



A sleepy snapshot of Saint Louis



The Saint Louis Jazz Orchestra get in the swing



New York jazz pianist Randy Weston



The town is split by the wide Senegal River



The decaying, colonial charm of Senegal's second city

SAINT LOUIS JAZZ FESTIVAL

SENEGAL, WEST AFRICA

For a weekend in May, Africa's finest jazzmen and traditional musicians jam together in Senegal's former capital. Rose Skelton reports

There is something magical about the month of May in Senegal. The cool of winter is gone, and stretching out in front is the steamy humidity of the rainy season. The evenings are getting warmer, making the late-night concert-going obligatory in this live music hub much more enjoyable; a perfect temperature for strolling from one open-air bar to the next, as the rattle of Senegalese drums and the buzz of the bass guitar pours into the street.

May is also the month of music festivals in Senegal, but none of them have yet managed to upstage the Saint Louis Jazz Festival, now in its 16th year. The northern Senegalese city's stages have in years past been graced by musicians such as jazz pianist and composer Herbie Hancock, Cameroonian bassists Richard Bona and Etienne Mbappé, Malian blues guitarist Ali Farka Touré, and jazz drummer Roy Haynes who has played with every jazz musician from Stan Getz to Miles Davis. Although organisation problems in recent years have threatened to push the festival

off its podium as Africa's most important jazz event, the Saint Louis Jazz Festival is still going strong. The names may be lesser known for the time being, but the organisers have got their act together, the funding is flowing in and the festival is back on track. Saint Louis Jazz is once again Africa's festival of choice on the last weekend in May.

Saint Louis was once Senegal's capital city, now a town split between the island, marooned in the wide Senegal River, and the coastal strip which runs down the Atlantic shoreline, fringed with pristine white beaches. The island is a World Heritage site, and some of its colonial houses, which have what might be euphemistically described as a 'decaying charm' with their crumbling walls, are being restored at about the same rate that the others are falling down.

Despite being Senegal's most popular tourist attraction, families live on the island and in the houses, and the town is as much alive as any *quartier* in the capital Dakar. Teenage boys play football in the path of oncoming traffic, families of sheep bleat

their way in and out of courtyards, where women pump water and babies start their *sabar* drum training on empty tin cans. At night, the intense melody of religious chant drifts over the river to the island and is swallowed up by the wide expanse of the Sahara desert, lying just beyond the northern riverbank. Saint Louis is a town with a kind of excitable musical energy – a perfect place for a jazz festival.

At one in the morning on the opening night of the festival's 15th edition, I found myself taking a walk through town. The African Touch Sextet, led by local French resident Abdul Jamal's deft piano playing and the sultry reverberations of Ibrahima M'Bengue's double bass, had just finished on the main stage, and there was nothing more programmed for that night.

Somewhere along the road where the river laps against the island's edge, I came across a cavern-like doorway with both music and people streaming in and out of it. I decided this was where the real jazz was going on and endeavoured to squeeze myself in through the crowd.

Long nights of hard, hot jazz jams in sweating bar back rooms, café au lait and croissants in the all-night bakeries, and the walk home in the cool of the early mornings

Some of the musicians packed into this slit-shaped bar I recognised from the Dakar music circuit. A bass guitarist from Viviane N'Dour's *mbalax* band, a drummer from another local band, called Opus, and Omar Sow, Dakar's finest guitar player, an elusive character who appears with both Cheikh Lô and Souleymane Faye. On this night he was playing with his own band, so said the chalkboard hidden amongst the sweating masses, and he was fired up. Pushing my way through to the back of the bar, someone bought me a drink and I managed to find a stool from where to watch this amazing scene of musical innovation.

Before long, a man sauntered in and sat on a low bench beside me. I recognised him as the wandering saxophonist who regularly appears when Orchestra Baobab are playing their Saturday night gig in Dakar, or when Souleymane Faye is rocking out his Senegalese rhythms on stage. He'll turn up, emit some sweet-sounding melodies and then disappear, as quietly as he came, presumably to play somewhere else.

This evening he had a friend with him who periodically took hold of the sax and had a go himself, so that the band expanded to take over three quarters of the bar, with very little room left for dancing. From somewhere behind me, an intricate rhythm tapped out on what sounded like a glass started up and when I turned around I saw a dreadlocked Senegalese man had hijacked a metal key ring from a passing Peace Corps



HOW TO GET THERE

FLIGHTS

● Direct flights from the UK to Dakar are available with BMI, and indirect flights with Air Maroc, Tap Air Portugal, Air France and Brussels Airlines. Air Maroc usually has the best prices and connection times. Dakar is roughly 200km away from Saint Louis.

GETTING AROUND

● **Private taxi with driver:** Any hotel will be able to organise a taxi with a driver, the price being negotiable. Check the car has all essentials functioning before you set off. Best not to expect luxuries like air-conditioning. The journey can take between four and seven hours.

● **Car hire:** Senecartours (+221 33 889 7777) rents cars, as does Hertz (+221 33 889 8181)

● **Public transport:** Seven-seater cars, known as 'sept-place,' go from the Gare Routière Pompier on Avenue Malick Sy, as do the larger, cheaper, and far more bumpy white buses which can take hours to fill up (and therefore, depart). Ignore the bus touts who tell you the sept-places are full; there are always cars to be had. Leaving at the crack of dawn will get you there many hours faster than leaving later on in the day.

FESTIVAL TICKETS

● Tickets for the festival can be bought from the tourist office (+221 33 961 24 55)



French quartet Pulcinella

volunteer and was making his contribution on an empty bottle, in perfect time.

At this point, Omar Sow had gone back to his corner to smoke a cigarette and someone else had taken up his guitar. The song switched from a classic jazz standard with a Wolof twist to an Afro-beat number; a Senegalese girl took her place at the set of hand drums, and made the whole room move. And it went on, until the sun started to rise and there were no musicians left to play.

The rest of the long weekend continued in much the same vein. Lazy days on the pristine beach, early evenings of sit-down jazz with local artists like *kora* player Abdoulaye Cissokho as part of the excellent Saint Louis Jazz Orchestra and French alto-saxophonist Géraldine Laurent and her Time Out Trio. Then long nights of hard, hot jazz jams in sweating bar back rooms, café au lait and croissants in the all-night bakeries, and the walk home in the cool of the early mornings. Just what a weekend of music should be. ●

Saint Louis Jazz Festival runs from May 8-11 2008.
www.saintlouisjazz.com

BEST FESTS

Songlines now has over 30 Festival Profiles archived on our site. Check out www.songlines.co.uk for inspiration before your next trip