

NO KID STUFF

By Brooke Wentz

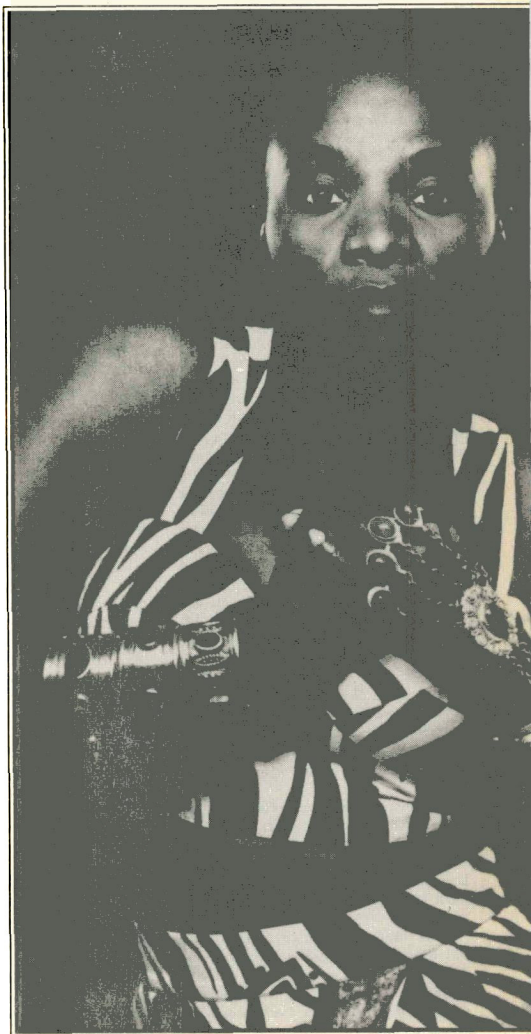
Miriam Makeba may be considered the empress of African song but Benin's Angelique Kidjo is running a close second. Tough, determined, a dynamo both on and off stage, the rising West African star is finding her own niche within the realm of world music.

"When I first heard her, I thought she sounded like a young Celia Cruz," says Cuban producer/writer/arranger Joe Galdo. "She's a little bullet. She burns out quickly, but when she burns, she burns strong."

"She's a fireball," adds producer/guitarist David Z. "To see her move, dance and sing is so dynamic. When she was recording her vocals [during the making of her most recent release *Ayé*] we couldn't take our eyes off of her, she's mesmerizing; better than Michael Jackson."

"I knew she was good because she was out of her mind, insane, completely bizarre," comments Branford Marsalis who recalls the first time he met her at a Toure Kunda show in Paris. "When she started cussing me out, I knew she had to be a great singer."

Since her 1991 release *Logozo* (Mango), Kidjo's career catapulted into America's dance mainstream. "Batonga" and "We-We," produced by Galdo (Miami Sound Machine, Marcia Griffiths, remixer of Salif Keita's "Nous Pas Bouger") were hailed as the best dance crossover achievements for an African artist to date. Yet, because they were so commercially successful with only hints of traditional African rhythms, critics and African music purists condemned her music for being too pop, too commercial, too electronic.



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"They were trying to make her music western," says Marsalis, who wails a few melodic solos on *Logozo*. "The production sounds good, but it's not her. When the world's greatest rhythms are in your own backyard, why use drum machines and sequencers?"

"I won't do my music different to please some people who want to see something very traditional," says Kidjo defiantly. "The music I write is me. It's how I feel. If you want to see traditional music and exoticism, take a plane to Africa. They play that music on the streets. I'm not going to play traditional drums and dress like bush people. I'm not going to show my ass for any fucking white man. If they want to see it, they can go outside. I'm not here for that. I don't ask Americans to play country music."

Despite the critics, Kidjo is one of the first African artists to reach a wide range of western audiences in a major way. This September Island released *Ayé*, a fast-paced, slickly produced dance recording that mixes Soul II Soul drum rhythms with funk and indigenous Benin beats. Kidjo's powerful, low-register voice remains tough and sensual; the music continues in the high-tech vein of *Logozo*. This petite dynamo struts her vocal range over bouncy, light-hearted pop beats ("Agolo"), rip-roaring funky grooves ("Adouma"), Brazilian Bahia-inspired melodies ("Tatchedogbe") and voodoo-based beats ("Yemandja"). Produced by David Z (Prince, Jody Watley, Fine Young Cannibals) and Will Mowat (Soul II Soul), *Ayé* speaks on the subject of God, love, racism and the homeless. The most touching song, "Idje Idje," was prompted by the AIDS crisis. "If a person is in a wheelchair, their head is not broken," says Kidjo about the song. "Behind the disease is a mind and the pain inside. They must have respect. We are normal and selfish. We must help them die proudly."

Although a modern woman with a strong sense of feminine pride and an equally strong determination to conquer this male-oriented music industry, Kidjo finds it difficult being a musician. "The music business is macho," says Kidjo, who is recently settling into motherhood. "When you are a woman, you have to be at a point in life when your mind is at the same place as a man. You have to fight two times harder because men want the power for themselves and they don't want to share it. The advantage of being a woman is having the pride to do what you do every day. Being there and showing men that because you are a woman you can do it too. That is the only way to gain respect."

Kidjo speaks eight different languages, including English, French, German, Fon, Nago, Swahili and Yoruba, and because she's asthmatic, avoids performing in smoky clubs. Now in her 30s, married to bassist Jean Hebrail and living in Paris, Kidjo admits that in Africa it is difficult to be a musician. "They think you are prostituting," she says. "I'm lucky, my parents have always been supportive. If you don't have a patron it is very difficult."



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Born and raised in a family of nine children in the village of Ouidah, Kidjo grew up in a household that embraced the arts. Her father is a musician and her mother invested the money she earned as a clothes merchant into directing, producing and costuming a 30-member theater troupe. Angelique's first stage experience was at age six. "I was into the traditional music of Benin and the music of West Africa. My mom did a lot of research for the ballet so I also learned different styles of dancing from her."

"I sang and danced. My brother had a band, the Kidjo Brothers, around the time of the Fender guitar. I'd sit and listen to everything they listened to—the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Johnny Halliday, James Brown, Aretha Franklin and Mahalia Jackson. I liked church singing and soon discovered pop and rock from England, America and France. After rehearsals I'd write some strange songs."

Today her record collection includes lots of jazz, rock and pop as well as Arabic, Indian and Pakistani music. "I listen to all kinds of music," says Kidjo, who enjoys the singing of Basia. "I'm not a kind of person that says I like this and don't like that. If I don't like something it means I don't get it, it's not talking to me."

By age 15, the budding Angelique began singing French tunes as well as her favorite, "Venus," by Shocking Blue. She wrote her first song for the late great female singer of Togo, Bella Bellow, whose fatal car accident in 1973 abruptly ended the 17 year-old's flourishing career. "It was a song of pain," Kidjo describes, "I included it on my first album that unfortunately is unavailable."

Between 1963 and 1972, the Benin government fell under the rule of Communism after a series of coups, 12 different governments and six constitutions. A young French-trained paratrooper, Mathieu Kérékou, decided that Benin needed a Marxist "revolution."

"Instead of stopping school at 5 p.m. on Friday, we would continue until 7 p.m.," recalls Kidjo. "But during those hours we didn't study. Instead we did art—drawing, theater and music. So I took up playing in a band called the Sphinx. It became popular and won local contests."

Also under Kérékou's rule, witchcraft became widespread. Voodoo, as we know it, and the musical influences it had originated in Benin (formerly Dahomey) and spread from there to Haiti and other parts of the world.

"If you are animist you are into voodoo," says Kidjo who is both Catholic and animist. "It's not negative. It's a religion."

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Voodoo is about one God... god from the sea, city, ground, wind or thunder. In voodoo ceremonies we kill animals—chickens or goats—to give the blood to voodoo. You eat the skin after. People fall down, go into a trance, speak different languages. Special people give them food and they can't talk after. The voodoo is inside them; it wants to dance."

Kidjo recorded her first song for the radio while in high school. She quickly became a local star and toured neighboring Togo, Ivory Coast and Nigeria. "My father said, 'I don't want any singer not knowing what they are talking about. You have to get your degree.' He was right. Coming home after a tour kept me close to the public and my head straight. I don't want to have a big head."

She moved to Paris in 1980 at the suggestion of Cameroonian composer/arranger Ekambi Brilliant, and for a brief moment kicked around the idea of becoming a lawyer. "The one thing that drives me crazy is injustice," she explains. "I hate it so much, but my idea of law was not to study so hard. It was more of going to people and talking to those who need help. So I walked away and went to music school instead."

She studied classical music, French song form and jazz composition, and trained with vocalist Joy Kane for two years. The American coach noticed that Kidjo's voice was so rich and powerful that she only had to learn to demystify it and utilize her vocal chords in a new way.

"Jazz influenced my vocal technique," says Kidjo. "After doing my scales I sing jazz to hear the tuning of my voice. When you sing jazz you can't sing out of tune, because it is so complicated that every note has to be clear and precise."

"Her sensibility is very unique," says Marsalis, who agrees that Kidjo's singing style, rather than musical style, borrows from jazz. "When I heard her sing jazz tunes, she knocks me out! You can hear it in her chords. It's very organic."

She returned to Africa in 1984 to play in a Radio France-sponsored tour of Cameroon, Zaire and Congo. The concerts were a hit and she returned to record a second album in Holland with the group Pili Pili, who later played the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1986.

A performance in 1989 opening for South African diva Miriam Makeba transformed Kidjo's life. It's been said that Kidjo broke down and cried upon meeting her, but most importantly Kidjo met her idol and mentor, a woman of great power and history.

After recording her third album in Paris, Mamadou Kante, transplanted



A dynamo on stage, Angelique Kidjo is seen here in performance at the Africa Fête show in Los Angeles.

Malian and founder of Africa Fête (who also was instrumental in the early stages of Salif Keita's career) brought Kidjo to the attention of Island Records CEO Chris Blackwell. Blackwell faxed the head of Island-France and told him to chase her down and sign her. They contracted producer Galdo after an attempt at recruiting fusion keyboardist and fellow Beninois Wally Badarou (Level 42, Herbie Hancock), and the result was *Logozo*.

"We did all the pre-production in Miami and recorded it in Paris," recounts Galdo who plays percussion on the album and called in Zairean guitarist/folk singer Ray Lema as well. "She used Manu Dibango on one tune, and brought in Branford one day when he was free in Paris. I tried to get some African background singers, but they were so bad that Angelique ended up singing them all! She's got unadulterated talent and is naturally energetic. When she got bored, she dug cable television and watched lots of 'Ironsides' re-runs."

For the follow-up album, *Ayé*, Minneapolis-based producer David Z was approached by Kidjo and arranger Hebrail. "I jumped at the chance," says Z, who is more accustomed to working on pop recordings and was looking to expand his repertoire. "Music today is so filtered that we don't get to see what the rest of the world is doing. The music has such different rhythms from pop. Jean [Hebrail] had arranged all the music on computer and I was brought in to make it sound more human. We had a great time. I brought in guitarist Paul Peterson, keyboardist Lester Mendez, and the Steele singers. Angelique became immediate friends with Javetta [lead vocalist on the Bob Telson, Bagdad Cafe hit "Calling You"]."

"I respect what she sings about," Z continues. "It's more real than most pop lyrics. I was hoping we'd get into more traditional music like what you can hear on her older recordings. There is one song in particular where they are sitting in a circle in a village singing. It's amazing."

"I'm not interested in working with any Parisian musicians," says Kidjo. "I've been on the scene for a long time, and I don't feel they can give me what I want."

On the new album Kidjo's lyrics remain in Fon, the native language of southern Benin, rather than French or English. "I have to sing in a text

that is me," says Kidjo. "I deeply believe that my language can bring emotion to people. It will be more beautiful to hear that emotion in another language. My language is stronger because people will read on the cover what I am talking about. They will be alone when they listen to the music and will make their own world reading about these songs. I'm not saying I will never sing in English. I will when the time comes. I want to communicate to talk to people, because I believe the change comes from the human being."

"Her voice is great," says Marsalis. "I love the way she sings in Fon, an endemic language which naturally has a strong rhythm to it."

"I enjoy not understanding what she says," comments Galdo. "Her phrasing is like James Brown; it adds to the funk."

Now a citizen of both France and Benin, Kidjo feels she won't be staying in France all her life due to the new conservative, right-wing government which has instituted immigration carding laws. "What makes me live in France is that I'm married to a French man, his country and his culture," explains Kidjo.

"He finds the immigration problem as frustrating as well. He's told me 'You don't know how uncomfortable my position is. I'm even more mad than you because I know all those calculations behind the things the French do.' I face the reality of what we [Africans] are every day. People are dying in Africa with no food and at the same time the French are telling us to go back to our country. But we want better things too, so we go to France to find a better way to live."

"If they can't kill you physically, they kill the economy of the country. It doesn't matter how much people are suffering, Africa is far away from them. The awful thing is that the younger generation, the students, in France don't know anything about Africa."

Today, most of Kidjo's family live in Benin, except for a few brothers and sisters who have moved to Belgium and France. Her panache for outrageous fashion, gourmet foods and high-caliber musicians keeps Kidjo in Paris. She is content with the direction of her career, confident with her success and keen to keep moving forward. With her incredible energy and infectious smile, as well as a superb new recording, nothing should hold this wild woman back.

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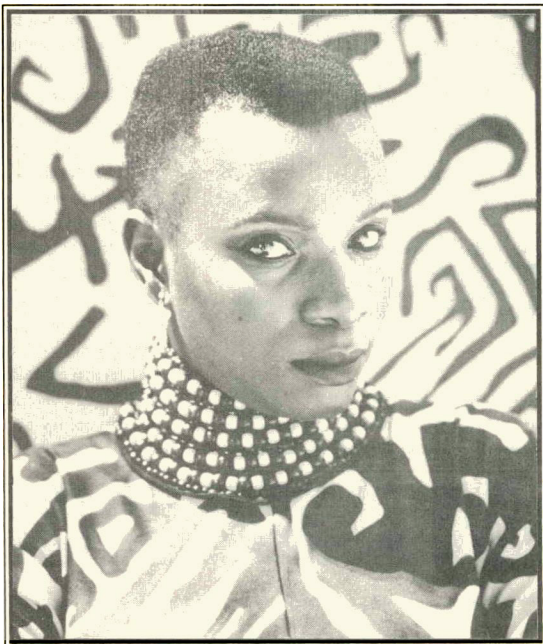


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