

NIYONU SPANN BIOGRAPHY

Anchoring Artist at NUYONI

Growing up in Newark, New Jersey during the uprisings of the late 1960s, confronted by burning buildings and crumbling neighborhoods, stoked my activist-artist spirit. I was raised in a family where music and social justice held equal sway. My sister, Diane and I would race to the piano after school. My dad and his dad, both named, Roosevelt, were jazz guitarists and pianists. I loved walking over to grandad's house, full of sweets and sheet music. Mom (Fredretha) was a favorite soloist in Jersey gospel circles while also loving European classical music, especially opera. As a family, music oozed out of our pores but discussions about movements for social justice held great importance around the dinner table.

In the late 60's, I found a home in a 'cool' church that nurtured my young, activist spirit. There, my sister and I were lifted as singers and leaders. Everyone knew Denise and Diane Spann – the singing sisters! I was blessed to attend Arts High School, where I allowed my creativity to express through my pen, my piano and especially my voice.

By the close of my sophomore year of high school – adding to my blossoming music expression and my deepening spiritual life I enjoyed the cultural re-education that came through community elders - Black Muslims, nationalists, and other everyday street educators. It was a time for raising consciousness and as that expansion occurred within me, I found myself compelled to take a new name. I wanted it to reflect my newly realized commitments and spiritual depth. As I declared my dedication to Great Spirit (then, I would have said, "God) and to the liberation of my people, I was given the name, Niyonu (Compassionate one).

My musical talent led me to the great Oberlin Conservatory of Music, where I found, once again, that I could not separate my music from my spirituality or from my commitment to abolishing systems that devalued some while elevating others. The works of great musical influences burned in my soul: Nina Simone, John Coltrane, Stevie Wonder, Roberta Flack, Earth, Wind & Fire as did the writers & poets: Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, James Baldwin, and Chinua Achebe.

As a young adult, I taught music on a high school level. I especially loved directing musical productions (The Wiz, Fiddler on the Roof, Sunday in the Park with George and more). In 1994, I founded Tribe 1- a group that sang original music with complex harmonies and rich percussion. Tribe 1 released its first album, "One" and I released my first solo album, "Workin' at the Roots," both in 1998. Under my direction, Tribe 1 continued to perform and tour in the U.S. (with one special performance in Nicaragua) - for 23 years! I will be forever grateful to each member of Tribe, for trusting and joining me on that journey.

With the 2020 launch of NUYONI, it is an honor to, once again, be the vessel through which the transformative power of music will flow - a healing power, of uncompromising love and boundless joy. I welcome this new and ancient energy.



**NUYONI! With a deep bow, I commit myself to your fullest expression.
Ase! Ase! Ase!**