

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

# SELAM AFRICAN FESTIVAL SWEDEN

The Nordic city of Stockholm rocks to the sounds of African music in November during its annual festival. Rose Skelton gives the low-down

Stomping cold feet outside Stockholm's stylish Södra Teatern's annexe, a colourful cross-section of the Swedish city's multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan citizens waits in line. Beside me a Swede, an Ivorian and a French woman chatter excitedly about seeing their reggae hero, Ivorian Tiken Jah Fakoly, perform inside. In front of me, a group of Senegalese are equally excitable in their patchwork outfits and rasta hats, and ahead of them, a group of rock-kids wrapped in warm hoodies are beginning to show their impatience.

"Last night we saw people we have never seen at world music concerts," says festival co-founder and organiser Teshome Wondimu the next day, after a gig that ended with South African rock-hip-hop quartet Tumi and the Volume. "We know they will have a good time when they get there, so the biggest

problem is getting them to come. But then we know they will come again."

The Selam African Festival will this year celebrate its tenth event, and artists already confirmed include Oumou Sangaré, Cheb Khaled, plus a night dedicated to Afro-Latin music. The non-profit organisation behind it, Selam, reached its tenth anniversary in 1997, and has grown from being a tiny team putting on the likes of Senegalese superstar Thione Seck – when Sweden hadn't even heard of *mbalax* – to a still-modest team lining up Mahmoud Ahmed, Tiken Jah and Amadou and Mariam on three consecutive nights, and filling the city's major concert hall with a cross-section of people who ten years ago were most likely blissfully unaware of the merits of Malian rock guitar.

On the opening night of the 2008 festival, which runs over the second weekend in November, a small, brightly smiling man takes the stage flanked by Badume's Band – eight young French horn players and guitarists. Women in the audience break into a united impassioned wail, and Mahmoud Ahmed, the veteran king of Abyssinian pop, parades his vitality and enthusiasm across the stage, draped in a white Ethiopian cloth sash, bright teeth announcing his pleasure at being there. He sashays before the audience, repeatedly bouncing up and down and shaking his shoulders as his voice soars up and down the scale, while his orchestra, impressively tight, lead him through his paces.

"It was surprising to see an old Ethiopian man and a young white band who were so



Ethiopian Mahmoud Ahmed plays with Badume's Band from France at the Selam Festival in 2008



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**"It takes time to give people a picture of African music, of hip-hop, pop, highlife; to show that it is not just the djembé and the kora"**

tight," says Sasha, one of the gig-goers afterwards. "That should happen more often." Wondimu is delighted. "I was worried at first when he said he was coming with this French band. But everyone was very excited because it's the first time Europeans are playing Ethiopian music, and doing it even better!"

The Ethiopian community is big in Stockholm, and the audience is filled with first- and second-generation immigrants,



reach varying kinds of people. In 2007, the whole festival was held in a 'culture house', the Dieselverkstaden, in a suburb of the city, with concerts, seminars, talks and films going on in one fantastically stylish building. In 2008, some of the concerts were held in the intimate setting of the city's Sodra Teatern, with the main show, of Amadou and Mariam, held in the 1,500-seater Konserthusset where the Nobel Prize is given. From 2009, informs co-founder Barbara Franke, Selam will also programme the grand venue's world music line-up, with a planned schedule including Salif Keita, Estrella Morente and Pablo Milanés for spring. With a city of just one million, selling out the hall on a regular basis is a grand aim that Selam, ever ambitious and unfailingly positive, know they can achieve.



Selam started out as a family, non-profit organisation, and today is just a slightly extended affair. The festival, though with no overnight camping or children's activities, has a family feel too, and the airy hall adjoining the theatre annexe is decked out in tasteful fake palm trees with glowing, beaded lizard lamps climbing the room's cast iron columns. A Senegalese woman runs a rice stall in one corner, beside a stall selling intricate jewellery made by South African bead-workers. Also in the bazaar is a woman who sells organic cotton T-shirts, the same T-shirt I notice Tiken Jah Fakoly sporting as he stampedes across the stage in pursuit of political wrong-

rightings through his music. During one of Sweden's dark winter afternoons, the festival hall is packed with people watching two African hip-hop documentaries, one from Burkina Faso, the other from Senegal, as part of CinemAfrica, an African film festival held annually in the city. Earlier on in the day, a symposium on women and entrepreneurship in Africa had attracted a wide audience of people interested in listening to the experiences of self-starting women working in music. A line of cups and thermos flasks on the bar and a little sign, saying: 'tea: ten krona,' indicates that in the absence of bar staff, one should help oneself.

Despite its completely global remit, the festival manages to be a friendly, inclusive affair, reaching an ever-increasing audience.

"It takes time to give people a picture of African music, of hip-hop, pop, highlife; to show that it is not just the *djembe* and the *kora*," says Wondimu during our Ethiopian blow-out. "I am a first-generation immigrant but Maam and Ociel," – he indicates to two young members of his team who respectively have Gambian and Chilean parents – "are second-generation immigrants who went to school here. With a new crew we can reach other generations, and that's really important for us." ●

ONLINE [www.selam.se](http://www.selam.se)  
[www.cinemAfrica.se](http://www.cinemAfrica.se)

DATES This year the festival runs from November 6-7 2009

Clockwise from above: Tiken Jah Fakoly performs in 2008; Selam founder Teshome Wondimu; the Selam crowd in Stockholm's Konserthusset; a Latin concert organised by Selam in June this year

Swedes with African origins or Africans who have made Sweden their home. Festivals like Selam African Festival are vital in keeping these people, hungry for music from their roots, happy. But the festival is also crucial in spreading the message of African music. "This isn't a concert just for the Ethiopian community," says Wondimu, as we eat a smorgasbord of Ethiopian dishes served on a large basket tray at one of the city's many African restaurants. "We don't only need people working in Africa, who know about Africa; we need a new public who've never been to Africa or listen to African music, especially young people."

As part of Selam's campaign to spread the message of African music and culture, the festival is held in different venues each year to

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