

Bringing it Back

Jane Cornwell speaks to Simon Emmerson, one of the original co-founders of Afro Celt Sound System, and fellow member Johnny Kalsi about their long-awaited return to the studio and stage



Tom Oldham

From left to right: N'Faly Kouyaté, Simon Emmerson, Johnny Kalsi and Griogair

A quarter of a century ago in Dakar, Senegal, a respected British producer, guitarist and self-described “East End New Age lager lout” stood recording a West African melody that sounded, to his ears, just like a traditional Irish air. Convinced there was more to this than mere coincidence, he set in motion a chain of events that would culminate in over one-and-a-half million album sales, two Grammy nominations, several world tours and a couple of A-list film soundtracks. And it ain’t over yet.

Last month a new, reinvigorated Afro Celt Sound System gifted us *The Source*, their first album in a decade. It’s a work that comes full circle, being as fluid and organic as their 1996 debut, *Volume 1: Sound Magic*, and bigging up the African side of their mighty Afro-Celtic collaborations, as their debut did too. Even the artwork is by the same anarcho-designer, Jamie Reid – the man famed for that Sex Pistols album cover featuring the Queen with a pin through her nose – they used the first time around. This album was a return, then, in more ways than one, to the source.

“Nobody has ever found a direct historical link, but there are whole areas of history that haven’t been recorded,” says Simon Emmerson, co-founder of the Afro Celt Sound System, for it was he in that Dakar studio. The story is now the stuff of legend: after working with Baaba Maal on his albums *Lam Toro* and *Firin in Fouta*, Emmerson arranged for members of Maal’s band to meet and jam with some traditional Irish players, to see if the theory – that nomadic Celts lived in Africa and India before migrating to Western Europe – had legs.

Revered Dublin-born songwriter and uilleann pipe player Davy Spillane – who’d played on the track ‘Daande Lenol’ on *Lam Toro* – was a firm believer in the existence of such nomadic Celts, and told Emmerson as much when they met up in London. On the wall of his home at the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare, he declared, was a map of the world. A map on which he’d traced a red line from the west coast of Ireland right down to the coast of West Africa.

Spillane – ACSS’ very first piper and whistle player – is there on *The Source*, enhancing the Celtic vibe on opener ‘Calling in the Horses’, his call-and-response with kora/balafon player N’Faly Kouyaté (a griot from Guinea Conakry) and the Guinean female vocal section Les Griottes recalling that original 1992 session with Baaba Maal that birthed the whole ACSS concept.

“I’m confident there were trade links up and down the west coast of Ireland that went to Africa,” says Emmerson, sitting in a café in Haggerston, East London, with his friend and longtime collaborator, Johnny Kalsi of The Dhol Foundation (TDF) – who, with Kouyaté, has written much of the new album. “Not the least because we’re still here, 20 years on, and we’ve sold a helluva lot of records.”

The Source will no doubt shift even more units. Daring and driving, more acoustic but no less danceable, it’s a work that rips up a template – a pan-global fusion of West African rhythms, traditional Irish music, cutting-edge dance grooves and influences from everywhere – that had started to feel a bit dated. The live gigs ACSS played on the back of their 2010’s career-spanning double album *Capture (1995-2010)* weren’t quite as vibrant as the earlier gigs they played at festivals everywhere from WOMAD and Glastonbury to the Montreux Jazz Festival, which swept audiences away on a journey of light and shade, delicacy and power.

“It was frustrating,” confesses Emmerson, “going onstage and playing the same set over and over again. My mates were like, ‘Hey, it’s good to see you reliving the spirit of the 90s!’ I felt like we’d become a nostalgia band.”

ACSS had always been a supergroup whose line-up expanded and evolved around its four core members (for years, Emmerson, Irish sean nós singer Iarla Ó’Lionáird, Irish bodhrán and whistle player James McNally and engineer/programmer Martin Russell), with artists ranging from Peter Gabriel and Robert Plant to Sinéad O’Connor and Mundy guesting on different albums.

While a 20th anniversary album of new material was long in the offing, various wildly successful projects by individual members made getting together tricky. Modern technology could circumvent the need for face-to-face interaction, but it also did away with much of that organic, original vibe: “We grew all our own samples back in the day, which was revolutionary,” says Emmerson, “but now you can download an app called Logic that is full of world music samples. World fusion is no longer a progressive form of music.”

Throughout *The Source* gazes were met, flesh was pressed and creative energies fully intertwined.

“This album is a lot more loose, fluid and organic because we got to express our creativity together,” says Kalsi, an erstwhile member of Fun-Da-Mental and Transglobal Underground who has been a session player and charismatic live presence in ACSS right from their 1999 sophomore album, *Volume 2: Release*. “And maybe because it’s the first time that me and N’Faly [Kouyaté] got to be more than just cogs in the wheel,” he continues. “I’d never written anything, ever, for Afro Celts. But now I feel fully connected.”

Indeed, it isn’t just the ACSS formula that’s been rewritten. Iarla Ó’Lionáird, James McNally and Martin Russell are absent; Ó’Lionáird having left the group in 2011 to pursue his own projects and the indisputably talented and inspiring duo of McNally and Russell currently engaged in a legal dispute over the use of the Afro Celt Sound System name, under which they also plan to release an album later in the year. “We want unity not hate,” says N’Faly Kouyaté. “This is how we have been brought up as griots.” For now let’s leave it at that.

Regardless, re-empowering the African side of ACSS was long overdue (Kalsi, a Sikh, has ties to Kenya); contributions by Kouyaté include ‘Mansani Cissé/Tàladh’, an ancient 12th-century African song featuring harp, kora and lyrical vocals, and ‘The Communicator’ – a stomping Afro-pop track that, states the sleeve notes, is ‘mixed in with Northern Soul/Fela Kuti kick horn brass and finished off with a wah wah kora solo.’

Longtime ACSS session player Moussa Sissoko is here on *djembe* and talking drum, along with the aforementioned Les Griottes who lend some exquisite harmonies to several tracks, and Scottish folk fusionists (and original ACSS collaborators) Shooglenifty, who provide a top melody to the rockabilly-style tribute to the late Joe Strummer on ‘Desert Billy.’

Kouyaté’s soaring vocals are a revelation, especially on ‘Cascade’, a traditional Scottish tune that Kalsi had originally planned to use on the next TDF album. “It’s a six-part reel that Simon heard and thought, ‘let’s give this a go,’” says Kalsi. “I played it to N’Faly and he immediately came up with this calabash rhythm. There was so much spontaneous creativity going on; it’s how the album was made.” ▶



Louis DeCarlo

Says Kouyaté from Brussels, “While I have given so much of my life to this project, I am one of the last members to compose and sing. I was young and innocent when I joined Afro Celts so I never signed a contract and then wasn’t permitted to sign a contract, but I still worked very hard on their CDs and live shows. This time, when Simon approached me, I told him my conditions. He agreed.”

“You can hear the new energy on this album,” he continues. “It is more balanced now between Africans and Celts. The Africans are being acknowledged. For me, it is much, much better.”

Bankrolled in part by Mark Constantine, the CEO of Lush Cosmetics, *The Source* was supposed to be recorded *in situ*, in Kouyaté’s ancestral homelands in the north of Guinea Conakry, but the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic put paid to that. “Now that West Africa’s Ebola-free we’ll be going back,” says Emmerson, who is already planning *The Source: Volume 2*. “N’Faly is doing amazing things in his village, which has no water. We’ll be crowdfunding to build wells. Doing a relief gig to raise money.”

But first, briefly, to the Celtic contingent on *The Source*, many of them old ACSS hands: pipers Ronan Browne and Emer Mayock, and the members of Shooglenifty among them. Fresh talent such as Armagh-born Ríoghnaich Connolly, a flautist and vocalist recruited after Emmerson caught her stunning set at the Larmer Tree Festival. Brought up listening to the ACSS, she gave Emmerson a recording of an EP with the track ‘Beware Soul Brother’ – a 12-minute improvised and impassioned tribute to the Nigerian author Chinua ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ Achebe – a song about what happens when something you love is stolen.

“Ríoghnaich is profoundly shamanic,” says Emmerson. “I played that track every day for the next few months. It became my spiritual touchstone; her final words in Gaelic mean ‘Open the Gate’. Then I played it to Johnny and ...”

Kalsi nods. “And I was gone,” he says. “It felt like a message. Giving us strength, helping us to move on.”

Fresh talent, too, in the form of Gaelic rapper, musician and language activist Griogair – an exponent of ghetto-croft who lives off-the-grid in the Scottish Highlands, in the same village as pure-voiced traditional singer Lucy Googan (on the gorgeous ‘Where Two Rivers Meet’), who’d never sung with a microphone before, let alone in a studio.

And tying the album up, bringing it right back to that source, was Davy Spillane, in whose remote studio atop the Cliffs of Moher some of the album was recorded. “That was amazing,” says Kalsi. “You take the ferry across to Ireland then drive across the island to these high cliffs and his house looks out over the bay. The views are amazing. He’s a coastguard as well,” he adds with a grin. “With these great big binoculars.”

The most amazing sight, however, was inside on a wall, where it had been hanging for over 25 years. “The map,” Emmerson says. “Davy finally got to show it to us. Traced his finger down from the west coast of Ireland to the coast of West Africa.” ♦

+ ALBUM *The Source* was a Top of the World in the last issue

+ DATES The group perform at various summer festivals including Larmer Tree and Cambridge and tour in the autumn, see www.afroceltsoundsystem.org.uk for details

Johnny Kalsi, N’Faly Kouyaté and special guest Angus Grant from Shooglenifty playing at Celtic Connections in January 2016