

YOUSSEU N'DOUR

After countless forays into the western world, Youssou N'Dour chose Dakar as a base from which to lead his geopolitical campaign in music.

His strategy is pan-African: "What all of us Africans share is much more important than what we don't share," says N'Dour, who grew up in Senegal's capital city, Dakar. Bringing unity to the African continent has been his priority for a long time; the key (along with love, opinions and a great festive sense) lay in the professional practice of music for some thirty-seven years. Yet his career was bound to lead to a form of musical expression that has become universal: reggae, which was born in Jamaica in the 1960s.

As a man of the media and a fighter for citizens' rights – from wiping out the African debt to the battle against malaria – Youssou N'Dour is well aware of the political import of reggae, the music-genre directly linked to Rastafarianism, whose leading figure was the "Ras Tafari" Haile Selassie, the black Emperor of Ethiopia.

As a religion, intellectual movement and way of life, Rastafarianism was conceived some thirty years before the first sound-systems by two Jamaican renegades living in The United States, Marcus Garvey, the ideologist of beauty and black rebellion, and preacher Leonard Percival Howell, who left Jamaica on a ship to America but returned from Harlem to work the soil in the hills of the Caribbean.

"From Brazil to Australia and even in Bombay / Africans, Indians and the Portuguese / they love the one-drop in the roots of reggae..." sings Youssou N'Dour today. And in Marley Demna, a tribute to Bob Marley, he goes on, "In the market, his music played all day. Marley was a young man who floated away. He showed the world the route of reggae / One love, No woman no cry." Youssou N'Dour shows his allegiance to the genre without pretending to belong; his approach is different from that of African reggae's creators, Alpha Blondy from the Ivory Coast, the South African Lucky Dube, who was shot to death in 2007, or followers such as Tiken Jah Fakoli, who took refuge in Mali in 2003 to escape the violence of the civil war raging in the Ivory Coast. What they created, diving deep into their roots, was a radical political movement.

Youssou, on the other hand, brushed the wings of reggae with his fingertips. He did so notably in 2000, with the album *Joko from Village to Town*, which featured an appearance by the Fugee Wyclef Jean, an Afro-American of Haitian origin. But African unity wasn't the only thing in the mind of Youssou N'Dour: he also had the desire to untangle the threads of the black Diaspora. In 1992 he found an ally in filmmaker **Spike Lee**, who released the album *Eyes Open* on his label '40 Acres and A Mule' (named after the compensation awarded to freed slaves after the American

Civil War). At the time Youssou wore a “wooly wooly”, the woolly hat taken from a song dedicated to the children of Africa quickly branded with an ‘X’, as in Malcom X, (but also an ‘X’ as in Xippi, his recording-studio in Dakar.)

When “You” gives a concert, everything jumps; he brings entire stadiums to their feet. This is Dakar by night, Dakar the capital of pulsating rhythms. Mbalax, the rhythm of the Wolofs, the ethnic majority, is an art-form like a whirling fan (with the dancer’s fanny replacing the fan.) It’s also an emotional dance, one of trance, and this is how the story of young Youssou, the kid with the golden voice, began. He was born one October in 1959, the son of a labourer named Elimane and his wife Ndèye Sokhna Mboup, a traditional “Griot” singer. After two years in street-theatre, Youssou’s career really started when he was thirteen, and it was the result of a miracle: in 1972, Papa Semba Diop, known as Mba, passed away. He was the leader of the Star Band in Dakar, and Youssou sang a tribute to him, a song he composed onstage right there in Senegal’s Saint-Louis Stadium. “Everyone was still in tears, and I brought a little joy. I was vibrating. Mba was like a star fading from the sky.” At the end of his song, Youssou was given a standing ovation.

The kid used to go down to the beach at Soumbédioune in Dakar, collecting the little sucker-fish known as takgaal and roasting them on the spot. In the small hours of the morning, he could smell the ovens cooking pastries in the Medina, and in his mind he could already see himself onstage: his career was on the move. In 1990 came one of his most beautiful albums, *Set*, which included the song “Medina”, an elegy that was pure and filled with nostalgia, and it featured a clear trumpet whose sound was almost Middle-Eastern. Every day he heard the muezzin’s calls to prayer, and some nights he could hear the voice of the Egyptian idol Oum Kalsoum.

In 2003 he celebrated his becoming a Murid, following the spiritual path of Sufism, with the album *Egypt*, recorded in Cairo with an Egyptian orchestra conducted by Fati Salama. Two years later in 2005, this hymn to a tolerant Islam received a Grammy Award in America despite the conflict in Iraq. The title “Shukran Bamba” gave fervent thanks to Sheik Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Murid brotherhood: “You taught me pardon and compassion, and the rejection of violence and arrogance.” Reggae words, man.

In 1981, after leaving the Etoiles group in Dakar, Youssou founded the exemplary orchestra Super Etoile. With electric guitar, bass, balafon, teeming percussion, tama (armpit-drum) or djembe, nothing was left to risk. Super Etoile, with all its human variables, was uniquely solid: 1984 saw its Parisian debuts during Africa Fête, the African cultural festival set up by Mamadou Konté from Mali, and it featured in the great pan-African dances and events organised at the Bercy Omnisports stadium in Paris by its leader.

After meeting Peter Gabriel in 1984, Youssou N’Dour joined “Band Aid for Ethiopia”; in 1988 he

sang at Wembley when Nelson Mandela was freed, and then alongside Sting, Tracy Chapman and Bruce Springsteen for Amnesty International. Himself an intensely loyal man, Youssou N'Dour also provoked fidelity: Sting joined him for one title, "Don't Walk Away", a nonchalant pop tune with lyrics written by Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens).

Youssou N'Dour could have fallen into the trap of a flat tribute to the federating hero Bob Marley, but instead he chose to take a look at himself in the reggae mirror: when he founded his club, he called it the Thiossane, a word that means "Our history, reality, that of the lineage which the griots knew and told stories about. My mother and my grandmother were Griots, Toucouleurs people from West Africa. The Griots are there for circumcisions, christenings and wedding feasts... they arrange the way the celebrations are organised... But in everyday life they invite themselves to people's houses, and spend the day telling stories, humming tales from the countryside about our ancestors, and they accompany themselves on the khalam, a four-string guitar. You can recognise the Griots because every part of their body talks: eyes, hands, even their behinds..."

By 1996 he was already famous worldwide thanks to "7 Seconds", his duet with Neneh Cherry (released in 1994 on the album *Wommat*, which also featured his cover of Bob Dylan's Chimes of Freedom), and he recorded "Voices of the Heart of Africa" with the great Yandé Codou Sène in the pure Senegalese Griot tradition.

Nothing's In Vain, another call for unity, included both "Joker", here picked up by vocalist Patrice, and "Africa Dream Again", which features Nigerian singer Ayo. With brass, percussion, bass and guitar lines all from Jamaican sources the album was recorded in the spring of 2009 at Kingston's Tuff Gong studios with Dean Fraser on saxophone, Michael Fletcher on "dancehall" bass and Earl "Chinna" Smith on guitar. The album's instrumental add-ons are all wedded to Africa's memory and modernity, and its leitmotif is Youssou N'Dour: from Bombay to Rio, and from Dakar to Melbourne, via New York and Bamako. Véronique Mortaigne

Youssou N'Dour made his long-awaited debut as a film actor in 2007 in Academy Award winner Michael Apted's historical drama *Amazing Grace*. This film depicts the campaign for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire two hundred years ago, with a focus on the efforts of the impassioned British parliamentarian William Wilberforce and those who rallied to his cause, including Olaudah Equiano, the self-made African merchant and author and former slave whom N'Dour portrays.

That year also saw the release of yet another daring creation by this artist who refuses to be constrained by his own past, while knowing how best to be nourished by it. N'Dour's 2007 release, *Rokku mi Rokka* (Give and Take), is, for Charlie Gillett, perhaps Britain's most respected world music broadcaster, critic, and historian, "a blissfully good album," an "adventurous and

extraordinary album [that] feels like a new pinnacle” in N’Dour’s career. *Rokku mi Rokka* prominently features Bassekou Kouyate, an ngoni player from Mali whom Gillett identifies as “a defining figure in modern West African music” in his own right, notably through his work with countrymen Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté, and with African-American roots music legend Taj Mahal, and for his own critically acclaimed album *Segu Blue* (Out Here Records, 2007).

N’Dour is clear in how he pinpoints the geographical and emotional foothold for most of the songs of *Rokku mi Rokka*: “The music on this album has its roots in the north of our country, from the desert, from the Sahelian corridor, from parts of the country that border on Mali and Mauritania. People from those countries will know and understand this music as well as people who come from the center of Senegal,” he says.

“Some people might think Senegalese music means only mbalax. But all my life, alongside my friends—Baaba Maal, Ismael Lo, and others—I have been saying that this is not the only music we have in Senegal. We have such a wide range of sounds and rhythms and colors. When it came to writing the songs for this album, I wanted to use different sounds.”

N’Dour’s *Dakar-Kingston* (2011) maps his road to reggae, turning classics and several new originals into reggae anthems, reflecting reggae’s deep impact on West African music and culture. Guided by veteran reggae producer and former Marley collaborator Tyrone Downie, N’Dour finds the sunny and urgent, the laid-back and the hard-grooving sides of Jamaican music, supported by a multigenerational crew of Jamaican and African reggae voices. “Reggae gives you more space than mbalax. You have more room to breathe,” N’Dour reflects. “You know the rhythm and the emotion, exactly what the song is saying to you. It’s very direct at its heart.”

On his travels, the importance of those who had gone before hit home, musicians like Bob Marley who hailed from long-denigrated places and yet managed to parlay powerful music into global stardom and a new social consciousness. “When I started traveling, I started seeing how Bob Marley had affected the world. I saw how someone from an underdeveloped country can become a star, someone who’s really loved,” N’Dour explains. “He was my example. I knew looking at Bob Marley that I could do my music from Senegal and touch the world.”

In reggae, N’Dour also heard the powerful transits that music from Africa made, as slavery ripped people and sounds from their homelands: “When people were taken from Africa, the music left, too.” Reggae’s African heart had long intrigued N’Dour, whether listening to Marley songs in the market or at home on his uncle’s records. He fantasized about taking his catchy yet moving songs and letting them unfold in a new reggae context.