



Yousou N'Dour
with
Fathy Salama's Cairo Orchestra

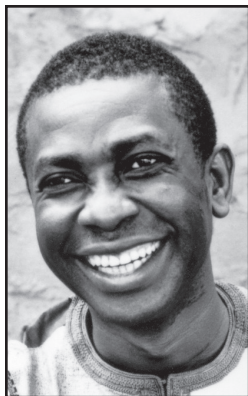
Friday, November 11, 2005, 8 pm
Zellerbach Hall

Egypt

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Modern Senegalese popular music, known in the Wolof language as *mbalax* (“umm-bah-laakh”), an enchanting blend of Senegal’s traditional percussion and griot singing with Afro-Cuban and indigenous dance flavors, has found in **Youssou N’Dour** both its enduring symbol and its hardest innovator.

N’Dour (born in 1959 in Dakar), a vocal artist with incredible range and poise who was dubbed “the West African Sinatra” by *New York Newsday* after one stirring concert in Manhattan’s Hammerstein Ballroom, has made *mbalax* famous throughout the world in more than twenty years of touring outside of Senegal with his band, The Super Etoile. However, N’Dour’s beginnings in Dakar were inauspicious. As a willowy teenager, N’Dour had to resort to hustling pirate gigs in the parking lots outside certain of the city’s dance clubs to which he and his band mates had little or no access. His distinctive voice eventually earned him a reputation as a boy wonder and the occasional live amateur-hour slot on the national radio. As early as age twelve, N’Dour was performing at neighborhood religious-ceremonial occasions in the hard-bitten Medina section of the city where he grew up as the first-born child of a pious auto mechanic, Elimane N’Dour, and his wife, Ndèye Sokhna Mboup, an occasional performer in the ceremonies of the Medina neighborhoods.

N’Dour solidified his leadership of The Super Etoile by 1979, and he soon thereafter launched an international career with the help of a Senegalese taxi drivers’ fraternal association in France and a small circle of supporters in England. The Super Etoile “plays with a joyous precision,” the *Los Angeles Times* noted, and the London *Guardian* has called their music “the finest example yet of the meeting of African and Western music: wholesome, urgent and thoughtful.” Admired by the likes of Peter Gabriel, Sting and

Wyckleff Jean, each of whom has collaborated with N’Dour on songs on N’Dour’s *Joko* (released in 2000), N’Dour, whom the *Village Voice*’s Robert Christgau says is “the one African moving inexorably toward the world-pop fusion everyone else theorizes about,” has captured the attention and the affection of a diverse, genuinely international audience, urging the delicious urban rhythms of *mbalax* beyond the territory of the world-music aficionados who first were hip to him.

As Gabriel, whose “In Your Eyes,” from the *SO* album features vocals by N’Dour, succinctly put it, “Youssou N’Dour is now one of the best-loved voices in the world.” Another commentator has said that N’Dour’s music “encourages you to think globally while dancing locally.” Yet for all of its openness toward music of other cultures, for all of N’Dour’s wit and cosmopolitan grace, *mbalax* remains an edgy, idiosyncratic music now so much a part of the Senegalese national identity as to be almost indistinguishable from it. N’Dour consequently finds himself nothing less than a cultural icon in his country and in the Senegalese and West African diaspora, including in the United States. Throughout an astonishing international career, N’Dour’s rootedness in Senegalese dance music and singing has remained the hallmark of his musical personality. Again, Christgau: “Crossover ambitions notwithstanding, ‘the protector of today’s Dakar Overgroove’ still turns out to be none other than the incomparable Youssou N’Dour.”

With his most recent album release, *Egypt* (Nonesuch 2004), N’Dour, ever the world music explorer, has turned his attention homeward with a musical document of his introspective pilgrimage to the heartland of Sufi (Muslim mystical) culture in his own country. *Egypt*, a 2004 Grammy Award winner for Best Contemporary World Music Album, leaps from Senegalese tradition to an outside source of musical inspiration, marrying Senegalese rhythmic, melodic and harmonic elements with arrangements from the repertoire of Egyptian and Arab orchestral music. Recording with traditional Senegalese instrumentalists and singers in Dakar and Fathy Salama’s sparkling Cairene orchestra, N’Dour has crafted a vehicle for some of the most moving vocal performances of his career.

Fathy Salama was born in Cairo, Egypt. He grew up listening to the family radio, which played the music of Oum Kalthoum, Abdelwahab and Farid el Attrash. Later, when he could tune the radio, he reached beyond the banks of the Nile to jazz and to a huge variety of traditional music from throughout the world.

Learning the piano from the age of six (he began by learning the roots of traditional Arabic music up to Oum Kalthoum, followed by the Western classics, such as Bartók and Tchaikovsky), he began playing in Cairo clubs at the age of thirteen. Soon the kid from Shobra, the “Harlem of Cairo,” made it to Europe and to New York to learn jazz with such great artists as Sun Ra, Barry Harris, Hal Galper, Malik Osman, Pat Patrick and Ossman Kareem.

Salama created many hits in Cairo during the 1980s, toured the world, and won two prizes for his

film soundtracks. With Sharkiat (his own group), Salama realized his dream of merging modern and traditional music, thus expressing both a message from his home country and his love of music. His music reflects his experience in the Orient and in Europe. His success in the music market plays a secondary role; first and foremost he wants to be understood, and so he works tirelessly on this bridge linking traditional and modern music from the Orient.

Today, this adventure takes Salama on new journeys, allowing him to perform in front of new audiences, as well as with other musicians. With a big smile under his beard, Salama dashes into the electronic music arena with his electronic performance ensemble Kouchari, then into sacred music with *Egypt*, the latest Youssou N’Dour album, which won a Grammy Award for Best Contemporary World Music Album.