

OMAR SOSA

Journeys **THROUGH AFRICA**

A prolific collaborator who has travelled extensively since leaving his Cuban homeland, Omar Sosa talks to **Jane Cornwell** about his fact-finding tour of East Africa and the long-awaited release of his adventurous new album, which sees him collaborate with some of the region's leading folkloric musicians

Afro-Cuban pianist and composer Omar Sosa has always been a seeker, an artist driven to explore African musical cultures and their connections to his own ancestral roots. Along the way he has linked the traditional and contemporary, the acoustic and electronic,

with forward-thinking solo work and collaborations with musicians from Latin America and across the African diaspora. "Most of the Cuban music people know about is from the 1940s onwards," says the Camagüey-born award-winner, Zooming from his home in Barcelona. "But if we look deeper there are cultural and musical reminders from so many different places in Africa. I want to give them attention, bring them together in one place."

That place is his back catalogue, which teems with over 30 recordings, the majority released on his own OTA label.



Massimo Mantovani

Albums such as 2002's Grammy-nominated *Sentir*, a tribute to the Santería orisha Elegguá, or 2016's *Eros*, one of several discs to feature Italian trumpeter Paolo Fresu, might equally be filed under jazz or global.

All, however, are imbued with a sense of space and a flowing sensuality variously informed by Sosa's profound spirituality, a grounding in classical music ("the way I play harmony owes much to composers like Ravel and Scarlatti") and the much-proved conviction that music is indeed a common language.

Recent releases, including 2017's *Transparent Water* (with Senegalese kora player Seckou Keita), and 2018's *Aguas* (with Cuban violinist-singer Yilian Cañizares), each sparked long and wildly successful international tours. Now comes *An East African Journey*, a cross-cultural adventure that, in these especially restrictive times, offers a welcome wealth of new discoveries and, at the very least, a soundtrack for metaphorical escape.

An East African Journey began back in late 2009, when, on the back of his 2008 album *Afreecanos*, and in a trio format featuring Senegalese vocalist Mola Sylla and Mozambican bassist Childo Tomas, Sosa embarked on a French-sponsored concert tour of eight Alliance Française venues across East Africa. Along the way he met and collaborated with some of East Africa's most significant folkloric musicians, recording the results on portable digital equipment.

An accompanying French film crew made *Souvenirs d'Afrique*, a 52-minute documentary of Sosa's experiences, directed by Olivier Taieb. And then... Well, nothing. "These interviews were in the archive in a bottom drawer for several years," says the drummer Steve Argüelles, Sosa's long-time producer. "We'd occasionally take them out and have a listen. Then we really got to work in 2018."

More than a decade after the original sessions, aided by Argüelles on drums and percussion and with French multi-instrumentalist Christophe 'Disco' Minck (who also performed on *Afreecanos*) adding keyboard-bass and analogue electronics, Sosa carried out the final, less-is-more recording and mixing in a studio near Pigalle in Paris. The sessions were completed in two days. "We decided



Patrick Desandreu

"There are cultural and musical reminders [in Cuban music] from so many different places in Africa"

to embrace the flower because it was already beautiful," smiles Sosa, who added his finishing touches on a lived-

in 1873 Steinway. His notes emerge subtly, sensually, from the silences, framing traditional recordings whose riches are almost palpable.

Among them, Burundi singer-songwriter Steven Sogo, a virtuoso on the *umuduri* bow. From Kenya, Olith Ratego, a singer and player of the *nyatiti*, a stringed plucked bowl yoke lute. From Mauritius,

percussionist-vocalist Menwar, whose take on traditional *séga* blues music features spoken-word elements in Creole and the *ravanne*, a frame drum made of goatskin that is heated before playing. "Menwar had a [Yamaha] MOTIF keyboard in his studio near the beach. We had a musical conversation, which was the point with all the artists, who brought their melodies, their traditional message. It's like a basketball game," adds Sosa, a man given to analogies. "I pass to you, you pass to another and so on. Menwar and I improvised a song we called 'Ravanne Meets Jazz'."

Elsewhere among the album's 13 tracks are artists from Ethiopia, Madagascar, Sudan and Zambia, each contributing one or more compositions either used whole or as a jumping point for more in-depth musical discussion.

In a library in Lusaka, Zambia, elder Abel Ntalasha – formerly of the Zambia National Dance Troupe – sings in ▶

From top: Omar Sosa with Kenya's Olith Ratego; with Burundi's Steven Sogo and with Rajery from Madagascar

