

Love and Joy

Ayo's fractured childhood had a powerful influence on her early music but in her latest album, *Billie-Eve*, released in March, something seems to have changed, writes Belinda Otas

Her music, which is often intensely personal, may not be for everybody. In the song *Mother* from her second album, *Gravity At Last*, her lyrics reflect a damaging relationship: 'Mother, what are you trying to achieve? Always telling lies and hurting me. You are messing up your life. As if that's not enough, you are trying to mess up mine. Stay away... You better love me from a distance.'

Ayo, which translates as joy in Yoruba, the mother-tongue of her Nigerian-born father was born Joy Olanmibo Ogunmakin in 1980 in the German city, Cologne. Both parents had a strong influence on her music but the relationship with her Romanian Gypsy mother, who was a heroin addict for 20 years, was challenging.

Ironically though, it seems to be motherhood and her relationship with her own children, which has brought her full circle and allowed her to move on. Her latest album, *Billie-Eve*, is named after her six-month-old daughter and derives from the word 'believe'. Critics have described it as an album of 'growth and evolution'.

Yet to understand how she has got to this point, first some history. Although Ayo spent two years in Nigeria as a child, she was mostly raised in Germany, and says that as the only black child at school she felt like an outcast. "This didn't do a lot of damage, but at some point, you do take a side," she says. "Whenever

I was around my father, I was really proud to be different. Whenever people asked: 'Where are you from?' I always said Nigeria. So, the Nigerian part of me is probably strongest."

Her father's influence came in the form of music. He was a DJ and Ayo says music was always present in their house with the likes of Fela Kuti, King Sunny Ade, Stevie Wonder and Nina Simone. While she was touched by these different artists, Ayo says her music remains very personal. "It has always been therapeutic and healing to me. When I started to play and write music, I would write about my truth. The life that I used to live was surrounded by a lot of lies to protect my mother, father and family but it's wrong. Music helped me to face myself, my fear and then heal."

After her mother deserted the family, Ayo and two older siblings were shuffled between foster care homes because the authorities felt her single father, a black man in 1980s Germany, where Africans were few-and-far-between, could not take care of his children. But when she was 14 years old she escaped and was finally allowed by the authorities to stay with her father.

Ayo's last two albums, *Joyful* and *Gravity at Last*, were released in 2006 and 2008 respectively. In these she explores her need to break the cycle of rejection and dishonesty. *Joyful* made Ayo a star in France and was released in over 40 markets globally, gaining platinum status in several European nations. She has toured Europe, Australia and played to audiences in Senegal, Nigeria, Reunion Island, Mauritius and the

Ayo's third album *Billie-Eve* takes on social and political issues

United States.

These first two albums were also a way to reconnect with her father's roots, which explains the fusion of Afrobeat (a genre made famous by the late Nigerian musician, Fela Kuti), reggae and soul. Back then, Ayo called her music 'Soregafrofolk', a word she coined from soul-reggae-afro-folk.

While her first two albums were deeply rooted in childhood, and particularly influenced by the music of her father, something has changed. In her latest album, *Billie-Eve*. Ayo seems to be taking on social, cultural and political issues. Although it maintains her musical diversity with a combination of soulful and rhythmic ballads, her lyrics have evolved and she has also embraced the electric guitar. "You'll definitely hear more of a rock influence. This is the record where I started writing differently and really thought



Ayo has spent her musical career resisting other people's definitions of who she is

about changing my music."

This was not an accidental change but the result of her journey through a complicated pregnancy and experience of mothering Billie-Eve and Nile, her five-year-old son. "They have given me hope and strength," she says. "I had lived something else and out of that emotion I wrote music."

Ayo's foray into the music industry started at 13 and German record labels were keen but on their terms – they wanted her as a reggae artist. She feels she was being viewed as a project and not an individual. However, her mother's advice based on her experiences with drugs helped Ayo make an unpopular decision. "Maybe you don't know what makes you happy but when you do know what makes you sad, get rid of it the moment that you feel it's wrong. So, I moved on even

though I didn't know where I was going and when I found it, I knew that this was it," she explains.

Indeed this need to define her own identity is a strong theme in Ayo's music and it is no different third time around. *How Many People*, a song on her new album, poses questions about values and freedom to be one's self. "Identity is very important to me and when I talk about identity, it has nothing to do with nationality. Identity to me has more to do with what you stand for and believe in as a person and your message."

The plight of African migrants is one she also explores in *Who Are They?*, which Ayo says is about those trying to cross the ocean on a boat and was inspired by news

reports. "I was like 'this is crazy, people get on the boat to cross the ocean without really knowing what is on the other side and what to expect'. I believe it's wrong that

there are such things as borders. Who are they to say, you cannot enter the country or you cannot exit the country?"

Ayo maintains she has no expectations with her new album. Most

important for her is that she lives the life of a musician. "Everything else after that is a bonus."

Still the hope is that *Billie-Eve* has the potential to introduce Ayo to a new audience, who may not have been so keen on her personal trauma.

Belinda Otas is a freelance journalist based in London

