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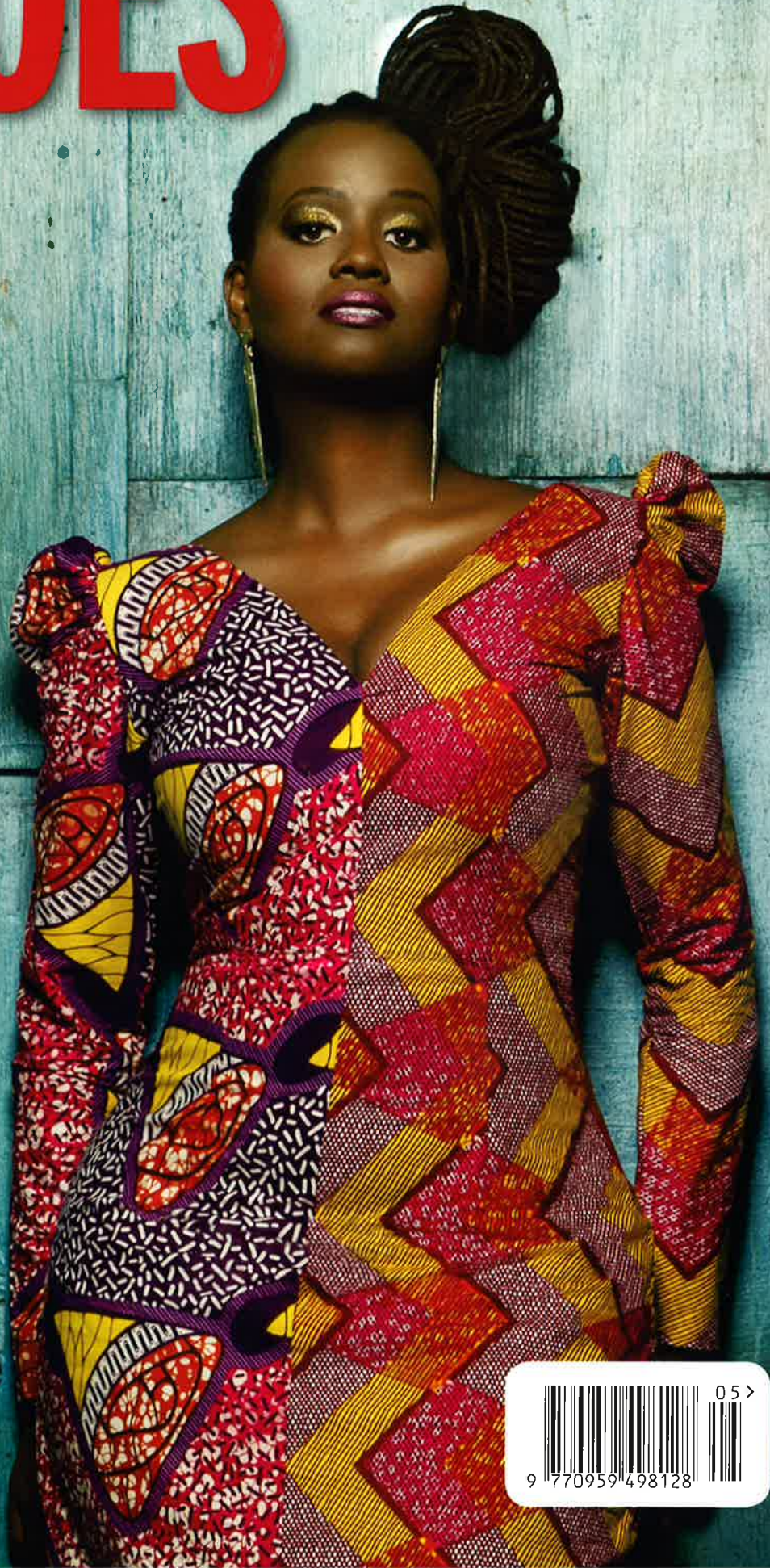
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# LOST [AND FOUND] IN LAGOS

Chris Wells talks to **Somi** and traces the development of *The Lagos Music Salon*, one of this year's very best albums.

**London and New York are big cities, each with a population of more than eight million people. Yet they are both dwarfed by Lagos.**

Nigeria's capital is home to a staggering 20 million souls, putting it high in the top 20 of the world's largest urban developments. Moreover, since one-in-six of the planet's black-skinned people are Nigerian (and one-in-four Africans), it's not surprising that in the 21st century Lagos has become Africa's most significant focal point for music, film, literature, art and fashion. [Nollywood is now the world's third biggest centre for movie making.]

The city was also the inspiration behind Somi's imminent fourth album, *The Lagos Music Salon*, due for release next month through the artist's deal with Okeh/Sony. It's a brilliant piece of work, merging the singer/songwriter's penchant for jazz and soul with her African cultural heritage. Lyrically speaking, it draws on the journal that Somi kept during an 18-month stay in Lagos and rural Nigeria that helped refocus both her art and self.

Much has happened to Somi since we last wrote about her. That was in late 2009, when indie label ObliqSound released *If The Rains Come First*, her much admired second set which featured strong contributions from Michael and

Alicia Olatuja as well as a guest spot from Somi's unofficial 'uncle' and mentor, trumpet legend Hugh Masekela. [There's been a live album, 2011's *Live At Jazz Standard*, since.]

To begin with, Somi's father, a diplomat and educator who'd worked for the World Health Organization, died only shortly after *If The Rains Come First's* release. As devastating as that was to her, Somi managed to support the album throughout 2010 with tours and promotion, generally fending off the grief with hard work. By the beginning of 2011, though, once the live set had been recorded, she began to reflect on where life was taking her and what she wanted to do next. A bold statement, a definitive change, seemed in order. Somi upped sticks and left for Nigeria.

"Initially I was supposed to be there for seven weeks," she explains at Sony HQ in London. "I had an opportunity to teach at a university: a former graduate advisor of mine in New York asked me to join a graduate programme in rural Nigeria. I had been to Lagos the year before with my band for the Lagos Jazz Festival, and I'd loved it. I went twice, in fact. But I would always come and go home after the show, and I found that frustrating.

"I could see the parallels between there and New York. It's bigger, it's gritty, fast paced... but



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there are huge rewards and returns. Every major company is there, it's fashionable, it's arty... it was interesting to see all that in an African context. And I had a social network over there from people I had known in New York who had moved back there. I was curious about it.

She committed to the seven weeks and began to look into opportunities that would allow her to stay longer.

"I moved there in late August 2011 and soon committed to staying there until December 2012 - I ended up being there for 18 months in total. The only reason I left was that I had this body of work and I knew that I had the opportunity with Sony, so it made more sense to return to New York to do those things."

Hugh Masekela played a part in the shift of continents. Over lunch, during the early part of 2011, he'd responded to her voicing of fears about the impending move with advice that she should stop regarding it as a permanent thing, that her audience was really anywhere she decided to set up and play, and that, in any case, she could always come back at any time.

"I saw him over there in the first few weeks. He rallied a number of people he knew to look out for me, and he said he could already hear the difference in my work, that he could see a change in me. He connected me with a network, and that was huge. Lagos is sooo expensive to live in!"

Somi had been to Africa on a number of occasions throughout her life, sometimes for longer than mere family holidays to her father's Rwandan homeland and mother's Uganda. From age three she lived in Zambia for five years [trailing her dad's posting with the W.H.O.]. Then, after returning to Champaign, Illinois - where she'd been born during her father's post-doctoral studies there - she undertook her own post-graduate research fellowship to Kenya and Tanzania, following her pre-music desires to become a medical anthropologist. Over a year-and-a-half Somi reconciled herself to being both African and American, without having to be one or the other. As she describes it, she, "got inside the nuance and recontextualised myself as an African woman and an artist. Once I was clear about where I was from, I was clear about where I wanted to go. It gave me the courage to go forward with the music."

Living in Lagos was something else again. After a few months Somi began to panic that she'd done the wrong thing, that maybe leaving her budding musical career behind in America hadn't exactly been the smartest thing to do. How would she get back there? Where was the next project coming from? Then she looked into her journal and realized she'd already begun it.

"The 'salon' concept in the album's title came out of the fact that I noticed there really weren't enough spaces where you could go see music in Lagos. It was always in hotel conference rooms. There are no venues. That was shocking.

"Partly it's the cost; it's so expensive. OK, you *could* see George Benson, Chaka Khan, Chris Brown, but it was always in a hotel conference room, and the tables at the front cost sooo much money - something like \$6,000 for 10 people. If you paid \$600 per person in the States, you'd expect to be backstage with a cocktail with Beyonce! The cheap seats were \$100 too.

"So I wanted to create a different setting and I started thinking about starting these salons. The first one was like a workshop thing in an art gallery in Lagos. I played and answered questions. Those small spaces are so crucial, so important, to your critical growth as an artist.

"I wanted to share this new material with a Lagosian audience and find out if they connected with it. I wanted a critical response. So the salon was about that - showing it to the people to see how it felt. I got feedback."

From its 16th century Italian and French beginnings, the 'salon' was about women coming together in an intimate setting to discuss life, politics, art... pretty much anything at all they wanted. It was originally meant to get around the lack of formal education opportunities afforded to women at that time, but soon grew beyond its primary premise.

Somi wanted to recreate the idea and become a kind of *Salonnière Africaine*. She played her own new material, bounced it off the local audience and invited other musicians along for the ride. She also ran into a producer who would become one of two crucial contributors to the finished album.

"I met Cobhams Asuquo early in the process. He is *really* a genius. Cobhams has a very keen awareness and understanding of African music and also keen pop sensibilities. He knows afrobeats and he also wants to reach for things that are a little more soulful. He happens also to be blind. He's also self-taught. But he's amazing. He'd sing me melodies I sang to him months beforehand, just the one time, that even I couldn't remember. He helped me honour the Nigerian energy."

When it became obvious that the lack of studios in Lagos large enough to record her band would be a problem, Somi decided to cut the album back in New York, where she could also link up with another person vital the project's success:

"Keith Witty is a long-time friend, a beautiful

bass player, arranger and composer. He has the jazz part, the more cerebral part. He made sure it was still - what's the right word? - *challenging*. For example, we did sonic overlays on things that brought in my interest in rock - if you can spot them I don't know!"

The plan was to release the album independently and so Somi set about funding it. [The magnificent Olatujas are once again on board, as is Angelique Kidjo and brilliant trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire.] By the end of 2012, however, Sony had picked up on it and indicated their willingness to put together a deal that would see the album to its completion - and most importantly, without compromise to its contents.

The result is an album that presents Nigerian life through the eyes of, yes, a foreigner, but an *African-American* who has long been in finely in tune with the first part of that description and its meaning. Through her lyrical observations, Somi is able to cast a fresh eye on what she encountered, but an understanding, empathetic one too. It's becomes both a remarkable travelogue and a nicely focused lens into Lagosian life.

Take the song *Brown Round Things*, for example.

"That song is a meditation on sex workers," says Somi. "There is a street in Lagos that every night you're gonna see these women working. Now, of course, it's not saying the prostitution is new - you see it all over the world - I had known girls from the States, students, who had been strippers at night to pay their bills and now they had moved on and had settled down to a "proper" life, and you'd never know. But considering the African family structure, I got to thinking, 'Where is their family?' There was this innocence that had been lost, and my perception of the African family was one of being very tight knit, involved in each other's life - too much sometimes - and then these women were here on the streets, exposed to danger and all kinds of things. How heartbreaking it must be for the woman and her family - if they should know. The song contemplates that."

More of Somi's musings on her lyrics will appear exclusively on our website. In the meantime, be preparing yourselves to encounter one of the year's best albums: an intelligent, soulful, funky and elegantly jazzy collection that blurs genre lines as merrily as it shows off the artist's depth of talent. Quite simply, *The Lagos Music Salon* is amazing.

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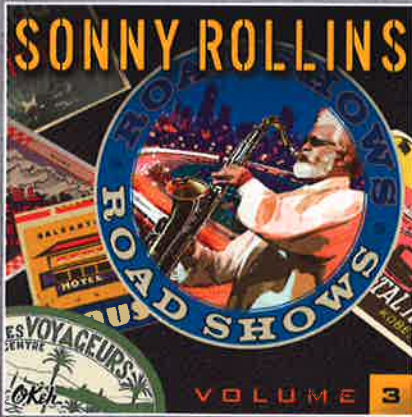
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