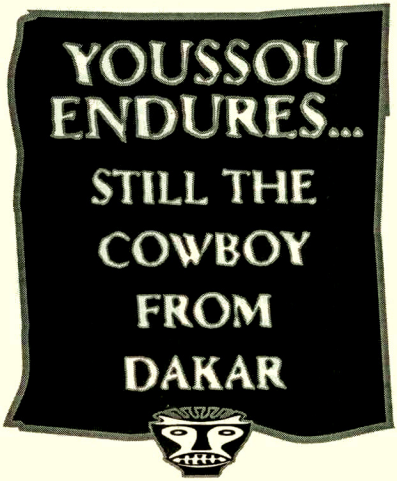
YOUSSOU N'DOUR

By CC Smith

It was 1987 when The Beat last featured Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour. African music had barely cracked the consciousness of American pop music fans. Peter Gabriel had brought Youssou to the attention of the mainstream audience in 1986 by featuring him on one of his songs ("In Your Eyes"), and then as the opening act on his U.S. tour. In Los Angeles, the crowd at the Forum was sparse when Youssou took the stage and did a brief but riveting four-song set that was, unfortunately, not the central focus for most of the audience, there primarily to see Gabriel. The irony that one country's superstar should be a largely ignored opening act in another land is a continuing problem with which world music is still coming to terms. It is changing, although slowly. To see Youssou commanding the stage before a sold-out House of Blues this summer—an audience that was there specifically to see him and enjoy his music—is strong evidence that the change is gaining momentum.



A child star from the age of 12, Youssou has been one of Senegal's leading musicians for two-thirds of his life, from his debut with the Star Band de Dakar, breaking away to form Étoile de Dakar and then the current Super Étoile formation. Working first in the Cuban rhumba idiom and then developing the complicated rhythms and melodies of the style that he named mbalax, N'dour has been at the forefront of establishing the sound of the popular music of Senegal. Progenitor of some 22 albums and a 15-volume series of Senegalese cassettes, Youssou has done more in his 35 years than many musicians have in a lifetime.

N'Dour's career has taken several giant leaps over the usual path followed by many of his still lesser-known Third World musical brethren. In 1988, the year following the Gabriel tour, he joined Gabriel, Sting, Tracy Chapman and Bruce Springsteen on the Amnesty International Human Rights Now! tour, exposing his music to an even wider audience. He hooked up with Spike Lee to produce an album, Eyes Open, in 1992, once again courting the attention of Americans, especially African-Americans. Other close encounters with Western celebrity musical figures have included Branford Marsalis and Daniel Lanois. This year's duet with Neneh Cherry, "7 Seconds," is mounting the pop charts and gaining mainstream radio play and MTV exposure, and the new album, The Guide (Wommat), is riding at number two on the Billboard World Music chart at press time.

Whether these moves were the result of a carefully calculated game plan or simply fortuituous accidents remains to be seen. The fact is that no other artist from Africa has made the strides or gotten the opportunity to win widespread popular attention in America as has Youssou. As a long-time world music observer and unabashed fan, I applaud his success at crossing over to the pop audience, but lament that despite the great advantages he's had, he has barely achieved the broad-based acclaim or level of popularity that even a minor American rock 'n' roll act receives. And I find it still problematical that the incredible talent and creativity from any other country must still be spoon-fed to the uncomprehending American audience by already established and accepted artists like Peter Simon, Herbie Hancock, Peter Gabriel, Mickey Hart, et al. However, it seems that if anyone is going to gain acceptance for African music in America, Youssou certainly has the best shot at it. And slowly the barriers that divide nations and cultures and musical styles will crumble, and the enjoyment of good music, whatever its origins, will be a universal, not a parochial, phenomenon.

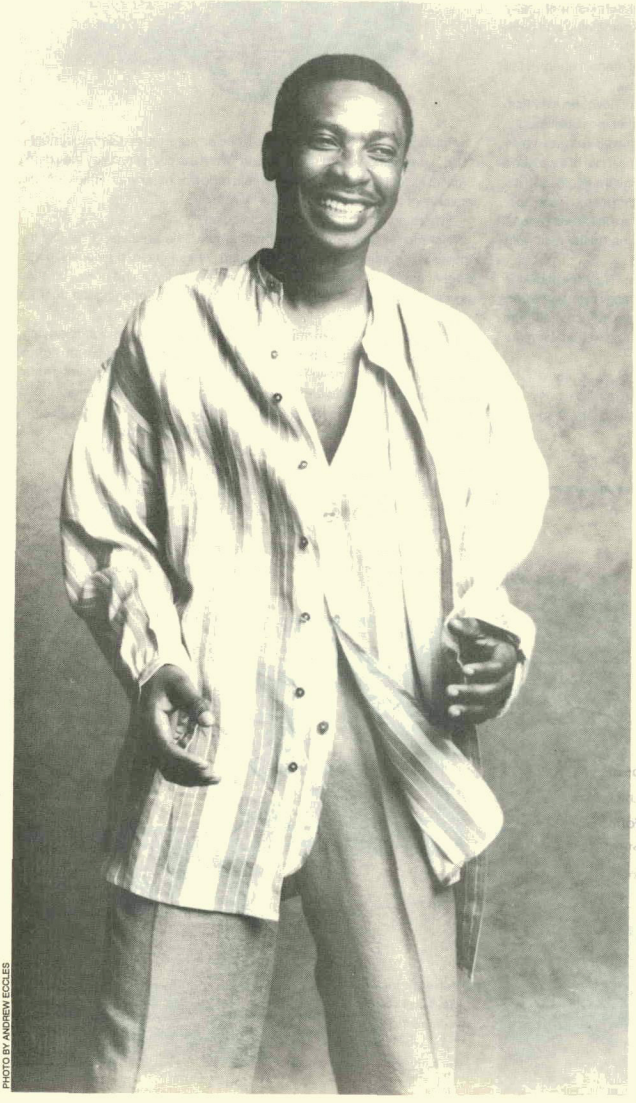


PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

In an interview in a hotel room overlooking the Sunset Strip and the roofs and towers of Hollywood, Youssou is composed, polite, a bit impatient. One feels he is dutifully submitting to yet another in a decade of press probings. He is tall, lanky and soft-spoken, with an occasional flash of humor that ignites his features with a brilliant smile. The youthful Youssou doesn't appear much older than he did eight years ago, although his self-confidence has visibly increased. We speak in fractured French (mine) and a bit of English (his, dramatically improved), and manage to communicate quite well.

We start at home base. He's married, and has three children, aged 12, 10 and 2½. He tries to spend at least three months a year at home with his family, but if but if he's working on a record, it can be up to eight months, while he records at his 32-track Studio Xippi in Dakar. Although he himself was a child star, he says his kids are not musicians, yet. It's his choice not to lead them in that direction, but with time, they may decide for themselves.

As so many African musicians, especially from French-speaking countries, have relocated to Paris for the recording and business opportunities, I wonder why he hasn't taken the same route north.

"Maybe because I became successful in Europe and the West very early, maybe because when I was in Africa, I had success at the same time the West became familiar with my music," he says. "Maybe that . . . there are many musicians who leave because they are not successful in Africa.

"I think also the family is very important and I think that the public at home is also very important—the relationship with the African audience, with people is very personal, and the music is stronger for that." He remains steadfastly committed to Africa.

I remind him of our last encounter eight years ago, and wonder how things have changed for him since then. "I didn't make it happen," he begins. "I let myself go with the things I encounter, the things that I live. I think there are many things that come to my ears, and that stay with me, and I work with it. I feel stronger, more sure where I'm going. I feel like someone in front of a generation—I let myself go with the moment, and I am evolving."

Continued on page 62

Continued from page 61

With the recent availability of his early Étoile de Dakar recordings re-released on Stern's, the contrast with Youssou's music of today is readily apparent. But how did he make the transition to his present sound? "How has the music changed over time?" I inquire.

"It's evolved," he says. "I have heard many new sounds, met many musicians, exchanged a lot of things. I think I gained something and gave something—that is how the music has evolved."

Mindful of the arresting high wail of his earlier vocal range, I query, "Has your singing style changed? You're singing lower now."

"With the voice, it's more experience that I bring in, now," he explains. "When you have the possibility, you search for other possibilities. It's always like that with people. I look for a possibility with a lower voice because I already have the possibility with a high voice. I like it, it's a good experience for me, because I think if a voice is only high it's good, but if it's high, to have the option of going low, it's more interesting for the technique. I tried this on the new disc, there are many things that are in a lower range."

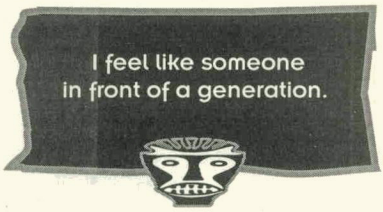
"Your voice is sweeter now, not as loud," I comment. "In the past, with Étoile de Dakar, you sang very high and very strong."

"It's the way we created songs then," he relates. "Now the music is different than before. Before, we didn't think about cutting records, we only knew about playing live, and that's what they took when they made the records. Now we have the conception of the record, and we can be more calm and concentrated than before."

"What have been the biggest successes in the past eight years?"

Without hesitation he states, "To make a modern African music—to make a song, for example, like 'Set,' which mixes traditional with modern elements."

Youssou in studio with Nench Cherry recording their "7 Seconds" duet, which appears on The Guide.



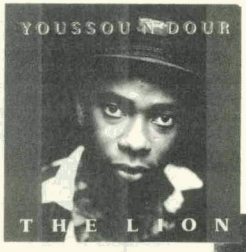
Putting him on the spot, I ask if he's had any regrets or disappointments. "Of course, there were things that didn't work exactly. I can't say they didn't work at all, but I could say today I would redo it another way. I think that the majority of it has been positive."

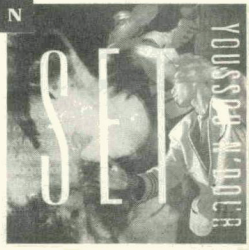
"Where do you think your music is going?"

"Not too far from what we're hearing now," he predicts. "Possibly my music will continue to develop around what I have previously done. Everything I have done has brought me to what I'm doing now. The style is very diverse, and seems to give the possibility of opening the door for African music."

And what about African music in general? Where is African music going, especially in America? "I think that there are two styles of African music that maybe people don't know: There is traditional African music, the image that people like, those who want to see something exotic. There is a small group of people who are interested in that. But modern African music, like the music that I do, and like that of Angelique Kidjo, Manu Dibango, Papa Wemba, that can touch a large audience—to be a 'pop African' music. I think that a modern African music can be very very popular."

"You've toured the States many times now," I observe. "Is the interest growing here, every time you come? Are people more familiar with it now?" I ask hopefully. But I'm surprised at the vehemence of his reply: "No, no—I think that Americans still don't understand, haven't evolved, as opposed to Europe, where there is really more interest and it's getting stronger and





stronger. In America I think there are fewer opportunities than in Europe."

"Tell me about your studio, Studio Xippi [pronounced "hippie," with a *gutteral h*]." *The Guide*, with the exception of "7 Seconds," was completely recorded and mixed there.

"It's primarily for me to work in when I'm in Dakar—it's better for me, the music, my family," Youssou says. "It's more calm. Also, with my success, it also gives me the chance to help other musicians. There is a lot of talent in Dakar who can record on the spot. When we were younger, we had no possibility to do this.

"The studio can help the music evolve, to have a lot of variety. Someone who makes traditional music doesn't think about recording, he thinks traditional music is in the street, or at parties. I think with the studio, traditional musicians can say 'What I do in the streets I can record on a cassette'."

Is he producing other artists himself?

"Yes, I don't have a lot of time but now I'm starting with some young musicians to produce and help them record."

"What about your connection with Spike Lee?" I wonder. "How was he involved in the recording of *Eyes Open*?"

"Spike always wants to do something to advance black culture," he replies. "I think it was this idea that brought him to work with me. Promotion, the ideas, it was very good what he did, I was happy for it. Musically, he really didn't bring anything—it was my music and he respected that."

Youssou's latest album, on Chaos/Columbia, is beautifully conceived and produced. The arrangements and compositions encompass both the traditional and the modern, featuring his distinctive and flexible voice. The lyrics, illuminated by helpful liner-note translations, speak of profound subjects: peace, freedom, love, racism, faith, traditional African life and customs; topical social issues like beseeching the Senegalese to treat tourists well for the good of the country, and a tribute to his fans. It's quite possibly one of his very best. However, I was curious about the packaging of the recording: "Now, about the new album. There's nothing on the cover about Africa—no picture, no African image at all. Why is that?"

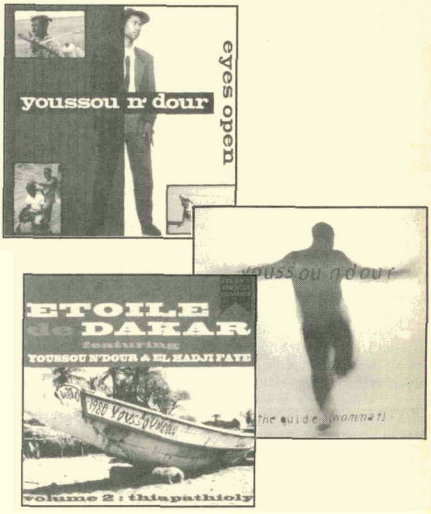
"It's like that because the recording has evolved, changed—I think the image has too." Defending the cd design, he adds: "I think what is on here is very African—it's the color. I think it's the sun—this is my favorite color—I like the color—it is very strong and represents Africa for me. The color yellow—it's the desert and the sun."

"Was this your choice—not the record company?"

"Yes, I like it—color of the sand, the sun. . . . For me the disc should be something different from the previous ones."

"Do you not want people to think this is African music?"

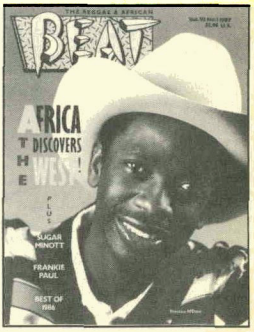
"No, no, to the contrary," he insists. "I still think that the music is more important than the image. African music has an image that I respect but I don't go along with it. Always when you want to see Africa you want to see the exotic—the forest, and so forth. That exists, but there is a modern Africa, the town, the city like Dakar, there is the sun that hits you, the cars. That's Africa also. I present a lot of this on the record—the modern city."



When we met last, Youssou had just come from Arizona, where he'd acquired a genuine Stetson and an elegant pair of cowboy boots, and realized his childhood dreams of the American West. When we'd taken him to photographer Ann Summa's studio, I'd assumed he would be pictured in African attire. He would have none of that—he insisted on being shot in his cowboy gear. Pointing to the *Beat* cover, I ask if he's still the cowboy from Dakar.

"Yeah!" he exclaims with a big smile. "I think that first, the first thing with me, I had many memories in my head. It was, I think, my guide, because the cowboy is something I loved very much when I was young. When I discovered this, I said I look like a cowboy who comes from Dakar, it is always in my mind." Does he still have the hat? "Yes, at home."

And so the cowboy from Dakar rides proudly off into his yellow desert sunset: Stronger than ever, Youssou endures.★



YOUSSOU N'DOUR