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SOMI

The Lagos Music Salon

Album Review by Christopher Loudon

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Born in Illinois to parents from Uganda and Rwanda, Somi has always felt the pull of Africa. She has visited much of the continent and in 2008 founded New Africa Live, dedicated to promoting global recognition of multidisciplinary African artists. The following year, spurred by her father's death, she journeyed "home," spending 18 months in Lagos [Nigeria]. From her detailed journal entries and with assistance from Nigerian producer and musician Cobhams Asuquo, a musical story emerged.

Upon her return to New York, this album took shape alongside drummer Otis Brown III, pianist Toru Dodo, guitarist Liberty Ellman, bassist Michael Olatuja and backing vocalist Alicia Olatuja. Across 18 tracks, it is a sweeping, powerful portrait of a vibrant culture 20 million strong.

Salon opens with a snippet of Somi's exchange with a Nigerian customs official. Then her voice emerges, pure and strong, traveling from the bliss of the two-part "Love Juju" to the despair of "Four African Women" (inspired by Nina Simone's "Four Women"), a searing examination of skin bleaching, circumcision, genocide and prostitution. Her observations of local prostitutes also inform the mournful "Brown Round Things," featuring trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire. She partners with rapper Common to lament Africa's escalating pollution on "When Rivers Cry," with Angélique Kidjo to salute Fela Kuti on the lively "Lady Revisited," and with trumpeter Etienne Charles for the celebratory "Akobi: First Born S(u)n." But marquee guests merely enhance a deeply personal journey, from which emerges a magnificently candid, reverent disquisition."