

# ANGELIQUE KIDJO



The uncompromising tigress of African music has always refused to be ghettoised.

**Nigel Williamson** charts her story

**L**et's face it. In music – as in most areas of African life – it's still men who pretty much run the show. Go to any village, almost anywhere across the continent, and you will find the women carrying the water, preparing the food and minding the children while the men look on idly from under the shade of the nearest tree.

No wonder, then, that so few African women have made it onto the world stage. There's Miriam Makeba, of course, supreme for half a century as a pan-African icon. She was followed in South Africa by the likes of Brenda Fassie and Yvonne Chaka

Chaka. Ethiopia has Aster Aweke, Congo had the late Mbilia Bel, Rwanda has Cécile Kayirebwa and Nigeria has Queen Salawa Abeni. Yet they are the exceptions that prove the rule and in most cases their domestic success has not translated into a genuinely international following.

Even Mali, unique in African music for the local dominance of the famed *jeli musolu* (female singing stars), only boasts Oumou Sangaré and, more recently, Rokia Traoré who have made much impact abroad.

As a noted champion of women's rights, Angélique Kidjo will find little satisfaction in this state of affairs that leaves her

unchallenged as the best-known African female singer of her generation. Since she burst on to the international scene in 1989, she's made a series of seven spunky, genre-busting albums that have explored the relationships between diverse musical cultures, a process that has not always been critically understood.

A forward and creative thinker with a passionate belief in the cause of African unity, in recent years she has also been an energetic goodwill ambassador for UNICEF, lobbying and speaking out uncompromisingly on behalf of Africa on a range of issues from the role of women to the fight against AIDS.

Her music has become truly international, embracing Afro-funk, reggae, samba, salsa, gospel, jazz, *rumba*, funk, *zouk*, *makossa*, rock and R&B, and has found her working with French, Caribbean, African, American and Brazilian musicians.

Influenced as much by Jimi Hendrix, Santana, James Brown and Aretha Franklin as by Miriam Makeba, Fela Kuti, Franco and Manu Dibango, she has resolutely refused to conform to the stereotype of an African singer that some have sought to impose upon her.

"I won't do my music different to please some people and I'm not going to play traditional drums and dress like bush people," she insists. "I'm proud to be an African artist because I come from Africa and African music has been the biggest influence on me. But I'm also a world musician in the true sense of the term."

Born in 1960, she grew up in Ouidah, a coastal city in Benin noted as the country's voodoo capital, and was acting and singing in her mother's theatrical troupe by the age of six. Influenced by Western rock and soul as well as local roots music, by her late teens she had become a professional singer and in 1980 recorded her debut album, the Africa-only release *Pretty*, with the Cameroonian producer Ekambi Brilliant.

In 1983 she moved to Paris, touring with Dutch fusionists Pili Pili and singing on several of their albums, before recording her solo international debut with 1989's *Parakou*. It established the blueprint for what would become her trademark style: an eclectic mix of West African rhythms with elements of zouk, soul and reggae sung in her mother language Fon and in a powerful voice that took no prisoners.



Angélique Kidjo belts out a tune at Africa Calling at the Eden Project (Theo Moyo)

Two years later she flew to Miami to record *Logozo* ('tortoise' in Fon) for Chris Blackwell's Mango label. Produced by the Cuban-American Joe Galdo, guests included Manu Dibango, Ray Lema and the American jazz star Branford Marsalis. Mixing techno-pop aspects with acoustic and a *capella* numbers of rootsier persuasion, the album included her haunting version of 'Malaika', a song made famous by Miriam Makeba, and the spectacular 'Batonga', which became something of a dance floor hit and established her as a dramatic new force on the world music scene.

*Ayé* followed in 1994, recorded at Prince's Paisley Park in Minneapolis and mixed by Will Mowat at Soul II Soul's studio in London. The locations suggested the direction in which she was moving and the result was a hybrid of Western and African styles that upset some of the purists but included such irresistible tracks as 'Agolo', a song about the environment with a driving dance rhythm.

Even better was 1996's *Fifa*, produced by her husband Jean Hebrail, and which found her returning to Benin to record for the first time. The album then took shape in Paris, London, Los Angeles and San Francisco weaving traditional motifs from her African field recordings into a high-tech studio mix, which in places found her singing in English for the first time. The title-track even featured in the Hollywood comedy *Ace Ventura*.

She followed with an even bolder march into the mainstream with 1998's

*Oremi*, her most misunderstood album to date. Sophisticated and funky, it found her covering Jimi Hendrix's 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' and featured American singers Cassandra Wilson and Kelly Price. Some angrily accused her of turning her back on her African heritage, yet the album was conceived as the first part of a trilogy that would explore the music of the African diaspora. *Oremi* was her African-American album. After a four year delay and a change of label to Columbia, it was followed by 2002's *Black Ivory Soul*, which exploited the musical and cultural kinship between Africa and Brazil and, more specifically, Benin and Bahia. Part three came in 2004 with *Oyaya!*, which gloriously celebrated the African roots of Latin and Caribbean music.

### BEST ALBUMS

*Logozo* (Island, 1991)



The record that announced her as a major talent on the world stage and which first displayed her dramatic vocal range, from the lovely tribute to Miriam Makeba on 'Malaika' to the Afro-funk of 'Batonga' via the a *capella* delights of 'Sénié'. She was later successfully sued for plagiarism in Benin by Athanase Akpovi, whose work she admitted sampling.

*Fifa* (Island, 1996)



An irresistible mix of traditional roots and high-tech dance and funk, combining recordings made in Benin with sophisticated and subtle state-of-the-art production and Carlos Santana's trademark guitar. One of the great African fusion albums of the past decade.

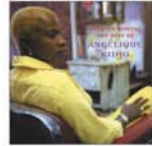
*Oyaya!* (Columbia, 2004)



The third part of her diaspora trilogy explores the influence of African music on Latin and Caribbean styles. The result is an audacious mix – Afro-salsa, Colombian *porro*, *bolero*, *son*, Gloria Estefan-style Latin-pop, mambo, zouk and even the use of steel pans.

### BEST COMPILATION

*Keep on Moving* (Wrasse, 2001)



Actually the only compilation, but it does a thorough job in collecting together the best of her first five international albums, with one track from *Parakou* and four apiece from *Logozo*, *Ayé*, *Fifa* and *Oremi*. A bonus is a brilliant rendition of 'Summertime', itself worth the price of admission alone.

### BEST AVOIDED

*Oremi* (Island, 1998)



In many ways *Oremi* is a thrilling record exploring the African heritage of American music. Kidjo has seldom sounded funkier but unless you're a fan of American R&B, this may not be the setting in which you want to hear her.

## LIKE ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO? THEN TRY...

**Zap Mama *A Ma Zone***  
 (Luaka Bop, 1999)

Like Kidjo, Zap Mama's Marie Daulne has also been criticised for departing too far from her African roots. But on *A Ma Zone* she and her band blend the traditional Congolese singing which first brought them to fame with American-influenced hip-hop and R&B in radical fashion. |