

On WFF #2: A griot divided

Decider previews the Wisconsin Film Festival



Youssou N'Dour's melodies are universal, but his music on the whole still requires some digging.

By Scott Gordon March 20, 2009

As more and more African music captures American ears, it's hard not to feel like a hopelessly unqualified dabbler. Chances are the first few world music records an American pop listener hears will open up an exciting melodic richness, a willingness to blend sounds and instrumentation from across continents. But the first few minutes of Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi's documentary *Youssou N'Dour: I Bring What I Love* (April 5, [Orpheum Theatre](#), 6 p.m.) should also remind us of a certain disconnect. As the Senegalese singer, bathed in blue stage lights and

soothing synthesizer chords, opens a concert with his song "New Africa," it's hard to reconcile his fluid vocal melodies with the multi-syllabic translations in the subtitles: "Without borders, let's pool our resources and work together"; "When I think of how our grandparents suffered, I cry / But our past must not stop us from moving forward."



Of course, here in America, there are still people who get shocked when bands like [R.E.M.](#) or [Pearl Jam](#) talk politics or social issues onstage. But in West African cultures, singers like [N'Dour](#) take on the role of "griot," who is charged with preserving the stories and identities of the people—even as they rise to pop stardom. That makes N'Dour a huge figure for Senegal's Sufi Muslim population, but in *I Bring What I Love*, he finds that not even griots have the run of the place. Vasarhelyi follows N'Dour through the making of his album *Egypt*, on which he took his mix of Western and traditional Senegalese music, termed mbalax, into controversial new territory—namely, singing pop songs about Muslim saints, and, at one point, even trying to shoot music videos in Senegal's holy city of Touba. As N'Dour and his band of Senegalese and Egyptian Muslims play to rapt crowds in Europe and the U.S., the ambitious new album faces public rejection at home, especially when it's released during Ramadan.

N'Dour says he's questioning the "boundaries set on who's allowed to speak about religion" in his society. Vasarhelyi doesn't bother to play devil's advocate much, aside from a few montages of outraged Senegalese newspaper headlines, and some footage of journalists asking him nifty questions. The film doesn't make it clear whether the *Egypt* controversy is a real threat to N'Dour's stature in his home country. Instead, it tries to balance the story with a little introductory background and an appreciation of some gorgeous, constantly evolving music. It's a film that any newly minted fan of African music needs to see, and the live footage is excellent. But if anything, *I Bring What I Love* could've committed a bit more to its central conflict—in the West, there's always time left over for contemplating the music itself.

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