

## BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Nigel Williamson gives the low-down on Senegal's biggest star

# YOUSSOU N'DOUR



Over the last two decades, Youssou N'Dour has established himself as the biggest name in African music. Outside Africa, his association with the likes of Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon and the international hit duet 'Seven Seconds' with Neneh Cherry, have allowed him to transcend the narrow confines of the usual world music audience.

At home in Senegal he is a national hero. He has always denied that he has any political ambitions, but his concerts frequently end with the crowd yelling "Youssou pour le Président". If he ran, he would surely win by a landslide.

There have been times when his celebrity and international profile have almost appeared to eclipse his music. In the six years between 1994 and 2000, he failed to release an album outside Senegal and spent much of his time in an ambassadorial-type role, working on projects with UNICEF and other aid organisations. Yet it is his music that makes Youssou such a significant world figure. Powerful and distinctive, his voice was once described by Peter Gabriel as "liquid silver". If he were an African-American, his soulful power would bracket him with Marvin Gaye and Otis Redding, with whom he shares the ability to raise the hairs on the back of your neck. A true pioneer and visionary, in the late 70s he was almost single-handedly responsible for revolutionising the sound of

Senegalese music.

Born in Dakar in October 1959 into a caste of *griots* (traditional praise singers and oral storytellers), he was singing at ritual functions from an early age. By the age of 15, he had earned a regular place in the line-up of Étoile de Dakar, one of the leading Senegalese dance bands of its day. It was while he was with Étoile that *mbalax*, the sound with which he is most associated, was born.

A term invented by Youssou and derived from the Wolof word for rhythm, *mbalax* was simply faster, funkier and hipper than anything previously associated with Senegalese music with a complex but distinctive dance floor groove derived from the dialogue between Youssou's voice and the explosive *tama* (talking drum).

By 1978, as *mbalax* swept the clubs of the Senegalese capital, Youssou had broken away to form Super Étoile de Dakar. His international career was launched five years later when he first toured Europe. The following year he made his first visit to Britain, where Peter Gabriel heard him and invited him to support him on his American tour.

That, in turn, led to Paul Simon asking him to sing on *Graceland* and in 1988, he joined Gabriel, Sting, Bruce Springsteen, Tracy Chapman and others on an Amnesty International world tour.

With major labels queuing up to sign him, he opted for Virgin, who hoped they had an African Bob Marley on their hands. But the

1989 album *The Lion* did not sell in the desired-for quantities and when its follow-up *Set* also disappointed, Virgin dropped him. One of the problems was that he controversially re-recorded songs for the international market that were already available on cassette in Senegal. Those who had heard both mostly preferred the more rugged African versions and found the Virgin albums too polished and over-produced.

He finally got the crossover format right in 1994 with the album *Wommat* (see below) and the hit single 'Seven Seconds'. Yet unlike many other African artists who at the first taste of success, move to Paris, London or New York, Youssou chose to stay close to his roots. He continued to live in Dakar, where he had owned his own club called the Thiossane since the mid-80s. By the mid-90s he had gone on to add his own record label Jololi, the Xippi studio and ownership of a newspaper and radio station. He also used his position to sponsor the emergence of such artists as Cheikh Lô and his sister-in-law Viviane N'Dour, before he eventually re-emerged on the international scene with 2000's patchy *Joko* (see opposite).

He recently signed to Nonesuch, which is releasing a new album *Nothing's in Vain* and for all the efforts of the younger pretenders to dislodge him, he remains quite simply Africa's pre-eminent musical voice on the world stage.



Seth Taras

## BEST ALBUMS

### 1 *The Guide: Wommat* (Columbia 1994)



Containing the hit single 'Seven Seconds' on which he duets with Neneh Cherry, this is Youssou's most successful international album – both commercially and



artistically. Its fusion of traditional Senegalese rhythms and Western rock influences is seamless, whether it's on the praise song 'Mame Bamba' or the anthemic version of Bob Dylan's 'Chimes of Freedom', which is given an entirely new resonance in an African context. And whatever anybody says, 'Seven Seconds' (snobbishly dismissed in the first edition of *The Rough Guide To World Music* as 'embarrassing') is a truly great pop song.

### 2 *Immigrés* (Earthworks, 1984)



Originally released on cassette in Senegal, *Immigrés* was substantially remastered for CD release and contains the first hints of the international success which was to come. Yet it



remains a fine example of Youssou's earthier Senegalese mbalax style. The whole album has a warm and expansive feel, and the title track, written after his

first visit to Paris in 1983, is a tour-de-force as he appeals to emigrant Senegalese workers to remember their African homeland. It's just been reissued on Earthworks at mid-price.

## BEST COMPILATION

### *Rough Guide To Youssou N'Dour & Étoile de Dakar* (World Music Network, 2002)



This is the best of the many Youssou reissues for the simple reason that the 11 tracks offer the widest spread of material and cover the entire series of original cassette releases



put out by both Étoile de Dakar and the breakaway Super Étoile in the late 70s and early 80s. All of the tracks are also Youssou compositions, which is not the case with some of the compilations on the market. The 12-minute version of 'Thiopathioly' in particular is a sublime early example of mbalax, and the liner notes are superbly informative.

## WHAT TO AVOID

### *Joko – From Village To Town* (Columbia 2000)



Actually, no need to shun completely, for the long-delayed international follow-up to *Wommat* contains great songs such as 'Birimba',



'Liggeey' and 'Beykat'. But much of it finds Youssou chasing the chimera of crossover appeal far too hard. 'Don't Walk Away,'

featuring Sting, is anodyne. A cover of The Temptations 'Don't Look Back' is pleasant enough but entirely gratuitous and the tracks with the American rapper Wyclef Jean are dire, particularly his hideous remix of 'Birimba'. Interestingly, when Nonesuch re-released the album in the US, the Wyclef tracks were quietly shelved.

## NEW ALBUM

### *Nothing's in Vain (Coono du Reer)*

(Nonesuch, 2002)



The brand new CD from Youssou marks a return to form with a largely acoustic album. See the review in the African section.



## LIKE YOUSOU? TRY...

✦ Baaba Maal  
*Missing You (Mi Yeewnii)*  
(Palm Pictures, 2001)

