

The Mighty Oak Has Fallen

by

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Baba Charles (Chuck) Davis, the mighty oak of African dance has ascended to the land of the ancestors. Chuck Davis was born on January 1, 1937 and passed away on Mother's Day May 14, 2017. Baba Chuck was a man of massive stature standing more than six feet tall with a deep baritone voice. He was born in North Carolina and probably never thought of becoming a dancer. He served his country in the U.S. Navy.

After he left the service, the tenor of the times was deeply entrenched in civil rights fever. The passage of the Civil Rights Act by President Lyndon Johnson decreed that schools throughout the nation must institute courses on Black and Minority Studies. We as Black people were virtually left out of the history books. The most popular course desired by Blacks was African dance and music. There were contingencies of grass roots African dance enthusiasts sprouting up through the country, particularly in states with large Black populations. The leader of the New York City group was Asadata Dafora, an African from Sierra Leone who is attributed as the first person to bring African dance to the States. If my memory serves me faithfully I believe Chuck Davis studied dance at Howard University.

He was a protégé of Babatunde Olatunji during the sixties. In fact as he entered the studio of Olatunji, I was leaving to pursue how to write Dance on paper which was a course being offered for the first time in Brooklyn College in 1962. I had already created Greenotation a system for writing music of percussion instruments and realizing that in Africa, the main partner for music was 'dance'. Therefore, I had to learn how to write dance and combine the African music and dance in a single integrated score.

Near the end of the sixties, the majority of schools throughout the nation had complied with the decree outlined in the Civil Rights Act and African dance was part of the curriculum but on a shaky basis as there was an insufficient amount of people who actually knew African dance, and music and could take the subject to the next level.

As I indicated a number of grass roots groups of African dance were beginning to sprout up throughout the city. Many students who wanted to become dancers in the African persuasion found that there were no professional companies or schools where they could hone their craft. Chuck Davis was located in the Bronx and was offering classes for students in the neighborhood. He had created a semi-professional troupe called the Chuck Davis Dancers. This group offered Black dancers an opportunity to study African movements that they could not find elsewhere. As the years passed Chuck was able to organize a number of the local groups and created Dance Africa in 1977. Their concert was held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In fact the Brooklyn Academy of Music had not seen, as much excitement and gathering of Black people since October 1971 when the National Ballet of Senegal debuted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They rocked the house beginning with the powerful Djimbe drum ensemble consisting of N'Deye Coumba, Lamine Diallo and Ibrahima Guisse as they played Apelle a Tam-Tam on Djimbe drums. In fact if memory serves me faithfully it took five curtain calls before the Senegalese were able to call it a night.

Dance Africa began with local dance groups, and soon emerged into a festival that captivated soul and spirit of the continent of Africa – bringing in groups from the continent to perform, also groups from African dance in the Diaspora to show how African dance was performed in their particular country He created the Council of Elders a group of the sage who oversee the society as they do in Africa under the Palaver.

There was also a open-door market created wherein where people could buy books, photos, clothing, records, and albums, videos, instruments as well as sample the cuisine of African food served in different African countries, This year is the 40th anniversary of the celebration of Dance Africa, and it is still going strong. It is celebrated every Memorial Day Weekend at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The evening show begins at 7:30 therefore at 7:25 Baba Chuck Davis dressed in a tailored Grand-bou-bou outfit would saunter down the aisle and mount the stage where he would introduce himself. Good Evening, I am Baba Chuck Davis, Artistic Director of Dance Africa. After this the drummers would play and we, the Council of Elders would march down the center aisle greeting the people as we paraded to our seats.

Baba Chuck would chat with the audience bidding them welcome with the words *Ago* and *Ame that meant* “Do I have your attention, and the response being I am listening, The Council of Elders were asked for permission to continue the show. They would grant permission and another show would begin.

Baba Chuck Davis was an imposing figure that graced the stage not only with his largess, but also with his spirit bringing the concept of “Peace, Love and Respect to everyone.

Peace Love and Respect for self, for self, for self, un-hun, un-hun, un-hun.

The icy hand of death claimed the life of Baba Chuck Davis on Mother’s Day 2017. The name of Baba Chuck Davis will be eternally engraved with Dance Africa and remain in our hearts forever. Most certainly the music the bells, rattles and drums will continue to waft and permeate the air around the Brooklyn Academy of Music, each Memorial day.