

INTRODUCING...

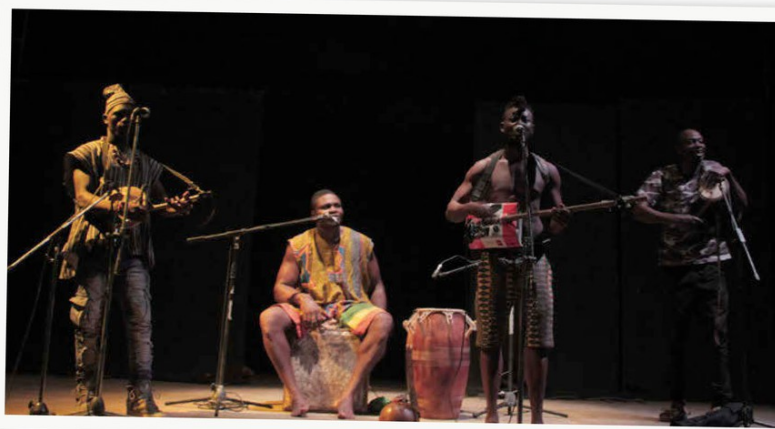
Alostmen

Stevo Atambire, Ghana's newest star of the two-stringed *kologo*, chats to **Jane Cornwell** about his new band with Wanlov the Kubolor

Back in the late 2000s Stevo Atambire had been living on the streets of Accra in Ghana for six years when he found a kindred spirit in Wanlov the Kubolor. The latter – a barefoot, dreadlocked, skirt-wearing cultural icon with social media savvy and a CV that includes fame as one half of rascally duo FOKN Bois (with M3nsa Ansah) – was struck by the raw musical talent of Atambire, then barely out of his teens. Atambire's singular use of the *kologo*, the two-stringed lute particular to his Frafra people of northern Ghana, was matched by his charisma.

"My two sisters sold tea and bananas in Tip Toe Lane, Circle," says the 30-something Atambire, referencing the city's sprawling, chaotic hub. "Wanlov would come by and we ended up jamming, me on *kologo*, him on *kashaka* [shakers]. He gave me good money for my music, which was the first time anybody had done that."

Kologo music is traditionally played at funerals, naming ceremonies and other gatherings. Its *griot*-like proponents are storytellers and messengers: relaying proverbs, encouraging unity and development, keeping ancestors' legacies alive.



"You can hear Afro-reggae and blues in this instrument, which can entertain thousands of people without a mic or an amplifier. But not all the youth are willing to listen to the same tuning and tones. To keep people entertained you need to bring the *kologo* to different levels," insists Atambire, whose fame among the Frafra had been forged by five cassette-only solo albums.

Contemporary Ghanaian musicians such as King Ayisoba, who wowed the WOMADelaide festival in March and with whom Wanlov has also collaborated, are doing precisely that. Atambire's rich voice and grab bag of *kologo* variations – tone slides, ghost notes, bends, syncopation, a wah-wah pedal – convinced Wanlov to include this bright Frafra *yout'man* from the Upper East region of Tanga in his Afro Gypsy Band, which toured West Africa and Europe in 2017.

Along the way – in hotel rooms, closets and bathrooms using Wanlov's mobile studio unit – Atambire began recording tracks for his own band, Alostmen, a quartet featuring a Nigerian talking drummer, a *goje* (two-string fiddle)

player and singer and a percussionist playing heavy Ga rhythms on *gome* box/*djembe*/congas. A clutch of guests, including Wanlov (on the catchy first single 'Kologo'), Ghanaian rap hero Yaa Pono (on the yearning 'Fauziah') and aforementioned FOKN Bois member M3nsa (on the trance-like 'Killer Fear Die'), help make the band's debut a toe-tapping, head-nodding delight.

Alostmen is a celebratory mix of Frafra/Guruna-language songs that tell of life in this poor but proud pocket of Ghana, where a semi-nomadic people herd cattle and play *goje* and *kologo*, sometimes relocating to cities such as Accra or Kumasi to work as food vendors or pounders of the popular dish called *fufu*.

"We use traditional instruments to bring something authentic and unique to impress the world," says Atambire, who left his village aged 15 after choosing music over agriculture. "I play *kologo* music to give people hope that if they work hard, they can achieve. I preach in a positive way." ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Alostmen* will be released in January on Strut and reviewed in #165

Ayom

A new outfit based in Barcelona are channelling myriad Afro-Lusophone influences on their debut, as lead singer Jabu Morales tells **Alex Robinson**

Of course, I could say that Ayom's debut is a delight; Jabu Morales' rich, sweet voice floats over songs alive with African rhythms, lilting with melancholic European Gypsy accordion and playful saxophone. It's all true. But it misses the point. Because Ayom isn't just music, it's ritual magic – called to entrance Europe, to open what lead singer Morales calls, "the Africa inside us all." And the spell couldn't have been cast at a better time.

As we think of George Floyd and the awakening of consciousness his death inspired, we might remember that it wasn't just the British and the Americans who tore African lives from their homelands. Europe's biggest slavers by far were Portuguese. Africans from myriad nations were thrown onto the shores of Brazil – to be worked like cattle in the forests and on sugar plantations. While their enslavers looked to Europe with *fado* longing, Brazil became as African as samba. Rhythm remains its heartbeat, African ritual its lifeblood: *capoeira* and Carnaval grew from religions devoted to *orixás* – sacred vital energies whose presence sanctifies space and time.

Which brings us back to ritual magic. Ayom you see, is the orixá of the *tambor*. She, not the band who bear her name, is pictured on the CD cover – sitting between an African drum and a European accordion – symbolic of the music that she energises. The orixás, says Brazilian lead singer Morales, are more universal than we realise. Ayom's mission is to awaken them in Europe.

"When we invoke an orixá," she explains, "we don't call on something external. They're closer than we believe – the energy in nature, in a



Violeta Truden

rushing river, in the living present moment. In Afro-Brazilian culture we feel this, spontaneously. Europe is more formalised. Ayom fuses the two: she brings liberty and spontaneity to European ears." Even sitting alone in autumn lockdown London I feel this. The first track 'Exu', opens with Ayom – spirit of the *tambor* – skipping in. Morales' Sade-smoky, sweet voice follows as sad as a psalm, with the shimmering beads of a *shekere*, like waves washing on the shore and Alberto Becucci's accordion, as plaintive as a Sicilian lament. Then the band lifts into an irresistible low, syncopated swing that brings shafts of warmth into my room, like tropical sun penetrating grey clouds.

From there on the album is an enchanting journey of joy tinged with sweet sorrow – through the jagged jig of 'Baile das Catitas' and the softly-sung seductiveness of 'Me Deixe Ser', with its

gorgeous interplay of guitar and sax – to the jauntness of 'Valsa Das Estações'.

"Ayom is connection," says Morales, "between male and female, between spontaneity and formality, between the rhythms of Africa and the melodies of Europe. She brings us from separation to seduction, from conflict to celebration." And Morales believes we need this right now. While the world watches the US, Bolsonaro's followers continue to persecute Afro-Brazilians. Candomblé temples are ransacked, Afro-Brazilian culture is deliberately starved of funds, and black Brazilians die in custody in greater numbers than anywhere else in the Americas.

"If Ayom touches you, then please value her," says Morales. "She is a voice of unity. But she's under threat..." ♦

♦ **ALBUM** *Ayom's self-titled debut album will be reviewed in the next issue, on sale December 18*



WIN

We have three copies of Ayom's debut to give away. To enter, answer: Where is lead singer Jabu Morales from? See p21 for competition rules and deadline