

## Nneka Lucia Egbuna

### On Life on the Road, God, and Darkness



In 2008 Nneka's "Heartbeat" charted across Europe and elevated the previously unknown reggae and soul singer to celebrity status. Since then she's been putting out emotionally and politically charged records that are both graceful and empowering. Nneka is currently touring Europe following the release of her latest full-length *My Fairy Tales*. I caught up with the singer in Saint Petersburg, Russia, to chat about life on the road, God, activism, and the music that inspires her.

**So you're almost done with your Euro tour.**

Yes, we still have Russia and then I think a festival in France.

**Any highlights?**

Yesterday, actually, I thought I wasn't going to be able to deliver because I got ill the day before. A friend of mine spoke to me before I went on stage and said, Nneka, if you need strength take a cup of water and pray over it. I said ok, I didn't take it too seriously, but in the end, 5 or 10 minutes before I got on stage I decided to do what he said and the energy came.

**Is religion important to you?**

It's in everything I do. I have conversations with God constantly, even while I'm on stage. He just reminds you: "Listen, I'm in charge. Take a chill pill and sit back." I have my own demons, but I try to be strong and also encourage others. You're not alone in your struggle, you can get along if you have God. That's it. Point blank.

**You founded an NGO whose mission is to educate young Nigerians in the arts. Can art help Nigeria's political situation?**

[In Nigeria] when you talk to your elders, you look at the ground. You respect them, but at the same time you fear them. That leads to anger, because if you can't express yourself you get agitated. If we had more institutions where kids could speak or express themselves, put their pain into learning an instrument or sewing, that would broaden their perception of life. We need NGOs to help out. We need rich people to be a bit more generous with their money and get involved in supporting children's future. People need to talk, people need to express themselves.

**Off the top of your head, what are three words that describe your last record?**

Strong, edifying, and pain. There was a lot of pain, [I was] having doubts about God and myself. Boko Haram was intense. I started questioning.

***My Fairy Tales* is an interesting name. You think of a happy ending, but the album itself deals with such dark themes.**

Up until now I've been very blunt. It's like *Nneka, why are you always so miserable and melancholic?* So I wanted to kind of package reality and wishful thinking at the same time.

**So, in the end there's optimism?**

Yes.

**Do you remember the first song you learned how to play on guitar and sing along to?**

It was my own version of "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill."

**What records inspired you to create your own music?**

I listened to a lot of Nigerian music, but also Western stuff like Mariah Carey, Boyz 2 Men, Dolly Parton, and Rod Stewart [laughs]. Bonnie Tyler [sings "Heartache"]. It's a mix of worlds. Really white and really black stuff. But that's my heritage.

**Who are some current Nigerian musicians who are worth checking out?**

There's a young man called Jessie Jagz. He's good. There's also Keziah Jones. He did blue funk. We have Wizkid and we have Shay Shay. And then there's this other girl called Yemi Alade, her track is called Johnny. The band that I've been taking along is this young man called Afrikan Boy. He's very good.

**Will your label Bushqueen Music serve as a platform for other artists?**

We had two artists. Now we have just one apart from me. Genda kind of went his way 'cuz I didn't have much money to support his career. Now we have an artist called Oranmiyan who's amazing. Hopefully with time we'll be able to set it up properly. It's definitely for other artists.

**How's the next album coming?**

It's pretty much done, so hopefully by February we should be releasing.

**Thanks Nneka.**

See you in New York.