



Cheikh Lô

'Lamp Fall' (WCD073)

Sleevenotes

"The theme of the album is Africa - my Africa. It's a plea against war and poverty. But it's also about love, religion and spirituality." Cheikh Lô.

Cheikh is entirely self-taught, self-composed, and self-contained. Though he draws with seemingly luxurious ease from a myriad of forms – m'balax, flamenco, reggae, soul, Cuban guajira – he realigns their roots to his own musical ends, and each song has its ornaments, its core structure and its spirit firmly entwined. With his flamenco-like rhythm guitar, superlative drumming, and extraordinary voice – it has the quality of rough, ragged silk: soft, but with a rawness at its edges – Cheikh's music is utterly distinctive. It draws you to its heart, and keeps you there. 'Lamp Fall' is Cheikh Lô's third album. It was recorded in Dakar, London, and Bahia.

The album opens with SOU (the night of love) which is sung in Bambara, the language Cheikh learnt during his childhood in Burkina Faso. The song has its origins in the traditional Mandinka music of Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. Cheikh has adapted a version of the song made popular by the great Guinean band Bembeya Jazz which was popular during his youth. The lyrics are about the reflective time of the night when thoughts turn to love. Cheikh's recording, made in Bahia includes Brazilian sanfona accordion, bandolim and a verse of whistling over a wonderful loping rhythm played out by the great Senegalese tama (talking drum) player Samba N'Dokh. Cheikh's rhythm guitar injects an element of funk as his vocal ascends into a heartfelt falsetto.

LAMP FALL (Light of Fall) is dedicated to Cheikh Ibra Fall, disciple of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba and the founder of the Baye Fall religious brotherhood. Cheikh Lô is a devoted follower and he dresses in the patchwork clothes and long dreads first worn by Cheikh Ibra as a symbol of the brotherhood's beliefs in recycling to avoid waste and dedication to work. The track opens with a killer guitar riff and steamy, brooding tenor sax from Pee Wee Ellis, before the complex, shifting patterns of bass, almost New Orleans style keyboards and Cheikh's 'Swing Lo' drums mix up this praise song into one of the album's funkier tracks.

XALÉ (the child) stresses the value of a sympathetic education for children. It's lilting, eerily percussive first half was recorded in Bahia complete with a typically eclectic instrumental mix of acoustic guitar, sitar, tambura and balafon. The second half was recorded in Dakar with Cheikh's working band, plus Pee Wee Ellis' horns.

KELLE MAGNI (War is not good) is Cheikh's protest against conflict where his opening plea to 'Stop the War' is followed in typically non-aggressive form by 'please'. The song is included in both Dakar/London and Bahia versions, both upbeat with great riffs and

sporting excellent guitar solos by Davi Moraes and Lamine Faye. The Brazilian version includes percussive accordion and funky berimbau breaks.

The thunderous SÉNÉGAL-BRÉSIL was recorded in Bahia with the forty strong carnival percussion ensemble Ilê Aiyê. Samba N'Dokh's tama joins the ensemble in a very rare combination. This track was worked up during the Brazilian sessions and is essentially a tribute to the respect and hospitality Cheikh enjoyed in the various recording locations. Cheikh was inspired by the musicians he encountered in Brazil, and was especially struck by the harmonic depth of the percussionists. Great chugging guitar parts, hard riffing chorus vocals and swaggering trombone add to the colour.

For SANTE YALLA (Thanks to Almighty God) the recording location moves back to Dakar. Stylistically the track is Cuban but with an unmistakable West African lope. Cheikh began playing music as a child and like so many West African musicians of his generation first started to play along with Cuban 78 rpm records. Guillermo Portabales' 'El Carretero' was one of the most popular records and 'Sante Yalla' bears echoes of that song's slow guajira rhythm. Cheikh dedicates the song to "my nephew N'Dongo Lô, N'Diaga M'Baye and Eva M'Baye who have left us. May the earth be light for them. The devotional chant is sung in the name of the Almighty and it accompanies each person to their final resting place." There is a superb slinking guitar solo from Lamine Faye and Cheikh's trademark harmony vocals open up the chorus.

The Cuban flavoured TOUGAYU M'BEDD (Sitting in the Street all day) may well be a song about the perils of unemployment, street-life and spiritual despair, but it's a warning sign painted in the warmest, brightest musical colours, with a light breezy groove that's impossible to resist.

The joyous love song to the beautiful Miss Marthe N'GALULA is Cheikh's take on the Zairean style that was so popular throughout West Africa in the 70's. The original recording was made by Orchestra Elegance Jazz in 1972-73 and here Cheikh sings in the Lingala (at times 'pidgin' Lingala) of the original. Cheikh lived and worked in Paris in the 80s playing lots of Zairean music as a session drummer. "It was difficult but enriching", he says of his experience. "I wrote my first songs there, and I learnt new techniques. I'd practice these different rhythms with my drumsticks on cushions." Samba N'Dokh's bubbling tama and Thio M'baye's sabars add the Senegalese element; Cameroonian bass player Etienne M'bappé is perfection and Cheikh's singing and drumming demonstrate how completely he has absorbed the style and made it his own.

SAMA KAANI XEEN (my strong chilli pepper) is dedicated to Cheikh's wife Adji Lô, "As soon as I touch you I sneeze." This tender love song was recorded in Bahia with a beautiful vocal melody, buoying horns (including bass clarinet) and a flavoursome stew from the Macajon percussion group, electric sitar and Brazilian flute lines.

BAMBA MÔ WOOR (Bamba is Sure) is in praise of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism. The sunlit reggae riff is impossibly ebullient, yet tender and reflective at the same time. Cheikh adds sweet falsetto vocals, Samba N'Dokh dynamic talking drum and Pee Wee's sax warms the fires alongside Bigga Morrison's shuffling Hammond organ. "Bamba, who by the grace of God and the prophet Mohammed became sure and certain to give grace to humankind on earth and on the seas. They deported him, but he came back safe and well and called out to the whole of humanity to share his divine grace. Let's take advantage of his devotion and belief. Bamba is our saviour."

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FATELIKU DËMB (Remember the Past) is the one pure m'balax track on the album. M'balax has been the dominant style in Senegalese music for over twenty years and Cheikh's driving acoustic flamenco guitar stamps it very much with his own personal style. The lyrics point to the need to know where you came from, however far you climb. It's a message of humility, delivered with typical directness and simplicity. "Remember wise man when you knew nothing, factory owner when you weren't in charge, President of the Republic before you were elected." The track features a great guitar solo from Lamine Faye.

Cheikh ends the album with a joyous praise song that begins by invoking the name of Cheikh Ibra Fall. "If you invoke the name of God all the time" he sings, "one day He will hear you and speak to you. God is sweet and good like sweets. Let's invoke the name of God..." And so begins ZIKROULAH (Invoking the name of God), the solo voice giving way to the totemic thunder of sabar drums with female chorus.