

Composer-pianist-bandleader **Omar Sosa** was born in 1965 in Camagüey, Cuba's largest inland city. At age eight, Omar began studying percussion and marimba at the music conservatory in Camagüey; in Havana, as a teenager, he took up piano at the prestigious Escuela Nacional de Música, and completed his formal education at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. Among his influences, Omar cites traditional Afro-Cuban music, European classical composers (including Chopin, Bartok, and Satie), Monk, Coltrane, Parker, Oscar Peterson, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Chucho Valdés, and the pioneering Cuban jazz group Irakere. Moving in 1993 to Ecuador, Omar immersed himself in the folkloric traditions of Esmeraldas, the northwest coast region whose African heritage includes the distinctive marimba tradition. He relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1995, and soon invigorated the Latin jazz scene with his adventurous writing and percussive style.

Annually performing upwards of 100 concerts on six continents, Omar has appeared in venues as diverse as the Blue Note (New York, Milan, and Tokyo), Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Arts, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Walker Art Center, the Getty Center, London's Barbican and Queen Elizabeth Hall, Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall, and Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt; festivals including Monterey Jazz, JVC Jazz, Montreal Jazz, Marciac Jazz, North Sea Jazz, Helsinki, Grenoble Jazz, Montreux Jazz, Naples Jazz, Ravenna Jazz, Roma Jazz, Spoleto, WOMAD, and Cape Town International Jazz; and universities on several continents, including a visiting artist fellowship at Princeton University in March 2008, and a visiting artist residency at Dartmouth College in April 2008. Omar will return to Dartmouth College for a second artist residency in February 2011.

Mr. Sosa received a lifetime achievement award from the Smithsonian Associates in Washington, DC in 2003 for his contribution to the development of Latin jazz in the United States. He has received two nominations from the BBC Radio 3 World Music Awards, in 2004 and 2006, both in the 'Americas' category. In 2003 Omar Sosa received the Afro-Caribbean Jazz Album of the Year Award from the Jazz Journalists Association in NYC for his recording *Sentir*; and a nomination from the Jazz Journalists Association for Latin Jazz Album of the Year in 2005 for his recording *Mulatos*.

Omar Sosa received an orchestral commission from Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and the Oakland Easy Bay Symphony, supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the MAP Fund (Multi-Arts Production Fund). During 2001-2002, Mr. Sosa composed a 45-minute work in three movements for symphony orchestra entitled, *From Our Mother*, which received its world premiere in January 2003 by the Oakland East Bay Symphony under the direction of Michael Morgan. In 2009, Mr. Sosa received an orchestral commission from the city of Girona, Spain and the Festival de Músicas Religiosas y del Mundo de Girona. The 20-minute work for symphony orchestra, entitled *Oda Africana*, received its world premiere in July 2009 by the Jove Orquesta Athenea, conducted by Lluís Caballeria. Also in 2009, Mr. Sosa received a commission from the Barcelona Jazz Festival to present a tribute to Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue* recording, featuring Afro-Cuban interpretations of the seminal Davis work on the

occasion of its 50th anniversary. The project was performed at L'Auditori in Barcelona in November 2009.

In 2008, Omar Sosa received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in conjunction with Yerba Buena Gardens (San Francisco) and the San Francisco International Arts Festival to present a new Omar Sosa Quintet featuring American roots vocalist Tim Eriksen. This collaboration resulted in the 2009 CD release on Half Note Records, *Across The Divide*, recorded live at the Blue Note Jazz Club in NYC. The project received a GRAMMY nomination for Best Contemporary World Music Album, and a Latin GRAMMY nomination for Best Instrumental Album, both in 2009.

For May 2011, Mr. Sosa has received further funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in conjunction with the Jazz School in Berkeley, California and the San Francisco International Arts Festival, to present a series of workshops with noted Latin jazz percussionist, educator and historian, John Santos, as well as a Festival performance in San Francisco with his primary touring ensemble, Afreecanos Quartet.

Mr. Sosa's recording career began in 1997 with the release of his first solo piano recording, *Omar* on the Oakland, California-based record label, Ot Records, and has continued with the release of 22 CDs as a leader, resulting in five GRAMMY nominations. These include a 2002 GRAMMY nomination and Latin GRAMMY nomination for Best Latin Jazz Album for the CD *Sentir*; a 2005 GRAMMY nomination for Best Latin Jazz Album for the CD *Mulatos*, featuring Cuban saxophone and clarinet master, Paquito D'Rivera; and the two nominations for *Across The Divide* in 2009. Omar works with an array of African, Arabic, European, Indian, Latin, and North American musicians. Among his many associations are drummers and percussionists Steve Argüelles, Julio Barretto, Mino Cinelu, Miguel "Angá" Diaz, Marque Gilmore, Trilok Gurtu, Marcos Ilukán, Ramiro Musotto, Gustavo Ovalles, Pancho Quinto, Adam Rudolph, John Santos, Carlos "Patato" Valdés, and Orestes Vilató; singers Tim Eriksen, Lázaro Galarraga, Marta Galarraga, El Houssaine Kili, Xiomara Laugart, María Márquez, Will Power, Mola Sylla, the Tenores San Gavino de Oniferi - Sardinia, and Dhafer Youssef; trumpeter Paolo Fresu; and woodwind masters Paquito D'Rivera, Luis Depestre, Leandro Saint-Hill, and Mark Weinstein.

Another recent work is *Tales From The Earth* (Otá Records, 2009), led by flute player Mark Weinstein. The recording presents a thoroughly cosmopolitan outlook rooted in the rhythmic intensity and improvisatory, call-and-response spirit of Africa writ large. It features artists of Cuban, Haitian, West African, European, African American, and Jewish American heritage, with a shared commitment to the communal, celebratory character that embodies the expressive riches of Mother Africa and features Omar on marimba and vibraphone, which he studied in Cuba's conservatories before switching to piano.

A major new project bears the fruit of Omar's first big band collaboration, working with composer Jaques Morelenbaum and Hamburg's North German Radio (NDR) Bigband. Recorded in 2007 and 2008 at the NDR studios in Hamburg, it features Jaques Morelenbaum

arrangements of material from the Omar Sosa CDs *Spirit Of The Roots* (1999), *Bembón* (2000), and *Afreecanos* (2008). Jaques Morelenbaum has arranged for Antonio Carlos Jobim, Gal Costa, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and Cesária Evora, among many others. Omar Sosa-NDR Bigband performances were held at the Banlieues Bleues festival in Paris and the NDR studios in March 2010; and will be presented again by the Barcelona Jazz Festival in November 2010 at that city's famous Palau Música Catalana, with Jaques Morelenbaum conducting.

New performing pursuits include a trio with noted Italian trumpet player Paolo Fresu and master Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu. Notable video productions include *Light In The Sky*, filmed in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil and directed by Aitor Echeverria (from the 2008 CD release *Afreecanos*), and the recent DVD release of Omar Sosa's 2007 Java Jazz Festival performance in Jakarta, Indonesia.

For film and television, Omar Sosa collaborated in 2008 on the soundtrack for the PBS documentary, *The Judge and the General*; and completed the soundtrack for the 2010 film *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, produced by Fado Filmes in Lisbon, Portugal, and based on Mia Couto's famous novel about Mozambique. Mr. Sosa also contributed a musical excerpt to the 2006 Andy Garcia film, *The Lost City*.

In 2011, Omar released his fifth solo piano recording, *Calma*, which received a Latin GRAMMY nomination. Featuring Omar's unique and original approach to the genre, the CD is comprised of 13 solo piano improvisations, fusing stylistic elements of jazz, classical new music, ambient, and electronica.

In January 2012, Omar collaborated with celebrated Italian trumpet and flugelhorn player, Paolo Fresu, on the release of *Alma*. The CD features guest cello contributions on four tracks by the masterful Brazilian conductor, arranger, producer, and cellist, Jaques Morelenbaum. Produced by Paolo Fresu and Omar Sosa for Mr. Fresu's label imprint, Tuk Music, the compositions are written by Omar Sosa and Paolo Fresu, except for *Under African Skies*, a gentle version of the popular track from the Paul Simon CD, *Graceland*.

Omar Sosa's next studio album, "*Eggun: The Afri-Lectric Experience*", is set for release worldwide in February 2013. *Eggun*, in the West African spiritual practice of Ifa and its various expressions throughout the African Diaspora, are the spirits of those who have gone before us, both in our personal families and those who serve as our spiritual guides.

The Omar Sosa *Afri-Lectric Experience* began as a commission from the Barcelona Jazz Festival in 2009. The assignment: to compose and produce a tribute performance to Miles Davis' classic *Kind Of Blue* recording on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. Inspired by various musical elements and motifs from *Kind Of Blue*, Omar wrote a suite of music honoring the spirit of freedom in Davis' seminal work. Featuring trumpet and two saxophones, *Eggun* provides a medium for musical elements from Africa to shape and develop the music, and the resulting

jazz textures are further enriched by the subtle and expressive use of electronic elements. At the heart of the recording is the spirit of Mother Africa.

Following the success of the Kind Of Blue commission, Omar began to include the new arrangements into the repertoire of his regular touring ensemble, resulting in the creation of the The Afri-Lectric Experience. The featured horn players are Joo Kraus on trumpet (from Germany), Leandro Saint-Hill on saxophones and flute (from Cuba), and Peter Apfelbaum on saxophones and percussion (from U.S.A.). Omar's longtime rhythm section of Marque Gilmore on drums (from U.S.A.) and Childo Tomas on electric bass (from Mozambique) create the foundation. Special guests on the project include Lionel Loueke on guitars (from Benin), Marvin Sewell on guitars (from U.S.A.), Pedro Martinez on Afro-Cuban percussion (from Cuba), John Santos on percussion (from U.S.A.) and Gustavo Ovalles on Afro-Venezuelan percussion (from Venezuela). The CD was recorded primarily in Brooklyn, NY.

The griot is a phenomenon dear to fans of West African music, defenders of African civilization and professors of ethnomusicology. Tomes have been written about this West African bard who's born not made and the verbal treasury of history, poetry and eloquence that flows through his or her veins. Commentators have marvelled at the bewildering range of the griot's potential skills and callings – poet, historian, musician, archivist, negotiator, diplomat, wedding-organiser, instrument maker, peacemaker, herald and more. Outsiders feel stirrings of awe when they hear about the 'chain' of griot lore, orally transmitted from father to son, or father to daughter (even mother to son and daughter) down through the generations and centuries, even millennia.

But a griot is also human and his story isn't just phenomenological – it's personal. It's about clans and families and where you have clans and families you will also inevitably get feuds, misunderstandings and revolts of some kind of another. And it's where the phenomenal and the personal intersect that you'll find the real story, one in which human frailty offers glimpses of universal truths.

Seckou Keita was born on February 14th 1978 in Lindiane, a suburb of Ziguinchor, capital of the Casamance region of southern Senegal. His mother, Fatou Bintou, was the daughter of Jali Kemo Cissokho, one of southern Senegal's most renowned and revered griots. Everybody in the family – brothers, half-brothers, uncles, great-uncles, grand-fathers and great-fathers – all were griots. Seckou can reel off his griot ancestry for at least four or five generations, but the lineage keeps on going beyond that, receding no one knows quite how far into the fog. Seckou's father on the other hand, whose name was Elhaji Mohammed Keita, wasn't a griot at all. He was a Keita, a descendant of the famous Emperor Sunjata Keita, who founded the Malian Empire in the 13th century. Griots are born to sing the praises of Sunjata and all his 'Keita' descendants. To be half griot and half Keita is to have the blood of both eulogiser and eulogised, bard and overlord, poet and king in your arteries.

Apart from being the descendant of kings, Seckou's father was also a roving spiritual healer and a holy man. He disappeared from Seckou's life soon after he was born, becoming literally, as far as Seckou was concerned, l'homme invisible – the invisible man. In the late 2000s, after decades wondering why he had been abandoned in this way, Seckou set out to find his father. It was an epic search that took him through the ancient kingdom of Gabou, now southern Senegal and Guinea, where the kora – the 21-stringed African harp emblematic of West African Manding culture – was born centuries ago. Eventually the quest led to the Malian capital Bamako, where Keita senior was reportedly living and looking after a family that had fallen on hard times. But just as he was preparing to go and meet him there, he heard that his father had died. "There's no right or wrong," Seckou says, "It was just supposed to happen that way." Seckou's grandfather Jali Kemo (jali just means 'griot' in the language of the Manding people) was a hard taskmaster. He imposed a strict regime on his children and grand-children, but especially on Seckou, whose precocious talents earned him the nickname Seckou jali n'ding or 'Seckou the little griot'. Pre-dawn awakenings, Quranic school and endless practice on the kora were the lot of Seckou and his brothers and uncles. "It was like a 13th century way of raising a child brought into the 20th century," Seckou says. And at times it created a sense of baffled resentment in him, of 'why me?'

Only years later did Seckou understand that his grandfather, who had had a tough childhood himself, was attempting to shield Seckou from the pitfalls of laziness and substance abuse in which local musicians were prone to fall. "My grandfather was role model for me," he says. "At the time, when he was around, I didn't accept that, because I was young and wanted to do other things and he was stopping me. But he made me who I am today."

In line with tradition, Seckou started his apprenticeship on the kora when he was seven years old. No one gave him lessons. He learned by close observation of all the many kora players and musicians in the household. And he learned quickly. By his early teens, however, he was being drawn away from the strictures of the kora towards other styles of music played by the different ethnicities – Wolof, Fulani, Djola, Manding, Djola, Manjak, Balantes – that populated the polyglot neighbourhood of Lindiane where Christians, Muslims and Animists coexisted without any self-conscious fanfare.

Seduced by the diverse rhythms all around him, Seckou set out to master a variety of drumming techniques; first the seourouba drums with teacher Souti Silamé, then djembe with 'Machine' Sylla and sabar with Pa Cor N'diaye. His grandfather, angry at first that Seckou should neglect his studies and home and at school for such frivolous diversions, eventually relented and granted the young Seckou the right to become the 'family drummer' and practitioner of a griot form of percussion called jali dundun. By his early teens, Seckou was accompanying his grandfather and uncles to various family gatherings and ceremonies throughout the region. When Seckou was fifteen, his uncle Jali Solo Cissokho – already famous throughout Senegal thanks to the success of his cassette releases – invited him on a trip to Dakar to play in a regional music competition. The big city was a shock, sweetened no doubt by the fact that the Solo Cissokho band won first prize. Seckou started travelling up to Dakar regularly.

A few years later, Seckou and uncle Sadio were invited by the Rikscenen in Oslo, Norway, to take part in a collaborative project with musicians from Cuba and India. Europe was another kind of shock altogether: “What I had imagined in my head, I didn’t find,” Seckou says. “What I had in my nature, I didn’t see that either. So I was lost for a bit. Lucky that my uncle was there with me.”

The Norwegian experience led to a series of concerts in India with the revered composer and violinist Dr L Subramaniam. Seckou and his uncle Sadio’s adventures in the sub-continent, made all the more challenging by the fact that the pair shared only a few words of English between them, would have made a good Bollywood script – part musical, part romance and part comedy.

From that moment on, Seckou’s life took on a picaresque flavour. It was one of constant movement and survival outside the comfort zone, of slipping in and out of alien musical worlds. He returned to Norway and then visited England for the first time, at the invitation of some music students who he’d met in Senegal. He toured around schools and universities with a company called Dada Drum led by Ross Moore, giving workshops. He later married the troupe’s secretary, Jackie Zammit. In 1999, he settled in England and his daughter Bintou was born.

The intense rhythm of Seckou’s working life was driven by the desirability of his musical talents and his ability to get along with all kinds of different people. He toured with the Sierra Leonean musician Francis Fuster, onetime sidekick to Paul Simon, Miriam Makeba and Manu Dibango, and with Baka Beyond, whose founders Martin Cradick and Su Hart had befriended Seckou in Ziguinchor a few years before. The pair helped to produce his first solo kora album *Baiyo* (Orphan), which was released in 2000 (and subsequently renamed *Mali* by the record label Arc Music).

The album showcased some of Seckou’s experimental kora tunings, which were often the result of serendipitous mistakes. “The defining theme of the album came about almost by accident,” Seckou says. “One day I was looking after my daughter and trying to get some writing done. I started playing to find that I had tuned up wrong. Strangely enough, I loved what I heard and tried to build on it. It was different, and did take me a while to get used to but with some hard work and an open mind I developed this new configuration further. The result was ‘Tamala’, the first track I ever recorded with one of my new experimental tunings.” These innovations were in tune with Seckou’s mission to push the kora gently into a modern world of connectivity and cross-fertilisation, whilst always paying respect to its past.

Seckou became involved with the WOMAD festival as a performer and a workshop host, travelling to Singapore, Australia and the Canary Islands. Teaching became his bread and butter and he travelled the UK and beyond giving percussion and kora lessons. He also set up the first ever kora exam with Lucy Duran at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. All this activity brought the added blessing of a wide circle of good friends.

In 2003, Seckou founded a family band called Jali Kunda ('Griot Family'), comprising family members and friends who went on tour extensively in the UK, Scandinavia and Spain, and released an album called Lindiane. In 2004 he began working with Juldeh Camara, the monochord fiddle or riti player from The Gambia who later hit the big time with Justin Adams and Robert Plant.

A new 'quintet' began to form around Seckou, which included the bassist, Davide Mantonvani, Seckou's 17-year-old brother, Surhata Susso, and the classically trained violinist, Samy Bishai. Mandé, Arab, Indian, pan-African, jazzy – a boundless souk of flavours were present on the group's first album Tama Silo: Afro-Mandinka Soul, released in 2006. Seckou then took the quintet back home to showcase this new blend to family and friends in Senegal, where they were joined by his sister Binta Susso on a various songs. She later went to England to become a permanent member of the band and contribute to their next album, The Silimbo Passage, released in 2008. The Seckou Keita Quintet toured incessantly during this period, notching up more than 200 concerts in over 40 countries. Such were the air miles they burned that they deemed it necessary to slow down after a while and make arrangements to 'offset' their carbon consumption.

Meanwhile, in 2007, Seckou was invited to play a leading role a project called Do You Speak Djembe?, a hugely ambitious percussion extravaganza created by his old friend Doug Manuel, the founder of Sewabeats and the French composer Philip Fournier, the principle conductor of the Lyons Symphony Orchestra. Davide Mantovani and a number of other musicians from West Africa were also involved. The project has played out at various prestigious venues in France, where audiences have arrived to find a djembe stowed under every seat and a monumental spectacle of participative rhythm and music unfolding before them.

In February 2012, Senegal faced perhaps the most significant Presidential election in its history. The incumbent Abdoulaye Wade was seeking a third term in office, against the stipulations of the country's constitution and the wishes of millions of its citizens. Civil society was doing battle against the forces of corruption, patronage and political arrogance. Seckou released a video of a song called 'Rewmi' ('Country') and it quietly took over the airwaves of every radio and TV station in Senegal and the wider region. It was a call to unite, to put an end to conflict and to harmonise energies and passions for the real battle, the one against corruption, disease and hunger.

'Rewmi' was taken from the album Miro, which received very positive reviews when it was released later that same year. As well as Seckou's voice and kora, the album featured the Cuban bass player Michel 'Pata' Salazar and the singers Mariama Kouyate and Binta Susso, Seckou's sister. The Guardian called it "a classy, often gently mesmerizing set."

But the kora was calling Seckou. Some years before, as his children were growing up, Seckou had started to wonder about this father. He eventually embarked on the quest that would take him back to his ancestral lands in southern Senegal and Guinea Bissau, the country that once belonged to the kingdom of Gabou where the kora was born centuries ago. And as he searched

for his father in his birthplace of Guinea Conakry, he also pondered the true nature of the instrument that has become the emblem of his people, the Manding. He felt it was important for the kora to remain a living thing, fluid and changeable, ready, like himself, to travel and cross-fertilise with other styles. But what about the old magic that once soothed the bloodlust and frenzy of the koring – the warriors of Gabou. What about slowness and meditation? What about the old quietness?

In March 2012 Seckou was giving a concert to a UN delegation in Rome when he received a call from his manager telling him to come to Wales quick-style. Political strife in Mali had detained the Malian kora virtuoso Toumani Diabate and prevented him from attend rehearsals for a major collaborative tour with the young Welsh harpist Catrin Finch. Seckou was asked to step in and help prepare the repertoire with Catrin, which he did before handing over to Toumani who managed to arrive just hours before the first concert of the tour. Months later, however, other commitments prevented Toumani from continuing with the project and Seckou Keita was invited back. After a great deal of experimentation, rehearsal and trail performing, Catrin Finch and Seckou Keita released the album *Clychau Dibon* in October 2013. It was an immediate success, winning the Songlines Best Album 2013 and Best Cross-Cultural Collaboration 2014, the fRoots Critics Poll Album of the Year 2013, a nomination for the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards and one of the Guardian's top World Music Albums of 2013. It also entered the Dutch National Album charts at No 50! The pair set out to tour the UK and have recently performed in Paris and Toronto. It's a project whose upward trajectory seems limitless at time of writing.

In the summer of 2012, Seckou Keita was asked to produce an entire stage for the BT River of Music project, an ambitious plan to turn the Thames into a one big statement of music and diversity in honour of the 2012 London Olympics. Artists from eight West African nations were assembled under the name The Bantamba Syndicate (the bantamba is the tree under which a community gathers to talk) for a joyous banquet of West African music and cultural pride. As well as *Do You Speak Djembé?*, one collaboration with the cuban pianist Omar Sosa, another with a flamenco singer on a song called 'Hino' for a limited edition CD to be released this winter by Jazz FM, as well as never-ending teaching commitments, there's been the solo album to consider. Not just any old solo album, but a definitive statement from Seckou about who he is, where he's come from, and what he believes in. He recorded most of *22 Strings* in the basement of his house in Nottingham, with the help of sound engineer and long time collaborator Tom Colvin. "It's freshly home made," he says.

The album is a visceral enterprise. "The challenge was to deliver something that came from my heart, to go to other hearts," he says. "It's the statement I have to leave ... I've always wanted to do a solo album – a solo album that really means a solo album. The kora plays with all sorts of music nowadays. It's all about speed ... rap, wah wah pedals, distortion, rock'n'roll and everything. But I think the time has come ... it's been around for a while but maybe many of us didn't realise it ... to say that this is an instrument that's very delicate. It's got its quietness, which is almost like its hidden force. On this album, I wanted to bring the kora back to its own land, where it really sort of belongs. [I want] everyone who listens to it to think that they've got more time than they realised in life. This is the solo album I was waiting for."

The title says it all. Centuries ago, when the djinns, the spirits of the African bush, gave the first ever kora to the griot Jali Mady 'Wuleng' (Jali Mady 'The Red') it had 22 strings. Then, when Jali Mady died, his fellow griots took one string away in its memory. But back in its birthplace in southern Senegal and Guinea Bissau, the 22-stringed kora survives, with the extra string giving the instrument special advantages in terms of tonal reach and groove.

For Seckou Keita, that one extra string represents home: the place where his heart resides.