YOUSSOU N'DOUR: Master of Mbalax
Cheyney, Tom;Smith, C C
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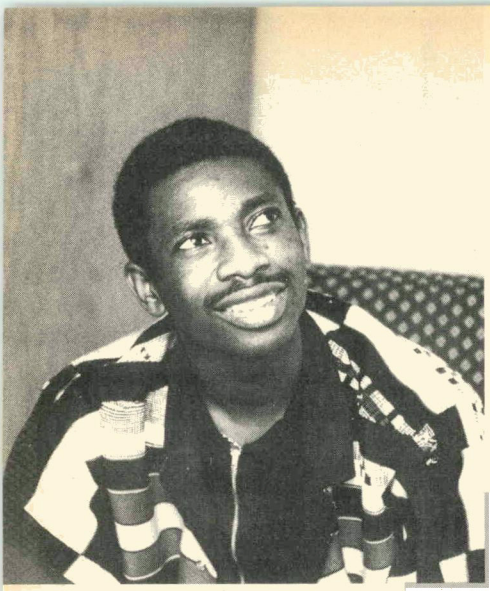

PHOTO BY CASSANDRA DAVIS-CHEYNEY

YOUSSOU

His voice, perfect in pitch and effortlessly powerful, echoed through the rafters and bounced off the walls of the large arena usually inhabited by Kareem, Magic and the Lakers crew. Youssou N'Dour and his world-class group, Super Etoile de Kakar, were wowing those who had made it inside in time to see and hear the band open for Peter Gabriel. Only four songs, including "Nelson Mandela" and "N'Dobine," were performed. But even this brief encounter with mbalax stirred the audience so much that they stood and applauded loudly at the end of the set. Unexpectedly, converts were made to the Senegalese star's musical cause.

Later that evening, Youssou and some of the band were performing in another setting, before a *much* smaller crowd. Momentarily taking over their hotel's piano lounge, to the great amazement of the chanteuse, they sang a Marvin Gaye tune, "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)," messing up or changing some of the lyrics, disarmingly unaffected and relaxed. This self-proclaimed cowboy from Dakar and lover of western movies as well as American soul had made his Hollywood debut.

Interview by
Tom Cheyney and CC Smith

Translated by Aziz Mbaye
Additional translations
by Tom Cheyney

Photos by
Cassandra Davis-Cheyney
and Ann Summa

Youssou N'Dour is the 27-year-old singing sensation of Senegal. His music and transcendent vocals pour out of boomboxes throughout his homeland. His most recent lp released in Europe and the U.S., *Nelson Mandela,* stayed on the London independent charts for several months in 1986. Now signed to Polydor/PolyGram in America, he plans to record another album and tour the States again on its release.

It is his zest for combining traditional Senegalese rhythms with modern dancehall and production sensibilities as well as addressing some social concerns of his own culture that have propelled him to unparalled celebrity status. Yet the importance of family and friends remains paramount in his life, though his increased time on the road makes his family ties more dependent on the telephone to keep the bonds tight.

Born into a "gawlo" family (on his mother's side), he was raised in an atmosphere of singing, dancing and tradition. The gawlo is part of the griot caste, the guardians and singers of history. He received early encouragement for his vocal talents while singing during the "cassaques," the ceremonies of circumcision of the youth held during the rainy season. In 1974, at the tender age of 15, Youssou was asked by a saxophonist to come and play with the local group Diamano. Passing through different bands, he finally set up Etoile de Dakar with

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some other musicians dedicated to a homegrown sound. The early '80s saw the spread of relatively cheap cassette players in his part of the world, coinciding nicely with a series of cassette releases that he and the band put out to popular acclaim. Cassettes, though often pirated by the thousands, are the means by which mbalax is heard there, and many of his early releases are nearly impossible to find outside of Senegal.

In the West, *Immigrés* was N'Dour's first effort of note, an album found on many Top 10s of 1985.But 1986's *Nelson Mandela* lp really pushed the distinctive mbalax blend into prominence.

The song topics on *Mandela* include a dedication to the best friend of his mother, named after a dance of the Tucoler people ("Moule Moule"), and a tune about his own mother, "Samayeye." A bird discovered by a king in the Jollof region of Senegal who used it as a symbol inspired the song "N'Dobine." All the sad and bad things that death brings are the subject of the slow and melancholy "Magninde." People must share wealth in countries like Senegal, according to Youssou in "Donkassi Gi." "Wareff" is about interior tourism in Senegal: People should discover the beauty of their own country before going abroad; it also means "your duties" or "your rights," that is, the right to travel somewhere else but the duty to stay home and realize what one is made of.

His work with Peter Gabriel, whom he met in London in 1984, has brought Youssou's voice to the ears of many Western listeners. Gabriel visited him in his home in Dakar, where the proverb goes, "If you want to know your man, go and see him in his house, where he is himself." This cemented their friendship, and they have kept in touch ever since, culminating in their recent tour together.

We caught up with Youssou, his translator Aziz Mbaye and manager Verna Gillis in his hotel room. They had been traveling all day from San Francisco to Los Angeles, a day made longer by their bus breaking down. The next night Youssou would be making his Southern California debut, opening for Gabriel at the less-than-Fabulous Forum. The interview bounced from English to Wolof to French and back again as this easygoing gent from Dakar shared some of himself with us.

BEAT: I read where you started out playing Cuban music. Is that true?

YOUSSOU N'DOUR: Yes. I played Cuban music for different reasons because the people at the time liked to dance to it. The music influenced our country for a long time. I needed to go through this music to go toward the music I believed in, to have the basis to put on this new music, mbalax. Cuban music is now completely gone from Senegal. Everybody listens to mbalax.

Q: How did Cuban music get to Senegal?

A: I don't know how. I was just born and the music was there. (Laughs).

Q: Do you feel there is any conflict between traditional African culture and music and modern American, or Western, style music?

A: Yes, there are differences between the two ways, modern and traditional, but they have something in common: the rhythm. Here (in the U.S.), they like rhythm very much; in Africa, there is *only* rhythm, so there is a great bond that exists. I find other relations between the folk music, country music, played here. The sound is very close to a sound we have in Africa, the xalam, the kora and traditional instruments. It really sounds like folk songs in the U.S.

Q: Toure Kunda's music is becoming more Americanized in their progressive albums, and there's Ismael Lô who has done a track, "Dioumaa," that sounds like zouk or makossa music. Do you think this is a trend; what direction do you think it will take?

A: It's mainly a question of sound. For example, in my case, on *Immigrés* and *Nelson Mandela* the sound is different. It's a technical question. There is a lot of influence by the technology; in what conditions you've been making the records, with whom you've been working. When you work with a sound engineer who doesn't know or isn't used to the African sound, his product will be a certain way, which will be different from when you're working with someone who is really in the African beat. Therefore, there is a lot of influence on the sound that you say is becoming more Americanized. Perhaps. It's the technology that's different, not a question of direction.

The source of inspiration for an African artist can be nothing other than African. Also there is the show biz influence; despite this, roots are most important. I think that there are other African musicians who have been misled by technology at a given moment. I'm sure that Toure Kunda's brand-new album will be more African than the last one. When an African musician leaves Africa and comes to a big studio, the conditions are different. Africans are not used to it and must habituate themselves to it. You cannot keep the same warmth that you have in Africa when you perform there, so there is a certain change in the way you play. After awhile, you realize what is happening and correct this.

The system makes it like that. When you're in Africa, you play with instruments that are not of high quality but you succeed in putting out a sound that you're satisfied with. You take the same product into a studio and everything is changed, more rationalized — you don't have the same warmth. This makes a difference between musicians here and in Africa. They have the same conditions in their houses as in the African studios, so they can make recordings that have a continuity in the expression of feelings. Therefore, there must be good studios in Africa.

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PHOTO BY VERNA GILLIS

Youssou N'Dour and Peter Gabriel perform together in an enthusiastically received encore.

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Q: In "Immigrés," I heard that you were making a comment about Toure Kunda deserting their country. Is that true?
A: No. I love Toure Kunda very much. I know that when they go out of Senegal to play music, they are representing African music at a top level to the world. So I respect that. The song was written for *all* the immigrants of the world.
Q: "Nelson Mandela" is a very strong song...
A: One day I was looking at the tv with my mother, and they were showing news about South Africa. I turned to her and asked if she was truly aware of what's going on there. My mother just said: "Yes. I see that sometimes the white policeman beats the black man. That's the only thing I see on the tv."

In Senegal, the majority of people have not been to school. They did not understand exactly what was going on there [in South Africa]. So I decided to write this song. They needed a new picture to give them the information about what is going on there. The song has been the most appreciated of my career because of the subject, and I have received congratulations for doing it. I am also aware that it is being used for a political side. Now in Senegal, people are so aware of it that they're baptizing street names to Soweto Place. There are important streets in Dakar that have had their names changed, due to the song.
Q: In the lyrics, you talk about the "historic day of N'Der." What is that?
A: N'Der was a big battle in the Walo region in the north of Senegal in the 19th century, a big battle that no one forgets. People were fighting from every side, trying to control the region. There were the Moors from the north, local kings, "djajandjai," trying to conquer this place. This fight is historical because the women had a large part in the fight, defending the land. When I look throughout the history of Senegal, and at what is going on in South Africa, I see that there is a match in Soweto, where people were fighting against something, for something. That's why I made the parallel between N'Der and Soweto.
Q: You have a song named "Maraal," the drought, that you haven't recorded yet. Tell us something about that song.
A: There was a drought that had been very hard on West Africa. Animals were dying, villages ran out of money, truly a famine. People organized a campaign to help the villagers so that everyone could contribute a little money to help. Fortunately, in the last two years, things are getting better. There has been more rain and all our economy is based on rain. I organized a big concert, which raised a few million francs, for the relief of the drought victims and wrote the song "Maraal" for the concert.

* * *

Q: How do you find the audience reaction to your music on the tour?
A: Things are going well. When we come out, people say, "What the hell is that?" but they listen. When we leave, they don't want to let us go, and when I come back out with Peter, it is very strong. There is a period of discovery.
Q: Are you writing any songs based on your experiences in the U.S.?
A: There is a song for the new album called "Road to Old Tucson." Visiting Tucson was the highlight of the trip. [At this point, Youssou showed off his new Stetson cowboy hat.] In Senegal, I saw lots of Western movies. I was very impressed to see the real life of the cowboy. I like cowboy music, cowboy movies, the cowboy life. I am a cowboy. I am the cowboy from Dakar!
Q: Do you know how to ride a horse?
A: Yes. I want to bring a horse on the stage! (Laughs) In Senegal, there are horses that dance. Yes! [Aziz interjected at this point: "In my family's village, there are people who keep horses, and they make the horses dance. This is one of my dreams, to see a big Youssou concert, with horses dancing and everything."]
Q: You should play in Nashville with horses like that . . . Are you going to make a video?
A: We have a video, but it's not good, really. I want to first work on my next album, but after that, we will do one . . . with a horse. (Laughs)
Q: One of the most important aspects of African music is performance, so a video would really help.
A: The African music needs to bring it with everything — dancers, costumes, everything together. People love it very much like that.

Q: You are a "taaw," the first born of your family, and have many responsibilities. How do you maintain that while you are away from home on tour?
A: By telephone, first of all, but it's too expensive. I have a very special bond to my family, it reinforces me. You can see that from some of my songs, talking about my mother . . . I used to be there, immersed in the family, a big family, not just the father, mother and two sisters but about 10, 20 people. When we eat, we all eat every day in the common dish. When I'm gone, I miss that and they miss that too. My mother says, because I'm gone so much, "We're losing you more and more." I've been home not more than five months this year, total.
Q: Does the band take the place of the family structure while you're traveling?
A: When we go on tour, a new family is created, because there is a certain ambience that goes on, but it is not exactly the same as my family. In the band, there are people who have been with me from the beginning. We know each other very well, and we get closer on the tour. Even if we weren't on tour, we used to make tea together in Dakar and we do that on tour as well. This creates an atmosphere of family.
Q: Does your mother still practice as a gawlo?
A: No, my father didn't want her to when they got married. She sang when she was

Youssou N'Dour: I am the cowboy from Dakar!

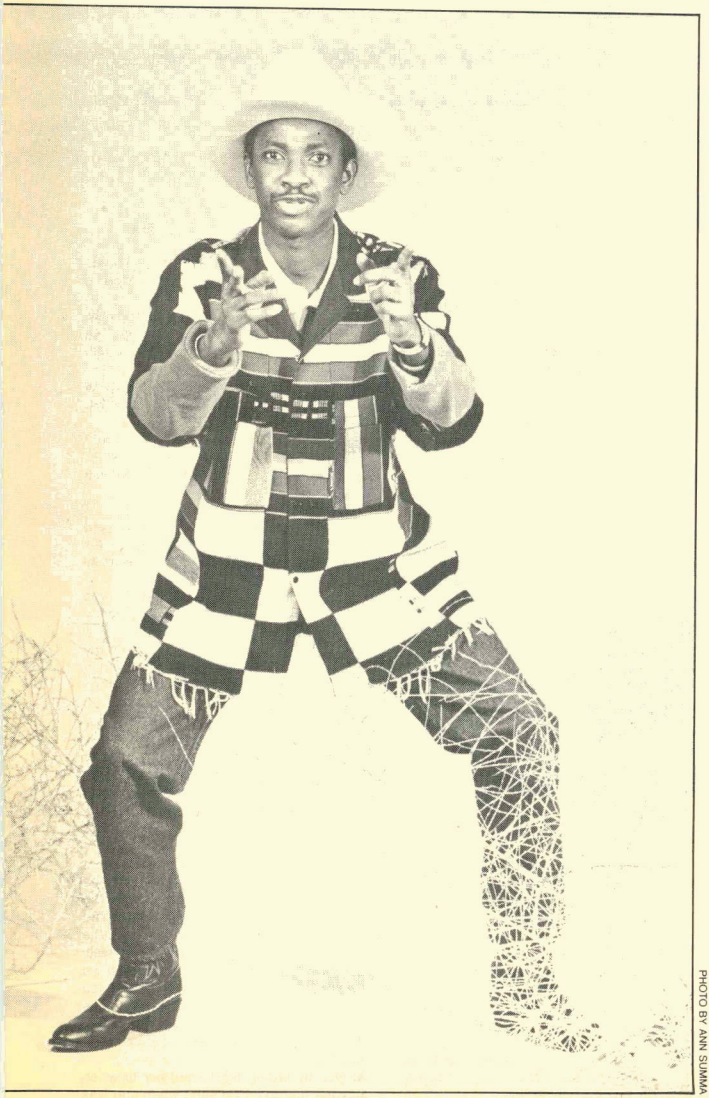

PHOTO BY ANN SUMMA

younger. My father is not a griot. He tried to prevent me from singing because song is a certain symbol. I had a lot of difficulty with him because he didn't want me to sing. He wanted me to study something else.

Q: What do you think of the future of Africa in general, in the world?

A: People are different in Africa and here. In Africa, it's still quite difficult. There are systems implanted in the countries which bother the development of the individual. For example, there are a lot of artists in African who can't write a little something that they like because the system is really rough . . . it censors records . . . this system of governance, monopoly, politicians, governments, all that. That is going to develop itself, maybe by arms.

A griot in Africa, 1,000 people are there and they listen to him, what he says, he recounts some history, he speaks the truth to them, he speaks of the future, he speaks of the past. They are the guardians of history itself. They talk to you of a knowledge of causes and tell it to you because they have the knowledge in their heads, a knowledge that they didn't learn at school — they were taught by their mother.

It is the system that makes these people, these artists, these griots, these guardians of history so that they can't evolve and it's from there, in my opinion, that Africa must evolve. But one doesn't know where he is going, there are no models and whenever we try to go somewhere, there is a wall.

Q: In Senegal, compared with other African countries, democracy is doing pretty well, isn't it?

A: Yes. There is a saying, "We have changed things by acquiring a new conscience." People need a new conscience, of peace, of freedom, of drugs.

Q: Where is this new conscience going to come from?

A: When the people know where they must go [from here]. In Africa, there is much confusion. Before it was much simpler. There are, for example, some griots who say they are the guardians of history and are people who inform [other people]. Before, there was no radio or other forms of communication, the griots beat on their drums and told the people what was happening. Now in Africa, the griots talk, the government talks, people talk, the police talk . . . the people don't know anymore. They aren't free. What I'm saying right now is liberty, first of all, of the individual is needed. If the people are free to gain a clear conscience, they will be able to make a better tomorrow. ★