

Youssou N'Dour
contemporary African music

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Education and community outreach

Royal Opera House Muscat

Senegal is located in the west of the African continent, bordered by Mauritania in the north, Mali from the east, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau to the south and by the Atlantic Ocean from the west. Senegal is a charming country with lots of green lands and abundance of waters. It has a population of approximately 14 Million of which 90% Muslims, the rest are constitute of the Christianity and other faiths. Wolof is the native language that spoken by Senegalese and understood by neighboring countries, but French is the official language of Senegal, Dakar was considered the French capital of Africa during the French mandate that lasted till the 1960s, even after the independence, French still the official language even though it's only spoken by less than 25% of the population and mostly the men. There are over 36 other languages spoken in Senegal but "Wolof" original language is the most common widely spoken one.

As for arts and music in Senegal, it is rich in traditional music in addition to modern music. We will review a brief history on traditional music, the instruments and our featured guest artist "Youssou N'Dour" who will be performing tonight at the Royal Opera House, we will highlight a profile of his life and career as an artist who made his way to be world music artist during the last thirty years where he is still regarded singer of some opinions as the most famous singer in Senegal and Africa.

The Senegalese music is an extension of the music of West Africa's in characteristics, feelings rhythms and musical scales which are mostly based on few sequence of notes or on a pentatonic scale, scales that were used in ancient times by musicians of ancient Egypt, Greeks and other countries in Asia and are still used in many parts of the African continent and in some Arab countries in North Africa such as Morocco especially in (Ginawa) Music which received its origins to Guinea.

Musical instruments: there are various music instruments used in Senegal most important is the "**Kora**" It is the most widely used instrument, has 21 strings attached to a round body made from gourd. The "**Hudo**" or "**Xalam**" (in Wolof) which resembles "**al Hajhu**" or "**Lutar**" in Morocco and the Amazigh tribes of the Atlas Mountains; it's played like an Oud accompanied singers during a performance. Another interesting and common instrument is the

“Balaphone”, belongs to the Xylophone and Marimba family which produce melodic and rhythmic sounds at the same time.

The most interesting aspect of African music is the colorful rhythms; they are the real pulse of the African culture. Most African percussion instruments are made from certain kind of trees such as the "Dojura" brown color tree - colored or "Lankah" red color. Most popular drum is the **“Djembe”** looks similar to the Arabic **“Darabukkah”** but larger in size. Different percussion instruments are played together to produce a nice ornamented harmonic polyrhythms with layers of beautiful sounds similar to a human dialogue and conversation. In addition to djembe, the **“djundjun”** is widely used; it is made from a famous fruit of pumpkin (Gourd). Another important and famous percussion instruments is the **“Sabar”** (This is also the name of a famous dance in Senegal), this instruments was and still is used by " Griots" , one or a group of musicians who have significant roll and prestigious in the country, a griot plays, sings and dances, a historian, story teller who can recite poetry without making a mistake, a griot carries an old oral tradition telling ancient stories of wisdom, spreads news and messages to the public from higher resources, they entertain kings and rich people regularly in their palaces by chanting mystical Sufi poems and other traditionally inherited rituals in special, national, religious and other various events. This life style of griots and the traditional music heritage influenced many African musicians and singers, including Youssou N’Dour an shaped his early musical years; N’Dour grew up in a musical family of Griots, his mother has a beautiful voice and the family was known at the time of the ruling classes, the wealthy and the nobility . The family sang in several occasions such as weddings, fairs, circumcisions and various religious and secular events. Youssou N’Dour spent a great amount of time in his childhood at his grandparent’s house; the house was so big and was used to accommodate large crowds to celebrate any events throughout the year. Youssou accompanied his family and was saturated by this rich ancient heritage of Sufi singing and the chanting of popular traditional stories accompanied with such beautiful music and rhythms.

Youssou N'Dour’s father witnessed the talent of his child and the beauty of his voice and his high confidence of himself; he was heard once saying, "I was born to be a singer ," that’s how he saw himself after reaching the age of 13 where he as a singer joined "Dyamno", a professional local music group and later "Utowal de Dakar" and then he even formed his own band in 1979 and called it "The Super Utowal" which had developed a new pattern of pop African music that influenced lots of new artists and attracted musicians who are attracted to world music like Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon who eventually produced albums with N’Dour and few other African artists.

It was a most unforgettable moment in N’Dour’s life when he was once introduced by a broadcaster from Senegal radio, to sing live in front of a big crowd on stage at the Dakar Stadium on the occasion of a memorial event of famous saxophonist **“Baba Samba Diob”** when the broadcaster announced:

"Today you will see the Birth of a Star in front of your own eyes", and when the young boy sang a beautiful solo, the crowd agreed that what has been said was true, he dazzled the public with his sweet voice which also had a tone of sadness for the loss of the great artist "Papa Samba Diob ."

At first his parents were unhappy about the fact that Youssou N'Dour turned to be a singer of whom they believe that they are alcoholics and womanizers in addition to many other behaviors which violate religious and moral traditions. These groups also did not use traditional instruments; on the contrary, they used amplified electrical instruments, brass and drum- set, all different from the traditional ones were used by the griots which the family tried to preserve within the traditional values and the rich heritage. Often resisted the desire of his father to get away from music and full-time study, but this pressure led Youssou N'Dour to leave Senegal and go to Guinea to join bands who performed songs in an African tradition but in a the look is modern look and sound tends to the West by using Western instrumentations and Latin kind of rhythms like Brazilian samba, Caribbean reggae, hip hop, jazz and funk.

But his father soon realized the great talent of his child and his ambitions, so he asked him to return to pursue his dream; he was proud and promised him to help him achieve his dream and be successful. Then Youssou N'Dour convinced him to seek a career in music and join the Art Institute of Dakar where he met and joined after some of the distinguished professional and famous renovated Senegalese groups who combined modernity in musical instruments and style but kept the African musical roots, rhythms and scales, and foremost Senegalese singing in local "Wolof "language. Contributed around in blending African music and traditional "Lambax " Senegalese with Latin and Western rhythms, using the best recording techniques of modern sounds blended with authentic African rhythms, till he became one of stars of African art as it was before Maryam Mekebe, Manu Dibango, Fela Kuti, Ali Farka Tore, Baba Mall and Salif Keita and Mori Kante.

Youssou N'Dour's is not limited in his singing religious songs only, but he sang for everyday life , friendship and peace, he's also known for inventing a new style dance called it the "Fan" dance started the Senegalese night clubs .

At the age of twenty – five, he toured with his band in Europe where he met rock star Peter Gabriel, who was trying to discover music in the Third World and was encouraging them. In 1988 he toured with global stars such as Sting and Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chatman performing in concerts held for the financing of the "International Amnesty". N'Dour devoted a lot of efforts for humanitarian activities and was nominated "Goodwill Ambassador" of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), awarded an honorary doctorate degree

in music from the University of Yale, in 2013 he received an award from Sweden for his role in promoting understanding among religions as well as music , a year later, he issued his album "Build Bridges" in coordination with the high commission of the refugees in the United Nations in order to finance educational projects for refugee children .