

COMMANDING THE STAGE WITH WORDS AND DANCING FEET

By: Jon Pareles
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Ushers at the Brooklyn Academy of Music fought a brief, losing battle against concertgoers surging into the aisle to dance when the Senegalese singer and bandleader Youssou N'Dour performed there on Friday night. All the better: Mr. N'Dour — a superstar across Africa and the French-speaking world since the 1980s, a 2012 presidential candidate in Senegal and the winner of the 2013 Polar Music Prize — leads one of Africa's greatest and most nimble bands, Le Super Étoile. With the audience on its feet, the synergy between performers and listeners only grew.

Mr. N'Dour's incessantly danceable music rides hurtling four-against-six grooves: from a percussion section crackling with high-speed talking drum, from guitars that can echo the staccato picking of the kora or mesh like a funk band, from keyboards that hint at West African balafon (marimba) or offer sleek contemporary tones. Before the audience got moving, there had already been bursts of frenetic footwork onstage from Le Super Étoile's dancer, Moussa Sonko.

For audiences in Senegal and elsewhere, Mr. N'Dour can play marathon dance-club sets. In Brooklyn, he geared this performance toward its site: an opera house with a seated audience. The set worked more than a dozen songs into less than two hours, and it featured the part of Mr. N'Dour's repertory that uses the major chords and terse refrains of Western rock. What the opera house sacrificed in participatory fervor, it partly offset with clear acoustics that revealed every particle of Super Étoile's syncopation.

The music offers its physical joys with a clear conscience. Mr. N'Dour extends Senegal's griot tradition of social conscience and praise singing into pop aimed worldwide. In all its intricate momentum, the band only complements Mr. N'Dour's kindly clarion of a voice, which is equally sweet, lithe and resolute. His songs are exhortations, history lessons and messages; Mr. N'Dour sang in Wolof, Fulani, French and English. His two nights at the Brooklyn Academy of Music were part of the monthlong series there dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Nonesuch Records, part of the Next wave Festival, and Mr. N'Dour got the audience on its feet and pumping its arms to celebrate the label.

One of the concert's key moments arrived when Mr. N'Dour introduced "New Africa" — a song, he said, that was not about war or Ebola but about people determined to create an Africa of hope and possibilities. It was an incantation, not a dance tune; with Mr. N'Dour's voice sailing over synthesizer chords, it was both mystical and contemporary. But the concert hit its peaks when the music hinted at a more African time frame: with Mr. N'Dour leaving pop refrains behind for swirls of improvisation, with the rhythm section revving up. "Set" was one song that started at a sprint and raced from there. At one point, with a percussionist thundering a solo on djembe (a hand drum), Mr. Sonko, the dancer, leapt over the drummer's head. "Have a clear mind," Mr. N'Dour sang in Wolof. "Be pure in your heart."

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/15/arts/music/youssou-ndour-performs-at-the-brooklyn-academy-of-music.html>