Youssou N'Dour performs at the Jazz Festival in Montreux, Switzerland

MUSIC INDUSTRY

For centuries Africans have been expressing themselves through their unique and inspiring music. Whether you understand the words matters not – you get the message and so does the rest of the world. By KERRY DIMMER

sound waves

waves

It's Sunday afternoon in Miami and you're feeling homesick. You miss Africa's earthy smells, the colours of the open marketplaces and its fiery sunsets. You walk to the beat of a different drum and that is exactly what the syndicated radio show Afropop Worldwide understands.

This show broadcasts to some 108 stations in the US (in Miami tune into WDNA 88.9 FM Sundays at 6 pm), and can also be heard in Africa and Europe or even streamed from its website, afropop.org. It's been around for more than two decades and is hosted by veteran Cameroonian broadcaster Georges Collinet (or Maxi Voom Voom as he's fondly called by his fans).

When it launched, Afropop Worldwide was the first of its kind and for producer Sean Barlow, it was his vision of connecting the African diaspora to the Americas and Europe through music. He had found a niche and unleashed the continent's original sounds to a broad international audience.

Award-winning South African performer Johnny Clegg believes: “International recognition comes with touring and the realisation that, as African musicians, we always start off as alternative and marginal in the international arena. But as touring develops we capture our own market. Our fans are loyal, interested in the sounds and combination of local and international hybridisation but also in the deep traditional sounds.”

What makes African music so different, so infectious is that it truly reflects the life and struggles of Africans: it’s storytelling with a heartbeat.

Diane Thram, ethnomusicologist at the International Library of African Music (ILAM) at Rhodes University in South Africa, explains its appeal: “It has a complexity that is so different from Western music. Fifty-six years ago people were listening to Cuban and American jazz that, with its mix of chords and vocals, was very interesting harmonically. The introduction of indigenous African music took this sound to another dimension way beyond what was known to the rest of the world at the time.

‘It introduced elaborate instruments that were completely foreign, like the multiple-stringed kor from Mali, which takes great expertise to play well, the Zimbabwe mbira (thumb piano) is another, and generally all the xylophone traditions that are complex and elaborate.’

Thram credits ILAM’s founder Hugh Tracey’s Music of Africa and Sound of Africa LP series
Festivals have been very important for the promotion of African artists since the world music craze of the 1980s.