

BAABA MAAL: Voice of the People

Maroni, Susan

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BAABA MAAL

Voice of the People

By Susan Maroni

When Baaba Maal takes the stage, you know you're in the presence of a master. He leaps and whirls and flickers like a flame, at the heart of a maelstrom of sound and color. His lucent voice pierces the dense air above the crowd. From the opening thunder of percussion to the evening's final fading note, Baaba exudes rare jubilation and fervor, and a palpable pride in the consummate musicians of his band, Daande Lenol.

PHOTO BY EDGIE MORGAN

THIS IS A MAN WHO GIVES EVERYTHING HE'S GOT, AND HIS GIFTS ARE MONUMENTAL.

Djam Leelii: The Adventurers is the iridescent, otherworldly album that introduced Americans to Baaba Maal and Mansour Seck. The recording was an outpouring of love for home by the two young Senegalese men living in Paris in 1982. Musically *Djam Leelii* is a joy and a revelation. Veiled in echoing nocturnal sounds of their homeland—gurgling water, frog and insect choruses—two voices and two guitars portrayed the life they had left behind. For some of us it was an early taste of West African acoustic music, a taste that would prove addictive.

Gorgeous as the album is, some of its potency derives from the yearning and passion that drench each song. The raw emotion of "Ko Wone Maayo," (recorded at the same sessions in Paris and included on Palm Pictures' re-release of the album in 1998), lingers long after the two young voices fade. "Miyeew nii" (I miss you) they sing to their neighbors and families in the village of Podor, in northern Senegal.

Baaba's newest cd, *Missing You (Mi Yeewnii)*, springs from that same source. After a succession of glossy, electronically enhanced albums with lots of Western overlay, Baaba has created an album that nourishes the same soul-crevasses fed by *Djam Leelii*. Produced by John Leckie and recorded largely near Baaba's home in the village of Nbnuk, *Missing You (Mi Yeewnii)*, is another acoustic treasure, his first mostly acoustic cd since 1991's *Baayo*. These are songs of elegant simplicity, wrapped in the organic warmth of traditional West African instruments: *hoddu*, *kora*, *n'goni*, balafon, flute and the guitar, less venerable but essential to Baaba and Mansour (who is an integral member of Baaba's band). The music is richly evocative, by intention, of Baaba's Africa.

Baaba and Mansour have reprised the song "Ko Wone Maayo" on *Mi Yeewnii*, threading the song's plaintive bluesiness with a strand of golden Latin syncopation. Baaba says that the lyrics of the song have new resonance for him now. The life of a musician of Baaba's stature involves extensive traveling; he still spends too much time far from home.

"I miss my home, I miss Africa and all the people where we come from. But for me, that song on this album means also that I miss this style of music, very simple...acoustic instruments, soft melodies, soft rhythms, so that people can catch the melodies easily and just listen to the song, and to the message also."

He adds, "I couldn't have made this song without Mansour...we had to do it together. Because we started singing that song together a long time ago. Everywhere we go in West Africa, people ask us to sing that song because it reminds them of where we come from, the sound of my village, the sounds of the cities."

Mansour Seck, the song's co-composer, says of "Ko Wone Maayo," "It's my favorite song. It's a very mystic song, very spiritual, very deep. It's about our home, but also about the River Senegal, near Podor. The river is very important to us." Separating Senegal from Mauritania, the river has been a channel for trade and culture for centuries.

In his endeavor to span the globe with Senegalese soul, Baaba has taken two seemingly divergent paths. He has created self-contained acoustic pearls like *Djam Leelii* and *Baayo*, and now *Mi Yeewnii*. Then there are the expansive, cross-cultural high-tech marvels: *Firin' in Fouta* and *Nomad Soul*, which have assuredly won him new listeners and favorable reviews, but have raised questions about how far he may have stretched himself toward global acceptance. Baaba sees no dichotomy. Rather, he holds his listeners to his own high standard—he expects them to be as open to musical possibilities as he is.

The cd title *Nomad Soul* was indicative of several truths about Baaba: He is a member of the Fulani tribe, a nomadic people who are traditionally herders and carriers of culture. By choice and necessity, his profession has propelled him around the world. And he is essentially, by his own description, a curious, restless spirit.

He is still, however, deeply rooted in the sandy soil of his heritage. Whatever form his music takes, Baaba's need to inform and inspire is apparent. Even when electronically enriched, his music has always been shaped by the architecture of West African tradition.

Baaba has observed his musical birthright from many vantage points. His parents both made music outside of the griot structure. As a student, along with Mansour, he served an apprenticeship in Asly Fouta, a traditional Senegalese performing troupe, where he learned the formal usage of traditional instruments. After abandoning his law studies in favor of a musical career, he studied European and African music academically, first at a conservatory in Dakar, and then in Paris. Returning home, Baaba and

Mansour traveled extensively around West Africa to delve into remote rural traditions.

Music enfolds myriad layers of significance in Baaba's part of the world; even dance and party music is not trivialized. In a land where oral history and discourse have always been paramount, (written language came in with colonialism), musical lyrics have weight and potency. Baaba honors the tradition that uses lyrics as a forum to air social concerns, to illuminate aspects of the culture, as a reservoir for history and genealogy.

"I wanted to say a lot of things. It's very important for me, for my society; when we think that the whole world is going into a new millennium...[There are] a lot of new governments now in Africa, a lot of elections. Things are moving and changing fast. There is a feeling that a lot of things are happening now. We need artists to talk about things like the protection of the environment, the problem of diseases like AIDS. We need to have music that can make people listen, to absorb the message, to make people aware. Especially the leaders, political leaders and religious leaders, everyone who is pulling Africa ahead. We need them to understand what's the hope, what people are expecting from them, what are the problems of the young generation."

In a lovely book called *Mali Blues*, author Lieve Joris tells a small anecdote about visiting a family in Senegal. The stern grandfather deplored the teenagers' musical choices, but when his grandchildren played Baaba's music, the old man's eyes lit up and he beamed approval. Baaba says that's a typical response among older Senegalese. "I really like that. I believe in what both generations believe about African music, what role it really does play in their lives—to make them know who they are, where they come from, their responsibility in the society."

Baaba's profound grasp of the music's foundations has earned him credibility with his elders. "Based on the rhythm, on the melody...when you want to say something very serious, very important for the life of people, you know what instruments to choose, the structure of the music. At the first note, people can feel it. When you want to have more ambience, like for a party, you need talking drums, percussions. If you want to say things that are more serious, you would use the *kora*. You know how to organize the music for its purpose. The older generation respects that I understand how to do this, to direct the music toward a particular group of people."

"For example, in the song 'Miyaabele' [from *Mi Yeewnii*], which is most West African, but it is very intellectual also, because the reference comes from the time when West African people first discovered the guitar. They tried to play the waltz and it turned to something else because they added African elements to it, and used African language to sing it. I chose that song to talk about African unity because the direction of that song was going to African leaders, to the new government. They're intellectual people. They're going to hear much better this kind of style. Normally, they would hear this song in school, in university, in a group of Scout boys...I changed the lyrics to say 'the cock is chanting, now it's time for Africa to wake up, to work hard and focus on unity.'"

"I'm not talking about a Utopian African society, not to make Africa like one big country with one president...I think every country in Africa has its own diversity, its own reality, its own problems. But I want Africa to join itself in the essential things. In business, to market African things so the money comes back to Africa...To develop opportunities for the whole continent...And for all the politicians to think about war, not to say that it's just Sierra Leone's problem, for example, but that it's everyone's problem. That's the kind of unity I'm talking about."

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The story of Baaba's friendship with Mansour is the fabric of legends. Born in 1955, the two have been companions from the age of 5. Mansour was from a prominent griot family; Baaba was the son of a *muezzin*, the crier who stood at the mosque to call worshippers to prayer. Baaba was received into the Sack home where he absorbed the ancestral learning of the griots. They grew up together, and when Baaba left for Paris to study, he made arrangements for Mansour to follow.

"Mansour is one of the persons in this world whose life has a really good meaning for my life, for my career. He's a reference for me. When I look at Mansour it's like I'm looking at the whole image of African traditional music that I grew up with. He's just a reflection of all that; the way he plays guitar, the melodies he's playing, the family he came from. He introduced me to all that. He took me to his grandmother [a locally famous singer] who gave me such a big amount of songs. She explained where and how the songs were created, and how to work with each song."

"It was a wonderful chance for me to have Mansour... And to have him as a friend also, because you can't cooperate with someone without being friends. We can share the life, we can share ideas. Every time I want to connect myself with who I am exactly, from where I started, when I look at Mansour I can see the way."

It was Baaba's mother's last request that their friendship should endure. "My mom was very close to me. She was one of my first inspirations. She said, 'Just be strong, everything is going to be all right.' Before I left to go to Paris, she called me one night and she said, 'Wherever you go in the world, please bring Mansour with you.' So you see, it's a pact between you and your parents. Mansour respected that also." Baaba's mother passed away while he was still in Paris.

Baaba's relationship with Mansour was the genesis for Daande Lenol. (The band's name means "voice of the people.") When the two friends returned to Senegal, they began their now-legendary musical explorations around the countryside. Mansour's lineage provided their cachet into griot homes; Baaba helped his friend get around despite deteriorating eyesight. And wherever they traveled they acquired songs, history and occasionally, musicians. Each member of Daande Lenol was painstakingly selected by Baaba and Mansour.

Their choices have proven to be inspired: Daande Lenol still boasts its original members. "It's a family. When we came back from Paris

together, we said it was time to put on a band. Now we traveled a lot in West Africa, we learned a lot of things, we have to share it with other people, people who are younger than us.

"It's always the same members. We teach them about music but also about life, the world and everything. You can feel that on the stage; it's a family, not just a business. In Senegal, the lives of all of us are connected, our wives and children; we are one strong family. It makes it easy for the work

they've stolen hearts by their captivating, insouciant interaction with the audience. In a few short years they've grown from winsome boys into lithe young men.

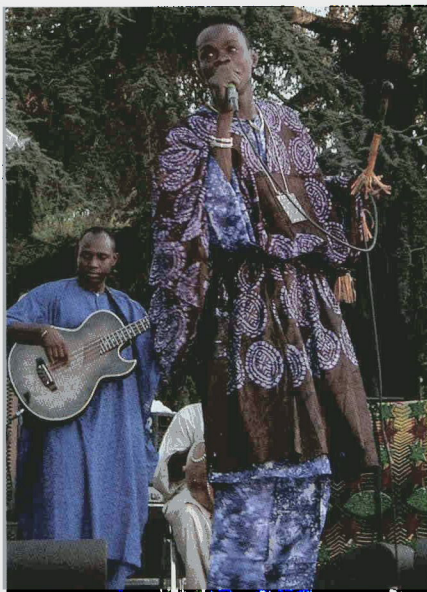
"They've been working, not hard but very well," Baaba says. "They're very creative, very interested, very focused. They want to share. What's important for any artist on the stage is to show that you like what you're doing, you want to share it with people, you want to make them happy. You want for everyone to say after this show, 'Oh, I have something in my heart.' The boys are very young, but they can feel that. They're very generous, I can say. One of them started when he was really very young, 5 or 6 years old. Every time we played, he was dancing. I would say, 'go to bed,' and he would say, 'please let me dance just one more song.' We never expected he would be a part of the band, but he was following us." And so, Daande Lenol acquired another family member.

Baaba acknowledges the responsibilities that come with his ever-increasing stature, particularly in an emerging region like West Africa. He has become a spokesperson for the United Nations on AIDS prevention, environmental issues such as desertification, and women's issues, including excision. "I get this respect from people in Senegal since a long time. I'm in this thing with the United Nations because I have a chance to go to these small villages to talk to people who live far away from where the information comes from.

"The people don't have money, they just like the music. They know it's their music, we're their musicians and they want to see us. They don't live near the big cities, so my musicians give me the opportunity to travel for two or three months every June and July. We choose 10 or 15 villages. We go there; we play for them the first night, and we pass all the next day visiting with people.

"The associations of women, the young people, they just want to talk with us about what we are doing in the rest of the world, what advice we can give to them. It's fantastic. And I take this opportunity to talk about things that stop development, diseases like AIDS, or lack of education. I say, 'You should organize yourselves, you should go to school, you should meet together to talk about the problems in your village, to try to resolve them.'

"In some places where you talk about AIDS, they think it doesn't exist. They don't speak English or French; they don't get the information. It's important that they have someone like me who speaks their language. I know the songs, the culture. I speak to them about excision also. It's very dangerous.



Baaba Maal and Daande Lenol performed for the U.C. Davis Presents series, Davis, CA, August 2001.

PHOTOS BY SARA ADRIEN

because when you do something, it is the whole group who come to think about it, to support me. That's wonderful. It's something that's not easy to get in this life."

No one enjoys Baaba's musicians more than he does. Onstage, instrumental solos abound—with Baaba nodding approval and encouragement, crouching inches away with his microphone nearly imbedded in the instruments. The sight of Mas-samba Diop hovering at the edge of the stage flailing his talking drum into eloquence may be familiar now, but it never pales.

For the past few years, Baaba has been traveling with two young dancers, Tabane Diouf and Ndiaw Samb. Their talent is prodigious, and

"And the religious leaders, they respect me. They listen to me. They see me like someone who is doing the music but not changing the way they understand music because they see the elements they know... the acoustic instruments, traditional music, the songs, the lyrics. It's not something that comes to change the way of living, but something to say 'This is important for the life. This is the role of the human being in the family, in society.'"

"If you need help, we can always organize ourselves to come to play. We take any amount of money from that to see what we can do... They [the villagers] listen to me and to the musicians also, because they know that the relationship between me and them is not just about music. A lot of them, they are born and grow up listening to this kind of music; their parents listen to this music, they take it as a reference. If they want to know what they should do in life, they listen to what we say."

Baaba has committed himself to enlighten his people about the knotty, culturally pervasive issues that hobble West African women. "The album *Baayo* is dedicated to the women who have meaning in my life. For example, my mom. I was always a very curious young boy, and I wanted to know what was going on. I could see what was not good for the time I was living, what I think was not right."

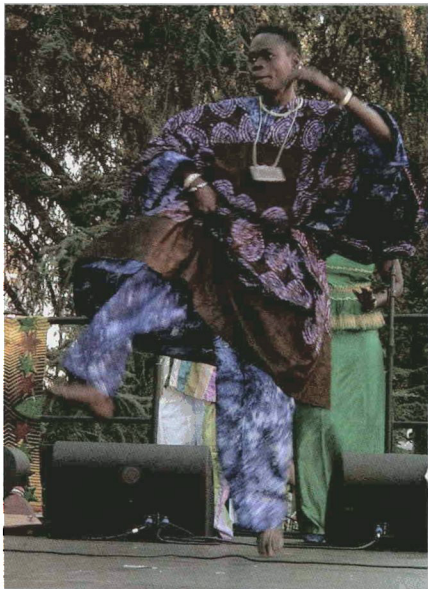
"I could see my mom like all those women in African families, working hard in the center of the family, keeping her eyes on the education of the children, taking care of all of us. But at the same I saw her sometimes suffering, because it's too much on the shoulders of a woman with no resources, no support. She had the love, but people can't just live with love, people need material things."

"Sometimes I would see her complaining to my dad or my uncle to say, 'I need that.' And I would think, 'Why can't she have something just for her?' I was so close to her... She gave me the power to be strong. I remember one time, when I was at the school, I said 'Mom, I'm going to do my best to do all my exams, to go quickly to Dakar, to the big city, to work and bring money for you.' I wanted to help. She used to sing, she gave me a lot of songs, she gave me support. Sometime when you would see us talking together we were like two friends, two really close friends."

"So looking at her, and at my sister and all those women, I understand the problem of African women in general, the position they have, all the things they want to do, the lessons that they can give to us. But [they have] nothing in the

house, only love. So, since four or five years now, I see African women organizing themselves, getting support, finding a lot of things they can do on their own. I think it's very important."

Baaba's generosity as a musician is obvious when he mingles his talent with artists from other musical spheres, as he did on *Nomad Soul*. He is a gifted collaborator; he has such mastery over his powerful, supple voice that he can ornament without overwhelming the contri-



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butions of his partners. On Ernest Ranglin's delectable cd *In Search of the Lost Riddim*, Baaba and Mansour contribute tracks that vividly illustrate a Jamaican bond with West Africa. The cd was recorded in Senegal in 1998 with American bassist Ira Coleman and a host of superb Senegalese musicians. According to Baaba, working with Ernest was pure pleasure. "He's a very very very good person. He's always smiling and he's a kind of musician who can help the younger generation of musicians to be so confident, because he knows how to make you feel relaxed and do what you want to do."

While *My Yeewni* is quintessentially West African, Baaba has made cultural cross-pollination a significant element in his repertoire. He's ex-

plored the Senegalese-Cuban link, and dabbled in reggae and Celtic streams. As he delves more intently into acoustic traditions, he has deepened the affinity he discovered several years ago with Celtic music.

"You can see the connection, the way these people in their different environments, they respect certain elements in the life. To respect your culture, to be proud of your culture... It's music for the society. It lives with you; it grows up with you.

It's not cultivated; it's very deep. It's not for show business, it has a meaning in your life. I feel that in Celtic music also. And when it's like that, you can notice that even the instruments are similar. And the roles they have are similar: the harp, the kora, the flute, the talking drum, the *bodhran*. They have the same meaning. And the melodies—I can sing on them. They are really similar; they work very well together. But it's normal, it's just normal. In the true notion of life, if you are a musician, whoever you are, if it's true music it's always the same."

What's the next quest for this always-curious man? "I'm going to go deeper into the tradition, not into electric music—more into acoustic instruments, everything that's true music. I'm going to go deeply into this kind of experimentation, connecting with people who play this kind of acoustic music, from Celtic musicians to Asian people and Indian people... That's what I want."

It's hard for a journalist not to feel invasive. This is the end of a long press day for Baaba, and his schedule has now been extended into the evening. No matter how the questions are phrased, he's answered some of them countless times before. Here's an artist who poured enough adrenaline into an audience the night before to induce several thousand cases of insomnia. Courtesy on his part would have seemed sufficient. Instead he's been warm, funny, passionate. In short, he's given his all—again.

"I like to talk to people; I have a lot of things to say. What I really want people to understand is that we are all the same, and especially now we have to be interested in the life of everyone, to make easy the connection between people, because it can really help. A lot of people seem not to understand that, and it's so important. So many things are going on in the world, and people have to join their forces together—to be closer in love and respect and understanding. If you just do that, we can face everything together."

Baaba Maal and Daande Lenol will be on tour in the U.S. in January and February 2002.