



CHEIKH LÔ

Biography

The Senegalese maverick is a free spirit, whose musical journey over the years has led him to soak up styles and cultures from all over the globe. With his deep rooted spirituality Cheikh has combined these influences into a sound that is uniquely his own.

Lô dedicates both his music and his life to Baye Fall, a specifically Senegalese form of Islam and part of the larger Islamic brotherhood of Mouridism. Established by Bamba (Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba M'Becke) at the end of the 19th century, Mouridism emerged from the nationalist struggles between the Senegalese and their French colonisers, and many fabulous stories are told of Bamba's struggles with the authorities who feared that the rapid spread of Mouridism would inspire armed insurrection. Bamba's closest disciple Cheikh Ibra Fall (also known as Lamp Fall) established the Baye Fall movement, who take their name from him, and was the first to wear the patchwork clothes and long dreads that are the Baye Fall trademarks. Cheikh Lô's own marabout Massamba (Maame Massamba N'Diaye) is said to be over 100 years old, and was a disciple of Cheikh Ibra Fall; Cheikh Lô wears his picture in a pendant around his neck.

Cheikh Lô was born in 1955, to Senegalese parents in the small town of Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso not far from the border with Mali, where he grew up speaking Bambara (language of Mali), Wolof (language of Senegal) and French. His father was from a long line of marabouts. From an early age Cheikh Lô was only interested in music, running away from school to teach himself drums and guitar on borrowed instruments.

During his teens Cheikh listened to all kinds of music, especially the Congolese Rumba which was popular throughout Africa. Cuban music was all the rage in West Africa in the Fifties, so when his older brothers started up their 78s and danced to 'El Pancho Bravo', Cheikh, without understanding a word, would mime exactly to the Spanish lyrics.

At 21 Cheikh started playing percussion with Orchestra Volta Jazz in Bobo Dioulasso. They played all kinds of music and cover versions of other African tunes, like Ernesto Djedje's hits from Côte d'Ivoire.

Cheikh moved to Dakar in 1970. He started out playing drum-kit for the renowned and progressive singer, Ouza, and then in 1984 he joined the house band at the Hotel Savana, drumming and singing an international repertoire.

In 1985 he moved to France, where he was immersed as a session drummer in the Parisian recording scene. Cheikh recalls: "Studio - sleep - studio for two years. I love Congolese and Cameroonian music and I absorbed a lot of it during this period. Maybe you can hear a bit of Papa Wemba in my singing." On his return to Senegal he tried to return to his former job at the Savana but found that with his (now very long) dreadlocks he was no longer entirely welcome; so he started looking for someone to produce his own music.

Youssou N'Dour first encountered Cheikh Lô as a session musician in 1989 when he was doing the chorus and drums on an album Youssou was producing by N'diaga M'baye (a traditional Wolof griot singer). 'Whenever he sang the choruses I was overwhelmed by his voice,' explains N'Dour 'but I really got to know him from his album 'Doxandeme', I heard his voice and said "wow" - I found something in his voice that's like a voyage through Burkina, Niger, Mali'.

Cheikh's first cassette 'Doxandeme' ('Immigrants') came out in 1990, where he sang about the experience of being Senegalese abroad: 'It was difficult and I needed to have a strong faith in my religion,' he explains. "Doxandeme" was a local production on a small label, the cassette sold well and got my name around but from my own point of view, it wasn't at all professional'. Despite his reservations about the production, in December of that year Cheikh won the 'Nouveau Talent' award in Dakar. The following year he started to work on the compositions for 'Ne La Thiass'.

Cheikh held onto his new compositions whilst looking for the best recording conditions, and would ultimately give his demo to N'Dour. On hearing the songs, N'Dour was immediately interested in producing and, although his success with 'Seven Seconds' held up recording, he kept his word and in August 1995 they went to work in Youssou's Xippi Studio in Dakar.

On 'Ne La Thiass', Lô is joined by Youssou N'Dour ('Guiss Guiss' and 'Set') and by musicians from the Super Etoile de Dakar; Oumar Sow (guitarist and arranger), Babacor Faye (percussion) and Assane Thiam (talking drum). 'Ne La Thiass' was released domestically on Youssou's Jololi label and was an instant success. 'Set' - a plea to clean up the streets during a Dakar municipal strike, was broadcast on loudspeakers throughout the country in a campaign by the Ministry of Health.

'Ne La Thiass' was released internationally on World Circuit Records, in November 1996 and in April 1997 Cheikh Lô made his debut tour in Europe with his own band. His early performances prompted rave reviews - 'A rare talent destined to become one of world music's biggest stars', The Times - 'a

compelling performer with energy and personality to match that of the early Bob Marley', The Guardian.

In 1997 Cheikh Lô was awarded Best Newcomer at the Kora All-African Awards in South Africa. In 1998 he went out on the road in the US, as part of the 'Africa-Fête' line-up that included Salif Keita and Papa Wemba. In 1999 he received the prestigious 'Ordre National de Merite de Léon' by the president of Senegal.

Cheikh's second album for World Circuit 'Bambay Gueej' was released in 1999, the tracks were co-produced by Nick Gold and Youssou N'Dour and once again recorded at N'Dour's Xippi studio, with additional recording in Havana and London. Adding to the energy and emotional intensity of his previous album, Cheikh Lô drew on sounds from Burkina Faso, Mali, Congo, and added influences from Cuba, subtle reggae and blasting African funk to the mix.

'Bambay Gueej' saw Cheikh's voice sounding sweeter than ever, and although he played a variety of instruments on the album he did retain the core musicians from his first record. This album features a selection of very special guests including Cheikh's musical hero, Cuba's legendary Richard Egües on flute and Aswad's Bigga Morrison on Hammond organ. Former James Brown and Horny Horns horn arranger and saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis appeared on the title track and fellow World Circuit artist, Malian diva Oumou Sangare brought her amazing vocal talents to the atmospheric duet 'Bobo-Dioulasso'.

In 2002 Cheikh Lô played various festivals across America followed by some dates in the UK. At the beginning of 2003 Cheikh played several Spanish dates and appeared at WOMAD in Australia and New Zealand to much acclaim. He also contributed 2 tracks to the 'Red Hot and Riot' album, which featured many influential world music artists covering Fela Kuti songs. The album is part of a series of compilations that have raised the profile of, and funds for, AIDS related charities.

2003 was a productive year for Cheikh, not only did he play a selection of European summer festivals, but he began work on his third album for World Circuit. Following the music that was influencing him at the time, Cheikh laid the foundations of the album in Dakar, moved on to London the following year to add more percussion, and once again the horns of Pee Wee Ellis; and having being suitably inspired by his discovery of Brazilian sounds and rhythms, Cheikh travelled to Bahia, Brazil in 2005 to work with acclaimed producer Alê Siqueira (Tribalistas, Omara Portuondo).

'Lamp Fall' is perhaps the release most reflective of Cheikh's personality: it retains the deeply spiritual message of the Baye Fall, whilst incorporating upbeat Brazilian rhythms, a Senegalese groove, a sense of warmth and fun, and a funk that is distinctly Cheikh Lô. Cheikh will hit the road at the end of 2005 and throughout 2006 to support his new album, giving live audiences the chance to

hear this eagerly awaited new material from one of Africa's most enigmatic live performers.

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