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WEST AFRICAN MUSIC, DANCE, AND ARTS

## NANI AGBELI

R!SOLO: *BEATBACK* FOR DRUMSET

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GRADUATE STUDENT LIFE

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WHY PLAY CAJON?

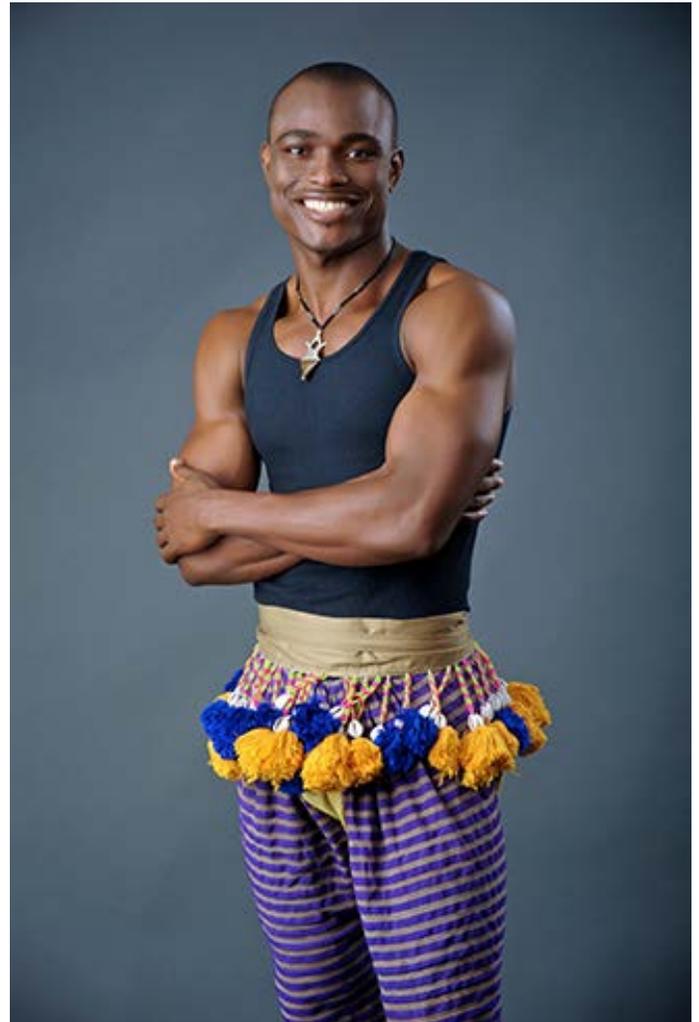


# NANI AGBELI: CALARTS' DIRECTOR OF WEST AFRICAN MUSIC, DANCE, AND ARTS

BY MEGAN ARNS

Ghanaian master musician Victor Nani Agbeli is one of the most energetic, athletic, and precise drummers and dancers of his generation. Currently residing in Los Angeles as a professor at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Nani frequently travels the world presenting master classes and concerts, as well as leading yearly study trips to Ghana in July and August. In this interview, we discussed his upbringing in Ghana, his teaching philosophy, cultural exchange, and his interdisciplinary projects.

Nani grew up in a musical family from Aflao in the Volta Region of Ghana, West Africa. His father, Godwin Kwasi Agbeli, was one of the most well respected traditional Ghanaian musicians and teachers of the 20th century. He performed with the Arts Council of Ghana Folkloric Company and later served as chairman of the Ghanaian National Association of Cultural Groups. Godwin started numerous traditional music groups



throughout Ghana, and Nani grew up tagging along to these rehearsals from a very young age.

“My two elder brothers were also in one of the groups my Dad started,” Nani recalled. “When they went to rehearsals, they didn’t want to leave me in the house by myself, so they took me along. At first I started goofing around on the side, but then I really started to catch on to the dance movements.” The group was so impressed with Nani’s ability that they invited him to perform with them when he was only seven years old. Audiences also recognized his natural talent and threw money at him after the performances. “I was very little, but I was really having fun doing what I was doing.”



In 1990, Godwin decided to move Nani from the city to the village. “When I moved to the village, I started being a big part of my Dad’s school group, a teenage group,” Nani said. “I loved being a part of that group, and I remember realizing at that point ‘Okay, I really need to learn.’ Until then, it was just me doing the best that I could do. Even though it was good, I knew I had to start taking it more seriously.”

Because of his father’s success, Nani often felt the pressure to be perfect. Even though it wasn’t always easy, he took on the challenge. “Because I was associated with my dad, everybody expected me to be perfect, and I wasn’t! Sometimes I felt depressed and angry, but I didn’t give up. I kept going every day,” Nani recalled.

Attending a boarding school for high school, Nani began exploring his interest in graphic design and textiles. Less than a month into the school year, his textile teacher called him into his office. Nani remembered thinking, “Come on, I didn’t do anything bad this time. Am I in trouble?” Instead, he was asked, “Is your father Godwin Agbeli?” To which Nani replied, “Why yes, that’s my father.” And the teacher said, “Okay good. You are going to put together a drum and dance troupe and we are going to use this group to compete and do our annual performances here at the school.” Nani’s reaction: “I was so nervous! I freaked out. I had never had an opportunity like that before.”

Much to his delight, there was a lot of interest in the group and they started working right away. Under his leadership, the group placed third the first year and first place by a



landslide the next year. Nani appeared to have a natural ability for teaching drumming, dancing, and singing. “Everything was just coming in place and moving,” he said.

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Instead, you go on stage saying, ‘I’m going to  
contribute to *us* shining.’ —Nani Agbeli

Upon graduating high school, Nani’s plan was to teach textiles at his father’s cultural institute in the village of Kopeyia, a close-knit farming community in the Ewe-speaking Volta Region. But two months after graduation, Godwin Agbeli passed away and Nani, his two elder brothers, and his younger sister took over Dagbe Cultural Institute in memory of their father. The mission of Dagbe is to sustainably preserve West African and Ewe culture by bringing the enduring economic benefits of a successful cultural tourism business to the local community. Nani became the principal drum and dance teacher of Dagbe, as well as the batik (fabric printing) and tie-dye teacher, positions he would hold for the next nine years.



August 9, 2006 signaled a huge life change for Nani: the date he moved to the U.S. He first moved to Madison, Wisconsin with his then-wife Laurel Finn, and then moved to Boston in 2010 to take a position at Tufts University as director of the Kniwe African Drum and Dance Ensemble and as Artistic Director of the Agbekor Drum and Dance Society, a community-based group in Greater Boston founded by Professor David Locke of Tufts University. In 2014, he accepted a position at CalArts in Los Angeles as Director of West African Music, Dance, and Arts. Nani also does frequent residencies at Stony Brook University, University of Virginia, Lawrence University, and Lane Tech High School in Chicago. He also has a yearly guest faculty residency at the Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA).

Drawing on his high school background in graphic design and textiles, Nani enjoys a variety of interdisciplinary projects and collaborations. “I think I’m one of the few people who have utilized and am still utilizing what they studied in high school,” he recalled. “I make and design most of my own Ghanaian

clothes through my experience in textiles and graphic design. In the fall, I'm going to start my own clothing company to start displaying my textile artwork. I also still use my general knowledge of the visual arts in my classes, and this is a big reason I came to CalArts. My idea is to have a class where I can teach textiles and graphic design incorporating African and Ghanaian design."



While it doesn't seem like Nani has much free time, he likes to watch movies that are not related to music or listen to music that is not related to his area of expertise when he can catch a break. He also likes to sit by his canvas and paint, and enjoys designing his website, posters, business cards, flyers, banners, etc. He also writes music.

"When I came to the U.S., one of my goals was to spread Ghanaian music to as many people as possible," Nani said. "I realized that some people are still skeptical about Ghanaian or African traditional music. My project aims to take every single rhythm and note from the traditional music and have a bass guitar, trumpet, sax, drumset, lead guitar, and piano play those rhythms and notes. The goal is to make this traditional Ghanaian music more accessible to the Western ear. That's another thing I do in my free time."

While enjoying a full schedule in the U.S. now, Nani makes time to return to his motherland every summer, frequently bringing a group of students from all over the U.S. to his dad's school for a three-week intensive music and culture experience.

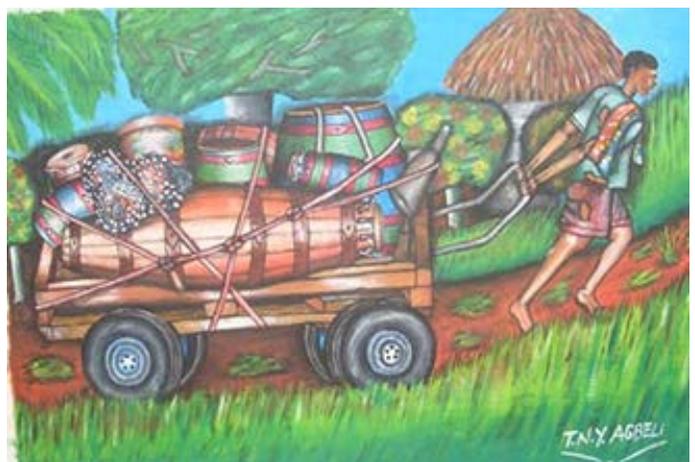
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"I take them on a musical journey with intensive training classes four hours a day, five days a week," Nani explained. "At the end, they do a big performance in the center of the village so the locals can see what they've been working on for the past



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Nani's painting of traditional drum transportation between performances.



This is a community of one. Everything you're giving, you're giving to the whole group.  
—Nani Agbeli



two weeks while they were studying with us in the village. After that, I take them on a one-week tour all around the country so they see some tourist attractions. This year the trip will run from July 23 through August 13." For more information, visit the Study Abroad section of his website by clicking [here](#).

Nani loves living in California and refers to it as "Ghana's big brother." However, his transition was understandably challenging. He recalled, "Ninety percent of the students who came to study at my Dad's school were from the U.S. I was very curious, so I asked them a lot of questions about the U.S. when we had free time. However, having an idea and experiencing it is totally different. I thought I had an idea and that I was ready when I came here, but I realized the cultures are basically 100 percent opposite of each other! I had a hard time with the

food, especially, until I learned to cook for myself." And apparently the snow: "At the beginning of my first winter, I was looking out the window and saw some white stuff falling; I started freaking out!" Nani recalled. "I thought the world was coming to an end. I thought 'What the heck is happening? Why did I come here?'" Since it had just started to fall, it didn't look piled up like I had seen in the movies. I went outside, opened my palm, caught the snowflakes in my palm, and watched them melt away. It was a crazy experience!"

Ghanaian music exists for a distinct purpose within society and fosters a sense of community, friendship and family amongst the people who play it together. Nani is adamant about incorporating this spirit into his classes. "When I teach, I don't just teach the material, I teach everything that comes with the material," he said. "I teach the cultural background of the whole piece, I teach the community aspect of it, I teach the reason why you do this as a group. Every school I go to, the first thing I say to the class is, 'This is not a class. This is a family

get-together. This is a community of one. So I want you to get to know everybody in the class. I want you to be comfortable and free around each other, because you are going to be interacting with each other with dance movements, drum rhythms, and with our voices singing. The more comfortable you feel, the easier it will be for you to contribute. Everything you're giving, you're giving to the whole group.' I say this because that is how our music is taught to us, and that is actually how we grow up."

These ideals also bleed over into performance and other aspects of Ghanaian culture. "You don't go on stage saying 'I am going to shine,'" Nani said. "Instead, you go on stage saying, 'I'm going to contribute to us shining.' It's not about you. Unless you are taking a solo, it's not about you. Even in drum solos in some of our pieces, solos are used to praise someone else or the group as a whole. This is the kind of music we have, and that is why you feel that connection, you feel that energy, and you feel that family love when you see us play."

To learn more about Nani, visit his website at [www.naniagbeli.com](http://www.naniagbeli.com).

**Megan Arns** is an Assistant Professor of Percussion at the University of Missouri. Megan regularly performs with three contemporary chamber groups: the [Switch~ Ensemble], an electroacoustic ensemble; What Is Noise, dedicated to building communities through music; and DRAX, a saxophone and percussion duo in residence at Mizzou. She is a DMA candidate in Percussion Performance and Literature at the Eastman School of Music, and is the editor of *Rhythm! Scene*. **RIS**



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