

BAABA MAAL :

At the Crossroads

BY DEREK RATH

It was an incongruous sight, to be sure: On the rooftop California Plaza in downtown Los Angeles a group of African musicians, fronted by an energetic sprite dressed in shimmering white robes and with a voice that could knock down walls, was holding forth with dancers, drummers and a music rooted in centuries-old Senegalese traditions. On this warm summer night, high in the marbled ramparts of Babylon itself, Baaba Maal, his band and several thousand bobbing and swaying devotees were in communion with life, the world and each other, seemingly at odds with the slab-faced corporate jungle around them. Caught in the spotlight's cross hairs, Baaba Maal sang and danced as if the sun's energies were focused on him and through him to the universe, like a latter-day African Nijinsky on fire with the soul of a preacherman possessed. Perhaps this would be an outlandish metaphor if it were not for the culture, traditions and the age in which Maal is working. After all, here is a man fusing Wolof, yela, reggae, rap and Cuban music, centuries of culture and tradition, several languages and cutting-edge technology in a way that not only makes sense but also oozes passion and integrity.

Like most African countries, Senegal has never separated cultural storytelling, poetry and classical music forms from dance music. Considered by many to be somewhat of an intellectual, Baaba Maal stays close to historic Senegalese tradition for inspiration, yet, as his most recent album *Firin'* in Fouta attests, gives new interpretations on old themes via a fresh approach to instrumentation, arrangement and recording techniques, all learned through experience and trial and error at home and abroad. Do not assume, therefore, that the dance rhythms and production of many of the songs are a prostitution of ancient culture for the mighty dollar just because they fit easily into a Western pop niche. This is African music reaching out to the world, not the wrenching out of roots by strangers for the decoration of something mindless and irrelevant.

"Music is inherent to life in my country, and the two must go together," explains Baaba. "There is no reason that while you make people dance you can't make them think at the same time. You have to understand that for my people music is not just about having a party or dancing—it is there to help us

understand all different areas of our lives. It is one of the most important means of communicating our history, our concerns and our values. Our traditions are carried in music more than in books. We can learn our positions and responsibilities in society through music because within our songs are the proverbs of the culture."

Once you understand the life/art symbiosis it is easier to throw off any patronizing cultural protectionism (the culture in question dates back nearly parallel to William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066) and get down to enjoying the music and the message on its own terms. In Baaba Maal you are dealing with an artist totally conversant with his background, not only through intellectual and academic study, but through his upbringing, his day-to-day life and his travels with long-time friend and itinerant *griot* Mansour Seck, with whom he recorded the brilliant traditional acoustic album *Djam Leelii*, voted "Best Album" by *Folk Roots* magazine in 1989. Mansour is still a close companion and player in his band, Daande Lenol ("Voice of the Race"), providing a tangible onstage validation of Baaba Maal's roots and honorable intentions.

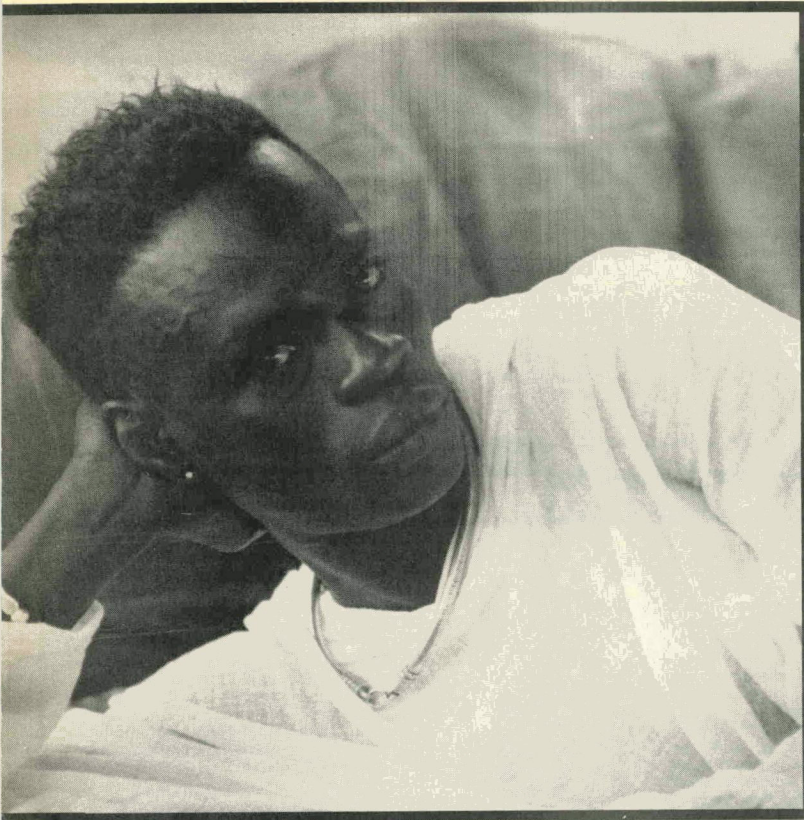


PHOTO BY ADRIAN BOOT

Central to any understanding of either Baaba Maal or Mansour Seck is the role of griot, and the name Seck, like Konte, Suso and Kuyate, is closely associated with this traditional combination of bard and troubadour—in fact you can only be accurately described as a griot (or *jall* in the nearby Mandinka culture) if the role has been carried down to you through your family. So it has been throughout history on the west coast of Africa, and these carriers of culture are well respected, traveling through the land, keeping the traditions alive and occasionally singing the praises of their sponsors. (European classical composers used to have similar practical considerations in the 18th century.) The technically blind Mansour was accompanied by Baaba on several trips, confirming his own belief in the values of Senegalese music and increasing his own understanding of his people's diverse background at the same time.

"It was great traveling with Mansour because we would stay with other griot families in every village," reflects Baaba, "and every day we would be playing music and listening to the histories of the people, and because Mansour was there they accepted us. Mansour is like my brother. His father and my

father were great friends and we have known each other a long time. His father used to sit me on his knee just like my own father and tell me stories. Mansour encouraged me in my music; at first I was only singing, and he would play along with me and so it developed. All my family liked him very much. My mother told me 'anywhere you go in the world, if you want to make me happy—take Mansour with you.' I asked her why she said that to me and she answered 'I don't know, I just like him—when I look at you two, its like you are the same.' So, it is like I carry my culture to the world, so I have my friend Mansour by my side also."

Baaba's aim soon became clear. He wanted to spread the values taught him by his upbringing not just in Senegal but throughout the world, and to do it in a way that did not compromise the very essence of that which he loved and respected. Not that it had to be sterile or dull, either. Like anywhere else, Africa is listening to the rest of the world through radio and tv, and is in a constant state of flux and development with its own music. True to his word, *Firin' in Fouta* (meaning "jamming hard" in Fouta, a local language)

Continued on page 44

BAABA MAAL. *Continued from page 43*
 effortlessly melds international music from the radio with music from the bush, the former's electricity and production values in support of the latter's timeless beliefs and relevance to Senegal. It is but the most recent of a series of albums starting with *Wango* in 1985, through *Tara, Djam Leelli, Baayo* and then the electric and studio-bound *Lam Toro* that, while not an unqualified success, pointed the way toward *Firin' in Fouta*. (He has also released several other records locally in Senegal.) *Firin' in Fouta* has elevated Baaba Maal into the front line of Senegalese music alongside Youssou N'Dour. In fact, Baaba Maal now has national respect and ranks in the pantheon of great African artists, based on this album and his mercurial stage performances. As you might expect, this success has a lot to do with his philosophy, where he is from and the way in which *Firin' in Fouta* was put together.

It's quite likely you won't find Podor on the

map: It's a small town of between 10-20,000 people on the River Senegal that separates Senegal from Mauritania to the north, and about 80 miles upriver from the coastal city of Saint Louis. Its size belies its importance, however, as this same river has been a conduit for merchandise to the Malian hinterland and beyond for centuries, and Podor was for a long time a major port and trading post. Here also music and religion flowed freely; Baaba was brought up here among the Fulani people who have been credited with the introduction to that part of Africa of Islam, also a vital part of Baaba's life.

"Podor is a very old, very important town and has changed names several times. It traded a lot with the borders of the Sahara and the old Tegu Empire. You can find just about every West African language and culture there."

There was also to be the most sinister of cargoes passing through as men, women and children from all parts were herded down to the

infamous island of Gorée to be shipped into a life of slavery in distant unknown lands.

Nowadays international contact is likely to be through the music on the radio, and Podor receives signals from several countries. The music that was carried down rivers so long ago is now coming back from foreign lands and with its own separate developments is affecting the Motherland's new sounds.

"You can hear just about anything on the radio there," grins Baaba, "but nowadays there is a lot of Senegalese music being played. Also, Cuban music has been very popular for a long time now, as well as r&b and reggae. People like all kinds, Michael Jackson, Burning Spear, Sting—many different artists and many of them perform in Dakar quite regularly."

It has been widely speculated that reggae developed from the yela rhythm that, in its African form, is also one of the staples of Baaba Maal's music. Jimmy Cliff is said to have heard

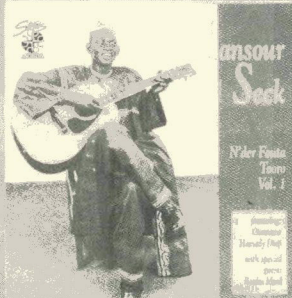
MANSOUR SECK: The Adventurers Continue

By Steve Heilig

On this past summer's Africa Fête '95 tour, a striking moment of tranquility amid the supercharged parade of performers arrived during headliner Baaba Maal's set. The members of Daande Lenol, Maal's high-powered band, laid down their electric instruments, sitting down on the stage and encouraging the audience to sit as well. The lights dimmed as Maal and one other musician picked up acoustic guitars, sat side by side on small chairs, and proceeded to make quiet magic. Their two guitars spun delicate West African melodic patterns, over which their voices blended in a timeless-sounding harmony. For many listeners, however energized they were by the dance music which dominated the evening, this was a high point of the concert.

Baaba Maal's "unplugged" partner is Mansour Seck. He has been playing and singing with Baaba Maal's band Daande Lenol since it was founded, but the bond between the two musicians goes back much further than that. Both were born in 1955 in the same town, Podor, in the Fouta region of Northern Senegal. Seck's family was full of traditional musicians or griots, and his father performed for Maal's family. As children Seck and Maal became fast friends and by the time they reached their teens were part of award-winning performance troupes, touring the country. In 1977 they traveled through West Africa, with Seck gaining them entre to renowned musicians via his griot credentials and Maal helping Seck get around despite the hereditary blindness developing in both his eyes.

Soon after Maal moved to Paris in 1981, he had saved enough money to send for Seck. Following a couple of years of playing in restaurants and anywhere else they could, the pair recorded *Djam Leelli* (The Adventurers) in 1984 with a small backing group; that seminal record remains an unsurpassed gem of



beautiful shimmering African music. In 1985 they returned home to Senegal to form an electric group, and the rest is history. Seck has served as Maal's mentor, partner and supporter every step along Maal's path to international stardom, and both have decided that it is Seck's turn to share more of the limelight. *N'der Fouta Tooro, Vol. 1* (Stern's), Seck's first "solo" album—actually a collaboration with fellow griot Ousmane Hamady Diop and, of course, Baaba Maal—is the first fruit of that conviction, with two more albums to follow.

Not surprisingly, Seck's music tends more towards the traditional, acoustic sound of *Djam Leelli* than Maal's electric outings. Seeing him perform with Maal, it is clear Seck has no trouble with the modernized approach of Daande Lenol. Yet he remains committed to more traditional forms of Senegalese music. "When I first started playing and singing, I sang only traditional songs, of stories and great figures in West African history," he recalls. "Once we formed Daande Lenol, we learned the new music as we played it. I like both kinds of music, but I still know the traditional songs better."

As for his current recordings, Seck notes that "I like to sing of my people's traditions and life in Senegal—about social life and the problems we have, and how we should live and help each other. I'm very happy that people around the world can like this music even when they cannot understand all the words."

Asked about his continuing friendship with Maal, Seck smiles and reflects that they too are bonded by tradition and family ties. "Baaba's mother's last words," he recalls, "were to tell Baaba, 'Wherever you are in the world, you must remain a faithful friend to Mansour.'" Mrs. Maal might never have guessed just how far in the world these two friends would travel, but it is a friendship whose musical flowers are blooming brightly.

the rhythm on a visit to Dakar and recognized the birth of reggae within its "one drop" rhythm, an emphasized third beat and weaker first, performed by womenfolk in imitation of the act of pounding grain.

Baaba's own father was not a musician (in fact, he wanted Baaba to have a "real" profession, as non-griot musicians are rather looked down on), but as a *muezzin* he called the Muslims to prayer.

"I remember my father calling and the sound of his voice. I wanted to be just like him. My mother used to sing also, but just in local ceremonies."

Baaba moved to Dakar to become a music teacher instead, if only to be able to please his father and play music.

"In the north we have a very closed system, almost a caste system. If you are not born into a griot family you are not supposed to play, so my strategy was to study Western classical music and later teach in the schools. That way my father could answer anyone that 'he is a teacher, not a musician'! I learned about composition, all the European composers."

Simultaneously he was active with Asil Fouta, a large assemblage of musicians rather like a university, where he learned the merits and formal uses of all the instruments—and learning how to play them all at the same time.

"It was interesting at that time," reflects Baaba, "I was studying both kinds of music and found similarities in the two. For instance, there is formal, classical music for some occasions in both cultures and also the more folk music, troubadour styles as well. The ways of accomplishing them may be different, but there is a similar place for each."

A stay in Paris opened his eyes to the tough, outside world of the working musician and indirectly contributed to the manner in which his biggest success would be made.

"Paris is a wonderful center for African music; you can see great artists from all over Africa and the rest of the world in one city, so it was a great opportunity for me to see and learn. I met many African artists like Manu Dibango and also all the zouk artists coming up from the Caribbean. I learned a lot about the professional side and showbiz. In Senegal the music is ceremonial or you just get together with friends and play. You can play anywhere, anytime and it is easy to meet and talk with other artists. In Paris there is a lot of music, but it is in clubs and your connection with the musicians is limited. If you are not well known it is hard to get to talk to the big artists."

"After a while I moved back to Dakar in Senegal, because I wanted to be close to where my roots are and where the music is developing today. African music is constantly changing and growing like any other. If you are not in the middle of it then things will pass you by."

Dakar, with its legacy of famous clubs and bands like Etoile de Dakar, its nightlife and studios like the aforementioned Studio 2000, was already a hot spot on the West African scene in the '80s. Senegalese star Youssou N'Dour had already taken off worldwide after the creation of *mbalax* music, first under the wing of Peter Gabriel and then in his own right. With his range of experience Baaba Maal was about to make it even hotter, and now is even eclipsing the success of N'Dour.

"It all came together after *Lam Toro* (by comparison a rather overly studio-produced and mechanical effort). I had wanted to use some musicians from the north, and I talked about it with the record company, saying I want to let these people express themselves in my music. These people are all musicians even if they are not famous, because they use music all the time in their everyday lives. Besides, I like the feeling of having other musicians joining me freely when I play. When I hear rap and reggae and all the modern rhythms, I hear them also played in the traditional way. So I wanted to experiment and invite some musicians from the north to see how they could participate.

"I took Simon [Emmerson] the producer to Podor and we had a big welcome party. He was so surprised to see all these musicians ready to travel the world even though they were not professional! I wanted him to understand that every song on the album had come from the traditional way and how I wanted to make sure that that was recorded and somehow got onto the record in the studio. I told him that I hear the traditional instruments everywhere I go in all the music all over the world. For instance the *kora* is similar and equal in many ways to the harp as a classical instrument. You have many virtuoso *kora* players at the same level as any classical European harp player.

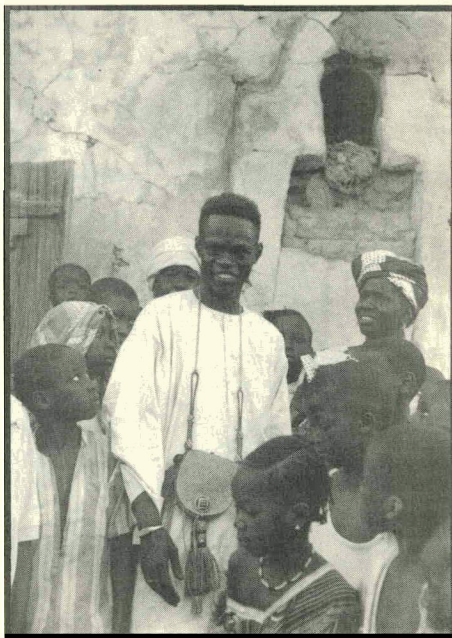


PHOTO BY ADRIAN BOOT

"So, we recorded a lot of music in Podor, but first we recorded some basic tracks at Studio 2000 in Dakar and also London, just me and the producer and some guys. Afterwards we went to the north and let the people express themselves to it and recorded them. Then we came back to Dakar and played again with Daande Lenol. Everything you hear at the beginning of the tracks is the people expressing their own version of the personality of that song. On 'Swing Yela' for instance, we are talking about my mother talking to her son, saying 'this is the truth and this is what you must do.'"

Even then he wasn't finished. Further work was done at RealWorld Studios, adding instrumental embellishments and some production. But the meat, the muscle of the music was already laid down, and it is a credit to the production that, as full and rich as it is, it never overpowers or loses track of the underlying traditions and power of the concept.

Having already traveled abroad extensively, Baaba has had time to see who his audience is in the rest of the world. Mainly comprising world music aficionados and of course the expatriate African contingency (not just Senegalese, but from all over Africa), the cd buyers and concert-goers have had some notable gaps that he is somewhat disappointed by.

"I was hoping to see more African-Americans at the shows, but it seems to be only about 10 percent. By playing this music I wanted to show them the roots of rap and r&b and reggae. I think that it is first of all a matter of promotion. The labels and all the people around us need to find a way to get our music to African Americans, but also to make arrangements with African-American musicians to play together, just the same as we have done with reggae artists and others have done with salsa musicians. It would be very good for their understanding. When I worked with Macka B our music was heard in Jamaica not just as African music anymore, and all we did was mix reggae and yela, but it showed them that all the reggae

Continued on page 78

REGGAE UPDATE

Continued from page 21

think) but **Rockers Hi-Fi, Rockers to Rockers** (Gee Street/Island) is good dub, if a little overly synthesized and gimmicked up for some tastes. Its point of origin is the house reggae of England and it's a mixing-table mix of English urban brain-spinning dance beats and post-King Tubby dub effects. Those who think a little sample, loop and midi can't do much harm may be charmed by the sheer listenability of this modern dub.

Seekers of more classic dub need look no further than **Heartbeat's Dub Specialists: 17 Shots from Studio One**. Mined from Coxson's vaults, dubs of Horace Andy's "Love of A Woman," the Lyrics' "Listen Wye the Old Man Say" and 15 others originally voiced by Cornell Campbell, the Heptones and others will fully satisfy your dub cravings. Studio One 7" version sides always had a sound all their own, informed by but not partaking in dub trends and innovations from other labels. This disc gives you a full taste of dub inna Studio One style.

Besides issuing crucial reggae on their own, the formerly cassette-only label ROIR distributes the prolific French Esoldun releases (among others—contact ROIR for a catalog at (212) 477-0563). Brand new from Esoldun/ROIR: **Bionic Dub** isn't actually a dub album—it's a dub backing to an instrumental album (the same way a '70s dj would chat over a dub mix) featuring hornsmen Tommy McCook, Bobby Ellis, Lester Sterling, Val Bennett, Roland Alphonso and Dirty Harry. Bunny Lee productions from the mid-'70s, these are some of the same Aggrovators/Revolutionaries tracks singers like Johnny Clarke and Cornell Campbell voiced for Lee, featuring the horns. Many of the cuts—like "The Dub Station" and "Joshua Word Horn (Version)" dub the horns, cutting sections, swathing them in echo and bringing them in and out like a chunk of vocal, guitar or keyboard caught in a stretch of dub.

One of the hottest labels in Jamaica today is Digital B: **The World of Digital B (Mesa)** will tell you why. Some of the hardest rhythms (many mined from the early days of Studio One and cut anew for modern tempo and tone) and artists combine on this generous 15-cut set that shows you why collectors have learned to keep an eye on the label as well as an ear on the song. The late Garnet Silk scores with "It's Growing," "Place in Your Heart" and "Keep Them Talking," and singers Sanchez, Johnny Osbourne and Gregory Isaacs—as well as djs Shabba Ranks, Ninjaman, Cobra and Terror Fabulous—roll over these rhythms in a '90s style. Two of the best are Half Pint's "Substitute Lover" and Tiger and (Anthony) Malvo's take on Fats Domino's (suddenly much-covered) "Hello Josephine." Wicked.

Brand-new anthologies from Esoldun (distributed by ROIR) include: **Straight to I Roy's Head** and **Straight to Prince Jazzbo's Head**, celebrating the famous record clash between these two djs with related work by them and additional cuts from the likes of Dillinger, Trinity, Big Joe, Clint Eastwood, Jah Stitch, U Roy and U Brown—all backed by the Aggrovators, produced by Bunny Lee (in the 1973-77 span). From the same label's Reggae from Jamaica series, **Ghetto Celebrity** and **Meet Me Tonight** cover a wide range of

music from artists as diverse as Junior Byles, Frankie Paul, Slim Smith, Johnny Miller, Al Campbell and the Maytals, as well as time periods stretching from ska to today's ragga sound. The selection might seem a little random at times but there's a mass of good music (16 tracks each) to be heard.

Returning to the fertile Bunny Lee/Aggrovators/King Tubby axis, **Creation Rebel** gathers vocals from Johnny Clarke, Max Romeo, Horace Andy and others and **Creation Dub** with King Tubby and the Aggrovators (both Esoldun/distributed by ROIR) tracks the dubs. The pair together make a nice set (although they are issued individually) and will give you a real feel for just what Tubby's contribution was "in the final mix." In fact **Creation Dub** is closer to the kind of dub we're usually looking for when we use the name King Tubby—with fragments of vocal "sampled" in, lots of bass, foot and flying cymbals—than many on the market.

The Portuguese Jamaican Gold series is now distributed in the U.S. by New York's Qualiton Imports. Among current releases are a brand-new reissue of **Barry Biggs' Sideshow** lp, **Delroy Wilson's Greatest Hits, Funny Man** by the Maytones, **Gregory Isaacs' Lonely Days and Willow Tree** lps, **Dennis Bovell's Dub Master** and albums I mentioned last year after returning from England by the Blues Busters, Derrick Harriot, and others. One of particular interest to me is **People Get Ready: This Is Rock Rock-Steady!** by Byron Lee and the Dragonaires whose liner notes quote from an interview Keith Scott and I did with Desmond Dekker (we ran the transcript in *Dubcatcher* and the article in *The Beat*). They also have the classic **From Bam Bam to Cherry Oh! Baby** with crucial Festival winners from Toots and the Maytals, Desmond Dekker and the Aces, the Jamaicans, Eric Donaldson and others, all on cd.

Just out is a two-volume set that serves as a good introduction to the label, **The Best of Jamaican Gold Vol. One and Two** (Jamaican Gold/Qualiton). There are some real gems (like Byron Lee and the Dragonaire's obscure but amazing "Beatles Got to Go" on volume two or Boris Gardiner's early monster hit "Commanding Wife" on volume one), some vital cuts (Gregory Isaacs' "Philiistines" on volume one and the Maytones' "Zion Land" on volume two) and few oddities (although Hopton Lewis' "Take It Easy" on the first disc isn't his original rock steady recording of the song it's still a decent go). The set will introduce you to artists like Stanley and the Turbines who you can pursue further on other discs from the label (in this case Stanley's *Big Bambo*).

A truly amazing set of music kicks off with *It's Shuffle 'N Ska Time with Lloyd 'The Matador' Daley* (Jamaican Gold/Qualiton). The pre-ska rhythm & blues "shuffles" (in England they called it blue beat because that label helped nurture the sound) and snappy ska originals are a treat to the jaded ear, especially mine after a weekend working on this column. It doesn't get much more obscure than the Overtakers (who have four full cuts on this disc) or Neville Esson (who has two) and it doesn't get much better either. These are among the earliest Jamaican recordings and those who were there might argue they are still among

the best. Owen Gray has five cuts and horn guys Roland Alphonso, Rico Rodriguez and Raymond Harper and the Matador All Stars are among the contributors. If you love the early stuff you're gonna love this.

Also brand new from Jamaican Gold is the equally stunning **Matador's Arena** three-volume set. I missed the first volume which covers Daley's late rock steady productions but volume two covering 1969-70 has some all-time great early cuts like "Gold Digger" by the Wailing Souls and Lloyd Robinson's strange and compelling "The Worm" as well as work from the Ethiopians, the Linkers, the Victors, the Emotions and singers Little Roy and others. There's even an early U Roy ("Scandal").

Volume three covers a wider timespan (1971-79) with cuts from the Gladiators, Audley Rollens, dj Lone Ranger and Barry Brown's still chilling "Put Down Your Guns." The discs altogether constitute an in-depth look at the career of a producer who helped take the music from its rudest beginnings to the start of its worldwide popularity—clearly, as a run through these recordings will tell you—without missing a beat. Kudos to the artists, producers, manufacturers and distributors who are making it possible for all of us to enjoy the best of Jamaican music—in many cases for the first time.

[Qualiton Imports, 24-02 40th Ave., Long Island City, NY 11101; (718) 937-8515]

BAABA MAAL

Continued from page 45

music; they play it truly African music, and we can do the same for African-Americans. I used to sing r&b songs when I was young and I never thought it was any different from my music at home."

"I think African and world music is only just beginning, just starting to get established. The labels are doing a good job, but we have a long road to go." Baaba's eyes gleam with the thought of the task ahead. "I really feel that the way to world peace can lie first with music and its power to bring everyone together. It's up to all of us."

Malian and Senegalese music has been alive and well in the blues for ages with nothing save the genetic links to give it away. From Robert Johnson through Bukka White, Son House, Robert Pete Williams to John Lee Hooker, the musical telegraph has been buzzing with an ancient song for years. It is a cry that echoes throughout the world, for its message is universal, its implications Shakespearean in scope. In the shimmering imagery of Robert Johnson's "Crossroads Blues" one could easily imagine the dark-skinned man at the crossroads, first looking east and then west, not knowing which way to turn, to be not in Mississippi but in another land altogether. There the road may turn to a river, the yellow dust perhaps blowing in from Mali and not Tupelo, the predicament of that one man being that of one people on the threshold of an unknown world, a voyage with no signposts.

Standing at the crossroads, dressed in shimmering white robes, a man dances in the heat of the sun and sings to the sky with a voice that can knock down walls. ★