

VOICES OF THE PEOPLE



SENEGAL Riots, rallies and revolution. Welcome to Dakar. With Youssou N'Dour's presidential bid now over, Rose Skelton exposes the hip-hop artists who will stop at nothing to overturn the political injustices that now plague Senegal

Senegalese music star Youssou N'Dour greets crowds at an anti-Wade rally in Dakar after announcing his presidential bid



Dakar's main commercial drag, Avenue Ponty, is always a streaming cacophony of noise, blaring taxis horns, a rush of people and the pavements filled with hawkers selling T-shirts, *djembe* drums and kitchen plates. But on a Friday in mid-February, the city centre moved to a very different beat. At one end of the wide avenue stood mostly young men, talking amongst themselves, their excitement rising. At the other end, forming a barrier around the Place de l'Indépendance, was a line of police, some carrying riot shields and others loading tear gas canisters into their guns. Behind them a water cannon waited for the first rock to fly.

Suddenly, a cry went up and the protestors swarmed towards a convoy of vehicles. Tough young men hung off the sides of the cars as the crowd surged to get close to it and glimpse the occupant. And there, on top, in a dapper suit and glasses, was a figure familiar not just to the crowd and the police but one that people all over the world would instantly recognise. Youssou N'Dour, the golden voice of Senegal and unofficial spokesman for the continent, had arrived to lend his support to the fight. His participation in a political struggle which has left the normally peaceful country in turmoil has ensured that Senegalese politics will never be the same again.

On January 2, Youssou went on his own TV station, TFM, and read out a declaration that threw the nation into a spin. "For

a very long time," he said in measured tones, "men and women have believed in me. They dream of a new Senegal. By many different routes they have asked me to stand in next February's election. I have listened, I have heard. I am a candidate."

Many were in a state of disbelief, pointing at Youssou's lack of formal education, none more so than the country's president, Abdoulaye Wade, the 85-year-old leader coming to the end of his second term in power and hoping for a third. Though the country's constitution stipulates that a president can only have two terms, Wade had already declared he would fight in the courts to prove that his first term didn't count because term limits came in after he was elected. By doing so, he unleashed a wave of instability and violence that Senegal, considered a model of democracy in a region embattled by civil wars and *coup d'états*, has never before seen.

Wade may have known that he could easily win the court battle – the head of the court is, after all, appointed by him – but he could not have known that he would be challenged by his long-time rival Youssou, whose popularity he so fears. And so began, at the start of 2012, a presidential race full of drama, intrigue and violence.

While the same court that validated Wade's run for a third term also invalidated Youssou's, saying he did not have enough signatures of support to run (despite submitting well over the required amount), the singer stayed at the front of the fight, >>

determined not to let Senegal go the way of so many of its African neighbours. Thanks to Youssou, Senegal now had the world's attention. The chances of Wade steamrolling to another term were diminishing.

Senegal was well acquainted with the powerful role that music could play in politics, long before Youssou made his dramatic entry into the election race. For centuries, *griots* (praise singers) of the Mande empire, which covered much of modern-day West Africa, would accompany kings on their travels, announcing their deeds to the people, good and bad. "The main job of the griot was to report the truth to society," says singer Faada Freddy of rap group Daara J Family. "He used to criticise the king poetically when he wasn't acting right, using metaphors he would understand. Now," he says, "hip-hoppers are the modern griots."

And Wade knows more than anyone how powerful music, and especially rap, has become in Senegalese society. A long-time opposition candidate, Wade finally became president in 2000 when rappers like Daara J, Xuman, Didier Awadi's Positive Black Soul and a host of others went on the musical campaign trail to dislodge the Socialist Party from power.

Mix tapes going by names such as *Politichien* (a play on the French for 'politician' and 'dog') went around reminding young

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people that it was time for a change. "Around that time," explains Xuman, "the youth in Senegal got more conscious about their future. They didn't recognise themselves in this political system. This is how hip-hop became the major force for the youth, to uplift the people."

The Socialist government had ruled Senegal since independence in 1960 under just two presidents. This period produced the names now fixed in Senegalese musical history: Orchestra Baobab, Baaba Maal, Youssou N'Dour and Cheikh Lô, and gave a platform to the next generation of musicians.

But despite the blossoming cultural scene, by the end of the 90s, the Senegalese economy was crumbling. Unemployment had risen to around 40% and Dakar was growing into a shabby metropolis that couldn't support the numbers of people, mostly young men, coming from the countryside looking for work. With rap now a feature of Senegalese life, having been brought from the US, it became the voice of the voiceless, speaking out in a language that young people could understand about the things that mattered to them most.

Songs like Positive Black Soul's 'Bang Bang Beugue' made a clear political statement: 'We are not PS [Socialist Party], we are not PDS [Wade's Senegalese Democratic Party], we are PBS [Positive Black Soul] and no one can stop us.' "For us," says Awadi, sitting on the rooftop of his Dakar studio, "we couldn't live in a system knowing that there was no future for the people living around us and be silent about it."

Bolstered by the united voices of musicians, Wade was voted in on a wave of hope and optimism. He promised that by the year 2010, Dakar would look like Paris and that every young man and woman would have a job. Senegal looked about to become one of the bright shining stars of Africa.

But things did not quite go as planned. Around 2005, cracks started to appear and the rappers who had helped Wade get elected now turned their tongues on him. When they refused to

sing for him, he used money to divide the hip-hop community and his control of state TV to stop them from getting airtime. Violent attacks on outspoken musicians became frequent, often by fervent supporters of the president or the religious elite. By the 2007 elections, the rap community was highly fragmented and no-one felt like fighting anymore. With the hip-hop community muted and a weak political opposition, Wade sauntered through the elections. The feeling in the hip-hop community and across the country was of disappointment, disillusion and finally, utter hopelessness.

On a quiet pre-election afternoon in 2012, I head out to Dakar's sprawling suburbs, where most of the city's population live in run-down neighbourhoods. Here lies the Y'en a Marre headquarters, nerve centre of one of the most influential groups today in Senegal and the epicentre of a much-needed revival of musicians claiming back their place in the political arena.

Y'en a Marre, meaning 'We've Had Enough' in French slang, is a rag-tag crew of rappers and journalists that has grown to encompass anyone who doesn't agree with the system. They are the only group so far that has had any influence over Wade, forcing him in June 2011 to retract planned changes to the constitution which would have ensured him and his son an >>



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Clockwise from top: Y'en a Marre activists in 'Faux! Pas Forcé' T-shirts; Thiat performing in the Keur-Gui Crew; Thiat in his role as founder of Y'en a Marre

strike at Dakar's once-prestigious Cheikh Anta Diop University, a fight they eventually won. The following year they were jailed for singing against the mayor of their hometown Kaolack, who they considered to be corrupt.

But in January last year, incensed by the power cuts which plunged much of urban Senegal into darkness for hours at a time, they decided to start a bigger movement which pushed for a better Senegal. Out of many late-night meetings between journalists and rappers, the movement Y'en a Marre was born.

It's their music that has allowed Y'en a Marre's message to penetrate Senegal's deepest corners. "We were able to talk to so many people because of our music," says Thiat. "If you make rap music for fun, people don't respect you because you talk about sex, money, your car, your dress. But if you do edutainment, you get respect and power"

The anti-Wade protests and rallies pulse with the kind of music that more than a decade ago helped Wade win the votes of these people. Songs like young rapper RedBlack's 'Nadem,' meaning 'He Should Go,' pointing to the president, is a rally staple, as is Awadi's 'Ma Wakhon Waxeet,' meaning 'I Said It, I Can Take It Back,' a phrase Wade used to 'unsay' his promise about not standing for a third term. In December last year, Y'en a Marre released a single called 'Faux! Pas Forcé,' a rap song written directly to the president. 'Our money,' shouts the verse in Wolof, 'you steal it from us and then share it with your clan... He who plays with the constitution will find us in his path. Who can stop the youth determined to have a better tomorrow?'

Whether or not they reach their goal of pushing Wade out –

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easy victory in the upcoming elections. During the pre-election turbulence, in which a handful of people were killed in clashes with the police, it was Y'en a Marre who led many of the protests. They have little in the way of funds or a formal network but an abundance of determination.

Their head office consists of a one-bedroom apartment on a sandy side-street where sheep munch on hay and a mosque calls the faithful to prayer five times a day. The group's press conferences are held on the building's small rooftop where journalists cram under an awning and listen to their latest pronouncements. Almost completely unheard of in Senegal, the press conferences start on time. This is all part of Y'en a Marre's fight to inspire a new and better society, one harnessing the strength of what they call NTS, or New Type of Senegalese.

In his small, chaotic front room, Thiat, one half of rap group Keur-Gui Crew and Y'en a Marre founder, sits surrounded by newspapers that bear his image. Wearing his trademark woolly hat, he fields endless calls on his mobile phone. When he turns to me to speak, he looks exhausted but determined.

"Rap music is protest music," says Thiat. "I make music against injustice, poor treatment, bad governance, corruption, political absurdity, against a dictatorial regime. My music is the bridge between people and politics."

Keur-Gui Crew, made up of Thiat and Kilifeu, have a long history of using their music to fight political injustice. In 1997, when they were just 18, they were part of a student's union

he faces a second round run-off in March – the very existence of Y'en a Marre points towards a wider movement which is sweeping across Africa and the Arab world, often on the back of revolutionary songs. Thiat has already been compared with the Tunisian rapper El Général who wrote a song credited with assisting in the overthrow of president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

"Every day that I wake up," says Thiat, "I know I could go to the prison, the hospital or the cemetery. Every day that I go outside and I come back home in the evening is a blessing. My life is in perpetual danger, but that was my choice. I prefer to die for a good cause than die without having done anything."

Youssou may not have been allowed to run for president, but his brave, if slightly awkward, entry into politics served to highlight both the weakness of the opposition, which had failed to unite in the face of a third Wade term, and the strength of music in this West African nation. "My inspiration," he says in his plush Dakar office, "comes from my music."

It's hard to know what's next for Senegal's great *mbalax* musician and statesman, whether he will continue to pursue a political career or, more likely, continue using his music to cast a light on his country's political situation. "I don't think anything will stop me from saying what I think," he says, "My work will always be the work of a man of culture, but that culture exists within Senegal. And right now, Senegal is more important." **N**

WEBSITE Follow Y'en a Marre at www.yenamarre-senegal.com

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