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MUSIC

Rapper, singer and songwriter Lord Afrixana holds true to his Worcester upbringing

Ghanaian-American rapper, singer and songwriter [Lord Afrixana](#) can draw on his background of African pop and Afrobeats, as well as hip-hop, colorful pop and R&B.

The fulcrum for the melding of genres and what he calls "the Afrixana sound" has been [Worcester](#), where he spent his formative years.

"Our city (Worcester) is a blue-collar, immigrant city. That's exactly who I am," he said during a recent telephone interview. "Those in Worcester know I've been working very hard to get to this point."

Now the three-time Grammy nominee has an EP, "[Ghana Must Go](#)," on a major new label, Protect the Culture/Warner Records, founded by veteran producer [Marc Byers](#).



"Our city (Worcester) is a blue-collar, immigrant city. That's exactly who I am." Lord Afrixana, a three-time Grammy nominee has an EP, "Ghana Must Go," on the label, Protect the Culture/Warner Records. *Submitted Photo*

New horizons

Afrixana first made an impact as a songwriter and producer, including co-writing "Don't Jealous Me" and "Water" for [Beyoncé's](#) 2019 album "[The Lion King: The Gift](#)." He has also released some independent recordings and now takes a big step into the spotlight as a solo artist with "Ghana Must Go," which was released Aug. 4.

The EP is part of a new joint venture with Protect the Culture. Lord Afrixana is the first artist on the label.

"Ghana Must Go" opens to a fast beat with "No Dey Tire" where the exhortation is "Don't look at me ... Shine your eyes on yourself."

The next track, "Not For Nothing," with striking vocal arrangements, also has a message: "Every stripe that you deserve is a stripe you gotta earn."

A longtime goal

The EP tones down to softer moments in "Pillow" with Afrixana and Firefly, while "Parachute" proclaims "Trust me I'll get you home safe."

"I'm happy. It's one of those things I've wanted to do for a long time," Afrixana said of the EP, which he said will be followed up later by an album.

The lyrics are gritty and self-affirming. The "Shine your eyes on yourself" refrain on "No Dey Tire" is "for anybody who doubts you," Afrixana said.

"I was told, Put your head down and work. If you're not the fastest and the biggest, what you say to that person (the doubter) is, Mind your own business and do what you've got to do to work, and I'll do the same."

'The power of words'

'The power of words'



Lord Afrixana performs at a recent gig at Boston's House of Blues. Born in Ghana, his upbringing in Worcester has had a great impact on his life and work. *Submitted Photo*

Meanwhile, "Not For Nothing" is "definitely the record I created from my Worcester upbringing," he said. "I always say my brand is a very motivational brand. I tell kids, 'It's never not for nothing, it's always towards the goal (you're striving for).'"

Afrixana was born in Kumasi, Ghana, and came with his family to the U.S. by way of Liberia. At first, the family lived in Greensborough, North Carolina, and then settled in Worcester when Afrixana was about 5. He went to Lake View School, Heard Street School, Worcester Arts Magnet School and Burncoat Middle and High Schools.

"I definitely knew I always wanted to be a writer," Afrixana said. "I knew whatever field I ended up in, writing would be involved because I loved the power of words."

Words and music began to come together at 14 or 15, "when I started entering high school, being around other kids my age, delving into genres, and I was good at it," he said. "I leaned into the music a bit more because I was so enamored by it."

A range of influences

Afrixana avidly listened to Ghanaian musical legends [Daddy Lumba](#) and [Kojo Antwi](#), alongside classic rock by [Paul Simon](#), [Peter Gabriel](#) and [Phil Collins](#). He discovered hip-hop and pop, including [Nas](#), [Mos Def](#), [Eminem](#), [Outkast](#) and [A Tribe Called Quest](#). He sees his music as incorporating all those influences. "There is a generation of Africans who do not live on the continent anymore but live in the diaspora, so I wanted to create a sound, a movement, and brand that was representative of that duality."

Growing up in Worcester, "I got to meet a lot of music artists ... Our music community is very small so you got to know everybody. Worcester was a great community of musicians for me."

Also, with its large Ghanaian population — [a community of roughly 5,000 people, according to the 2020 Census](#) — Worcester was "one of the few places I could grow up as Ghanaian and preserve my culture. I could have grown up in another city and lost who I was," Afrixana said.

He has seen that "a lot of people leave our city and don't (always) return."

Afrixana has moved out of Worcester, but he said he "wants to shine a light on the city because we don't get that often."

Afrixana lives with his fiancée and daughter. His parents still live in Worcester and his sister is in Washington, D.C. "I'm still a Massachusetts guy," he said.

A path filled with challenges

In 2015, he visited Los Angeles for the first time and spent time experimenting in the studio. While creating demos for other artists, he got to explore his voice as a singer. Since then, he's written for and worked with producers and musicians including Akon, Bebe Rexha, Pharrell Williams, Tiwa Savage, Yemi Alade, Jidenna and DJ Mustard.

But in 2017, Afrixana's immigration status appeared in jeopardy when then-President Trump suspended the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. The program was created by the Obama administration to shield eligible immigrant youth who arrived in the U.S. illegally as children from deportation. For nearly a year, Afrixana had to remain in Worcester until multiple lower court decisions and injunctions restored DACA.

Asked about his biggest musical break, Afrixana said it was getting to work with Beyoncé on "The Lion King: The Gift," inspired by the original "The Lion King." But prior to that, "I had a lot of wins in a row. I got really lucky."

'To do well, and be successful'

The call to work with Beyoncé came "out of the blue," followed by "an email confirmation of my flight." Once in Los Angeles with her team, "I realized I'm a small whale in a big ocean." He said, "I wanted to represent Worcester in a way to do well, and be successful. Thankfully, it worked out."

"The Lion King: The Gift" would go on to debut at No. 2 on the Billboard Top 200 Albums chart.

Stepping out as a solo artist had been "something in the back of my mind," he said. Afrixana feels it was good to see the process first from the vantage point of a songwriter. "I needed it to go through some kind of training."

For his solo songs, "I'm here to highlight the faces, the situations that tell our stories — the Worcester kids that grew up when I grew up."

He released some work independently on EPs, and then Byers and Protect the Culture contacted him through his manager.

Creating a vision

Byers, who previously served as the general manager of Motown Records, brings a wealth of experience to the joint venture with Warner Records.

As part of the collaboration, Byers will also serve as an A&R consultant for Warner Records, with a focus on the African music scene.

"They have this vision. It was a no-brainer," Afrixana said.

"Ghana Must Go" has been "getting some really great reaction," Afrixana said.

More: What is Thursday?: When does Worcester's Brendan Sargent return to 'Jeopardy!'

He has been performing as part of Tiwa Savage's North American tour, which came to Boston on Aug. 31.

As for Afrixana making any appearances locally, he said, "I'll know more soon."

Having come this far from Ghana to Worcester and new possible points beyond, would he like to be an international star?

"I don't know anybody who wouldn't," Afrixana said good-naturedly. "Of course that is a goal, and that's what we're shooting for."

To learn more, visit Lord Afrixana's site at unitedmasters.com.