

...from DAKAR

'Senegalese Rap is Dead: Long Live Senegalese Rap.' Rose Skelton reports from Dakar on the changes afoot in the local hip-hop scene

Walking through the streets of Dakar, the staccato rhythm of Wolof chatter rings out like music as young boys hawk phone cards, ironing boards and caged canaries. The policeman in white gloves shouting as he directs traffic across an unmarked crossroads; the thump as cars plunge into potholes and dodge colourful, turbaned women calling out their wares. If there's a soundtrack to daily life in Dakar, the hard edge of Senegalese hip-hop is it.

But there have been ructions in the Senegalese hip-hop world, as rumours circulate that one of Senegal's best-loved rap groups, Daara J, have split. Heralding the notion that hip-hop was born in Africa, voyaged to the US and has now returned, the trio who toured the world for more than ten years and had hit albums such as *Boomerang* (2003), are something like a national treasure. While Faada Freddy, the sweet-voiced soul singer of the group, maintains that Daara J will continue without the third member, Lord Alaji Man, it is a sign that things are changing in the Senegalese hip-hop world, and no one's quite sure where it's going.

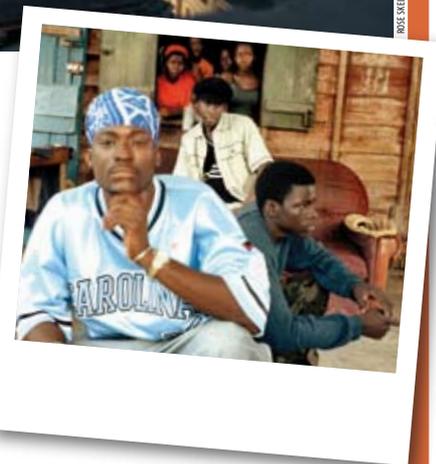
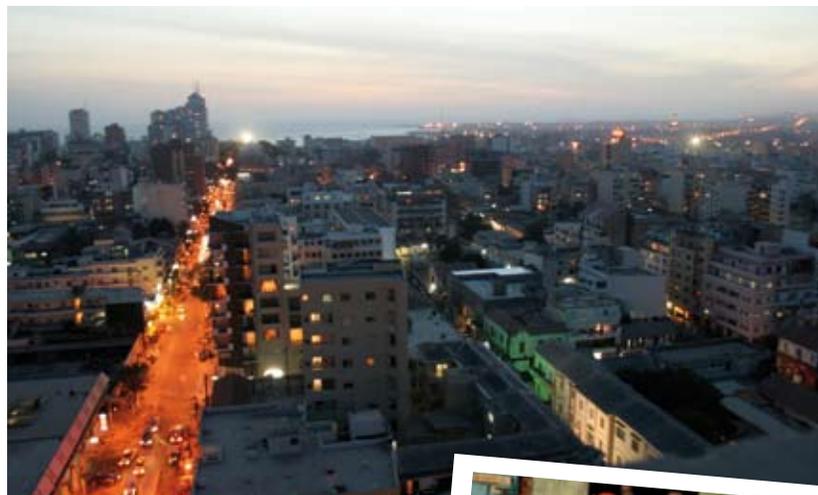
Senegalese rap had its moment of glory in the year 2000, when it sang for political change and brought about the end of 40 years of Socialist rule. In a country where young people are taught to listen to their elders but not speak themselves, groups such as Didier Awadi's Positive Black Soul, Pee Froiss and Daara J dared to challenge the political class with their critical tracks, and in the process, changed the country's history. The Senegalese rap movement entered the 21st century as one of the most powerful musical movements in existence.

Eight years later, things look very different for rap and for the people it represents. Abdoulaye Wade, the president that a nation of young, disenchanted youth put their faith in eight years ago, has failed to deliver on his promises. Unemployment remains at around 40%, inflation is spiralling out of control, while salaries stagnate and the freedom of expression that has allowed Senegal to have such a ripe hip-hop scene is something of the past.

"I have waited 32 years to see a new president with a new system," says Awadi.



Clockwise from above: towering hip-hop inferno Xuman; Dakar by night; Daara J before the split



"But what we see today is worse. There are a lot of rappers who don't believe anymore in the role we have in this society. We have lost faith."

But can this really be the end for Senegalese political rap? "Rap is *edutainment*," smiles Xuman, the towering rap artist who has been one of the most vocal since the movement began. "It's not going to die tomorrow, no way."

As 'dirty south' hits Senegal, a style of hip-hop originating in the south of the US which is all cars, girls, bling and nice clothes set to a pumping beat, old school rappers like Xuman and Awadi know that they have their work cut out for them.

Senegalese rap had its moment of glory in 2000 when it brought about the end of Socialist rule

"People still love the message [of conscious music]," says Xuman. "So we have two fights – to make sure that the music is going to be played in the clubs and that it's still representing the message. Rappers have to find a way to mix both."

Not free to make a music video that openly criticises the government, Xuman has taken a sideways approach so that people dance to the music in clubs, then take the album home and listen to the lyrics.

'Bal Poussier', meaning 'Dusty Party', is one of today's Dakar soundtracks. A jumping, dirty south beat, a slick music video, and now the ring tone to every self-

respecting Dakar boy's mobile phone – it's a song with a double edge. Gently mocking the boys desperate to imitate their southern American idols, it paints a picture of a poor guy scrounging for money so he can go to the club and buy champagne. "I don't have money, I don't have girls," laughs Xuman, tugging at his ordinary white T-shirt. "So I'm talking about my reality. People like the song because they recognise themselves in it."

Despite the hurdles of daily survival, music piracy and an oppressive political regime, it seems like Senegal's vocal rappers are here to stay.

"My dream is that they will all come back to conscious music," says Awadi. "When I see certain ministers who are afraid of me, when I see that when we speak even the president listens, that shows that we have some power. If everyone becomes conscious, we will change the country. That already happened once; it can happen again." ●

SONGLINES MUSIC TRAVEL
 Check out the scene for yourself with our bespoke trip to Senegal. See p18

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