Key to N’Dour: roots of the Senegalese star

LUCY DURAN

Overland travel in Senegal and Gambia is the best introduction to local music. Blaring out from every market stall, taxi radio-cassette and record shop in every town along the trans-Gambian highway, is the music of Youssou N’Dour, Baaba Maal, Ismael Lo, Super Diamono, Toure Kunda or some kora player. The smells of perfumed incense and smoked fish mingle with the rich inflections of Youssou’s voice. You stop to buy a piece of tie-dye cloth, or maybe you are waiting at Farafenni to catch the ferry across the river. ‘I like his music too much,’ says a Gambian standing next to you, listening to Youssou’s latest cassette, Kocc Barma. ‘I like the tama (drum) with keyboards, it makes me want to dance.’ ‘That’s deep Wolof,’ says another; ‘He’s singing for Alla Seck who died, Ndyesan (alas).’ The nearby stall-owner disagrees. ‘I prefer his old tapes, like Tabaski,’ he says. ‘That was sayisayi (rascal) music, that was real Wolof music, now he’s too toubab (European). Now I listen to Baaba Maal.’ A fourth person joins in. ‘Baaba only sings for his own people, the Tukulor: he doesn’t care about anyone else.’

‘But Youssou only sings in Wolof,’ I comment. ‘What about those people who don’t speak any Wolof?’ They all look at me with a touch of pity and incredulity. ‘Everyone speaks Wolof in Senegambia’ is the unanimous and confident reply.

Wolof is the most widely spoken language of northern Senegal and it has a rich and ancient musical culture performed by hereditary musicians (gewel). Drums are their main instruments and there is also a small five-string lute called the halam which has a repertoire not unlike that of the kora. But Wolof music has also adapted mercurially to all the different influences of modern urban life in Africa. Perhaps no other singer personifies this Wolof ability to bridge two worlds, the old and the new, as much as Youssou. Over the last eleven years, since he first rose to fame, his music has swung from a derivative Cuban to a distinctly Wolof sound, later to include elements from jazz, soul and rock. With each new cassette – his output has been so prolific that even he cannot remember it all – the Senegambian public enters into a new debate as to whether Youssou is still their favourite star.

‘Whenever a new cassette of Youssou’s comes out,’ says Camin Minte, owner of one of Gambia’s busiest cassette shops in Serrekunda, ‘people fuss and criticise it. They give you this reason and that reason why they don’t like it, but still they hang around the shop listening. They say he’s gone too far over to a European style, or not far enough. And still they listen. Then all of a sudden everyone starts buying it. In two weeks I’m totally sold out of originals. I hide my last one so I can run off copies. There’s so much demand that I’m running off copies all day. It’s playing everywhere you go, on the radio, in the clubs, in the market; people can’t get enough of it. That’s Youssou’s music every time.’
Youssou’s rise to fame in the late 1970s was dazzling. There was already a strong movement in Senegal away from European cultural models; in musical terms, this meant going back to local musical styles and instruments, and singing in your own language. At first the bands of the day were tentative in their efforts. Gambia’s Super Eagles, the first local band to use electric instruments back in the late 1950s, had just renamed themselves I Fang Bondi, a Mandinka name to honour their new ‘Afro-Manding’ sound. They had a hit with their version of the kora tune ‘Sutuku Kumbusora’ in 1975. But they were also singing ‘Hey Jude’ and James Brown songs.

When I first heard Youssou sing, in 1979, it was in the open-air community centre of Brikama, a small town in the Gambia. He was singing in Wolof alright – one of my favourite songs of his from the time was ‘Mane Kauma Khol’ – but the backing was still very Cuban. He also sang in Spanish, though he rarely took the lead. ‘Soy el hombre misterioso (I am the mysterious man)’ sang this tall, lanky, twenty-year-old with a high-pitched and slightly cheeky voice. The place was packed. Couples danced the pachanga, the Cuban dance that Aragon and Johnny Pacheco made famous in Africa, and you could hear hundreds of feet shuffling across the cement floor as if one. Then, the tama, the little laced drum that ‘talks’, would play a short burst in counter rhythm, and something magical happened to the audience – circles formed, people clapped to the rhythm, and dancers, abandoning their shoes and partners, stepped into the centre to do the Wolof dance the Gambians called ndaga; lots of swinging, suggestive, hip, bottom and leg movement. Sometimes the women would get so carried away with the sound of the tama that their wrapped skirts would fly off, and those around would shriek with laughter and delight. Everyone, including the band, looked happy and relaxed. It was as if they could finally be themselves.
The importance of the *tama* and the rhythm section as a factor in Youssou’s continuing success cannot be underestimated. Ask any Senegalese or Gambian woman why they like his music and most of them will say the *tama*. The *tama* is the drum that calls to dance; it is played at wedding, circumcision, baptism and any other Wolof ceremony or festivity. The sound of the *tama* makes everyone, especially women, jump to their feet. And the finest *tama* player of all is Assane Thiam, who has been with Youssou since 1977.

At the Bracknell WOMAD Festival in 1988, Youssou talked about his early success.

I think that the main reason why the Star Band and later the Etoile de Dakar, the band I formed in 1979, were so successful was because I tried to do something in my music which felt right, which felt good; nothing more complicated than that! It wasn’t a question of searching for some remote musical style; on the contrary, what we did was music that was already familiar to the audience, that made people feel comfortable and at home.

I’m not the one who changed the face of Senegalese music. Other bands were also using the *tama* and singing in Wolof. But I think I’m the one who took these changes to their furthest limit. Others were moving in that direction, towards a more traditional sound, but they hesitated, they didn’t dare go quite far enough. Maybe they were afraid of being criticised, or they weren’t sure they were doing the right thing, maybe deep down they didn’t even like what they were doing . . . I was braver and went straight for it. Some musicians at that time hated and rejected the Senegalese sound, but they’ve ended up doing the same thing themselves.

Jenny Cathcart, a great friend of Youssou’s and an expert on his music, commented on this in London in November 1988 after one of his visits:

Some ‘cultivated’ Senegalese, those who have been educated abroad or have lived for long periods in Europe, felt uncomfortable with Youssou’s music; they saw it as too raw. But when he wrote his song ‘Nelson Mandela’, and the President of Senegal acknowledged it with the ‘Order Of The Lion’, his music became more accepted in intellectual circles. They couldn’t deny that Youssou had become their best ambassador. In his songs like Bekoor (Drought) and Immigres (advising Senegalese immigrants not to forget their home country), he tackles some of Senegal’s most fundamental issues. Eventually, the intellectuals had nothing more to say against him.

It is true though that Youssou’s music went through a very, and delightfully, raw stage, in terms of lyrics and the strong rhythmic basis known as *mbalax*. Young Senegalese, says Youssou, used to think that music meant European instruments like keyboard and guitar; they didn’t think of percussion as music. But for me, percussion was the most vital part of music. I saw my role as bringing percussion into my music, and putting rhythm into even the melody instruments. So, the guitar and the keyboard in my group also started to play a lot of traditional rhythms, and people accepted this because it was translated into melody. This rhythm is the basis of all my music, right from the early days, and I called it *mbalax*. You know, that’s that rhythm you can hear all the time on the *sabar* (the Wolof equivalent of congas) and *tama*; it’s in most of my music.’ He mimes the sharp rap of the *mbalax* rhythm. ‘I took the word *mbalax* because it’s a beautiful and original word, it’s a purely Wolof word and I wanted to show that I had the courage to play purely Senegalese music. It’s a real ‘roots’ word, and it’s the rhythm that the Wolof feel and love the most, above all it’s the rhythm of the griots.

Youssou himself, who was born in 1959 in Dakar, is only half griot; that is, his mother belongs to the hereditary caste of musicians, but not his father. Youssou’s mother is a Tukulor, a branch of the Fula people from northern Senegal, and in her youth was a famous gawulo (the Tukulor term for griot). Her fine singing is still remembered by many, but when she married a guer (non-griot) she had to give up
music. Youssou attributes his musical ability to a gift of God, not necessarily learnt directly from his mother.

I didn’t really learn to sing, although I knew that I came from a family of gawulo, and sometimes I heard my mother’s family singing at ceremonies and parties and it was extremely beautiful. From an early age I just felt that I could sing. I never asked anyone to help me with that, I went ahead and sang to enjoy myself, the way I might enjoy myself playing football.

I started singing in my part of town, the part they call Medina. [Later on, Youssou was to pay tribute in one of his best songs, ‘Medina’, to this beautiful section of Dakar, the ‘native’ quarter during colonial times, an area of sandy streets and busy, colourful markets.] You can tell someone from Medina just by the way he walks. [He sings, and at that point he and other members of the band strut confidently across the stage] I used to sing at kassak (the party to celebrate the end of circumcision) and sometimes on one street there would be four or five kassak going on at the same time. They would start in the evening and I would go to one and sing two numbers, then on to the next... sometimes I used to sing to 10 kassak a night. Gradually my friends and others encouraged me and gave me confidence, because they liked my singing; I became a star of the kassak. I used to adore doing this, and when the school holidays were over I’d be really sad. I lived for the holidays when I could continue my music.

Then I started to perform with a theatre troupe in Medina and word got around about my voice. A man came along and said he liked my singing, would I like to join a band? I was thrilled. So I started singing with this band called Diamono (not the same band as Super Diamono) with Babakar Faye and Ouzin N’Diaye. Diamono used to play regularly in Gambia but my father was against my taking up music professionally and refused to let me go. So I ran away in the middle of the night, but my parents called the police and I was caught at the border and sent back. It was very tough on me.

Youssou’s sister, Ngone, recalls how he ran away again, paying for his trip to Gambia by selling his shoes. ‘Our parents didn’t want him to sing,’ she says, ‘because at that time musicians in Senegal were not successful, they didn’t make much money and had a reputation for drinking alcohol.’ (This is of course against the Islamic religion.)

Youssou was nevertheless, at the age of sixteen, determined to make music his life.

I decided to have a serious talk with my parents. At that time I was already beginning to be well-known because I had done a song on the radio called Mba for Papa Samb Diop, and people liked it. (I did this song on the album titled Diongoma). My success helped me persuade my parents to let me continue with music, so we compromised by my going to the École des Arts to study music. Then, at last, my father gave in and said I could sing in a band if I agreed to stay in Dakar.

To this day, Youssou lives in Dakar with his family, as tradition demands, in spite of increasingly frequent and long trips abroad since his collaboration with Peter Gabriel.

In 1977, I went to see the Star Band, who were then the number one band in Dakar; they were based at the Miami club and their manager was someone called Ibra Kasse. I offered to sing with them. Ibra looked at me with surprise and said ‘Wow, you’re really young!’ I replied, ‘Yeh, but just try me!’, which he did and took me on instantly. So I began singing at the Miami every night to packed audiences, and our music became more and more popular. I stayed with the Star Band for two and a half years with Assane Thiam, the tama player, Babakar, the percussionist, and one or two others who are still with me. That’s when I wrote songs like ‘Mane Khouma Khol’ and ‘Senegal Sama Rew’ (Senegal, my country).

After that, a group of us decided to form our own band in 1979, with Kabou Gueye, the bass player, Badou N’Diaye, the guitarist, and others. We called it Etoile de Dakar, and from its birth it became the top band of Senegal.

My first smash hit was ‘Xalis’ (‘Money’). It was an extraordinary success everywhere in Senegal and Gambia and even in Paris.
Thousands of Senegalese were living in Paris at that time. 'Xalis' was recorded in 1979 at the Jandear Night Club, now the Kilimanjaro, in Dakar, and the record, Etoile's first, was published in France with generous subsidy from the Senegalese community in Paris. It still has a strong Cuban element – it includes the song 'Soy El Hombre Misterioso' – but the Wolof contribution, especially the rhythm, is overriding. 'Xalis' sold like hot cakes in Paris; a few copies even made their way to London where they were snatched up by the young Gambian student community. Youssou's music became the basis for a whole new type of social gathering. Parties in London would start at 2 a.m. and go on till daybreak, with non-stop and ever-more virtuosic displays of ndaga, the Wolof village dance. Heavily pleated white crimpene skirts shook and shuddered to the rapid patter of the tama. Gambians and Senegalese abroad were revelling in the new sound of mbalax.

Youssou's unashamed tribute in 'Xalis' to the pleasures of having money – Bilahi, xalit nexna (By God, money is nice!) – was especially relevant in the context of a new generation of Senegambians who had been exposed to Western values but rarely its benefits. George Christensen, a Gambian living in London with a long professional connection with Gambian music, recalls how Youssou's songs of this period were seen as fairly defiant.

Youssou was echoing the sentiments of the new generation, and at the same time advocating the traditional values of elders. This is one of his great strengths – he bridges the gap between the young and the old.

Another Gambian resident in London, Musa Joh – who recently brought Baaba Maal over for a UK tour – feels nostalgic for 'early Youssou'.

In those days Youssou just used to sing more or less straight kassak music. This was music for what we called sayisayi (rascal, naughty) dancing, it was the dancing that boys used to do when they were healed after circumcision, and they were well enough to start thinking about women again. The tama played an important part in all of this. It's mainly a dance called hoti chaya, named after the wide Arabic-style trousers. The boys would get into the middle of the circle, hold their groin, and shake and wobble their legs in rascal fashion, but not for too long, otherwise you'd be accused of being gay! Those were great days. Youssou would sing like an old-fashioned praise singer for his friends and for the audience; he'd say 'It's yours, the song is yours – I'm yours, I'm calling you!' And people would feel so happy, they'd dig deep into their pockets to give him money. No-one plays this kind of music any more in Senegal; maybe the only band that come near to that feeling are Baaba Maal.

Tabaski, a cassette from c.1981 with a song commemorating the great Islamic feast after the end of Ramadan, was another of Youssou's great hits. Although never officially released, it was in wide circulation, pirated off radio and live gigs. It is mbalax at its height, with lots of almost flamenco-like minor harmonic shifts, and frequent changes of tempo from slow to fast and back again, as with village drumming. This is where the word Thia'kas, representing the sound of the rhythm guitar playing off the beat, was coined. Words, expressions, dances and even fashions have come out of Youssou's music. The appeal of Tabaski was also in its lyrics. One of the songs 'Ki sa dom la' ('This Is Your Child') says, 'If your child troubles you to the point of making you really angry, whatever happens, don't kick him out.' Another one, called 'Thiapathialy', after the name of a bird, is about a relationship which has just ended. 'You said something to me, I said something to you,' the line goes, (meaning 'we let each other know we liked each other'). 'Now you don't say anything to me, and I don't care, what the hell!' At the end the rhythm speeds up going into a circumcision dance affectionately termed bougoun bangar,
the sound of a shaking bottom. This was defiant music; above all, it encouraged Senegambians to be themselves.

My next sight of Youssou was in late 1982 in one of Dakar's best clubs, the Thiossane. By then he had formed a new group called Super Etoile. A dance called ventilateur was all the rage, a charming but blatantly erotic dance by women where they turn their bottom to the onlooker and shake or rotate it, arching their back. This dance has taken on a kind of universal status, and it is performed by dancers with groups like Mory Kante, Salif Keita and others from further afield. I recently saw a Cuban dancer with Sam Mangwana perform ventilateur. Ventilateur was the rage of the Gambian community in London, and I was looking forward to seeing it in context, but evidently this was not to be at the Thiossane: Youssou's audience there was the chic crowd of Dakar and they danced European-style, with only a hint of Wolof and a rather detached attitude, though they were clearly enjoying the music. Maybe it had something to do with identity; the further from home, the more need to act Wolof.

In any case, the Super Etoile had moved into another gear. Says Youssou:

The Etoile were a great success and we stayed together for more than two years, but there were financial and other problems, so I had to make the difficult decision of breaking away. I took some of the band with me: Assane Thiam, Jimmy Mbaye, the guitarist, Pap Oumar Ngom, who plays rhythm guitar, Kabou Gueye, Ouzin N'Diaye; in fact, it was more or less the nucleus of the old group, plus we kept some of Etoile's repertoire, like 'Thiapathioly' with some new numbers I composed. I think the main difference between the Etoile and the Super Etoile was that we were more serious about our work and we thought more about the message of our songs, about where our music was going. We dropped our Cuban repertoire completely. Don't get me wrong [he added hastily] I still love Cuban music. I think it's fantastic, and I used to sing it Senegalese... but it's completely out of fashion now in Senegal, and there are no traces left of it in my music.

But even in Super Etoile there's an occasional flavour of Cuba in the horn section. It is only now in the smaller group who have just been in Paris cutting the forthcoming record for Virgin that there are no horns at all; the final shedding of the Latin tinge?

Youssou's famous series of cassettes, Volumes 1–13, which contain his best material, are with the Super Etoile. Their first included a reworking of 'Thiapathioly' and 'Xarit' ('Friend'); Vol. 2 had 'Aziz' and 'Independence'. Some of these songs came out on bootleg records in Europe. Youssou and many other Senegambian musicians feel bitterly about this bootlegging, but for immigrant communities this was often their only access to their own music. I asked Lamin Minté, the cassette-shop owner in Serrekunda whether it did not worry him, all this running off of bootleg copies.

Yes, of course I worry and feel bad about 'copyright' but everyone does it all over the country. It's a question of economics. If you want to sell originals, you have to buy them first and that costs money up front. Sometimes we don't have it. Sometimes we don't get sent many originals in Gambia, only a few, and then how do you deal with the demand? An original cassette costs 45 dalasis (c. £4), and a copy only 16... if you look at the economic condition of most Gambians, they can't afford to buy the originals, but they still want their music. What are we supposed to do? The whole system has to change first.

Musa Joh agrees but adds, with reference to the early Youssou tapes, 'Thank God for the pirates of those days! Africa didn't release those tapes, and if it weren't for the bootlegs, we would never have had Youssou's Tabaski or other great tracks.' I looked at my own copy of Tabaski; the label has Tabaski scrawled on it in Arabic script and is peeling off; it has been on many voyages, and dublings of it have been played on
radio stations as far afield as Nigeria, Sudan and Cuba... I think I have to agree with Musa Joh - at least retrospectively.

With the Super Etoile, Youssou was launched on the beginnings of a truly international career. In 1982, he was invited to Paris, his first out of Africa.

I performed in France for the Senegalese community, and listened to lots of different kinds of music - I saw there was a whole world out there. Also, around that time, I started working with musicians who had a more modern approach - especially Habib Faye, who plays bass and keyboards with the group, and his brother, Adama. They brought a new spirit to my music, though we always tried to hold on to our Senegalese roots. That was how we started playing a more mixed kind of music.

This was around the time of Vol. 9 with pieces like 'Africa' and 'Awa Gueye' (later renamed 'Moule Moule' for the European market).

Youssou made frequent appearances on Senegalese television, often performing at the Sorrano Theatre in Dakar. Hundreds of bootleg videos found their way into general currency, bringing him into Gambian and Senegalese homes abroad. This was around 1983-84 and although his music was still wildly popular, his fans would often comment on his wooden stance in front of the camera or on stage. It was rumoured that this great singer, whose music was full of the most complex rhythm, did not know how to dance. Horrors! Compensating for this was the fact that he had two or three superb dancers, usually male, who would occasionally come on stage with their hoti chaya baggy trousers and perform the most exquisitely elastic dances (my own term for them was 'the spaghetti boys' because their legs were literally like strings of spaghetti). Youssou stood almost self-consciously behind them, and the band, except for Assane Thiam, the tama player, were also largely static. However, there was also the magnificent rapper and dancer, Alla Seck, who died tragically last year of typhoid. Alla Seck was the animator of the group; he was 'the voice of Senegal', with a great gift for words, and could whip an audience up to a frenzy, as with his advice in the song 'Immigres': 'Immigrants, it's good to travel, but don't take it too far by staying for ever in a country that is not your own...' The loss of Alla Seck was a severe blow to Youssou and the Super Etoile, and for many fans, their music will never be the same without him.

Youssou is often accused of being a 'ladies' singer, a rather vague term that one suspects emanates from less popular men; it means that he has more female than male fans, and also often sings about women. I asked Youssou's sister, Ngone, about this.

It's more to do with mbalax than specifically with Youssou. Women like the sabar drums more than men do, and they dance more than men. Women can spend literally millions on baptism or marriage parties, where they dance to mbalax. When you're happy, you give money to a musician or a singer to express your enjoyment. Even my mother gives money to Youssou!

At this Ngone remembered a delightful anecdote.

Once Youssou was singing at the Sorrano, and I went there with my whole family. He was singing very beautifully and my sisters couldn't help themselves, they just had to go up to the stage one by one to give him money. I thought, I want to go too, then I thought, Oh no, I haven't got any money! Give me some money. I asked my sisters but they'd all run out. So I pulled my ticket out of my pocket and went up to give it to Youssou hoping he wouldn't notice. After the concert he came up to me and said, Hey thanks for the ticket! I knew it was you.

Youssou's first trip to London was in June 1984 when he took part in Sterns' pioneer African music series at the (now defunct) Venue. He wowed the audience with a
woman dancer, Ndei Haddy Niang, one of Senegal’s most famous dancers ever; also a well-known patron of music in Dakar and the subject of a lovely song on *Tabaski*. Musically as well, Youssou took the audience by storm. For many it was a real revelation. For Charlie Gillett of Capital Radio’s ‘City Beats World of Difference’, it was an introduction to a world of music from which he has not looked back. So it was also for Peter Gabriel, who later visited Youssou in Dakar. This was a major breakthrough. It led to Youssou collaborating on the track ‘In Your Eyes’ from Gabriel’s best-selling album. So, followed by an invitation to be the support for Gabriel’s two world tours. This period of Youssou’s career abroad, his two European LP releases *Immigres* and the hauntingly beautiful *Nelson Mandela*, up to his recent contract with Virgin records have already been the subject of many features in the UK music press.

Meanwhile, how was all this exposure affecting Youssou and his music? The frequent trips away from home meant that he could no longer do his regular club gigs in the Thiossane or the Sahel. He formed a second group, Etoile 2, to hold the home front. Included in this group are Kabou Gueye, the bass player who he took with him from the original Star Band and the singer Malang Cissokho, the son of Senegal’s most famous kora player, Sounkoulo Cissoko. Etoile 2 have their own cassette out in Senegal; the opening track is a *kora* tune called ‘Wara’ and features a magnificent vocal duet between Malang and Youssou. Having a ‘second formation’ gives Youssou a bit of room to experiment with different styles and repertoires for the home audience. Senegal is a country of many cultures and languages, and bands often have to sing in different languages, such as Mandinka, Fula or Jola, according to the region. When Youssou performed in December 1988 in Ziguinchor, southern Senegal to an audience of 5,000, many of whom were Mandinka and Jola, he played a much-loved *kora* tune ‘Musa Coli Sabari’, which commemorates a Jola trader. Mbaye Faye, Super Etoile’s brilliant percussionist, leapt to his feet, slightly bent at the waist, and with raised arms performed the energetic Jola dance. He was joined by nearly the whole audience – a breathtaking sight. Youssou won over audiences in Bamako, the capital of Mali, by doing ‘Wareff’, a version of a song by Mali’s top traditional woman singer, Fanta Damba. Before the concert, he got into a taxi and went to meet this great singer, who had recently been on the pilgrimage to Mecca and had vowed not to sing in public again. ‘I admire her music enormously,’ says Youssou. ‘It is deep folklore. It is the roots of much of West Africa’s culture.’ The music was partly arranged by Pap Oumar Ngom, another hereditary musician in Youssou’s group, whose highly rhythmic and somewhat plaintive style of guitar playing is one of the hallmarks of Youssou’s music. In conversation with us after the Ziguinchor concert, Youssou got quite animated over a casual enquiry from Ian Anderson as to whether he might one day consider recording a special project album with traditional musicians.

Working with Peter Gabriel has had an immeasurable impact on Youssou. This is the most obvious in his new style of stage presentation. Most excitingly, Youssou has proved the old rumours that he ‘can’t dance’ are far from true – in fact, he dances exceptionally well, with great charm and impeccable sense of timing. None of the band stands still any more; their movements are subtly choreographed, with considerable wit, to reflect the subject of the song. Sometimes Mbaye Faye, who is delightfully exhibitionist with a devilish grin, cannot resist a bit of *hoti chaya*. The spirit of *kassak* with its rascal dancing lives on, in spite of synthesisers and contracts
with multi-nationals, and this is what makes Youssou still the most popular star in Senegal and Gambia.

In January 1988 in Gambia, I talked to Ibrahima Jarju, the main DJ at Gambia’s Radio Syd:

Here at Syd, we get thousands of letters from our listeners requesting Gambian music, musicians like I Fang Bondi. The problem is, we have no recording studio here, and it’s three or four years before they are able to make a new record. You can’t go on playing the same record over and over, year after year, you have to give your listeners new material. So we have to play the Senegalese artists. I play Musa Ngom (Super Diamono), Baaba Maal, and many others plus some old tracks by artists like Salif Kenta and Mory Kante with the Rail Band. But if you ask me who is the artist with the biggest following here, then that’s another question. Here in the Gambia, Youssou N’Dour is still at the top. He’s not Gambian; I’m a DJ, but as music has no boundaries I’ve got to speak out the truth. His music is great, especially his latest cassette, Koc Barma – you wouldn’t believe – it even has the synthesiser sounding like our balafon. Youssou is gifted. I’m not praising him. I’m telling you the truth; he knows exactly what he’s doing. If Pa Toure [the singer from I Fang Bondi] were like that, maybe we’d like him as much as Youssou, but we’ve had nothing new from them for four years, and I’m sorry to say we’re tired of it!

Youssou had just done two shows in Gambia; the first was an all-night dance at St Augustine’s High School in Banjul, where he played virtually his entire repertoire starting with Tabaski, and where he was showered with what looked like literally hundreds of 25 dalasi notes by an inebriated restaurant owner. On one side in a cordoned off area sat the VIPs – government officials and hotel owners in richly coloured or embroidered damask cloth, or safari suits, with gorgeous wives, decked with gold. In front of the stage were some 3,000 young Gambians madly performing ndaga. Banjul is not a dry town; there is a hefty non-Muslim (i.e. alcohol drinking) population, and by 4 a.m. the audience was getting a bit unruly. An over-enthusiastic and definitely quite drunk fan jumped on to the stage. The police threatened to pull him off, but Youssou, with a smile on his face, managed to get him off with a few polite words.

The next day he did his ‘lights show’ at the stadium in Bakau. This is a choreographed, highly theatrical and humorous presentation of twenty-five songs, with orchestrated lighting, a trick Youssou learnt from his world tour with Peter Gabriel. We had to wait for the sun to go down so we could see the lights, which meant the show started about two hours late. Youssou had not been in Gambia for well over a year and the audience was impatient. At last, the MC began introducing members of the band, and Habib Faye, on keyboards, took up the soaring tune of ‘Bes’ from their latest cassette. When Youssou finally made a dramatic entrance taking up the song, there was a roar from the audience; it was true, he was dancing, he could dance! Their appreciation of this artist, whose music they have lived with affectionately for so many years, instantly doubled.

The new album Youssou is doing for Virgin is going to have several numbers from his last two cassettes, Jamm and Koc Barma, plus one or two rock numbers. He has pared the group down: horns are out, their riffs are played instead on a second keyboard provided by ex-Toure Kunda musician, Alain Loy. Ouzin N’Diaye, the fruity second voice behind Youssou, stayed at home to make a solo album; there is no lead guitar.

They got mixed reviews in New York, but Youssou says,

Sometimes critics review with their eyes and not their ears; they expect to see 15 musicians on
stage and when they see only 7 they assume the music is not as good. But if they would only listen they will probably find that it is better music. I have chosen the very best musicians for this recording and I am also very involved in the mixing, because that’s what gives a particular sound. You can change our music from mbalax into rock just by changing the mix. I want this record with Virgin to sound closer in spirit to the cassettes released in Senegal, but with better technology.

Curiously enough, Charlie Gillett revealed on his Capital show in August 1988 that Earthworks, when re-releasing Immigres, found the original masters muffled. In a new re-mix, working from the multi-track, they have been able to bring the tama and sabar to the front again and restore the mbalax sound.

Virgin also have plans, so Youssou says, to bring out all his Volumes 1–13, as they are. Astutely, Youssou has kept all the masters. Hopefully, we will all soon be able to hear a little more of his ‘rascal’ music.

Acknowledgement

This article was first published in Folk Roots and is reproduced with their permission.