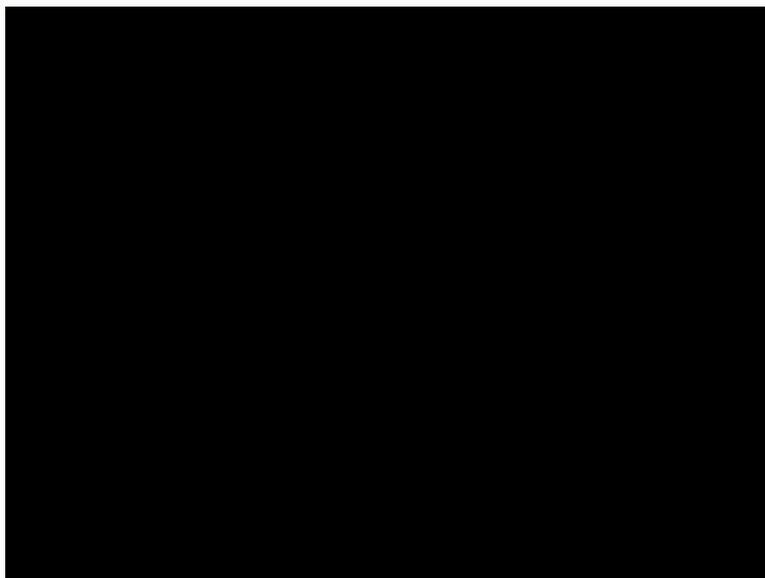
“Leaving home was a sad decision to make, but I had no other options but to go. I left not because I hate my country or anything, but because the government failed to provide the basic needs for the citizens, first of all, safety and protection. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa; we’re more than 200 million. Although Nigeria is a fast-growing economy, almost half of its population still lives in poverty. Corruption has become a plague in Nigeria. Sicily was not actually my final destination, but in the end, I decided to stay.”

When you arrived in Sicily, how did you adjust? Who helped you with the basic things that immigrants must deal with—finding a place to live and work, and adapting to a different language and culture?

“When I came to Sicily, adjusting to life here was so difficult. I had a lot of challenges with the Italian language. At first, I hated the language: it was my first nightmare! I preferred using English in all my conversations with Italians. When I arrived, I was scared to go out because of my experience and all the terrible things I went through. When I was in prison in Libya, I could hear gunshots every day, people shouting and screaming; I was so scared. With all this in mind, going out and just starting life again in Palermo was not so easy for me.

Nevertheless, I found new friends here in Palermo. People are so friendly, easy to get along with; also, the hospitality was cool. But I will say that in all those difficult times, music saved my life. I quickly found friends who invited me to jam sessions, we played music together, and some of them were even giving me Italian lessons.

After I left the reception center, life was hard for me because I had to look quickly for a job and rent a place to sleep. I tried, but it was hard to find, so I started busking with my guitar in the streets of Palermo for survival. In this way, I was able to get the money to pay for my rent and a warm meal to eat almost every day. I started busking in places close by bars and restaurants, where people, after hearing my music, would tip me. It was little, but it was something I needed at that moment.”



How did you discover Sicilian music and, in particular, the music of Rosa Balistreri? What appeals to you about her music?

“I discovered Rosa Balistreri from a friend here in Palermo, Francesco Riotta. He asked me to be the bass player in his band, and I accepted. One day we were rehearsing, and he said, ‘Chris, listen to this song, I think you’ll like it.’ I had goosebumps while listening to ‘Cu ti lu dissi’ by Balistreri. I went home, I tried to lay down, but that song was stuck inside my head. I searched it on YouTube, and I kept listening to it over and over every day. The language was so strange to me at the beginning, because it’s not Italian, it’s Sicilian dialect. I learned ‘Cu ti lu dissi’ the way I learned how to play the acoustic guitar: through YouTube!

Learning the guitar took me six months and a lot of practice on the streets of Palermo as well as in my room.”



Chris and Shayo Three (Photo Elijah Ikekhua)

“I got to meet Fabio after I did a video clip of me singing ‘Cu ti lu dissi.’ I did that video with the Palermo Festival, then the video went viral, and I found Fabio. He loves what I do, my music, and my project, so I have decided to work with him. He is an amazing person, and since then, we have been working together as a great team, a family for me.”

Fabio, why did you decide to record Chris for your 800A Records? What appealed to you about his music?

“For our label, the most important thing when we are looking for an artist is his vision: if his music and his story allow us to connect Sicily with the world, then it is exactly what we are looking for. Chris is a true manifesto for art and life for 800A Records.”

Fabio, you have written that “we are constructing a cultural axis between Sicily and Nigeria.” What do you mean by that, and how are you constructing it?

“Our mission is cultural at 360 degrees, not only musical. Preparing the trip and the project in Nigeria, we established many relationships: artistic, logistical, productive, cultural, with many realities of Lagos that will allow us to develop many other projects after this one. Speaking also of the commercial aspect, I think that in Italy, we have not yet realized how much the African and Nigerian music industry, in particular, is exploding. We in Palermo want to be among the first to bet on this movement.”

Chris, what is happening with the documentary about the Nigeria trip, “Back to Motherland,” directed by Shayo Three?

“The documentary is currently being edited and post-produced. During February, we will release some excerpts, and the full release will be by the end of the month.”

For more information about Chris Obehi and 800A Records:

<https://800arecords.bandcamp.com/artists>

Chris Obehi videos:

“Non siamo pesci”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnoawuMgD6Y>

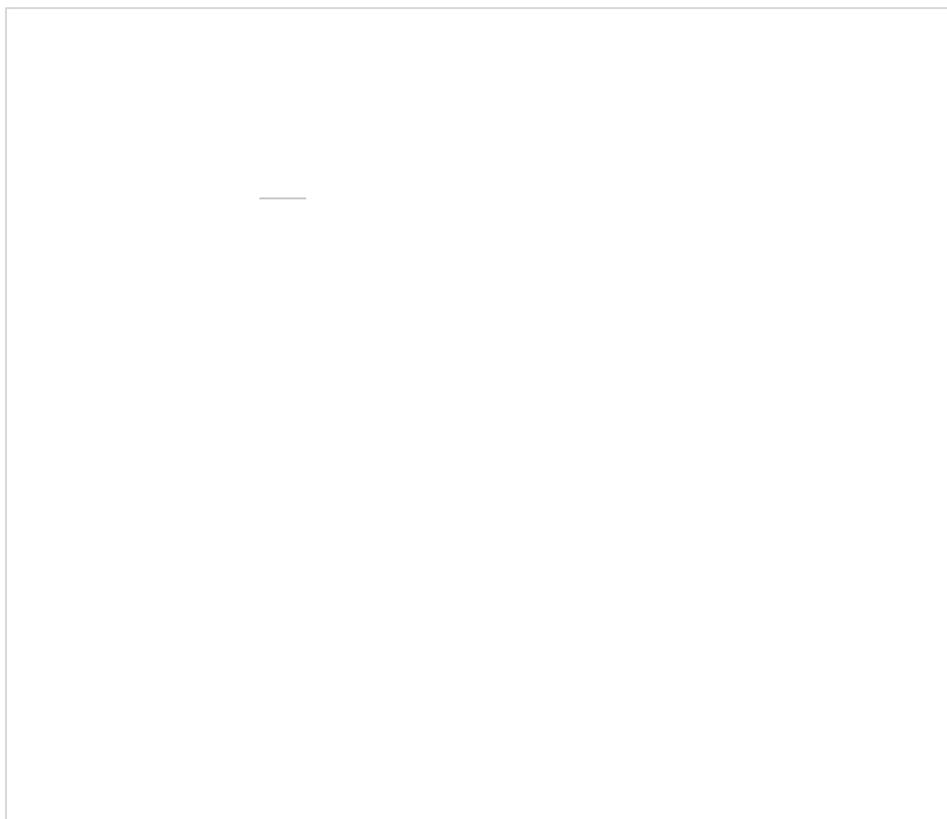
“Cu ti lu dissi”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWvwMhApKv4>

“La Siminzina” (with Angelo Daddelli & I Picciotti)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JqvNJThYos>

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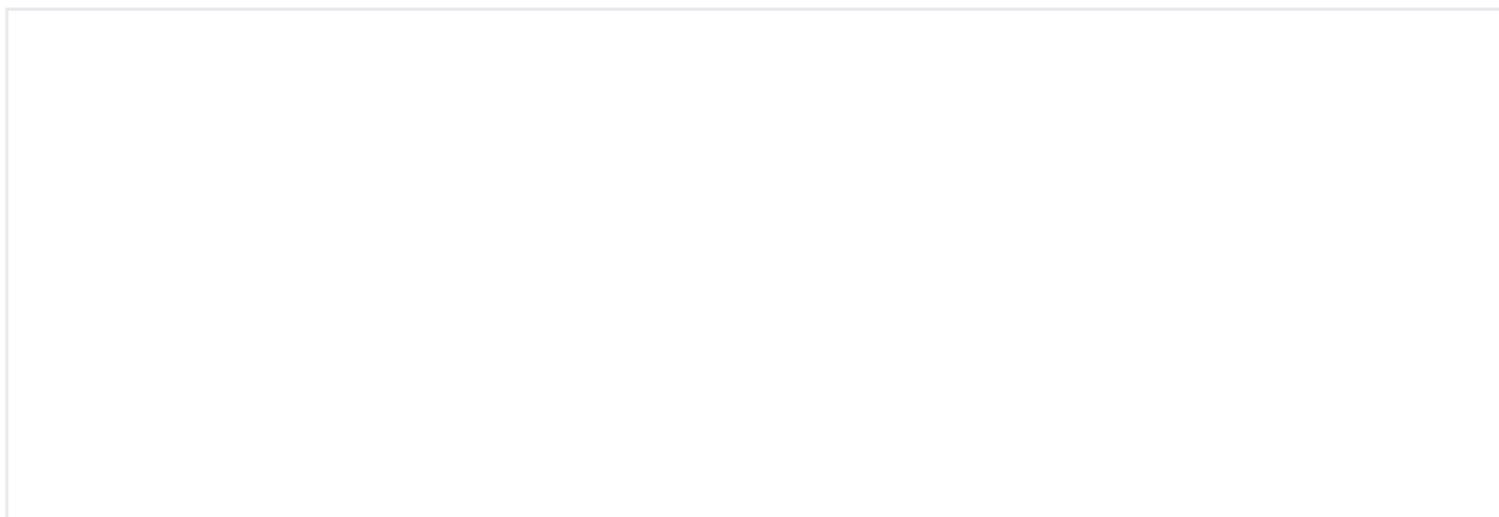
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Chris Obehi

Nigeria

Palermo

Sicilian music





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