

On a surprisingly torrid July evening, Montréal's funky rue Sainte-Catherine Est vibrates with streetlife: drifting packs of purple and black clad young Goths walking their communal dogs; the after-show crowd from the Just For Laughs comedy festival round the corner; gay couples en route to dinner in the Rainbow district a few blocks further east; intrepid disabled citizens expertly weaving a passage through in motorised wheelchairs and a good-humoured young man sitting on the pavement holding a placard which pleads: 'Need \$\$\$ for beer'.

Outside the Metropolis theatre demographics and fashions change. There's the rustle and swish of traditional African robes and an excited babel of West African languages, Québécois, Haitian and Antillean Creole, plus some Cuban Spanish. Entering the cavernous old theatre, a steamy aura of



FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL NUITS D'AFRIQUE

Simon Lee reports from North America's biggest African music extravaganza

anticipation envelops the wall-to-wall, sold-out audience. The first ten rows frontstage are a solid phalanx of Senegalese women who levitate as one when the baseball-tall figure of their own superstar Youssou N'Dour arrives all in white, accompanied by his radiant smile.

This is the launch of Montréal's 20th anniversary Nuits d'Afrique 2006 festival. Youssou has broken his Italian tour to fly in and out to do the honours. Which he does for the next hour, saturating all-comers with his golden voice; the energy fuelled by *sabar* drums, *djembe* and the frenetic acrobatic antics of a traditional Senegalese dancer. Youssou pauses to speak about the fundamental function of the *griot* and to remind anyone who doesn't already know it that "music is release, healing and bonding."

Towards the end of a set so sublime its brevity goes unnoticed by the dancing, sing-along audience, he also talks of presenting another image of Africa, beyond the played-out media cliché of a sick

and starving war-torn society, offering the alternative of a "happy, singing, productive and creative" one instead. And then he's gone, heading back to the airport, leaving the crowd to another ten nights of more than 40 concerts featuring 450 plus singers, dancers and musicians from Guinea, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritius, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Martinique and Trinidad – just to mention a few.

With its easy 'anything goes' multicultural vibe, the world's second largest French-speaking city offers a summer season of festivals probably unparalleled globally. In July alone there's jazz, comedy, reggae, global rhythms, rock, blues and Nuits d'Afrique, North America's biggest festival of African, Caribbean and Latin music. The founding concept remains the same since the inaugural festival in 1987. As founder Lamine Touré, a Guinean who arrived in Montréal in 1976, says: "Nous sommes tous frères," (we're all brothers) and

his vision of bringing people of the world together through music has definitely succeeded, judging by the multicultural audiences at the 2006 festival.

Fellow founder and festival general manager Suzanne Rousseau emphasises that it is purpose rather than profit that's the motivation: "The mission and spirit remain unchanged, the feeling of coming into a family, of respecting the artists, that's the strength of Nuits d'Afrique... It's important for both the artists and public to know

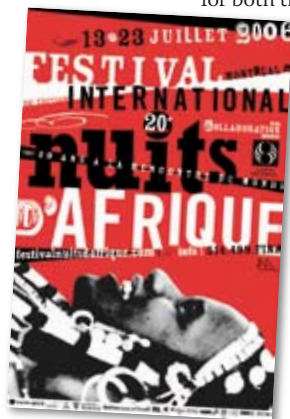
each other and where they've come from. Africans don't know Caribbeans and many people from the Caribbean don't know where they come from (in Africa)." The festival's intimate family feel begins with the organisation itself, which is quite small and is supplemented for two frenetic summer weeks by volunteers.

Family bonds between African and Caribbean music were underscored at the 2006 festival by Cuban *son* revivalists Sierra

Maestra and Septeto Variedades along with Congolese *rumberos* Kékélé, much of whose repertoire was directly inspired by Cuban *son* from the golden age 1920-30, which itself was derived from Congolese rhythms brought by slaves in the 19th century.

Nuits d'Afrique began as a one-day event held at Touré's Club Balattou with attendance of a mere 1,500. Over the years major performers have included Miriam Makeba, Salif Keita, Papa Wemba, Alpha Blondy, Manu Dibango, Cheb Mami, Bembeya Jazz, Angélique Kidjo, Natacha Atlas, Daby Touré, Les Ballets Africains de Guinée, Beethova Obas, Maria de Barros and Ferro Gaita.

Now the festival attracts 150,000 and



spreads itself out at major venues throughout the city – Métropolis, Le National, La Tulipe, Kola Note and one of Montréal's architectural treasures, the atmospheric Lion d'Or on rue Ontario Est, a cabaret club built in 1932 celebrating both art nouveau and deco styles, and a favourite haunt of mobster Al Capone. One of the many highspots of the 2006 festival took aficionados across town from the packed National of the Rainbow district, where veteran all-female Guinean drum and dance troupe the Amazonas performed, up north to La Tulipe on rue Papineau, for a blazing set by Daara J, the young Senegalese stars of African rap, resplendent in their traditional robes (pictured below left).

With several concerts billed each night, out-of-towners get the chance to familiarise themselves with different locales in the city and check out the varied cuisine. Anyone with a palate to match their taste in world music will savour the mouth-watering spreads of Chinatown's budget restaurants, the bagels and cream cheese of Beauty's, a Jewish family-run 1940s style diner, or authentic Tibetan dishes at Om, conveniently situated a few doors up from Club Balattou on Boulevard St Laurent, where festival musicians can be found

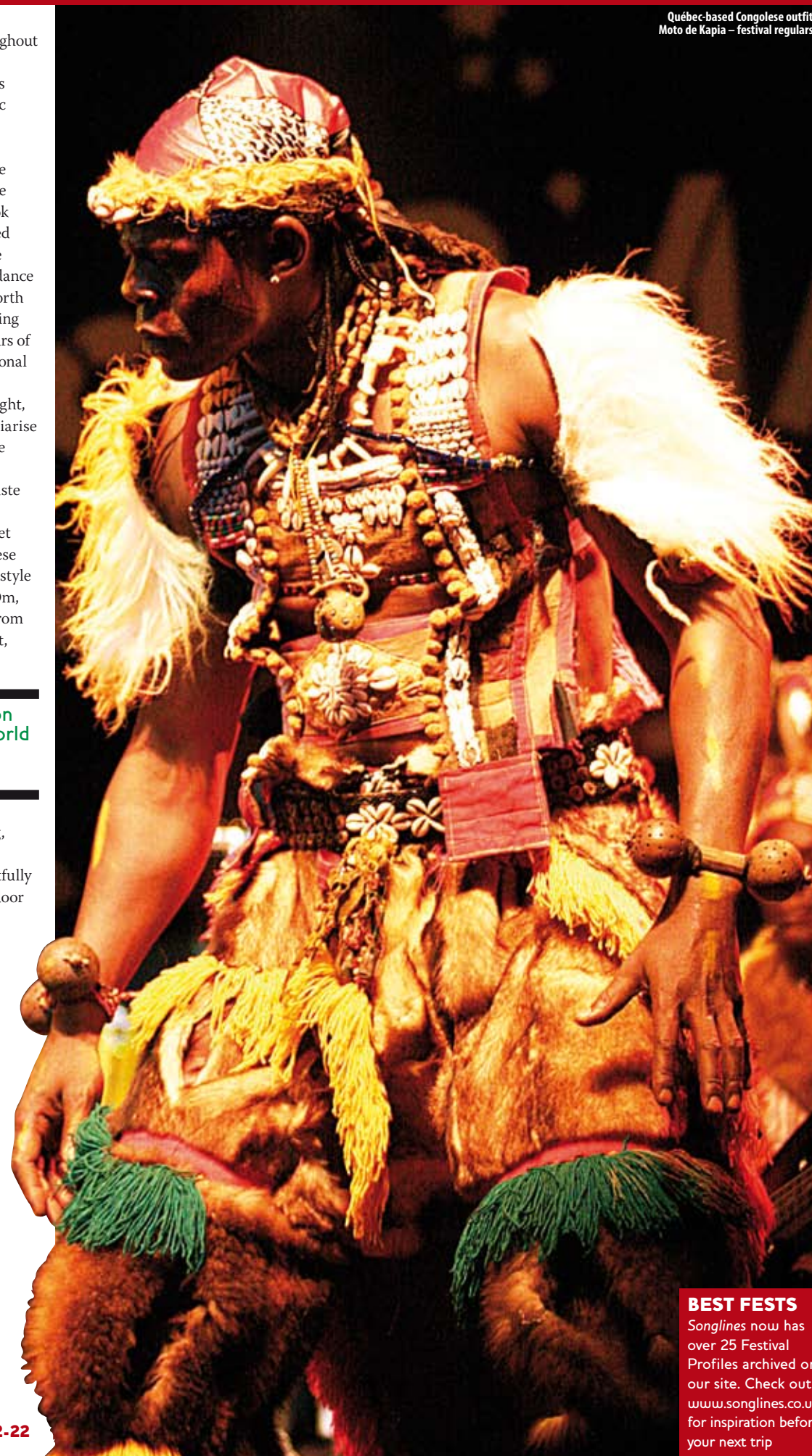
Founder Lamine Touré's vision of bringing people of the world together through music has definitely succeeded

jamming or just post-concert partying, most nights.

The festival concludes with a delightfully relaxed three-day family-oriented outdoor weekend at the Place Émilie-Gamelin park, where in addition to the live music, there are workshops and kids' activities, simmering pots of African and Caribbean food and the Marché Tombouctou crafts market, where reasonably priced djembés are on sale, ready for another of Montréal's institutions – the Sunday afternoon free-for-all Tam Tam drumming sessions in Park Mont Royal.

Recognised as "one of the first initiatives to promote African cultures," which has now become a "veritable institution, a true Montréal landmark," Nuits d'Afrique has contributed in no small measure to the city's multicultural reputation. This summer's 21st birthday edition promises to be a must-see coming of age celebration for the festival that "reaches out to the world." ●

www.festivalnuitsdafrique.com
Nuits d'Afrique runs from July 12-22



Québec-based Congolese outfit Moto de Kapia – festival regulars

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