



BEING BAABA

Seven years since his last album, Baaba Maal has remained busy – lending his voice to Hollywood, working with countless foundations and acting as an elder for his Senegalese community. He speaks to **Jane Cornwell** about his new release and staying true to his roots

Baaba Maal is relaxing on his porch in Podor, a riverside village in far north Senegal, up near the border with Mauritania. There are chickens pecking by his feet. Under the acacia trees, goats are bleating. The West African superstar – a singer, dancer, composer, activist, guitarist, humanitarian and festival founder – is taking time out from the demands of his high-profile life. Here, in his happy place, Baaba gets to chill, make music, gets to just be.

To be Baaba Maal, the son of a Fulani fisherman-muezzin who netted tuna from the Senegal River between calling the faithful to prayer at the local mosque. The son of a mother who sang traditional songs as she went about her day, within a multi-generational family that spoke Wolof, Serer and Pulaar at home.

To be the golden-voiced kid whose peers encouraged his pursuit of music, even if, unlike his childhood friend and longtime collaborator, singer/guitarist Mansour Seck, Baaba wasn't born into the *griot*-troubadour caste – and wasn't supposed to be a musician at all.

It was here, in the cattle-strewn fields of the Fouta region, that Baaba's voice exploded sometime around his 16th birthday – a vocal coming-of-age known as *daande heli*. "In Senegal, a singer must communicate to hundreds of people in a big space without a microphone," says Baaba, 69. "With training, little by little your voice changes. Once you pass a certain level, then boom! You get this big new power."

"I can still make my voice strong," he continues. "But lately I am playing with vocal styles, with rap and with the funny rhythmic songs Fulani kids sing as they play together. I'm always bringing in new elements."

Welcome, then, to *Being*, Maal's first album in seven years. Produced by musician Johan Hugo, the Margate-based Swede who helmed 2016's *The Traveller*, the record once again blends traditional African instrumentation (*ngoni*, *kora* and *sabar* and *tama* drums) with modern electronics. Baaba's questing ancient-to-future aesthetic has been fed over the years by cross-genre projects with the likes of Brian Eno, Jamaican producers Sly and Robbie and banjo-twang UK quartet Mumford & Sons.

Right from 2009's *Television*, his collaboration with producer Barry Reynolds and electronic dance outfit the Brazilian Girls, Baaba has also embraced sci-fi soundscapes that respect and enhance the essence of the sound which he and Seck debuted in 1985 with their acoustic classic, *Djam Leelii* (The Adventurers).

The seven songs on *Being* range from electro spirituals and trancey desert blues to kora-fed meditations and sonically hyperactive wig-outs. Sharpening the album's contemporary edge are features from Mauritian rapper General Paco Lenol, London-based Malawian-born singer Esau Mwamwaya (one of Afro-Western trio The Very Best, along with Karlberg) and an exciting new Senegalese singer named Rougi.

"Rougi reworked one of my songs and posted it to YouTube," says Baaba, "which reminded me of the way songs would traditionally travel from village to village with new elements being added all the time... I'm in love with her voice." A smile. "With the right support she could be the next Oumou Sangaré."

Being developed organically over several years. There were improvisation sessions in Podor, London and New York. New rhythms were discovered by clinking empty bottles. Found sounds – crickets, birds, moving water – evoked place. Baaba

experimented with riffs on his acoustic guitar – the boundary-less instrument introduced to West Africa in the pop-bedazzled 1960s. Loops and beats went back and forth between Karlberg and Baaba in Podor and Dakar, Senegal's sprawling capital, where Baaba owns two homes.

There was no pressure. No rush. Things were allowed to be. "I wasn't sure I'd ever record another album," says Baaba. "I thought I'd focus on other engagements. But my body, heart, spirit and soul kept reminding me that I'm an artist."

In 2020 he'd donned a sky-blue *boubou* and toured his intimate acoustic show, *Songs From the Sahel*, to venues including The Met in New York. The show's post-song Q&A session variously saw Baaba speaking about the situation in the Sahel, a frequently conflict-ridden, climate change-bashed region stretching across northern Africa from northern Senegal and Mauritania across Burkina Faso to Chad, Sudan and Ethiopia; of his work with the NANN-K Trust, a charity attempting to counter the impact of the Sahel's desertification (they recently launched a solar irrigation project on 50 acres outside Podor); and of his hugely popular Festival Blues du Fleuve, the annual music-and-arts festival he founded in Podor in 2006, presciently envisioning a sort of African Glastonbury.

Alongside Swedish-born composer Ludwig Göransson, Baaba

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brought his Africa to the abstract Africa of *Black Panther*, the 2018 smash hit Marvel film, co-devising a soundtrack in which the two continents collided beautifully. Having travelled to meet Baaba in Podor, Göransson had then accompanied Baaba on a 10-day village tour of remote northern Senegal, where shows started after midnight, amps were powered by generators and many had travelled hours, even days, to see Baaba in action.

"These small villages are sacred to me," says Baaba. "We often sit down with village development associations, or groups of young people and women, and talk about what we could be doing to make life easier. This is what African musicians and griots have been doing for centuries. Hopefully we are keeping alive this oral tradition in today's digital age." The arrival of Baaba and his entourage was often met by dancing, drumming and the praise songs sung by traditionally dressed griots – ceremonies that would inspire Göransson's writing for the film.

"I brought Ludwig the sabar, *ngoni* and Fula flute. I brought him percussionist Massamba Diop, who played out the name of King T'Challa, the Black Panther [Chadwick Boseman], on the talking drum." In Podor, director Ryan Coogler described *Black Panther*'s premise to Baaba over FaceTime. Baaba took Göransson into his studio and sang him a *yela* folk song about the death of an elephant – a metaphor for a fallen leader. A new king will take over in time, went the Fulani lyrics. There is no rush.

Retitled 'Wakanda', the reworked song graces the opening moments of *Black Panther*, Baaba's vocals echoing ▶