

OMAR SOSA

Lenje, a Bantu language, of a youth who plays his *kalumbu* through the night to let his parents know he wants to marry.

In Addis Ababa, at a small theatre at the Alliance Ethio-Française, the ethnomusicologist and *krar* (five-string lyre) virtuoso Seleshe Damessae uses a complex vocal styling, delivered in Amharic, on 'Tizeta' to tell of beautiful Ethiopian women. On 'Che Che' he switches to the regional Oromo language to imitate a horse's rhythmic gallop.

"You know, when I was 18, the Cuban army sent me to Ethiopia," says Sosa in his scratchy, animated way.

"I discovered a lot of things musically, and that country got into my heart and soul. When I got the opportunity to tour there in 2009, I called my manager and said 'We have to find a way to record there!' This is how it began."

"Most people, when they think of African instruments, think of instruments from West Africa like the *djembe*, kora and talking drum. They don't realise that some East African music has Arabic modes. It was so fascinating for me to find similarities and connections. If you close your eyes you can hear Moroccan choirs, for example. You can hear the choreography of Indian *ragas*. The *kalumbu* of Zambia is very like the Brazilian *berimbau*. For this reason we will have a *berimbau* player with us if and when we tour."

Fascinating, too, for Sosa was the comparative lack of knowledge about his own country – let alone about Cuban music. "Nothing. Nada." He flashes a smile. "Most people hadn't even heard of Cuba, except in places like Ethiopia or among artists such as [well-known Malagasy *valiha* player] Rajery, who I already knew and who tours internationally. Sometimes I would play Afro-Cuban rhythms and they'd say 'But this is music from Nigeria!'"

Officials at the airport in Khartoum, Sudan – the home of multi-instrumentalist Dafaalla Elhag Ali, head of the Sudanese Traditional Music Centre and a member of the



Patrick Desandreu

Sudanese National Band for Traditional Instruments – initially failed to grasp that they were there to play music, despite negotiations by the Centre Culturel Français. "When my keyboard with effects pedals and cables went through the scanners they thought it was a bomb. There was chaos! We waited for hours in immigration, where no one spoke English, French or Spanish, trying to tell the police we were musicians. Eventually we played some drum rhythms, and they understood. Ah! Music!" Another smile. "Music as a weapon of mass consciousness," he says.

There are other projects in the works. Sosa has already returned to West Africa – via a studio in the remote German countryside – with Seckou Keita and Steve Argüelles to record the follow-up to *Transparent Water*, which is scheduled for release later this year.

"Africa is a big, big continent. There are so many different sounds and traditions and I want to study every single area in a way that feels natural and organic and open hearted. I want to express the difference between West and East Africa."

"With *An East African Journey* I wanted to look at tradition and then add touches that functioned like a bridge, letting the music breathe out." Sosa exhales happily. "It's about the freedom that comes when different worlds meet and share connections. That's what I want my music to do." ♦

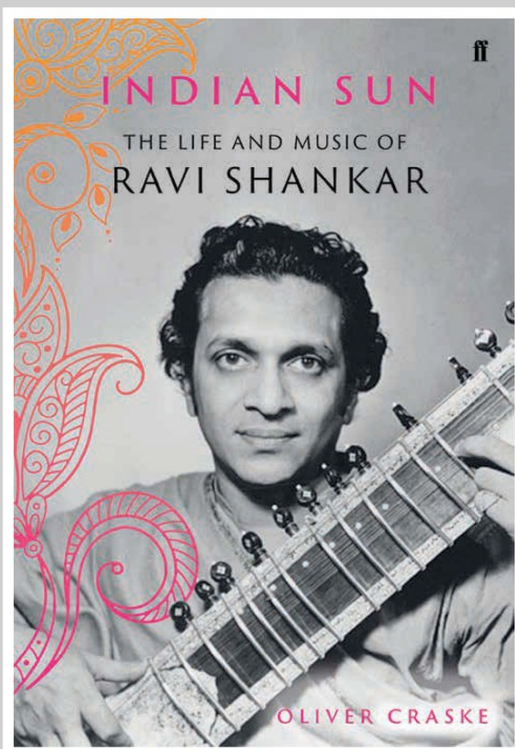
♦ **ALBUM** *An East African Journey* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue, see p57

♦ **DATES** Visit Omar Sosa's website, omarososa.com, for details about forthcoming tour dates



Ravi Shankar

THE BIOGRAPHY



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