



# Motherland CALLING

Senegalese singer Baaba Maal's powerful voice carries a message for the world about Africa

WORDS JANE CORNWELL

**BAABA** Maal thinks his voice exploded some time around his 16th birthday. One moment he was singing in tones as fine and delicate as he is himself, and the next – boom! – he'd startled the birds from the trees and the cattle from the riverside in Podor, a village in the far north of Senegal near the border with Mauritania, where they probably heard him as well.

"In Senegal a singer has to communicate with hundreds of people in a big space, without a microphone," says Maal, now a remarkably youthful 58. "So little by little your voice changes. With training you pass a certain level, what we call 'the voice exploding' or *daande heli*. After that you can never be quiet again."

Expect a multisensory feast when Maal headlines Womadelaide's 20th anniversary festival in March. Backed by his longtime band Daande Lenol – a traditionally-dressed crew on everything from keyboards and guitars to upturned gourds and talking drums – the African star flings high notes into the air with gale force and unnerving ease. It's not just his voice that wallops. Maal's lyrics tell of issues affecting Africa: the importance of settling old tribal conflicts and the need for mass education, the changing role of women, the advantages of being self-reliant, and of a future that looks bright, positive – even exemplary.

No matter that his words are primarily in Pulaar, the language of the Fulani people, one of the several formerly nomadic cultures that occupy his dusty birthplace. When Maal sings, Africa listens. Just as they do at the Hollywood Bowl and London's Royal Festival Hall, and just as they'll do in Adelaide's Botanic Park. Whether standing, arms spread, in a golden boubou robe or strutting across the stage in an Armani suit, Maal – along with his polyrhythmic drummers and acrobatic dancers – delivers shows that are captivating

and joyful, ancient and modern. Shows that reflect how much of the Motherland is, much of the time.

"African concerts are the real self of Africa," says Maal after a performance of *Tales of the Sahel* in London. The intimate acoustic show includes an onstage interview and a question-and-answer session with the audience. "The colour, the singing, the dancing, the smiling. Our music reflects the fact that most Africans are still living together, getting together, helping each other," he says smiling. "It's not all war, famine and disease, you know."

Along with his Grammy-winning compatriot Youssou N'Dour, who headlined the first Womadelaide back in 1992 (and pulled out of this one after deciding to enter politics in the run up to the Senegalese elections next month) Maal has devoted much of his life to fostering a positive image of Africa. His most recent western album, 2009's electro-friendly *Television*, focused on both his own view of the world and his concern at the misuse of power by TV media (he re-released an acoustic cassette titled *Souvenirs* for the Senegalese market last year). He is a United Nations youth emissary and devotes considerable time and energy to raising awareness about HIV and AIDS.

"I go to the schools in Senegal and tell them, 'Hey man, or hey sister, you can do something.' Poverty is where most of these problems come from and you need education to overcome this," he says.

Maal is a man who makes things happen. In 2005, incensed by the all-white line-up programmed by Bob Geldof for the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park – a charity gig intent on "ending" poverty in Africa – Maal co-founded Africa Express, a collaborative project that sees Western musicians such as Blur's Damon Albarn working alongside African musicians in Africa, and vice

versa. The colonial mentality is anathema to Maal. He chats at length of his vision for a united Africa, where resources are shared, bought and sold, and where the benefits come back to the continent. “Every country wishes it had Africa’s resources.” Maal shrugs matter-of-factly. “Every country. It is in the West’s interests that Africa has strong institutions.”

As a child Maal was expected to become a fisherman like his father, who was also a muezzin (the religious singers who call the faithful to prayer) at the local mosque. But having listened to his father’s sonorous invocations, the young Baaba chose to sing the traditional songs his mother taught him, quietly at home and more freely at school, where a headmaster recognised his gift. He’d sneak off to sing songs for the radio. Once he was listening to the radio with his father when one of his songs came on. “I remember coughing very loudly when the announcer said my name,” Maal says.

Maal and his family were not griots, the musicians predestined by caste to keep the West African oral song tradition alive. But the old system was changing. Maal’s pursuit of music as a career was encouraged by his peers; most notably by a blind griot singer named Mansour Seck who has become his musical collaborator. In between enrolling in a fine arts course in the Senegalese capital Dakar and winning a scholarship to study music in Paris at Ecole des Beaux Arts, Maal toured West Africa with a traditional group. A few years later he and Seck followed the Senegal River, exploring the roots of African classical music. In 1982 they released *Djam Leeli*, an album of duets, which was picked up by Chris Blackwell of Island Records.



“African music is the basis of all music: jazz, blues rap, reggae,” says Maal, who spent his teenage years listening to Wilson Pickett and James Brown. “All world music is African music. There is a new generation of African musicians who know that they can bring something to the world. Something that belongs to them.”

Which, he says, is one of the reasons he enjoys playing WOMAD so much. Maal has been a popular headliner at several international WOMADs for over two decades (including the original, which was co-founded in England in 1982 by musician Peter Gabriel out of “pure enthusiasm for music from around the world”). Though he last played Womadelaide in 1999, it remains a favourite. “One of my most memorable concerts,” he says. “The audience was so appreciative,

so ready to have a good time and party like we do in Africa. I remember we played a band versus band football match backstage with an Irish crew called Kila. I can’t remember who won, but it was probably us,” he says with a grin.

Having worked with everyone from Brian Eno to legendary Jamaican producers Sly and Robbie, and being as adept at playing hip-hop and electronica as they are traditional African rhythms, Daande Lenol (Voice of the People) recently marked 25 years in the business. To celebrate they set off on a tour of remote Senegalese villages: performing, talking, and listening. It’s a format Maal reproduced with his *Tales of the Sahel* show and one he is long familiar with.

“When we work in Africa we travel from village to village. As well as playing concerts” – which, this being Africa, usually went until sun up – “we would sit down with village development associations, or groups of young people and women, and talk about what we should all be doing to make our lives easier for ourselves.” He pauses for a beat or two. “This is what African musicians and griots have been doing for centuries, and hopefully we are keeping alive this oral tradition in today’s digital age.”

Maal, whose life has been led by a belief in music’s power to make a change and who works in a genre where ethics and entertainment go hand in hand, says that because people know he is famous and travels the world they want to know what he thinks about these things. “They want to hear me sing too,” he adds with a smile. “They always want to hear me do that.” ■

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*Womadelaide is at Botanic Park from March 9-12.*