



**PRESS RELEASE**

## **Orchestra Baobab 'Made in Dakar' (WCD078)**

**RELEASED 15<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2007**

**ORCHESTRA BAOBAB BIOGRAPHY (5<sup>th</sup> July. FINAL)**

### **THE ORCHESTRA BAOBAB STORY**

**Orchestra Baobab are one of Africa's great iconic bands, creators of one of the world's most sublime and truly distinctive pop sounds. Founded in 1970, Orchestra Baobab fused Afro-Cuban rhythm and Portuguese Creole melody with Congolese rumba, high life and a whole gamut of local styles – kickstarting a musical renaissance in their native Senegal, which turned the capital Dakar into one of the world's most vibrant musical cities. They produced more hits in less than a decade than other bands in a lifetime. While Baobab found themselves sidelined by the revolution they helped create and disbanded in 1985, a huge groundswell of international interest led to their triumphant reformation in 2001. Orchestra Baobab are still very much in business today.**

**'When I arrived in Senegal in 1968, there was only Cuban music,' says Orchestra Baobab's Togolese guitarist Barthélemy Attisso. 'Back home, we were listening to Nigerian high life and Congolese guitar music, but if you walked past a club in Dakar, you would swear there were Cubans playing inside. Yet they were all Senegalese!'**

If you want to get to grips with the Orchestra Baobab story, you have to get under the skin of their home town Dakar. Westernmost city on the African continent, former capital of France's vast West African empire, Dakar has earned a reputation as one of the world's most dynamic musical capitals, home to superstars like Youssou N'Dour, Baaba Maal and Cheikh Lô who have given Senegal perhaps the highest musical profile of any country in Africa. Yet in 1970, when Orchestra Baobab were formed, Dakar was still, in many ways like a French city, a tropical Marseille of art deco apartment blocks, showpiece modernist architecture and pavement cafes. And musically, the city was a backwater.

Neighbouring Mali and Guinea had taken a socialist path, developing new pop identities, based on the rediscovery of traditional sounds, from the 1950s onwards. But Senegal had maintained strong links with France, and its nightclubs were still

dominated by the afro-cuban sounds that had been a massive influence in Africa since the 1940s.

But just a short distance from the Plateau, the airy European district, lay the Medina, Dakar's original native quarter – home to Senegal's leading ensemble, the mighty Star Band. And beyond it stretched an ever-expanding sprawl of poverty-stricken, shanty-town suburbs known as the 'quartiers populaires'.

Now 65, percussionist and singer Balla Sidibe is a dignified, avuncular figure with a rich, deep voice. While he wasn't the original leader of Orchestra Baobab (there wasn't one), he was there from the beginning – present through every twist and turn of the band's chequered career – and he was the one who did most to keep the spirit of Orchestra Baobab alive during its darkest hours.

When our story starts, Sidibe was just one of a pool of semi-professional musicians who served Dakar's nightclubs, moving from band to band in search of better pay and conditions, but rarely achieving more than a local profile. A former gendarme and sometime paratrooper, Sidibe had played in bands in his home town in the Casamance, Senegal's southern region. Having come to Dakar with the intention of joining the elite presidential guard, he soon found himself embroiled in the music scene, alongside another young singer from the Casamance, a language student named Rudy Gomis.

'We were young, and looking for excitement,' says Sidibe. 'We played in the Café Palladium every Monday once the resident orchestra stopped playing. But we weren't aware that we were preparing our musical careers. We just played to have a few francs in our pockets. We weren't married. We had no responsibilities. Life was beautiful.'

By 1970, Sidibe and Gomis had graduated through the Standard Orchestra to the country's leading ensemble – the Star Band of the Miami Nightclub. Founded by the club's owner, Ibra 'Le Grand' Kasse, to celebrate Senegalese independence in 1960, the Star Band had become a school through which every musician of any worth passed, and the crucible for the gradual Africanisation of Senegalese music. Kasse encouraged the musicians to sing in their own languages, to play traditional songs and indigenous instruments such as the tama (or talking drum).

Sidibe transposed Cuban standards into the rolling cadences of his native Mandinka; Gomis specialised in lilting, melancholy ballads in Portuguese Creole. While Gomis soon tired of Kasse's dictatorial ways and left, Sidibe stayed on.

'Ibra Kasse was a perfectionist. We would arrive at 9pm, and he would give us the music we were to play at midnight. There was no discussion. If you sang out of tune he would simply cut you off. It sometimes made us very angry, but it allowed us to master certain things. Without him we could never have come so far.'

Situated in the proletarian Medina, the Miami was a typical African nightclub, lively, populist and slightly seedy. But up the road in the heart of the European quarter, a new club was opening with a very different feel, which was to have huge impact on Senegalese popular culture.

Created in 1970 by a group of young businessmen and politicians as an exclusive meeting place near the country's National Assembly, the Baobab Club quickly established itself as Dakar's chicest nightspot. Decorated by Senegal's top artists, it had a bar in the form of the trunk of a baobab – the majestic tree of the savannah.

Veteran Star Band saxman Baro Ndiaye was brought in to provide the music, and he quickly poached his former band's most promising younger members: Sidibe, Gomis, and a young Togolese law student named Barthélemy Attisso, who had taken up music to pay his course fees, but who was emerging as one of the city's most talented guitarists.

'The Baobab was beautiful,' says Sidibe. 'There was a strict dress code: a suit and tie or full traditional robes. You had to be somebody to even get in there. We musicians realised we had to bring the kind of quality that people expected in a place like that.'

The fact that none of the three were Dakar insiders was highly significant in the evolution of the Baobab sound. Sidibe and Gomis's husky voices worked superbly together, their deep-velvet harmonies redolent of the tropical atmosphere of their native Casamance. Attisso, meanwhile, was steeped in Ghanaian high life and Congolese music, and was evolving his own idiosyncratic version of the florid Congolese guitar style of Franco and Dr Nico, filtered through influences as diverse as Wes Montgomery, BB King and Carlos Santana.

In contrast to these warm, rich, lyrical flavours, Laye Mboup, another crucial early member, brought the starker, neo-Islamic sounds of the Dakar region. A griot – traditional praise singer – working with the National Instrumental Ensemble, he sang entirely in Wolof, the lingua franca of Dakar, which was becoming increasingly important as an indicator of national identity. Mboup's use of the arcane language of the griots, combined with his personal charisma and sex appeal added greatly to Baobab's cachet – particularly with women. His soaring voice was heard to compelling effect on the smouldering 'Nijaay' from their first LP, released on the club's own label in 1972. He died tragically in a car accident in 1974.

As Dakar's elite danced till dawn with their soignée girlfriends, packing the club out five nights a week, Orchestra Baobab became established as Senegal's top group. And as older members Ndiaye and original bass player Sidath Ly left, the group's classic line-up was gradually established. Rhythm guitarist Latfi Benjaloune was of Moroccan parentage, bassist Charlie Ndiaye was from the Casamance, while drummer and percussionist Mountaga Kouyate hailed from eastern Senegal.

Singer Ndiouga Dieng, in contrast, was very Dakar – another Wolof griot, brought in to replace Laye Mboup during his absences with the National Ensemble. He introduced Thione Seck, a teenager with a wonderfully luminous, yearning voice. Medoune Dialo, another mainstay of this period, had the rich, vibrato-laden tone of a Cuban rumbero, but with an unmistakably nasal Senegalese tinge. Even more crucial to Baobab's sound and image were the smokily rhapsodic tone and wayward charisma of rangy tenor saxman, Issa Cissoko, whose family originally from Mali.

Yet while each member brought his individual style and charisma, it all blended into one unmistakable sound. Whatever the language or the rhythm, the most compelling feature of any Baobab song was the warm, lilting and fabulously melodic Baobab sound.

Baobab's heyday at their eponymous home club lasted five glorious years, during which they also toured in Cameroon, Tunisia and Guinea. The poor sales of a series of five LPs recorded in one marathon session & pressed by the club's owners in America, led to bad feeling between band and employers. In 1975, Orchestra Baobab accepted an offer to move to the Jandeer nightclub at a vastly increased salary. But things didn't work out as they'd hoped, and they moved to the Balafoon – run by a Madame Michel – before decamping to Paris in 1978. Their six month stay produced two highly rated albums, recorded with up and coming producer Ibrahima Sylla, 'Baobab à Paris, Vols 1 & 2', which included the perennial favourite 'On Verra Ça'. Yet it proved an unsatisfactory experience and they returned to Senegal out of pocket and without a club residency.

Baobab were soon ensconced at the Ngalam, and proved so successful that the club had to be rebuilt to accommodate the crowds they attracted. Much of the band's best material dates from this period. Their 1981 album 'Mohammadou Bamba' features stunning vocal performances from Thione Seck on the title track and Ndiouga Dieng on 'Bulmamin'. Yet all was not well with Orchestra Baobab. They couldn't shake off the old nightclub ethos where musicians came and went as the mood took them, and the personnel was never entirely stable.

Baobab's 1982 album 'Ken Dou Werente' included many of their most famous songs, 'Coumba', 'Ledi Njemme Mbodj' and 'Utru Horas' – Rudy Gomis's magnificent, slowburning lament on the civil war then taking place in his native Casamance. Yet while the album should have been their defining masterpiece, it went largely ignored.

Orchestra Baobab had barely noticed it, but the balance of Senegalese society was changing. Out in the quartiers populaires, the sprawling, impoverished suburbs, which had grown vastly in size over the decade of Baobab's supremacy, a pop revolution was underway. And the focus for these new developments was the band's old alma mater, the Star Band. While their old ensemble had been temporarily put out of business by the rise of Orchestra Baobab, it had revived with an influx of new talent, including an extraordinary young singer named Youssou N'Dour. In 1979 these young

turks left to form Etoile de Dakar, a band whose arrival had an impact equivalent to that of punk in the West.

While the new generation drew on Baobab's freewheeling, pan-African approach, they pushed one element right to the fore of their sound – the Wolof rhythms of Dakar. The hard-cracking sabar drums and the tama talking drum became the signature sounds of a new genre – *mbalax*. While *mbalax* rhythms had been present in Baobab's music – *mbalax* was in fact what Laye Mboup had been doing with them ten years before – they had been subsumed into the gracious flow of the Baobab sound, played not on sabar drums, but on afro-cuban congas.

Charlie Ndiaye sums up the times: Sometimes I think the success of *mbalax* was perhaps linked to the phenomenon of urbanisation. People left the villages and came to the capital and those people didn't know how to dance salsa properly. Not even R&B. But the sabar was easy to dance for them. And it was a women's thing. They loved it and with that, things were decided. Where women go, men will go too, especially in matters of dancing. Women went to dance the sabar at Youssou's club and the men followed them.

Faced with dwindling audiences, Baobab had to decide whether to adapt musically to the new changes or simply call it a day. 'We decided against following fashion,' says Attisso. 'That meant our gradual decline, but we accepted that in order to protect our originality, our identity.'

Thione Seck had already left to form his own highly successful *mbalax* outfit, Attisso got a job at the university and gradually the other members left, till there was only the original vocal duo Balla Sidibe and Rudy Gomis with bass player Charlie Ndiaye. An attempt to forge an updated version of the Baobab sound with a group of younger musicians failed to find an audience, and finally Sidibe was left as sole custodian of the name Orchestra Baobab.

Yet the late 1980s, when Orchestra Baobab were at the lowest point of their popularity in Senegal, was the very period when their music was being discovered on the burgeoning Western world music scene. While the likes of Youssou N'Dour and Baaba Maal were trying to break into the Western mainstream, Baobab's earthily melodic sound struck a chord with listeners discovering African music for the first time. Baobab's neglected 1982 album 'Ken Dou Werente' became a sought-after cult-classic. In 1989, it was re-released to huge acclaim by World Circuit under the title 'Pirate's Choice'.

Yet while Orchestra Baobab were now established among Western connoisseurs as icons of the African dance-band era, many of the original members were struggling. Sidibe, Ndiaye and Latfi Benjaloune eked out a precarious living playing in hotel foyers, while Gomis was running an African language school for foreign aid workers and Attisso had long since returned to his native Togo.

World Circuit's Nick Gold had long dreamed of reuniting Orchestra Baobab. Incidentally, the band's subtle blend of the African and latin was one of the

main reasons behind the proposed meeting of Africans & Cubans convened by World Circuit in Havana in 1996 - a project which eventually became the multi million selling BVSC phenomenon. Talks about reforming the band had begun in 1997, by which time the cultural climate in Senegal had radically changed.

The novelty had long since gone out of mbalax, and a more open and pluralistic attitude prevailed. Indeed, among those closely involved in Baobab's revival was Youssou N'Dour, who, it turned out, had been a huge Baobab fan all along. 'They had such a clean sound,' he says. 'And they were pan-African. We're ready for this approach to come back. We've put up too many barriers in our music. Young people understand now how important those years – the 1970s – were for our music. So they're ready to listen.'

It was agreed that Baobab should appear at a special Dakar concert at London's Barbican in May 2001 – on the proviso that guitarist Attisso would take part. Attisso was eventually tracked down to Togo, where he was running a successful commercial law practice, though he hadn't touched a guitar in 15 years. Thierno Kouyate – sometime Youssou N'Dour sideman and brother of Baobab drummer Mountaga – was recruited on alto sax, while Assane Mboup, an up and coming star of Dakar's mbalax scene, fulfilled the role played by his hero Laye Mboup.

The Barbican concert provoked ecstatic responses from the Western media. Far from crassly modernising their music, as many fans had feared, the group looked and sounded as though they had stepped through a 1970s time-warp. 'Pirates Choice' was re-released as a remastered double album with additional rare tracks, and a year of euphoric international touring followed. Finally, in June 2002, Orchestra Baobab made a triumphant return to Senegal to coincide with the release of a new album, 'Specialist in All Styles', their first in nearly twenty years. Comprising lovingly crafted reworkings of some of their best-loved songs, the album was co-produced by Youssou N'Dour and Nick Gold and featured cameos from N'Dour and the great Buena Vista crooner Ibrahim Ferrer.

Orchestra Baobab won two awards at the BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music 2003 – in the Africa category and for Album of the Year – gained a Grammy nomination, were the subjects of VH1 Special and took part in the highly prestigious Nobel Peace Prize Concert in Oslo.

Following on from a series of international tours, the band recently took up a Dakar club residency for the first time in nearly twenty years, playing hugely popular Saturday night sessions at the Just 4 U club. Here they began developing material for 'Made in Dakar', an album that takes them back to their lo-fi roots in the clubs and streets of their home town. 'Made in Dakar' presents a string of beautifully crafted new songs alongside reworked gems from their 20 album discography, some of which date back to their apprentice days in the Star Band.

'Made in Dakar' squares the circle on a band who suffered a sixteen year career hiatus, but for whom the flame never quite went out. As guitarist Barthélemy Attisso puts it, 'We were very anxious before the Barbican concert, but when we heard the strength of the applause, we heaved a sigh of relief. And that's how the adventure started again. We had just been on standby for a moment. The Baobab is a strong tree. Even if you cut it down, it will keep on growing. So when you speak of Orchestra Baobab, you know that we're not the kind of band to disappear quietly.'