

The road to Cheikh Lô's house is long.

Far out in the suburbs of Dakar, it's sandy and scattered with rocks and scraps of rubbish, like any other road in these parts. Neighbourhood shops line the wide street, selling everything from cigarettes to tyre-pumping services, and horse carts ply the road ferrying butane gas from shop to shop or rubbish to the city-sized dump which lies just over the brow of the hill. This is an ordinary street with no pretensions, where ordinary people live.

But when I arrive at Cheikh Lô's house, it's clear that this is no ordinary home. The front of the modest two-story concrete building is completely covered in shiny red, yellow and white tiles which, set against the monotone backdrop of the sandy landscape, is startling, like stumbling across a Punch and Judy show in the desert.

Emerging through the pattern of this giant tiled patchwork is the face of a man who, at three metres tall, looks down on me standing, open-mouthed, in the street below. This is the face of Cheikh Ibra Fall, one of Senegal's

Sufi – or mystical – Islamic *marabouts* (holy leaders), and the guiding light for millions of followers around the world who adhere to his method of Islamic practice.

It's a familiar image in Senegal; the dreadlocked face of Cheikh Ibra Fall appears on every second shop façade and on the leather frames that followers, known as Baye Fall, wear around their necks [see picture below]. So when I am let in to another musician's house later in the week – this time by Carlou D, the young Senegalese pop sensation who has taken the spiritual songs of the Baye Fall and mixed them with outspoken lyrics and blinding acoustic instrumentation – I'm not surprised to see another massive portrait of the marabout, this time an almost two-metre tall pencil drawing, watching us as we chat.

Carlou, in his gently spoken way, tells me how much he loves Dakar, but not for the reasons people usually give: the good weather, vibrant music life and vivacious people. "I want to stay in Dakar because I don't want to be away from my spiritual guide, Cheikh Ibra Fall," he says. "He's buried in Senegalese soil and I will never leave that soil to go and live elsewhere. I've had a lot of proposals to go to Paris or Amsterdam to study music, but I will never leave >>



Clockwise from above: Cheikh Lô pictured in patchwork dress, a style typical of Baye Fall followers; they also wear a picture of their leader Cheikh Ibra Fall around their necks; fellow follower Carlou D; Cheikh Lô at home, underneath a portrait of Cheikh Ibra Fall

DEDICATED FOLLOWERS

SENEGAL Religious songs praising Islamic leaders are hugely popular in Senegal. Rose Skelton talks to two of the country's biggest stars – both loyal Baye Fall followers – Cheikh Lô and Carlou D

CHEIKH LO PHOTOS YOURI LENQUETTE
CARLOU D PHOTOS JEREMY LLEWELLYN-JONES

Senegal. I know that life isn't easy here, that we really suffer, but it's also hard to leave the land where my spiritual guide is buried."

That rockstars – Cheikh Lô is legendary in Senegal, and Carlou D is as close to a celebrity as anyone in this country where even the musical giants stop to chat with the man on the street – are more concerned with honouring their spiritual guides than driving around in flash cars, is not surprising. This is

fact, it's like watching a Punch and Judy show. Cheikh is both exceptionally funny and sharply clever, attributes that tend to hide behind a façade of rather explosive moods and the detached air of someone who likes to smoke.

Like many conversations that take place in Senegal, we soon get onto the subject of religion and the Mourides, one of the four Sufi groups in Senegal to which Cheikh belongs. Mouridism, if not the most populous group, is

the most powerful; controlling business, transport and the music distribution industry.

"I was born a Mouride," Cheikh says, talking about the spiritual group formed by Cheikh Amadou Bamba, a Senegalese visionary and colonial resistor (see box on p31). "But I felt more for Cheikh Ibra Fall, Bamba's first disciple, than I did for the five prayer times that make a Mouride. People have the freedom to choose but for me it was

the Baye Fall that I felt strongly about, because with them, there is more tolerance."

The Baye Fall are an offshoot of the Mourides, a group easily identified by their distinctive and colourful patchwork outfits, their long dreadlocks and the thick leather necklaces which carry the photo of their spiritual guide Cheikh Ibra Fall. When Cheikh Ibra gave his life in service to Cheikh Amadou Bamba in the late 19th century, his theory was

that manual labour was like prayer – a form of remembering God.

He set up working farms, known as *daaras*, where his disciples could go to offer their hard work, usually in tending peanut crops, as a form of service to the Cheikh and through him, remembrance of God. Prayer, in the orthodox sense of the term, was dispensed with and instead disciples worked hard on the farms and held night-time song sessions

Both of these musicians, separated by a generation but tied by their faith, feel that

a successfully musical nation, but Senegal is also an intensely spiritual place and while the unorthodox form of Islam – Sufism – that the Senegalese practise means that rules such as praying five times a day or abstaining from alcohol are often tossed aside, what is left is the raw roots of the religion: total devotion to the spiritual guide.

In the case of Cheikh Lô and Carlou D – both making very different music in style and energy – this filters down to the songs. Their lyrics are rich in religious metaphor and, especially in the case of Carlou D, the form and rhythms take much from the heady night-time *ziker* (Sufi spiritual gatherings) that characterise the sound of the Dakar night. Both of these musicians, separated by a generation but tied by their faith, feel that music is the best way of spreading this love and devotion around the world.

Cheikh Lô is waiting for me in a small box-like room where he is watching television and smoking. He drags a plastic chair across the concrete floor for me to sit down and gives me his fabulous smile, full of brilliant white teeth, dazzling against his dark skin and thin cheeks. We chat for more than two hours about the state of the Senegalese economy whilst drinking glass after glass of strong, black tea.

He chats merrily on about president Wade's latest political moves. One minute he is mimicking Wade's voice, and the next he has transformed into Senegal's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor. So brilliant is his impression, it's like watching a theatre show; in



music is the best way of spreading this love and devotion around the world



Cheikh Lô at home in Dakar, with his band and in one of the typical yellow Senegalese taxis which often sport the symbol of the Baye Fall. Below: Cheikh pictured at the time of his last release, *Lamp Fall*, in 2005



whose repetitive calls from the Qur'an and the drum beats that went with it led to members falling into a trance. Today, with many young city-dwellers looking for a more open religion, one that embraces music as a form of worship, the Baye Fall, with its lack of strict religious rules, is hugely popular.

One of the devotional songs on Cheikh's new album is a fanfare of a track called 'Dieuf Dieul' which features a swinging Wolof beat, a cracking rhythm section and the unmistakably clear horns of Pee Wee Ellis, James Brown's saxophone player. It's a song which gives thanks to Allah and to the Senegalese Sufi leaders, the kind of song whose rolling rhythms would have people up and dancing in the small clubs that Cheikh plays in every week in Dakar.

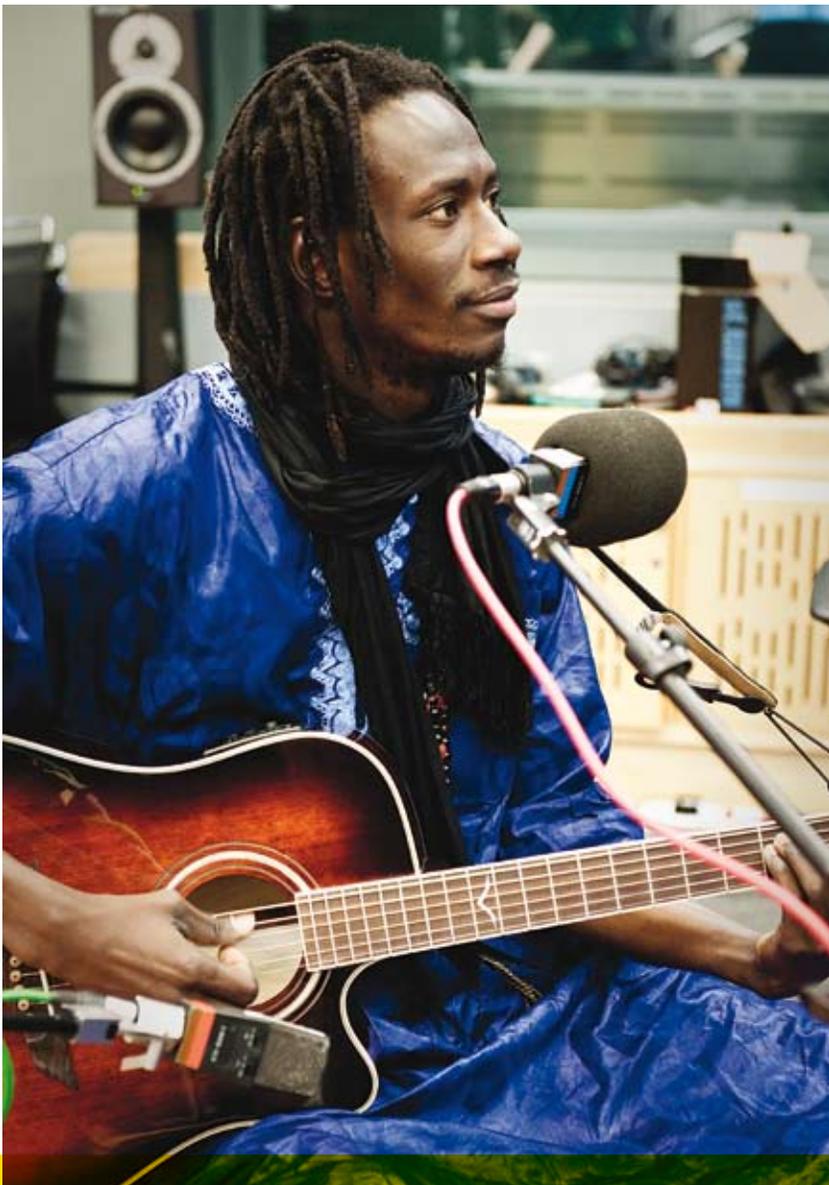
Islam is often reported on as a religion which doesn't tolerate music and certainly not music played in clubs where people drink alcohol and wear revealing outfits. Rarely is the other side of Islam – the Sufis who use music as a way of giving thanks and praise to God – talked about.

"There are some Muslims who say that music is not allowed, that it's not good," says

Cheikh, hushing his voice and leaning closer. "I just can't understand that, people who are against music. For them it's *haram* (forbidden), a good person should not do that. They look at you like you're Satan!" Cheikh breaks out into an astounding phrase of 'Alleluia', a voice as sweet and melodic as a choirboy's. "That's music too!" he shouts excitedly, throwing his arms up. "And the music which rings out here is going to ring all the way to Paradise. I believe it!"

Carlou D grew up in the suburbs of Dakar, singing at the night-time Baye Fall vigils that permeate the city air. "I grew up with those meetings like every Senegalese," says Carlou, timidly clasping a guitar to his chest. "Young children who are Baye Fall start to sing to express themselves, we all grew up with that. It's part of the beautiful history of the Baye Fall"

Carlou went on to have a career in hip-hop when it became popular in Dakar in the 90s, singing with the rap group Positive Black Soul along with political rapper Didier Awadi. While most of Carlou's songs now draw »



Left: Carlou D during a session for Radio 3's *World Routes* programme
Below: at the launch of his album *Muzikr*, at London's Africa Centre in June



PHOTO: SETH STAN

Fall Guys

The most revered figure in Senegal, **Cheikh Amadou Bamba** (1853-1927) also goes by the name of Serigne Touba, an honorific title referring to his leadership of Touba, an important holy town in Senegal and home to the Mouride brotherhood which he founded. His most important disciple was **Cheikh Ibra Fall** (1855-1930) who acted as his right-hand man, setting up working farms for disciples to lend a hand on as a form of prayer and devotion, and founding the Baye Fall brotherhood, an offshoot of the Mourides. Baye means 'father' in the Wolof language.

The symbol for the Baye Fall, painted on buses (public transport being an important part of the Mouride economic power) is of the minaret of the mosque at Touba and the phrase 'Lamp Fall' meaning, 'Light of Ibra Fall' or 'Wakeur Serigne Touba' meaning 'Followers of Cheikh Amadou Bamba'. The Baye Fall wear patchwork clothing as a symbol of asceticism.

“Now I sing in places where I see young, well-dressed people singing along with my music. That means that spiritual music has no boundaries any more” Carlou D

on his courage to speak out against social ills – adopted from the hip-hop genre – many of his songs take the pure form of Baye Fall song: the heavy drum beat and the Wolof 3/4 rhythm, and mix it with jazz, funk and acoustic instrumentation. The album's opener, 'Sam Fall' features a soaring repeated phrase from the Qur'an: *'La ilaha illallah'*, meaning 'There is no God but Allah.'

“When you sing (the phrase) and you believe in it, it takes you into an extraordinary dimension, another state of mind,” he says. “It purifies you.” This is something that also comes up in my discussions with Cheikh. “When I sing about Cheikh Ibra Fall on stage, I have internal peace,” Cheikh says. “This is really important, more important than all the gold in the world.”

It seems that the 'state' that the Baye Fall slip into whilst singing the Qur'anic verses at their night-time meetings has the same effect

on these two musicians when they sing their music on stages across the world. “We didn't used to sing religious songs in the kinds of places I sing them now,” says Carlou, who is revered in Senegal not only for his utterly captivating stage presence, but also because he has taken those popular Baye Fall chants and put them into a commercially distributable framework.

“I took those songs, mixed them with different kinds of music and with my lyrics which have my way of seeing and thinking in them too, mixed it all up and gave it to the audience. Now I sing in places where I see young, well-dressed people singing along with my music. That means that spiritual music has no boundaries any more.”

Up until now, Cheikh Lô's finest moment was his debut international release, *Né La Thiass* (1996). It was pure acoustic bliss with the rawness of reggae and the slinkiness >>



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making tracks



• CHEIKH LÔ & CARLOU D •

of jazz, mixed up with Cheikh's cool voice, full of wry humour. Despite successful releases since then – notably his last album, *Lamp Fall* [reviewed in #33], recorded largely in Brazil with the backing of a Brazilian samba band – people seem to yearn for the Cheikh Lô of his debut, to hear once more that raw, open voice and his choppy rhythm-guitar playing.

"We were very wary of losing the vibe of the demo," says Nick Gold, the co-producer and head of the World Circuit record label. He explains that Cheikh sent a demo that he'd recorded on basic recording software with his bass player Thierno Sarr at a home-studio in Dakar but that when Cheikh filled the demo out with the whole band, something was lost.

"I recorded everything here and sent it to Nick," says Cheikh from the front seat of his old grey Mercedes to where we have now decamped to listen to the new album on the car stereo. The car, parked out the front of the tiled house, is awash with bits of tobacco, old cigarette boxes and papers. I realise that I have been allowed entry to his den.

"But Nick said: 'The demo, can't we have more of that?' I said, 'Nick, that demo we did in a little house, just Thierno and I...?' I realised that the demo sounded better than what we'd done with the whole band in a big studio."

Under Gold's guidance, the larger elements of the record were taken out – the layers of guitar, the rattling *tama* drum rhythms, even the thwacking *sabar* drums were pulled right back and played with the hands rather than the usual hand-and-stick. Then the original vocals from the demo were fed back in.

"It was like he was cooking – a bit of salt, a bit of pepper, some garlic!" Cheikh says, taking

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imaginary pinches of the various ingredients from around the car, whilst smiling and drawing on a spliff, the smoke curling up and snaking out of the thin gaps at the top of the window. "But he made a good decision to do what he did," he concedes, nodding his head. "We have a very good relationship. He knows that if I wasn't feeling it, I'd say so. I won't pretend."

Some children have crept up beside the car and are putting their hands in the gaping mouths of the concrete lions on either side of the car; blue light bulbs hanging disjointedly out of the lions' mouths. Cheikh laughs kindly as he watches them, his face half hidden by a pair of cheap, gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses.

As the sun begins to dip, Cheikh announces that it's time for me to go home. But he wants



Cheikh Lô greeting his fans on a tour around his neighbourhood in his old, grey Mercedes

to take me on a tour of the neighbourhood first. He winds down the windows to let some of the fresh evening air into the car and crunches the gears into reverse. The car ploughs through the sand and, a slender spliff still burning on one side of his smiling mouth, we climb up the road that leads to Mbeubeuss, Dakar's rubbish dump that's so large it has schools and houses built within it. He indicates proudly to the left and right, showing me the sights of his ramshackle neighbourhood.

'Folly Cagni', the last song on his album, oozes from the stereo speakers, the chopping guitar rhythm accompanying Cheikh's vocals which have become so much more soulful and tender over the years. The song is about the necessity of greeting people for a peaceful society and as we go, people wave and greet Cheikh from either side of the road. Watching him grinning and waving back at people in this very ordinary Dakar neighbourhood, I see that he is in his element. Here is a man in his natural habitat, extremely happy in his own skin.

After a while, and a hairy moment in which we pull up to a group of uniformed policemen and, spliff still in hand, he greets them all with handshakes, Cheikh returns to our conversation about religious music.

"Sometimes people ask me why I sing for Cheikh Amadou Bamba," he says, before launching into a long critique of the *griot* praise singers who sing about undeserving rich folk in the hope of getting the keys to a flash car and a trip to Mecca. "But Bamba is a legend; a hugely respected figure. He did things which deserve to have these songs sung about him." ●

REVIEWS *Muzikr and Jamm* are both reviewed in this issue. *Jamm* is a Top of the World review – track 1 on the CD

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- Sa 25 **WORCESTER** Swan Theatre 01905 611 427
- Su 26 **LOUGHBOROUGH** Town Hall 01509 231 914
- Tu 28 **HORSHAM** The Capitol 01403 750 220
- W 29 **CLACTON** Princes Theatre 01255 686 633
- Th 30 **CHELMSFORD** Civic Theatre 01245 606 505

OCTOBER

- Fr 1 **DARTFORD** Orchard Theatre 01322 220 000
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- Su 3 **MILTON KEYNES** The Stables 01908 280 800
- M 4 **EPSOM** Playhouse 01372 742 555
- Tu 5 **PORTSMOUTH** Kings Theatre 02392 828 282
- Th 7 **STOURBRIDGE** Town Hall 01384 812 812
- Fr 8 **FROME** Merlin Theatre 01373 465 949
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