

# A COMPILER'S JOURNEY

The record stores are full of them, but have you ever thought about what's involved in making a compilation? Rose Skelton, compiler of a new album about the issues of migration and leaving Africa, gives an insight into this sometimes lengthy and complex task

ILLUSTRATION FABIO CORUZZI

It definitely wasn't a project I imagined was going to take two and a half years; when I started out compiling *Yes We Can: Songs about Leaving Africa*, I'm pretty sure I had no idea what it was going to involve. But after dozens of sweaty trips into the depths of West Africa's most notorious city limits, months of cajoling, pleading and finally blackmailing musicians into getting the music sent (only to find the files corrupted) and lengthy battles over licensing, rights and melody ownership and my project of music that highlights the issue of migration from Africa is finally on the shelves. At the time of writing, I'm yet to land my hands on a copy of what has been, up until now, my longest labour of love, but when I do, I guess it'll feel pretty good.

Senegal, where I have lived for most of the last ten years, found itself in the news headlines in 2006 when thousands of young men and women set sail in rickety wooden fishing canoes for the Canary Islands, in the hope of reaching Europe and a better life. That year, more than 31,000 people arrived on the shores of the Spanish islands; the Red Cross estimate that 7,000 more died along the way, either drowned or killed by exposure to the Atlantic storms that swell up during the summer months.

A year before, tens of thousands of West Africans were trapped in Morocco, having travelled from their homes across the Sahara. Many, like the young Nigerian I interviewed in Rabat, had lost limbs during run-ins with the authorities, and many more were caught in a cycle of rape and torture by people-trafficking rings, too ashamed to go home, unable to move forward.

Watching my African friends deal with the dilemma of not *whether* to leave Africa, but *how* to leave, I was unable to offer any credible advice. Whatever my own circumstances – knowing life in both places – I had a European passport. But while communities on the continent struggled with the situation, I began to hear songs which offered perspectives on migration, from tracks by Senegalese hip-hop collectives that told young people the dangers of taking the canoes to Europe, to pop videos that featured the singers enjoying the kind of luxury life imagined in the West.

The more I looked, the more I realised that music was a way people could talk about the thing that was on everyone's mind: getting out of Africa. In 2007, Outthere Records, a German label dealing largely in underground African music, and I decided to make a compilation of this music and call it *Yes We Can*, in recognition of the unshakeable

optimism ordinary Africans have for finding a better life elsewhere.

Senegal was the obvious place for me to start, so I set about asking musician friends if they had any songs that might throw some light on the subject of migration. One hot afternoon in Dakar, Senegalese rapper Xuman and I sat on his living room floor, going through piles of CDs and listening to songs that begged young people not to take the boats, stay at home and invest in a better Africa. But the sound quality was so dismal that we couldn't use any of it and we can't, Jay at Outthere reminded me, sell bad music. After the first year, with dozens of trips to the Dakar suburbs under my belt, we had only two songs that we agreed sounded good and had a pertinent message.

In Lagos, I was taken to one of Africa's most notorious slums, Adjegunlé, by a friendly 20-stone body-builder music producer called Ken, to listen to some tracks he thought might fit. As he showed me around his decrepit neighbourhood on the way to his one-roomed studio, he said furtively, "look," pointing to a clearing behind a cage of snarling dogs. "That's where they plan armed robberies." Sipping a Pepsi, feeling desperate in the heat as we listened to song after song of political hip-hop that might fit the bill (but none of which did), I swallowed a chunk of broken Pepsi bottle and thought, as it went down, what on earth am I doing here?

But other songs came much more easily. In Dakar I set up some late-night meetings at the studio of the newly reformed hip-hop duo Daara J Family. When I told them about the project, they jumped at the chance to make a track which would give them a voice on a situation that they felt was wrecking their

community and their continent. As musicians who have had the chance to tour internationally and who choose Senegal as their home, they have a unique and much-misunderstood perspective.

Their song, 'Unité 75', so-called after the international phone booths that litter the Dakar streets charging 75 CFA francs a unit for a call, talks of the hardship of being in Europe, saving up every penny to send it back to Senegal, only to be asked for more from back home. *'It's easy to feel helpless'*, they sing. *'You're always running around till you're out of breath, looking for that little bit to send the family. Don't think that I just walk around finding money on street corners.'*

After much prodding, a year later the Daara J Family song landed in my in-box and cold with anticipation, I opened it, worried that it wouldn't work musically. Luckily, we all agreed, it was a fantastic track, lyrically on-point and sounded great. Now there were only the lyrics to get and translate (they arrived two months later in Wolof, the language of Senegal), get the song in the right file format, find some images and write the sleeve notes. Choosing the music, I was learning, is only one tiny part of making a compilation.

One big issue we encountered was with the major record labels who owned the rights to some of the songs we wanted to license. The rights to Somali rapper K'Naan's track '15 Minutes Away', which tells of the life-line of Western Union money for people in a war-torn country, were owned by Universal who rejected our request, claiming we weren't going to sell enough copies. They later conceded. Other labels turned down our request outright and gave no reasons as to why.

A fabulous Algerian *rai*/hip-hop track

about immigrant life in France passed us by, as did some Ivorian *zouglou*. Who owned the rights to a Franco loop I fell in love with, rapped over by Ivorian/US-citizen Boobah Siddik on 'Got My Hustle Jacket', is still anyone's guess, and after months of listening to every song we could find by the Congolese guitar veteran, we gave up trying to locate its origins. Happily, Cameroonian guitar maverick Muntu Valdo stepped in to make us a new loop for the song which talks about life as an African immigrant in the US.

After months of brainstorming to find a title, we decided to go back to our original working title: *Yes We Can*. MP3s, sleeve notes and photos shot between London, Africa and Germany for many more weeks and finally we pronounced our set of songs ready to go. I have wanted as much as possible for this to be a 360-degree view of the topic of migration, as spoken by Africans on behalf of their communities, both at home and in the diaspora. The hope is to contribute to a debate that might in some little way help to shift perceptions of Africa in the West and the West in Africa. Failing that, I hope this brings a bit more good African music to the surface. ●

**REVIEW** *Yes We Can: Songs About Leaving Africa* is reviewed in this issue, p63

**PODCAST** Hear music from Daara J Family and CAPSI Revolution, plus Rose Skelton's report about the making of the album on the podcast

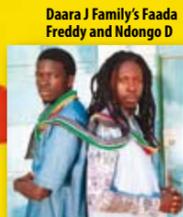
**ALBUM** DJs Max Reinhardt and Rita Ray will host a show of live music at Passing Clouds on June 18 to launch *Yes We Can*.



London-born Nigerian Afrikan Boy



Didier Awadi from Senegal



Daara J Family's Faada Freddy and Ndongo D



London-based Cameroonian Muntu Valdo



Somali hip-hop star K'Naan



Sapeur singer from Cameroon Martin Pecheur



Izé from Cape Verde



Hip-hop artist Zubz, born in Zambia and brought up in Zimbabwe



Boobah Siddik, from Ivory Coast

Kedjevara from Ivory Coast



Wanlov the Kubolor from Ghana

