

Womad 2014: Youssou N'Dour - Senegal's minister of sound

Womad festival headliner Youssou N'Dour tells Mark Hudson about his journey from grooves to government – and back again

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By **Mark Hudson**

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'When you're outside politics, it's very easy to say, 'Why didn't they think of that?' or 'Why are they so slow?' But when you get inside, you realise how complicated the processes are.'

Africa's biggest music star is sitting in his hotel room in the Dutch city of Eindhoven the day after the opening concert of his first European tour in three years. In the intervening period Youssou N'Dour has tried and failed to become president of his native Senegal.

Becoming head of state might sound like the ultimate vanity project for the star who has everything. When you've been the most influential cultural figure on your home turf for a good two decades, building a media empire that's seen you dubbed an "African Rupert Murdoch", when you've won a Grammy, had a global million-seller (7 Seconds with Neneh Cherry), toured the world with Springsteen, Sting and Peter Gabriel and been hailed as "world music's only real star", what else is there to aspire to?

N'Dour, however, maintains that he was forced into politics by circumstances: the reigning President Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to change the constitution to allow himself a third term in office. N'Dour's move into the highest level of politics was regarded with some bemusement outside Senegal. Was it preposterous hubris? Or a legitimate attempt to defend one of Africa's most stable (if hardly unflawed) democracies – the only West African country not to have suffered a coup?

When his candidacy was disqualified on a technicality, he threw in his lot with opposition leader (and former Prime Minister) Macky Sall, becoming first minister for culture and tourism when Sall was elected in 2012, then minister for tourism and leisure, an appointment that ended last September.

If the 54-year-old singer is piqued at not getting the top job or that he is no longer a minister of state he certainly isn't letting it show.

"I came into politics to defend the constitution. Like a lot of Senegalese people I objected to what was happening. The former president blocked my candidacy, so I supported our current president. We're very close. I'm now a presidential adviser, and he listens to me." He shrugs. "It's great."

N'Dour cancelled all tours and musical commitments after announcing his presidential bid in January 2012. While it might be assumed he has now abandoned politics with equal decisiveness in favour of a more or less honorary role and a full-on return to music, that is far from the case. After coming offstage the night before we speak, he was immediately on the phone to the president's office in Dakar, where the results of a local election were coming in.

While N'Dour claims his current role is concerned largely with culture, his manager Dudu Sarr says he also advises on foreign policy and international investment. That's quite a position for a mechanic's son who left school with minimal qualifications.

N'Dour began his career while still a child, singing at parties in the working-class Medina district of Dakar. By 15 he was the main draw in the country's top group, the Star Band, graduating to another group, Etoile de Dakar, and then on to form his own band, Super Etoile. He early on learnt the habit of pleasing different audiences – getting the respect of older people, while appeasing radical youth – a talent that would serve any politician well.

When Jenny Cathcart, then a BBC researcher, later N'Dour's biographer, went in search of the "Senegalese Michael Jackson" in 1984, she took a taxi into Dakar's shanty town suburbs, asking directions to N'Dour's house from a group of guys sitting on a corner. "I'm Youssou N'Dour," said one of them. "Can I help you?" The story is telling because although N'Dour now lives a life of mansions and expensive cars, and hasn't walked on Dakar's crumbling pavements in years, he still thinks of himself as fundamentally a guy on the corner – someone who is closer to the real people than a conventional politician could ever be.

"I didn't go into politics to change my style," he says. "I've kept doing things my way, even if sometimes it doesn't work." He chuckles wryly. "I've maintained my credibility – that's difficult in politics – and I've tried to tell the truth."

The Senegalese public didn't think much of 7 Seconds (they prefer his earthier local recordings), nor were they much impressed by Egypt, his Grammy-winning album of Islamic praise songs. But these international successes added massively to his prestige at home. As early as 1994 he was being tipped as a potential president. N'Dour avoided overt political involvement, but supported Abdoulaye Wade's successful bid to oust the country's dominant Francophile political elite in 2000.

But Wade's blatant nepotism and fondness for grandiose gestures, which included erecting a 160ft statue at the westernmost point of the African continent, caused widespread discontent. When he attempted to change the constitution, rioting ensued.

N'Dour took to the streets, addressing rallies of his newly created youth movement, Fekkee Ma Ci Boole (meaning We have witnessed it, in the Wolof language), and announcing his presidential candidacy. His bid was disqualified over the legitimacy of the signatures collected to endorse his campaign.

Opinion is divided as to whether an N'Dour presidential campaign would have proved unstoppable or ended in embarrassment. His "movement" is still active, he says, its aim being to educate ordinary people – "old grannies" as Sarr puts it – about their constitutional rights and duties. Membership is the equivalent of 10p. N'Dour's move from tourism minister to minister-counsellor was announced in a government reshuffle last September, without reason being given. But you get the impression he's relieved to be out of regular professional politics.

"My current job isn't something I start at eight in the morning. I have my office and I go there from time to time. Every week I have a meeting with the president. It's cool.

"Better than being minister of culture. Culture is my life. But actually doing it, playing music and trying to mix that with politics and 'the power of Youssou N'Dour' is too much." He laughs.

N'Dour's interview style veered towards the blandly diplomatic even before he got into politics. His English, never brilliant, has got rusty since we last spoke (and this is my 11th interview with him since I first wrote about him for this newspaper in 1988). Yet he has a clever way of making his platitudes hum with sincerity, and of making you feel privileged for being in on the whole thing, while reassuring you that everything is, well, cool. Meanwhile, his return to music is progressing gently. He released four new tracks in April, a tribute to some of the great traditional singers who first inspired him. There is the possibility of a new album next year, but there's nothing concrete yet, and you get the impression he's in no rush. A project that does appear to excite him is a projected album with Malian kora virtuoso Toumani Diabate, under the aegis of Nick Gold, the British producer behind Buena Vista Social Club. An album uniting arguably Africa's greatest singer with arguably Africa's greatest musician in an exploration of their shared roots in the ancient art of griot – praise-singing – sounds like a hell of a project. Yet its traditional feel is a confirmation that N'Dour, once at the cutting edge of

African youth culture is now well into middle age, and his classic mbalax sound has been superseded, to a degree, by rap and other newer forms.

“I see a lot of talented young people doing things. I try to help them, and they still have a lot of respect for me. But it’s not about how many years you have, it’s about your head. And my head’s still in the same position. I’m still growing.”

And if the circumstances were right, would he like another crack at the presidency?

“Listen,” he says, a note of weariness entering his voice. “I’m still involved in politics. I’m still observing everything that’s happening in my country. But being president isn’t something I really need. It may happen in the future, but for the moment, I’m a happy man.”