

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Jane Cornwell salutes an African legend and spokesman

BAABA MAAL



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There used to be two Baaba Maals. The Western one: remixed, hip, post-modern. The African one: acoustic, heroic, traditional. Both were distinguished by that voice, that glorious, wailing high tenor honed by years of practice and the childhood Maal spent listening to his father, a *muezzin* in Podor, northern Senegal, calling worshippers to the local mosque with the call to prayer. Here in the West, Maal, age 52, is considered one of African music's most famous stars, renowned for a sparkling catalogue of albums that balance respect for tradition with hunger for innovation, upmarket concerts of riotous colour, energy and sound. Beloved of Michael Stipe, Brian Eno and the late John Peel, Maal has the sort of leftfield integrity that makes him, well, cool to like. His music remains rhythmically, irresistibly accessible.

In Africa, however, Maal is more than simply a remarkable musician. He is a

communicator, a statesman and, for many, a prophet. Despite not being born into a musical caste, he is considered an honorary *griot*, one of the time-honoured custodians of local history. To hear Maal sing, as he usually does, in the Fulani language of his Pulaar people, on issues such as education, the environment and AIDS awareness (alongside a repertoire of gorgeous love songs), is to witness a man who cares deeply for his country, its people and their welfare. News that Maal is at home in Dakar can trigger mass hysteria; some, whether or not they've brought him gifts of money or livestock, seek advice and consolation on anything from failing crops to the death of a child. The dignified Maal takes everything in his stride. "I was born to it," he says.

Over the last few years there have been signs that the schism is finally closing. That Maal's role as a spokesman for Africa is taken as seriously in the West as it is back home. Think, say, Bono without the ego. Maal is currently a Youth Emissary for

the United Nations, a spokesman on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa – one who delivered a powerful speech on the issue at last year's massive AIDS awareness concert in South Africa. He recently played the Nobel Peace Prize concert in Norway. In February he gives a lecture on 'contemporary African society' at the British Museum in London, an introductory event to the South Bank Centre's sprawling festival of African art, *Africa Remix*. On April 1 he will deliver his singular musical response to the exhibition, replete with full band and Senegalese dancers.

Singing or speaking, cross-art-form or cross-genre, this combination of elements comprise who Maal is, onstage and off. Responsibilities are there to be shouldered. "A musician in Africa," he says, "should be someone who educates. I don't regard myself as a politician, but in our society we use songs to express what people are feeling. Musicians are closer to society in Africa – we use our voice to say what the



people expect from their leaders.”

One of 11 siblings in a family of farmers and fishermen, Maal's social awareness began early. His mother encouraged him to listen to the morally conscious songs of the Fulani; his father's voice, the one that called the faithful to prayer, was big and loud. Later, though enjoying Otis Redding, James Brown and Bob Marley on the airwaves, Maal would wonder why his people's music wasn't being played. He heard the African roots in Cuban music, American black music, reggae, R&B, and found a like mind in his childhood friend, the blind griot Mansour Seck. A musician by birth, Seck encouraged Maal's musicality, gave it a stamp of approval. For a while the duo travelled around West Africa, absorbing a variety of musical customs and quirks.

Maal entered the Paris conservatoire, where he “began to see all the differences in music and how all these musics could go together.” In 1983 he and Seck recorded their classic acoustic set, *Djam Leelii* (“like hearing Muddy Waters for the first time,” declared John Peel on its UK release in 1989). Back in Senegal several years later, Maal formed his band Dande Lenol (Voice of the People), a group of traditional players - including Mansour Seck - with a penchant for cross-cultural experimentation.

“We take from the past and put into the present,” Maal says. “Inside the sound are the original things: my voice, the lyrics in my language, the *kora*, the talking drum. We use synthesizers, drum machines and electronic guitars, but combine them with traditional rhythms like the *yela*, which imitates the sound of someone pounding millet.”

Maal consolidated his international reputation throughout the 90s, releasing albums that mixed African and Fulani styles with Irish (he's collaborated with Davy Spillane and Donal Lunny) and even Jamaican styles (check out his contribution to Ernest Ranglin's *In Search of the Lost Riddim*). Classic, anthemic albums such as *Lam Toro* and *Firin' in Fouta* were followed by the unfortunately dodgy *Nomad Soul*, before Maal veered firmly back on track with the stunning, deceptively simple *Missing You* (Mi Yeewnii) - its success prompting similarly 'unplugged' albums from African stars such as Salif Keita and Youssou N'Dour.

Word is that his next album will be more dance-oriented, a homage to his country's upbeat influences and outlook, and a blend of traditional and modern. An album, if you like, of both Baaba Maals. “In Senegal,” he says, “there is lots of smiling, mad clothes, dancing together and positive energy for the future.” Maal flashes a grin. “And I want to be in the middle of that.”

BEST ALBUMS

Firin' in Fouta (Mango 1994) ▶ 1012



As fierce and upbeat as its title suggests, this Grammy-winning landmark recording hails the arrival of a major musical force. Amidst the pop, rap and drum loops are mighty British bassist Jah Wobble and, hinting at later Celtic crossovers, Dónal Lunny - of Irish group Planxty. Simon Emmerson, pre-Afro Celts, produces.

Missing You (Mi Yeewnii)

(Palm Pictures 2001)

▶ 1013



Maal returns, beautifully, to his origins (literally, sounds include the chirping of crickets) in a series of tunes blessed only by traditional instrumentation and Maal's soaring voice.

BEST COMPILATION

Baaba Maal: The Best of the Early Years

(Wrasse 2002)

▶ 1014



Not strictly true: this collection omits the early 80s Senegalese material only ever released on cassette. These, then, are the Island Records years, featuring such memorable, traditional tracks as 'Yero Mama' and the original, pre-remixed version of 'African Woman'.

BEST AVOIDED

Nomad Soul (Palm Pictures 1998)

▶ 1015



Helmed by the generals of Western music production - Brian Eno, Howie B et al - this long-awaited album tries too hard to be all things to everyone and ends up lacking. With few exceptions, technology smothers Maal's musical roots; 'Yolela', a duet with reggae star Luciano, stinks.

Baaba Maal performs at the Royal Festival Hall on April 1 as part of *Africa Remix*. See On the Road for details

LIKE BAABA MAAL? THEN TRY...

◆ **Mansour Seck *Yelayo***

(Stern's 1997)

▶ 1016

Maal's long-time friend and collaborator has an impressive, resolutely traditional catalogue of his own, *Yelayo* his most accomplished recording to date. An ensemble of *hoddu*, *kora*, percussion, electric bass and two guitars help demonstrate why Maal holds this singer/songwriter in such esteem.



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