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*“Oh woman, African woman
Oh woman, Beninese woman
Black woman, get up, don’t sleep
Oh black woman, get up don’t sleep
You can become president of the republic
You can become the country’s Prime Minister
Get up, something has to be done
African woman, be independent
The country needs us, let’s go to school
Africa needs you, you have to work
The world needs us, stand up, let’s stand up
African woman, be independent”*

Star Feminine Band “Femme Africaine”

Without warning, a group of young girls from a remote region of Benin is shaking up the world of garage rock with breathtaking freshness, ingenuity and energy, playing spot-on, loud and clear.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the division of the majority of Africa by European powers introduced a forced modernity throughout most of the continent. In cities and ports, the continent buzzed with new energy as electricity began its timid appearance. Thanks to booming maritime transport, the 78 rpm records brought in by Latin American sailors, in particular Cubans, but also by European soldiers or settlers, had a durable influence on the new musical interests along the African coasts.

Gradually, the reinterpretation of Cuban, but also Caribbean, jazz or rhythm’n’ blues music began. For the most part originally from Africa, this music from the Americas acted as a natural truth on the continent. Some orchestras thus decided to “re-Africanize” this Afro-Cuban and black American music heard in ports, public places or broadcasted on the radio. Bars and dance halls, as well as youth associations also played an important role in the dissemination and development of this music.

In most African cities, many orchestras were born during the 1950s and 1960s. They became symbols of modernity, like electricity, cars and cinema. The euphoria of the years following independence was therefore set to music by these orchestras. These were partly influenced by Ghanaian dance formations that toured through all the major cities of the Gulf of Benin, from Nigeria to Liberia. The cultural exchanges were fertile.

In the early 1960s, the rich local traditions of Benin, starting with trance and voodoo ceremonial music, began to merge with Afro-Cuban, Congolese rumba and high-life. Dozens of orchestras, artists and labels participated in this unprecedented movement. Unlike its population count, Benin is the most prolific African country in terms of record production, especially during the extraordinary exhilaration of the 1970s.

In Guinea, Ivory Coast or Mali, each major city or prefecture had at least one modern orchestra, whether in Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Parakou, Ouidah, Natitingou, Abomey or Bohicon. Bands such as the Black Santiagos, the National Jazz of Dahomey, the Super Star of Ouidah, the Picoby Band, the Renova Band of Abomey and the Black Dragons of Porto Novo gained in popularity at the national level. In the mid-1960s, singer Sophie Edia became the first female singer to distribute Beninese music outside of the country's borders, starting with Nigeria.

In 1975, Unesco promoted the International Women's Year, an event designed to raise awareness of the role of women in many countries, where their role is too often downplayed or flouted. This initiative had a considerable impact on the African continent. Whether in Mali with Fanta Damba, in Côte d'Ivoire with Mamadou Doumbia, in Cameroon with Anne-Marie Nzie, in Congo Brazzaville with Les Bantous de la Capitale or in Burkina Faso with Echo del Africa, they all paid tribute to this initiative. All over French-speaking Africa, people were awakening to women's rights.



Star Feminine Band & Jb's Born Bad

In 1976, the Cameroonian poet Francis Bebey published the eloquent *La Condition Masculine*. Under its humorous airs, this gem challenged morals with lightness and tact.

*"You don't know Sizana
Sizana is my wife
She's my wife since we've been married for over seventeen years now
She used to be very nice
I would say to her "Sizana, give me water"
And she would bring me water to drink
Clear water, huh, very good!
I would say, "Sizana, do this"
"Do that" and she would obey
And I was happy
Ah, I tell you that Sizana, Sizana, she used to be a very good wife
But, these past few days, these people
They brought the female condition here
Apparently over there, where they live, they put a woman in an office
So that she can give orders to men
Ouch, have you ever heard such a thing? "*

Francis Bebey "La condition masculine"

His fellow countryman Ali Baba ploughed the same furrow with *La Condition Féminine*, on ne tape pas la femme (The Feminine Condition, you don't hit a woman). In Ivory Coast, Sidiki Bakaba recited a poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor on the eloquent *Femme noir* (Black Woman) 45 rpm, set to spiritual jazz. In Benin, in 1977, drummer Danialou Sagbohan recorded the eloquent *Viva, femme africaine* (Viva, African woman), a founding song for women's rights in his country.

However, the enthusiasm of these years of emancipation dropped during the 1980s, with its share of forced unions, early pregnancies, various forms of violence and female genital mutilation, particularly in Sahelian Africa. In 1989, Oumou Sangaré, a young Malian singer from Wassoulou, recorded the historic *Moussoulou* ("Women"), with clear and acoustic tones. Powerful and impactful, her song influenced many female singers on the continent during the following decades. This first opus offered a striking snapshot of the condition of West African women in the late 1980s. When she started out, she sang in the streets of Bamako in order to earn enough to eat.



Musée Régional de Natitingou ou se trouve le local de répétition des filles / Regional Museum of Natitingou where the girls' rehearsal room is located

Oumou Sangaré radically modernized the tradition of local singers. She immediately seduces the listener with her feline voice, but also with her lyrics which denounce polygamy, forced marriages or female genital mutilation, advocating sensuality, pride and unambiguous femininity. Her success was immediate, with millions of cassettes sold throughout all West African markets. Oumou Sangaré reached the status of African popstar.

A Malian woman of her time, she embodied the triumph of love and female emotions in all circumstances. If the music on which she sings is attractive, daring and full of life, her words impose a new way of seeing things. These words weighed more than the music. Inspired by social events and her immediate environment, a free woman, she spoke her truth. Her music, apolitical but feminist, had a wide impact. Her message about African women was widely heard, both on the continent and throughout the rest of the world.

During the 1990s, the Beninese Angélique Kidjo also established herself as one of the great African female singers. She proudly promoted Beninese musical heritage. Born in 1960 in Ouidah, the cradle of voodooism, she was raised in the world of theater and African-American sounds. As a teenager, she made a name for herself throughout the country thanks to her radio appearances. At the start of her career, she was accompanied by the Poly Rythmo of Cotonou, formed in 1969. The most legendary orchestra of the country, according to an enormous discography that includes hundreds of singles, albums as well as countless tours around the world.

In 1980, Angélique Kidjo recorded her first album *Pretty* in Paris under the leadership of the Cameroonian Ekambi Brillant. Its success in West Africa was immediate. She moved to France in 1983 when music from Africa was all the hype. She joined different bands, before going solo and establishing herself as the greatest female voice of Benin. Forty years later, her successors and compatriots are about to shine bright.

The last big city on the main road that criss-crosses northwestern Benin, peaceful Natitingou stretches out on either side of a strip of asphalt. After a fifteen hour drive from the business capital of Cotonou, this city offers a valuable stopover before heading to Burkina Faso, Togo or the huge Pendjari reserve, via Tanguiéta, where the vast Sahelian plains begin and where the last great wild animals to have escaped the madness of mankind take refuge.

One of the region's main crossover cities located at the crossroads of four countries, Natitingou controls the access to the Atakora hills region, which surrounds the city. Landlocked, the city of Natitingou is largely isolated from the rest of Benin, dependent on road deliveries and subject to power cuts and sometimes hostile natural elements.

Steadily reluctant to any form of domination, this region's hero is named Kaba. At the start of the First World War, he refused compulsory military service and led a fierce guerrilla war against colonial oppression. This lost war ended in a bloodbath in 1917. Upon leaving the city, the Kaba museum tells the story of the resistance of the Somba people, in particular through its evocation of its culture, its ceremonies, its iron work and even its circular huts with conical roofs, often raised and fortified, called tatas that are found in a good part of the Sahel.



Kaba gave his name to one of Natitingou's first orchestras, Kaba Diya. Active between 1979 and 1983, it released a unique record of modern music in 1980, representative of the culture of its region, starting with the artwork. If Kaba Diya had the opportunity of releasing an LP, so did other local bands. A historical group formed in 1960, the Bopeci orchestra, released two 45 rpm records. On the other hand, Nati Fiesta, Tchankpa Jazz or L'Echo de l'Atakora never had a chance to release their songs on vinyl. More recently, since the mid 90s, Gay Stone, Cool Star, Ata Echo, Les 3 Couleurs, the Tchingas band, Zénith Temple, Excelsior and also since 2017 the FMG formation have been livening up the nights of Natitingou and Atakora.

Culturally and musically, this region of North-West Benin is more influenced by the Sahel than by the South of the country, by sato, voodoo and modernized folklore developed by groups like the Black Santiagos orchestra which gave birth to Afrobeat in the mid-1960s, before being adopted and developed by Fela Kuti.

It is in this region full of contrast, of both green and rocky landscapes, that the seven young stars of the Star Feminine Band grew up. Often taken out of school and sent to sell peanuts, bananas, gari or tchoucoutou, a local millet drink on the side of the road, most young girls in the region have little future to look forward to. Forced marriages and early pregnancies in the majority of cases.

Aware of this insecurity, a musician named André Baleguemon decided to form an exclusively female band rooted in the concerns of its time. He puts the spotlight on the guitar, drums and keyboard, instruments he has admired since his childhood, symbols of

modernity in this remote region. His observation is simple: “In the North, girls have no room to advance and women are put aside. I simply wanted to show the importance of women in the societies of North Benin by forming a female orchestra “.



Jeremie Verdier who “discovered” the band during a humanitarian mission, with a friend

Originally from Tchaourou, a vast commune located in central eastern Benin, André Balaguemon developed a passion for music at a very young age. During the 1990s, he joined the Sam 11 orchestra in Parakou, in the northeastern part of the country, where he successively played trumpet and guitar. In 1999, he spent some time in Cotonou before settling in the northwest, in order to reconnect with his roots and musical passions.

On July 25th, 2016, with the support of the city of Natitingou, André launched a press release on Nanto FM offering to help train girls in music for free. A few days later, dozens of aspiring musicians showed up at the Youth Center. “The girls who came didn’t know anything about music. We selected seven girls of the Waama and Nabo ethnic groups from the surrounding villages, some had never even seen these types of instruments before. “

Since the independence era, having your own instruments has always been the prerequisite of any self-respected African orchestra. With drums, two guitars, keyboards and some added percussion purchased by André, the first musical tests began with his new recruits, a handful of young girls among the most motivated.

The girls quickly became passionate about their new musical activities, learning how to play drums, guitar, piano and sing vocal harmonies. Their progress was astounding. An intense work of musical training took place, starting with drum workshops, their favorite instrument. Angélique and Urrice on drums and vocals, assisted by Marguerite, the third drummer. Sandrine is on keyboards, as is Grace, who also sings vocals. Julienne is on bass and Anne on guitar.

As the founding influence of their approach, André readily quotes Angélique Kidjo, “our main inspiration. She is a woman you cannot ignore. Miriam Makeba is also a source of pride, as is Sagbohan Danialou, Stanislas Tohon. Kaba Diya, the great regional orchestra, also inspired us a lot.”

André’s determination is one of the key elements of this human and artistic success. The girls have already performed dozens of concerts in the region, forging and expanding an already solid repertoire, while attracting an ever-increasing local audience. In addition to musical progress, he has been personally involved with each family, showing them the importance of his project, both musically and humanly and in particular the fact that each girl must remain in school and not be forced into marriage.

There are very few female bands in the history of popular African music. If the Amazones de Guinée, la Famille Bassavé and les Colombes de la Révolution in Burkina, the Sœurs Comoë in Ivory Coast or the Lijadu Sisters in Nigeria notably come to mind, Star Feminine Band has no equivalent in Benin. The originality, carefree attitude, freedom, and above all the talent of these young girls is undeniable.

At the end of 2018, their encounter with the young French sound engineer Jérémie Verdier accelerated the course of things. On a mission in the region, he called on his Spanish friends Juan Toran and Juan Serra who showed up with their recording equipment in order to record the band’s first songs in the annex of the local museum. Random encounters and fate led Jean-Baptiste Guillot to hear the tapes. He decided to go meet them at the end of 2019. This short but memorable journey sealed the fate of the record you are now holding in your hands.



Juan Toran and Juan Serra with the band

Now aged nine to fifteen, the seven girls of the Star Feminine Band continue to go to school. André installed a rehearsal room in an annex of the Departmental Museum of Natitingou. Several times a week, the seven young girls get together, inhabited by the noblest aspirations, those of singing their culture, their feminine condition and their possible emancipation. They rehearse three times a week, from 4 to 7 p.m. During school holidays, they rehearse daily from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

It's 2020 but the situation of women in many rural areas of the African continent and also sometimes in large metropolises, has hardly changed since the 1960s, the era of independence when it was believed that everything would change in this continent that was searching for modernity, culture and emancipation. Although there were some followers of the Me Too movement in Africa, it hardly touched the most remote parts of the continent.

The Star Feminine Band is taking off. Performing several concerts in Natitingou but also in the surrounding villages. Each time they play in public, they bring together an ever-increasing and curious local audience when it comes to this one of a kind training. Women come en masse, as well as parents with their children, but also many elderly people, in a region where cultural activities are often limited to agricultural or funeral ceremonies.

André Baleguemon and his talented protégés adapt songs of traditional inspiration, in a vein of modernized folklore. "We play waama rhythm dances, we want to honor them. We compose songs in French, waama and ditamari, two unknown ethnic groups from the North. We also sing songs in the Bariba language, as well as the Fon language, the main language in Benin, in the new repertoire, in order to be understood by as many people as possible."

Peba is sung in waama. It's about girls going to school in order to be themselves. Sung in French, the lyrics of La Musique and Femme africaine speak for themselves. Timtilu is sung in

ditamari. In this song, the girls give the advice to not abandon your culture, but rather to honor it. A song of emancipation in the peul language, Rew Be Me Light, is an ode to women, an encouragement to succeed in your own career and succeed as a woman.



Difficile de croire que l'album a été enregistré avec cette batterie / Hard to believe they recorded the album with this drumkit

A unifying song, Iseo is sung in bariba. "Men and women, let us rise, from the south, from the center, from the north, let us unite and be one so that the country can evolve". This song is about bringing together the regions and the diversity of cultures in Benin. Praise be to God in peul, Montealla's interpretation was inspired by mandingo. Sung in bariba, Idesouse indicates that girls must go to school until the end of their studies in order to defend the values of women. They have to fight all the more in order to gain this recognition.

Through all of these songs, each of the Star Feminine Band members brings their own inspiration. André composes all their songs. He admits: "They bring their ideas. The dream of these girls is to become international stars. They must show the importance of women throughout the world. Speak of Africa, accomplish great missions around the values of women. They talk about female genital mutilation, abuse and violence against girls. We want to include these subjects in the political debate in Benin, then elsewhere in Africa if this is ever possible".

With much confidence, an undeniable ecumenism and charisma, Star Feminine Band is one of the prides of the Atakora region. The band is even starting to instigate vocations, while sowing the seeds for the next generation of provincial girls, driven by an iron will, forged of the same mineral as the weapons of Kaba, forgotten hero of the Atakora.

True heroines of everyday life, the seven girls of the Star Feminine Band embody the future and the next generation in search of recognition. “In the 1960s, God was a black girl who sang” used to say New York composer duo Carole King and Gerry Goffin. Sixty years later, in one of the forgotten provinces of the African continent, this adage takes on its full value.

Florent Mazzoleni