

Notes from **Leni Stern** on her new album **3**

Khavare

Mbalax is the rhythm of Senegal, and this song is based on this rhythm. My percussionist Alioune Faye comes from the Seng Seng percussionist family of griots. The former Allées du Centenaire in Dakar, the capital of Senegal has been renamed Seng Seng Boulevard since the passing of Alioune's father last year. I have had the privilege to study percussion with Alioune for a number of years now. While I was dutifully memorizing the mile-long rhythm calls named "bak", my sense of time changed and the dancing polyrhythms of West African music became plausible and joyful.

Khavare means party. Sabar parties, named after the most famous Senegalese drum the sabar, start at midnight and go all night until dawn, all over the world even here in America.



Barambai

Barambai is the Senegalese rhythm of the baby naming ceremony. Seven days after the baby is born families gather to announce which relative the baby gets named after. While studying n'goni and voice in Bamako, Mali, Ami Sacko and Bassekou Kouyate's children took me to play guitar at similar ceremonies. Music is such an important part in everyday Malian and Senegalese life. I felt incredibly privileged to be part of this. The baby naming and wedding ceremonies played a big part in how I learned to play African music.

Wakhma

I heard the scale I used to compose Wakhma for the first time when I listened to flamenco players from Spain. The first two chords of the song are typical of that style. There is a n'goni tuning in Mali that is used for the same scale. My teacher Bassekou Kouyate taught it to me, and he composed many beautiful songs with it. Like the Spanish songs I heard early on they are plaintiff laments.



Calabas

I have tried for years to learn a percussion instrument that would not be detrimental to my guitar playing. When I tried to play djembe I hit the rim of the drum and my hands swelled up, and when I studied frame drums my wrist was killing me. Finally while in Mali I discovered the calabas. It can take the place of the bass drum and the snare drum, if you look at it from a western standpoint. In the southern Wassoulou River Valley they sew cowrie shells to the edges and it becomes a shaker of sorts. I play it upside down with a microphone underneath like they do in Bamako. Now I can be part of a percussion, even without my guitar. In Mali and in Senegal the calabas is used for many different things around the house, just like any other bowl. It can also be a shopping bag.

The lyrics I sing:

Coumba n'ge duggi marche, Leket chi diggu bobbi
(Coumba went to the market with a calabas on her head)

Spell

I spent a lot of time in Ouidah, Benin where I helped set up the Centre International D'Art et de Musique de Ouidah (CIAMO) created by Gigi Hancock and Sarah DuPont. Benin and Ouidah specifically are considered the birthplace of Vodoun. These traditions are alive and well in Ouidah. I noticed some of my very young students, they were great drummers and singers and knew many songs at age 9. I found out they had been trained in the Vodoun schools where the old traditions were taught. For the opening of the school I invited the head of the local Vodoun chapter, a woman to bless the grounds. She arrived on a motorcycle with a young man as her assistant. Imagine the faces of the American ambassador and his wife, the head of the Benin Peace Corp, and the minister of culture of Benin, when she walked the grounds chanting and pouring rum! Later at dinner the Dha (chief) of the Ouidah Vodoun chapter said that Yemanja (goddess of the ocean) has many children, and some of them are white. I felt deeply honored. I made friends with the Vodoun community and got their blessing to teach the children. The Marabou (sorcerers) of the Vodoun community told me many secret stories. One of them that I liked in particular, because it found its way into the blues, was the stories of the spirits meeting at the crossroads at night. This is the reason why people should stay away from there come dusk. In the light of day the Marabou can leave gifts, gold mostly, and requests on people's behalf in a hole in the ground. I can't tell you any more about it, because I promised I would keep the secrets, but let me tell you this: there's a world behind the world we see.



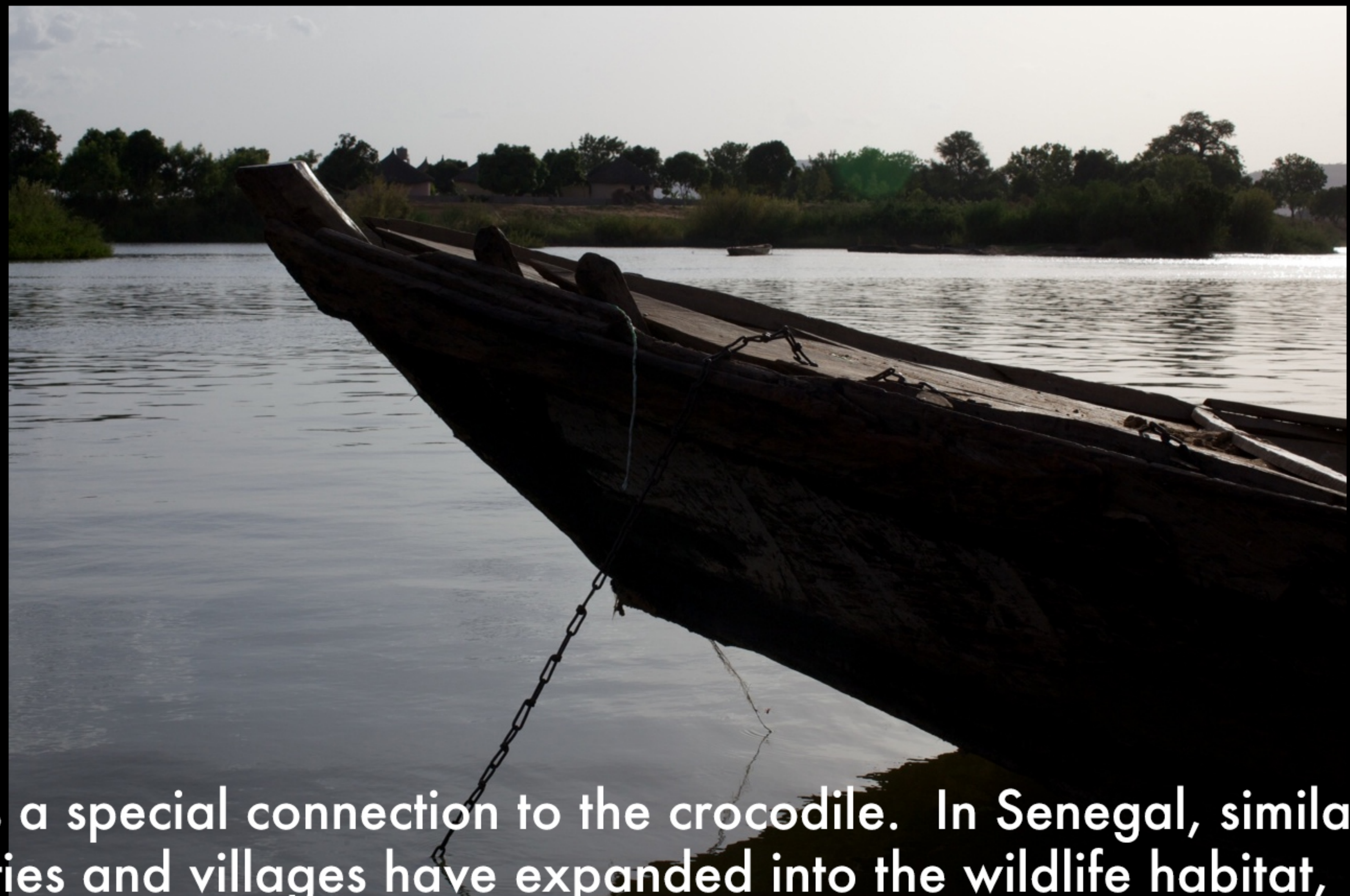
Colombiano

We toured in South America last year and got to witness firsthand the influences of African rhythms on the music of the continent. We were invited to countless barbeques followed by jam sessions late into the night, where we learned the local rhythms: tangos, boleros, chacareras... On my return to NYC I asked my friend and composer/percussionist extraordinaire Samuel Torres to explain all the new rhythms I had learned. I spent a wonderful afternoon hearing about the musical history of South America, how the complex and bloody history of colonialization explains the different musical influences. After Samuel left, I sat down and tried to capture all the stories as I wrote this song. It is called 'Colombiano' not for the rhythm but because Samuel is from Colombia.



Assiko

All sports events in Senegal are accompanied by drumming ensembles. Every team has a band. Assiko is the soccer rhythm. The drummers start as the players enter the stadium, they set the mood, encourage them, they heat up the audience and all around town, and after the stadium empties out the assiko beat reminds people of the game. I have always felt that all over the world we have much more in common than what sets us apart. Soccer was the sport of my childhood. I grew up in Munich which made me very popular in Africa, because Munich is the current world champion in soccer. When I met people and they found out where I was from, they would say "Beckenbauer! Fabulous!" (He is the former star player and now the coach of the German team.) I remember when I played in Salif's band we watched the famous African world cup game, Mali vs. Ivory Coast where Mali won 4-2 in the very last minutes of the game. We all screamed our heads off in different languages but with definitely the same feeling.



Crocodile

The Walla Walla tribe of Senegal has a special connection to the crocodile. In Senegal, similar to many states here in America like Florida, cities and villages have expanded into the wildlife habitat, encroaching on the animals whose very existence is threatened. The animals fight back! Quickly they learn that garbage cans are an easier source of food than chasing rabbits, and they learn that humans and their pets are a tasty snack. Garages, toolsheds and even cars provide shelter from the elements. Here we have professional alligator hunters, in Senegal there are the Walla Walla people. They are believed to be able to speak with the crocodiles through rhythm and chants. They have done so since as far back as anyone can remember.

We start our song with the chant of the Walla Walla:

diggi diggi m'baye diggi nata m'baye
atchoum nya nyama nya momin