

FESTIVAL MUSIC REVIEW: YOUSSEU N'DOUR, USHER HALL, EDINBURGH

By: Rob Adams
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He's introduced onstage as the king of African music. He looks the part, too, resplendent in a white tunic suit. A large turnout of his Edinburgh-based Senegalese constituency is there to greet him, dressed to kill and keen to get the party started after a half-hour delay. What's particularly impressive about this king is his court, however.

It wouldn't do to suggest that Youssou N'Dour, a superbly expressive singer and justifiably a folk hero across the world now, gets upstaged by his band. The singing here, though, became a cog in a wheel with fantastic forward motion. You really daren't look away from components such as the outrageously brilliant percussion section or the bass guitar and guitar team to N'Dour's left, and there was quite a distraction early on as an over-exuberant, not to say aggressive, reveller was ushered away.

The power of the drum can rarely have been emphasised so generously, and by power I don't mean volume but strength and sheer musicality. Features for talking drum and djembe didn't just give the players the spotlight, they added feverish excitement, tone and momentum to the marvellously arranged, if not always clearly delivered songs.

Seven Seconds, N'Dour's hit collaboration with Neneh Cherry, with his backing singer taking Cherry's role, sounded like a curious artefact, older than its 1990s origins, compared to the bubbling sounds of contemporary Africa around it, and indeed one of the best "songs" came from N'Dour's rabble rousing timbalero who good-naturedly goaded the crowd, chanting to see if they were awake, present even. They were, and the party was apparently continuing elsewhere – with the band doubtless still effervescing.

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