



Medoune Diallo, Gnonnas Pedro & Nicolas Menheim of Africando in 1996

AFRICANDO

Philip Sweeney looks back at the incredible career of salsa fusion band Africando, the brainchild of the visionary Senegalese producer, Ibrahima Sylla

When the first Africando recording hit the world's CD racks in 1992 it was a dramatic return to popularity for a style that had long been endemic to both Africa and the Latin world. From the 1930s, all the Latin styles fashionable in Havana, New York and Paris were equally so across Africa, not surprisingly, since Latin/Caribbean music is derived

in large part from African roots anyway. What was the song composed by the great Congolese musician Joseph Kabasele to celebrate the birth of the new nation of Zaire? 'Indépendance Cha Cha'. All of the African stars of the 60s and 70s sang in Spanish as well as their own languages, from Salif Keita to Sam Mangwana, and the top Latin bands like Cuba's Orquesta Aragón and the

luminaries of the New York Fania stable toured Africa to ecstatic receptions. By the 90s, though, younger listeners had lost interest, preferring speeded-up *soukous*, *mbalax* or strident Mande funk. The aging members of Latin-influenced bands such as Senegal's Orchestra Baobab were retired or working in lawyers' offices or grocery stores, still years away from the rediscovery awaiting them. Though a handful of bands such as Super Cayor de Dakar kept the flame gloriously alive, they were far from the top ranks of show business.

One extremely influential Latin fan had not abandoned the genre however. Ibrahima Sylla, the record producer son of a high dignitary of West African Islam, nurtured his vast collection of classic Latin vinyl while churning out a stream of successful discs on his Syllart

label and travelling constantly between Dakar, Bamako, Abidjan, Kinshasa and Paris.

Sitting in his office in the Barbès-Rochechouart *quartier* of Paris at the time, Sylla explained his concept for Africando. "I remember going to see Johnny Pacheco in Dakar Stadium with my father when I was 14," he told me. "I've always loved real classic salsa. So do many of my friends, and they persuaded me it was time to try and recreate it in Africa."

Sylla approached two veterans of the Dakar music scene, Pape Seck and Medoune Diallo, former vocalists respectively of the Star Band, responsible for Africanising the percussion of Senegalese popular music in the 60s, and Orchestra Baobab, Star Band's later rivals. As arranger, Sylla brought on board his old associate, the Malian flautist, arranger and bandleader Boncana Maïga. Maïga had deepened his knowledge of Latin music during a long study period at a music conservatory in Havana, benefitting from Cuban aid to newly independent Mali, where he'd founded what is still the only fully African musical group of Cuba, Las Maravillas de Mali.

This caste of heavyweight talents made the African side of Africando impressive enough, but Sylla's stroke of genius was the thoroughness and brilliance of the Latin side of the equation. Sylla wanted top US Latin musicians from the international cradle of salsa, New York. The task of recruiting was entrusted to Maïga's brother-in-law, the singer Ronnie Baro, formerly of the top NY *charanga* band Orquesta Broadway. For the first recording, Baro enrolled a stellar caste of 19 crack session players, including Broadway's former leader Eddy Zervigon and Sergio George, himself an ace salsa producer and arranger, on keyboards.

Africando's repertoire initially gravitated to the fertile territory of songs that had already undergone transmutation from Latino to African, and sometimes back again. The nine tracks for the debut album included Senegalese classics such as Medoune Diallo's lovely old Baobab romance 'Gouye Gui', which promptly became a favourite with the ladies of Dakar a second time round, or Latin hits such as the Gran Combo of Puerto Rico's 'Eliminacion de los Feos', which had acquired a Wolof lyric and transmuted into a praise song, 'Doley Mbolo'. *Africando Vol 1: Trovador's* combination of soulful African

voices and hot salsa instrumentation, either in charanga form, with violins and flutes, or brass-led conjunto mode, was an instant hit. *Africando Vol 2: Tierra Tradicional*, the following year, essentially more of the same, gave birth to a huge hit, 'Yay Boy', which Pape Seck had adapted from an Ismael Rivera number. It took on a new life, not only a hit for Africando but covered by the Orquesta Aragón no less, remixed into a dancefloor killer by the Colombian DJ brothers behind the *Mascara Salsera* albums.

By *Gombo Salsa* the success of the band enabled Sylla and Maïga to draw on increasingly diverse and adventurous ingredients, which they did with unerring taste and expertise. The absence of Pape Seck, who died just before the recording, was compensated for by the great singer and character Gnonnas Pedro from Benin, and guest appearances from Congolese legend Tabu Ley Rochereau and Guinean

star Sékouba Bambino Diabaté. The salsa contingent was enhanced with the presence of masters such as Rudy Calzado, José Fajardo and Oscar Hernández, and Roger Shoubou Eugene from Tabou Combo brought a new Haitian lilt to the party.

And so things have continued over the subsequent 18 years and eight albums, a constant replenishment of new guests, while the ranks of the older generation have thinned.

It was shortly after the release of *Viva Africando* that Sylla succumbed to a long illness, after fighting on with the complicated recording project for several years, slipping out of his hospital bed towards the end to sit in on sessions. The new record is another triumph, both artistically and commercially. After a hiatus, Sylla's eldest daughter Binetou abandoned doctoral studies in African history at the Sorbonne to take over the running of the label and the organisation of Africando's 2014 tour, which began with a typically high-octane performance at the Vic-Fezensac Tempo Latino festival in France. "Africando's audience tends to be the 35-plus age group," Binetou tells me, sitting in the new Syllart office down the road from the first. "So I want to keep up my father's work in always seeking out the best new talent." She was last heard from between Bamako and the Notting Hill carnival, doing just that, while planning Africando's 2015 world tour. ♦

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BEST ALBUMS



Africando Vol 1: Trovador (Sterns, 1993)

Both of Africando's early albums are worth having for historical importance as well as excellence. The first release showcased the perfect combination of soulful African voices and hot salsa instrumentation and contains high points 'Doley Mbolo' and 'Gouye Gui'.



Africando Vol 2: Tierra Tradicional (Sterns, 1994)

The second Africando release features more of the strong music-making of the first volume and is unmissable for the magnificent 'Yay Boy'.



Mandali (Sterns, 2000)

The fifth record finds the band on scorching form, mesmeric piano *tumbaos* and choruses, razor-sharp brass, terrific bass and percussion. Stand-out tracks include 'Betece', the exciting debut of Amadou Ballaké who later became a key member, and Salif Keita's Latinised version of his old Les Ambassadeurs' hit 'Ntoman'.



Viva Africando (Sterns, 2013)

The most recent album and one of the best, spearheaded by four great tracks – a hypnotic version of the Super Cayor de Dakar song 'Xam Sa Bop'; a tribute to the late Gnonnas Pedro, 'Es Para Ti Gnonnas'; a lovely French Haitian number by Shoubou Eugene, and a delightful piece of Congolese rumba-salsa guitar solo. Reviewed in #96.

IF YOU LIKE AFRICANDO, THEN TRY:

Various Artists



African Salsa (Sterns/Earthworks 1998)

This is a compilation, mainly from Senegal, that features great tracks from the splendid Super Cayor de Dakar with their soulful electric guitar sound, and Pape Fall, another stalwart of the genre.

Kékélé



Kinavana (Sterns 2006)

Another Ibrahima Sylla production, because nobody did it better, this is the third album by a group of veteran Congolese and Latin musicians revisiting the Cuban classics. It is worth buying for the beautiful rendition of Portabales' 'El Carretero' by M'Bilia Bel as 'Ba Kristo'.