



leni stern sa belle belle ba

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12 ya khali bi khali



sa belle belle ba

leni stern

Produced by Andy Tommasi and Leni Stern at Bedford Studio - New York
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Leni Stern - guitar, n'goni, vocals Mamadou Ba - bass Harvey Wirht - drums
Brahim Fribgane - oud, doudoumbek Harouna Samake - camela n'goni
Mamadou Kone - calabash, tama Ami Sacko, Mah Soumano - vocals
Jami Sacko, Oumou Kouyate, Sally Kouyate - backing vocals
Makane Kouyate - jembe, calabash Yakouba Sissoko - kora
Kofo - talking drum Toumani Diabate - kora ('farafina cadi') Tim Keiper - percussion



Zoumana Tareta - soukou, vocals Bassekou Kouyate, Bouba Sacko - n'goni jazz-rap
Souleyman Doumbia, Towner Galager - percussion
Andy Tommasi - guitar ('sa belle belle ba') Andara Kouyate - n'goni and n'goni ba (on 'sera')
Habib Sangare - bolon Diego Augusto - 1st violin Claudia Vega - 2nd violin
Yanet Aguillon - viola Alexandro Rodriguez - cello



Recorded at Bedford Studio New York by Andy Tommasi
Moffou Bamako by Abou Cisse, Jack and Andy Tommasi
Mixed at Bedford Studio by Andy Tommasi - Produced by Andy Tommasi and Leni Stern
Assistant eng Giacomo Esposito, Jeremy Lubsey, Raúl Arroyo, Dahilenis Hernandez
Mastered by Nathan James
Harvey Wirht plays sabien cymbals Mamadou Ba plays fodera basses
Leni Stern plays d'addario strings
Songs by Leni Stern except 'babakar' by Mamadou Ba, 'madoumba' and 'yakhal bi khali' trad.
'sa belle belle ba' arranged by Andy Tommasi

special thanks to:
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'yakhal bi khaly' arranged by Brahim Fribgane
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Sa belle belle ba

Sa belle belle, belle belle,
Sa belle belle ba,
Belle belle ba....

You raise your head.
You curl your body.
You show your tongue.
You're beautiful and rare,
Black cobra,
But your time has come.
And soon enough,
I'll see you drying,
On a rooftop in the sun.

Sa belle....

featuring:

harouna samake -
camela n'goni,
jazz - voice

Smoke's risin'

Smoke's risin' from a backyard fire.
World's gone haywire, haywire.
Smoke's risin' from a backyard fire.
World's gone haywire, haywire.

The boardwalk is narrow, and the river is wide.
There's thieves and angels on either side.
The sky is blue and the grass is green.
You're the most lovin' man I've ever seen.

I tell my heart, stop beating,
When he comes around.
Go take your lovin' to the lost and found.
My heart won't listen, never does, never will.
I will stop lovin' crazy when my heart stands still.

featuring:

zoumana tareta - soukou and voice



Souma Chamon

If I had known,
I would have prepared my house
With flowers and tea,
With music dance and poetry.
If I had known that you would
Come to me.
If I had known that you would
Come to me.

Sumah hamon Sumah hamon
Li Hail Subei
Sumah hamon Sumah hamon
Li dang ge mah nob
Sumah hamon

If I had known,
I would have carefully chosen
My dress,
Braided my hair,
Darkened my eyes with coal.
So you could see them
Through the silken veil
That hides my face,
That hides my face.

Sumah hamon Sumah hamon
Li Hail Subei...

If I had known what was written
On the pages of my life,
If I had seen the shine of love
In your smile in your eyes,
If I had known, if I had known.

If I had known ,
I would have asked my brothers
to befriend you.
Find out who you really are.
Test you so that I would know,
If it is the merciless heat of summer
Or this restless times and my loneliness
That have blinded me.
So that I would fall for you like this.
So that I would fall for you like this.

Sumah hamon Sumah hamon
Li Hail Subei
Sumah hamon Sumah hamon
Li dang ge mah nob
Sumah hamon

featuring:
brahim fribgane - oud
yacouba sissoko - kora



Nan Jeya

If the wind would blow right now,
It would go right through me.
I have become transparent, somehow.

If the rain would fall right now,
It wouldn't notice me.
I have become invisible, finally.

Nan sa nuya nan jeya

They say that in your sleep,
You call my name.
As if I lay beside you.
No, you haven't been the same,
Since love came to find you.

Nan sa nuya nan jeya

featuring:
mah soumano - voice
harouna samake - camela n'goni

Farafina cadi

My Africa is warm and golden.
My Africa protects me.
She welcomes me with open arms.
Red earth, that's where we come from, all of us.

Onga farafina cadi, onga farafina cadi
Onga farafina cadi, onga farafina douma

My Africa is calling me
Come home, she says, and rest.
Why are you running,
Everything will come to you,
Just wait.
My oceans, all my lakes and rivers wait for you.
My desert towns will tell their secrets,
If you come and stay.
look at the starlit sky,
When night time comes

Onga farafina cadi...

My Africa was torn apart,
Murdered, robbed, divided, enslaved
And fighting for freedom.
My Africa is slowly healing.
Onga farafina cadi..

featuring: toumani diabate - kora



Born Bad

No, no, no it's not alright,
And sorry will not make it so.
No, no, no, I've had enough.
Enough. Let me go.

I came to a stone for mercy.
Asked a thorny scrub for love.
Went to the desert looking for water.
What was I thinking of?

N'te n'te n'te ayi n'te.

No, no, no I can't forgive.
I can't forget.
No, no, no I can't let go,
Not yet, not yet.

I came to a stone for mercy.
Asked a thorny scrub for love.
Went to the desert looking for water.
What was I thinking of?

Something in your mind says it's alright to let it fly.
I wonder what happened to make you like that,
Or maybe you're just born bad.

featuring: bassekou kouyate - n'goni

Namu

With jasmine flowers, comfrey leaves,
With spiders web and poetry,
I cast my spell.

With rosewood, ebony, and pine,
With almond oil and coffee grinds,
I wish you well.

Blood of my heart, moonlight in my dream,
The cowry shells are talking.

Things are not as they seem.

With diamond dust and ivory,
Jade, opal, lapis lazuli,
I cast my spell.

With arrowheads and mountain stream,
With amber and magnolia leaves,
I wish you well.

Blood of my heart ...

With cedar, cinnamon, and jade,
With serpent venom and with sage,
I cast my spell.

With Capricorn and Gemini,
With emeralds and butterflies,
I wish you well.

Blood of my heart ...

Namu atey

featuring: ami sacko - voice , koffo - talking drum
yacouba sissoko - kora, brahim fribgane - dumbek



Sera

Sera sera sera, kanakassi sera, kanakassi sera.

Don't cry my love, don't cry.
You told me you believe,
That God knows what he does and why.
Me, I'm not so sure, I wonder.
Don't cry my love, don't cry.

Sera sera sera ...
And don't forget, my love,
That you're beautiful and blessed.
Don't cry my love, you should rest now.
Let the darkness of night carry you away from here.
Let me sing you to sleep.
Dry all your tears.

Sera sera sera, kanakassi sera.

featuring:

mah soumano - voice

andara kouyate - jelly n'goni, n'goni ba

Now I Close My Heart

Now I close my heart.
Wish you would hold me in your arms,
Keep me safe, keep me warm.
I don't know what it is about you,
That makes me feel like I will lose my mind.
It's not just that you're beautiful.
You're fearless and you're kind.

Now that night has come,
All the day's heat is gone.
I can see clearly.
I don't know, I just felt quiet.
I should have tried to find my way back home.
Yes, I know there is a stillness
Before the storm.

Did you hear the seabirds calling?
See them race across the sky as day begins.
The sun has burned my wings,
Like Icarus, I am falling.

featuring:
yacouba sissoko - kora



Tell Me

The sky is grey.
The air is cool.
Feels like rain is gonna fall,
Like tears.
Yes, I am blue

Love is a spider's web,
It's cruel, it's true.

So tell me, tell me,
tell me, tell me,
Can I put my faith in you?

We carry our wounds.
We remember all.
If you never trust,
You never fall.
You'll never be betrayed.

and maybe I prefer the walls
That I have made,
To shield my heart from you,
To open skies and chance.

And still,
Your hair's so raven black,
Your eyes so blue.

Just tell me, tell me
Tell me, tell me.
Can I put my faith in you?

Solle solle solle solle
Unay nam balaamah

The sky is grey.
The air is cool.
Feels like rain is gonna fall,
Like tears.
Yes, I am blue.

Tell me ...
Solle ...

featuring:
brahim fribgane - oud

Yakhal Bi Khali
featuring:
brahim fribgane - oud
yacouba sissoko - kora

My friend Ami Sacko is one of West Africa's great singers. She has toured all over America with Bassekou Kouyate, her husband, and his band N'goni Ba since January 2010. Bassekou has taken me into the Kouyate family, and I am his daughter Oumou's godmother. Oumou is also my African name. American audiences have fallen in love with Ami. In their hometown of Bamako, the capital of Mali, she is adored like no other. She was born into a *griot* family, the cast of African storytellers, historians, and ceremonial singers. Women will arrange marriages and baptisms according to her schedule. Sorcerers and politicians will wait for her to be available for functions.

In the beginning of this year, while we were recording for this album, Ami decided that it was time for me to go see a particular, very powerful sorcerer, to assure us that the success of our work was properly prepared in the spirit world. Ami is this sorcerer's griot and can ask him for favors, so she asked him to protect me. He is a hunter in the oldest purely African tradition of sorcery, from the time before the Muslims came to West Africa and brought with them the Arabic seers. The hunters play the *camela n'goni*, also called a hunter's harp, an instrument that is featured on this album. They are also medicine men since they spend a lot of time in the forest and know about healing plants. Most of them keep snakes and milk their poison for medicine. (In the west we make a heart medicine, Digitalis, from snake poison.)

On my first visit the sorcerer asked me what he could do for me. I told him about my music and how I wished that I could contribute to people living peacefully together by showing how music from different cultures can form a new and more exiting richer tapestry, how in combining our individual customs we can create new beautiful ways of living, how our differences are our greatest wealth, and how instead of exploiting and killing each other we could dance together. He listened to every word, then translated it to his assistant, and they began writing on a black piece of wood, strange lines, geometrical patterns. When it was all done they looked at it, and there were a lot of 'ahs' and 'oohs' and Bambara expressions I didn't know. Ami told me that the spirits had decided I should ride a wild white horse for seven days every morning, and that it was a great honor to be given this task, a great omen.

You know, there have been many times where I have had no idea why Ami says what she says, but it always makes some strange kind of sense to me. I have learned not to question this, It's nothing my mind can fully grasp anyway. I know that the horse is a sacred animal in Muslim cultures. It is believed that Muslim faith spread throughout the world on horseback with Mohammed's warriors, but this was more. The horse was doing things for me in the spirit world, said Ami.

The sorcerer went looking in the countryside for a suitable horse, and a week later he called me to his house. There he was, a beautiful white stallion. His mane and tail had been dyed in henna to celebrate the occasion. I named him Sabou Nyuma, the good road, the road to salvation, to peace. The woman of the house had prepared an herbal medicine bath for me. I needed to be cleansed from all past bad things. The potion smelled wonderful, soft herbs and roots and flowers. I was so touched by the women's kindness; they warmed the medicine every morning so that I could bathe comfortably, and every morning I rode around the neighborhood. The sorcerer's house is in a part of the city where there are no tourists, no white folks at all. So, of course all of the kids ran behind me screaming and laughing. Groups of men that sit around a little fire and make tea stopped to check me out and discuss the white girl on a white spirit horse! The women gathered in front of their houses and waved and nodded in approval.

After riding the horse there was a small ceremony where I had to put my hands on the horse's back and ask it for all I needed. After a couple of days my mind became so clear that I could see what mattered most to me and what I really needed in my life. Maybe that was the purpose of the ritual.

During the day the sorcerer went to the forest to perform secret rituals on my behalf. Ami's brother Buba who accompanied me every day wouldn't tell me exactly what the sorcerer was doing. He said that I was a woman, there were things I did not need to know. No matter how many times I tried to explain to him that in New York City that was absolutely not the custom, I couldn't get him to talk. He divulged only a few little secrets. Every other day the sorcerer would pull out the black wooden boards and start writing symbols, asking the spirits about my progress and what offerings were needed.

One day Buba and I had to take a big white chicken and give it to a beggar. Buba grabbed the chicken, put it in the backseat of Ami's blue Toyota, and we drove to the center of town where all the blind beggars are. They are usually accompanied by a young girl that guides them. When you give them money they bless you and say prayers for you. I always felt good when on my way to rehearsal a few of them prayed for me, felt like I was atoning for my actions in New York City, where I am too busy and too in a hurry, too stressed out to be kind.

Buba told me to grab the chicken, put it in my lap, and tell it my wishes. It was really hard to catch the bird. It was hiding under the back seat, the car was hopping along the bumpy road and I couldn't figure out if I should grab it by the wings or the feet. Finally Buba reached back with one hand (driving with the other) and pulled the chicken out from under the seat, plopping it down in my lap. I felt so bad for the poor bird that was about to become a meal, but it sat very quietly while I tried to focus on all of the things that really matter. Suddenly the car swerved. Buba said, "There he is," opened the window, and I handed the chicken to a very old blind beggar. As soon as I saw his hands tremble with excitement and joy I stopped feeling bad for the chicken. A waterfall of prayers and blessings came down on Buba and me. We saw the old man and the girl get on a small overcrowded bus to go home and have a meal.

Every morning we brought carrots for the horse and for the sorcerer, who both loved them, and bananas and oranges for the kids. I brought the women all the little shampoos and soaps I'd collected from the hotel. One day they dyed a strand of my hair with henna to match Sabou Nyuma, the spirit horse. The house of the sorcerer had a large courtyard. There was a pen for his beautiful porcupines. They love bananas, holding them in their hands like squirrels when they eat. Then, to the side, were the snake cages: black and tan cobras, a fat viper, two very long boas and a few snakes I didn't recognize. One day I saw a large snake curled up on the roof of a cage. I was ready to run when the sorcerer told me that it was dead, drying in the sun.

That night I started writing 'Sa Belle Belle Ba.' The image of the dead snake was etched into my mind as I thought back on all of the different kinds of powerful, mysterious, and beautiful human snakes that had crossed my path in the past. Sa belle belle ba.

- leni stern, 2010

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all photos by andy tommasi