

ANGELIQUE KIDJO

“OYO”

Angelique Kidjo digs into her roots with her new Razor & Tie release, *OYO*. Roots that reach far beyond her West African homeland of Benin, because Grammy Award winning singer, dancer and songwriter Kidjo is a definitive 21st century world artist. Her art roves across boundaries, genres and ethnicities, finding the connections that link musical forms from every part of the world, while still bonding closely with her own traditions.

The songs on *OYO* embrace rhythm & blues, soul music, jazz, and Beninese melodies, as well as a trio of her own original works. Growing up in the port city of Cotonou, raised by parents who honored many forms of creativity, she was exposed to a far-ranging array of music and dance. West Africa, in the '60s, had an omnivorous appetite for international pop music, and Kidjo was intensely familiar with the music of James Brown, Otis Redding and Carlos Santana, as well as Miriam Makeba and Bella Bellow before she reached her teens.

Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up," which she sings in a duet with multiple Grammy Award-winning singer John Legend epitomizes her affection for that music. Chosen, says Kidjo, "by my daughter," the song illustrates her skill at finding both the timelessness and the contemporary qualities in a song. In 1970, Mayfield sang "Move On Up" as a rallying call to underprivileged American youth. In 2010, Kidjo and Legend, backed by a spirited chorus and riffing horns, sing "Move On Up" as a call to African youth to direct the fate of their continent.

But the closing piece she selected for the album traces to even earlier memories. Kidjo was only six years old the first time she sang in public, and the song was "Atcha Houn," a traditional melody she describes as "a kind of parade music people sing when they gather together. I sang it at my Mom's theatre company," she recalls. "My Mom had to push me on stage to do it, but that's when my addiction to singing, and to the stage, too, got started."

Kidjo was delighted to have the superb guitarist/singer, Lionel Loueke – also a native of Benin – backing her on "Atcha Houn," as well as numerous other songs on the CD. Their friendship reaches back to their youth. "His brother was in my class," she says. "Lionel understood exactly what I was trying to do when I told him I wanted to get into the music that influenced me as a child."

That music – the music from her youth – is the theme of the album's mesmerizing tracks. In the case of her renderings of four songs from iconic American pop music figures, each is a display of Kidjo's ability to, as she says, "bring the music of Benin" into her interpretations. Carlos Santana's "Samba Pa Ti" emerges as a captivating ballad spotlighting the always-gripping trumpet of Roy Hargrove. On "Cold Sweat," featuring members of the Afro Beat band, Antibalas, the horn-heavy riffs and call and response back-up singing frame a driving vocal from Kidjo that would surely have been a turn-on for James Brown. She remembers hearing Otis Redding's "I Got Dreams To Remember" when she was young, and her brother telling her to "shut up" when she sang it, saying "You don't know the words." But Kidjo prevailed and sings it with a quality of soul that is utterly transcendent. Another old familiar tune, Aretha Franklin's "Baby I Love You," begins with percussion and voices before Kidjo and Dianne Reeves dig into a stirring series of Franklin-inspired diva exchanges.

In the years after Kidjo's initial exposure to the American pop music that influenced her as a child her career escalated in a steadily rising arc. Heard on national radio as a teen-ager, she moved to Paris in the early '80s, when the political situation in Benin became untenable for an independent creative artist. Initially active in the jazz community, she gradually expanded her interests and, by the '90s had become a major international artist.

Over the past decade, she has used her visibility to support a far-reaching collection of advocacy groups, from UNICEF (for whom she is a Goodwill Ambassador) to her own Batonga Foundation (providing educational aid to young African girls). In September, 2009, she joined forces with UNICEF in a campaign to eliminate tetanus. A portion of proceeds for downloads

of the song, "You Can Count On Me," will provide tetanus vaccines to pregnant women and mothers. Another haunting song, "Agbalagba," was originally penned for and offered as a free download with the New York Times best-selling book *Say You're One Of Them* by African writer Uwem Akpan. The book, recently featured in Oprah Winfrey's book club consists of five stories, each written from the point of view of a child in Africa. Written with her longtime collaborator Jean Hebrail in the Yoruba language, "Agbalagba" roughly translates to "the ancestors," as the song pertains to young peoples' responsibility to those that came before them. "I immediately felt a bond with Uwem. The second we met, it was as if we had always known each other. I'm proud to contribute a song to his beautiful collection of stories."

But Kidjo has never lost her African musical connections, the linkages of which are present in several traditionally-oriented pieces. The dramatic, call-like melody of "Zelie" was composed by Togo's Bella Bellow, and sung by Kidjo with articulate, theatrical intensity. The lullaby "Lakutsn Llanga," delivered in a sweet-toned interpretation, recalls her admiration for the late Miriam Makeba. "Mbube," performed with a spirited rhythmic propulsion and also associated with Makeba (and Harry Belafonte) is, says Kidjo, "the original version of 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight,' before it had French or English lyrics." And John Barry's music from the Sidney Pollack film, "Out of Africa," is sung with passionate intensity. "I had to sing it," she explains, "because the music was so perfectly done."

Kidjo's original songs illuminate the emotional range of her creativity. She describes the spirited "Kelele" as a "High Life from Ghana," and goes on to add that "Everywhere I go in the world I want people to remember that they are human beings and to remember that if we don't have fun, everything we do will have no taste." Traces of Brazil course through the lyrical, floating rhythms of "Afia," written with guitarist/singer Vinicius Cantuaria.

Two other items further illustrate her open-minded receptivity to different forms of music. "Petite Fleur" is a classic jazz piece written by soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet, and a favorite song of Kidjo's father, who died in the spring of 2008. "I had to include something to remember him," says Kidjo. "He produced my first concert, and he stood up against those people who said 'You should never let your child become an entertainer'." She invests the French lyrics with the intimate warmth of loving memory.

"Dil Main Chuppa Ke Pyar Ka," a very different song, may be the most unusual track on the CD. Beginning with the sound of an Indian flute, it switches quickly into a jaunty rhythm combining African High Life with the spirit of Bollywood film music. Its source is an Indian musical film called *Aan* that Kidjo saw in her youth. "I loved it, and I never forgot one of the songs," she explains. "But it took my brother, who flies to India for his job, to find it for me. I sent him an MP-3 of what I remembered and – incredibly – he found the film and the song."

Given the stylistic range of the selections, the music for OYO was recorded in an amazingly short period of time. "In four days, with the help of Christian McBride on upright bass, Kendrick Scott on drums and Thiokho Diagne on percussion," says Kidjo, "we did 16 songs. But it wasn't hard, because I have so much music in my brain. It was there, it was dominant, it was ready to be expressed, and I urgently wanted to express it."

And express it she did, with the same kind of charismatic life force that Kidjo expresses in her stage performances. Asked about her seemingly boundless enthusiasm, drive and creativity, she simply laughs and says, "Without challenges in life, we get bored. Me, I just always keep in mind what my grandmother used to say, 'You rest when you die'."

- Don Heckman