

Material Memory Season 3, Bonus Episode

Cadence to the Rhythm of Life

Transcript

[Music]

Sharon M. Burney: Hello and welcome to Material Memory. I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney. We have a special bonus episode for you today. We'll be speaking with Kofi Amu Horne, the drummer who created the new theme music for this season. In the last episode, we discussed the drum as an artifact. In this episode, we will explore the drum as an instrument and its significance to the peoples of the African diaspora.

Kofi Horne: My name's Kofi Amu. I'm named after my maternal grandfather. My father is from Miami, Florida, and my mother is from Ghana, West Africa. My sisters and I are American-born, between Wisconsin and Miami. I'm a self-taught musician for the most part.

Sharon M. Burney: Before we go any further, let's enjoy a little more of the music Kofi wrote for us this season. We'll play the full recording at the end of the episode.

[Drum music]

Sharon M. Burney: Let's talk about the drumming that you created so graciously for us. Tell me how you chose that particular cadence, what you've created, and the purpose behind it.

Kofi Horne: So, when I was young, I used to go to Ghana. They had [Ghana Television](#). It was like pretty much one channel, maybe two. And when the news came on, there was this drum call that would play before the news came on, it's called Ghana Muntie. So, it's pretty much a call for all Ghanaians to open their ears. That specific call is used by [Akan people](#) to grab the attention of the masses. I just jazzed it up a little bit.

Sharon M. Burney: You jazzed it up a lot. *(Laughs)* That's great.

Sharon M. Burney: I asked Kofi how he got started drumming.

Kofi Horne: So, I started drumming when I was about a year and a half, maybe two. And since I was young, I've been going places, just performing with my mom. And I start drumming and I mean, it's innate, it's natural, once you hear a drum, you're going to start dancing, booty popping, whatever, it's going to happen. And so, at a young age, I learned the importance of the percussion instruments to

move the spirit. And so, the importance of what I do, in my perspective, is I give cadence to the rhythm of life.

Sharon M. Burney: What I found is interesting is when you talked about the first time you got on the drum was at the age of one and a half. It's funny when I watch Black children and you put a, the beat goes down and they were not even walking yet, and they start moving to the beat and how spiritually innate that is, from the diaspora, right? How do you feel, or what do you think transforms in babies when you see them and you start playing the drum?

Kofi Horne: Well, I have my own personal theory about what happened with me and it's that my mom, being from West Africa, was also homesick, especially in Wisconsin. And so, I mean, there's a lot of Africans up there, don't get me wrong. But I can remember my mom playing traditional Ghanaian music every day. And, it's like, I'm listening to this thing every day, every day. And you know, certain kids, a certain song would come on the radio and the children will sing the song and they'll be word for word. And for me—

Sharon M. Burney: She taught you drumming as a baby because you're hurting.

Kofi Horne: Exactly. For me, I didn't have these songs that had these words. I had these songs with these rhythms and intonations. And so that's what taught me how to drum in the womb all the way until I was able to express myself with my muscle, my development.

Narration: Even while Kofi's mother, Naana Banyiwa Horne, lived in a community in the US, with many Africans, she still missed the motherland. I know from personal experience that people from the diaspora, whose ancestors were stolen from Africa hundreds of years ago, can still be homesick. As peoples of the diaspora, we are looking for the connections to the ancestral home that has been taken from us. It reveals itself in the drum, dialect, music, artifacts, dance, and history. We don't always know what's missing, but it's deeply in us, and we are always searching for it.

Sharon M. Burney: Explain to me what happens to you when you start to play the drum? And tell me about your drum first though, tell me what kind of drums you have or own or use when you create?

Kofi Horne: I prefer [congas](#) and cylinder-shaped wooden drums, conga-style, the more traditional versions. I'll play a [djembe](#). I'll play any kind of drum. I really prefer strong wood with goat skin, because the drum contains the spirit of the wood and the spirit of the animal, and also that to merge with my spirit, to create a Trinity. And that's the secret to drumming. It is a spiritual connection between the musician and the instrument. And then that creates a spiritual connection between the music and the dancers. If you listen to live music, there's a spiritual component that takes over.

Narration: This is something Kofi has experienced himself and seen in other African drummers.

Kofi Horne: You know, a lot of times you see African drummers and their hands are so fast and it's like: *[fast vocal drum impression]*. And, it's so amazing, right. And you're in awe. But then I learned, it's like the guys who teach them—listen to them drum. It's not so much *[fast vocal drum impression]*. You know? They do like: *[slower vocal drum impression]* and slowly, it sounds like random slaps and hits and tones. But once you put the whole phrase together, they are speaking blessings, they speak in blessings.

And then the thing about it is, through drumming, I understood genius. Okay, what is genius? When you break down the word you have genie or gen, which is spirit, right? And so, when you say someone's genius, you're saying that they're in the spirit of what it is that they're doing. And I can remember being like ten, eleven, and doing rehearsals for my mom. Cause like everywhere we go, she wants to set up a cultural dance troupe. I remember rehearsing. And it'd get to a point where I couldn't drum for three or four minutes without going into trance.

And she'd be upset and she's like, you play the most wonderfully outrageous things on your drum, but you're slow! And I'd be entranced, and I'm trying to figure out how to snap out of it.

Sharon M. Burney: Yeah.

Kofi Horne: I talk a lot about spirit, because it was a magical journey for me. And it just revealed so much through the spirit playing my drum.

Narration: The spiritual component of African drumming cannot be feigned. In music, much like cultural heritage preservation, there is a difference between appreciation and appropriation. Preserving cultural heritage is about having authentic human connections that appreciate the value and uniqueness of other cultures, without weakening their identities. That means not taking and distorting cultural traditions in ways that center yourself in their storytelling. When it is true appreciation, it produces magic that creates an experience that is beyond words.

Kofi Horne: If everything is pure, except for one aspect, because that one aspect is the thing that stands out. When someone's entranced, and you hitting *[drum vocalizations]* and you see their head doing *[drum vocalizations]* and their bodies moving to your *[drum vocalizations]* and it's kind of like the dancer knows what the drummer's gonna drum: that is a psychic connection that is so, so, so strong. A lot of people buy drums and then they want to go to the drum circle and just play. And they play loud and they play fast and it's not medicine. It's not food. What I do, I speak languages. I speak the oldest language you can speak, and not with my voice, but with my hands. I have conversations that transcend time with my hands.

Sharon M. Burney: When you're watching African dance and you see the drum and the dancer feed back to each other, I think about that when you talk about the trance, right? It's so powerful to watch. Can you describe that a little?

Kofi Horne: So, I'm going to describe this moment I can't let go of. I witnessed one time in a dance class, a dancer elevate from the earthly plane, the living plane, to the heavenly plane. She was entranced and dancing. And there's a lot more to the story, but I drummed with my brothers and this woman danced, the most beautiful dance. We saw her fly in the air. She jumped, flipped, and floated. And when she finished dancing, she hit the floor. She put it all on the dance floor.

And, um, so that did something to me.

Narration: There is this dual existence of beauty and trauma that is balanced in the lived experience of Black people that we are always trying to break free from. Our story was interrupted by generational trauma that has been passed physically through the body. The dance Kofi speaks of was a response to the story that was being told. This story, expressed through art, creates trauma interruption and conveys the beauty and richness that is our heritage. Music and dance offer us a connection to our history, and treatment for this trauma.

Kofi Horne: Yeah, so that's what I was getting into. So it's like—you might have a feeling on a day where you're kind of not feeling it, you're just not, whatever. And then you get this feeling, "I want to go dance," that's your spirit talking to you. That's your spirit letting you know, "Hey, there is a deficiency, I need food." Like I'm saying, I provide the rhythm of life, but it's really food for the spirit.

Sharon M. Burney: Thank you, Kofi. And now, to close out our episode, here's the full recording of Kofi playing the theme music he wrote for our podcast season.

[Drum music]

Sharon M. Burney: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about Kofi Amu Horne, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we'll return to our regular lineup. I'm looking forward to sharing my interview with Dr. Ida Jones. It's a good one.

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I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.