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**Cheikh  
Lô**

86  
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# A Sufi Stance

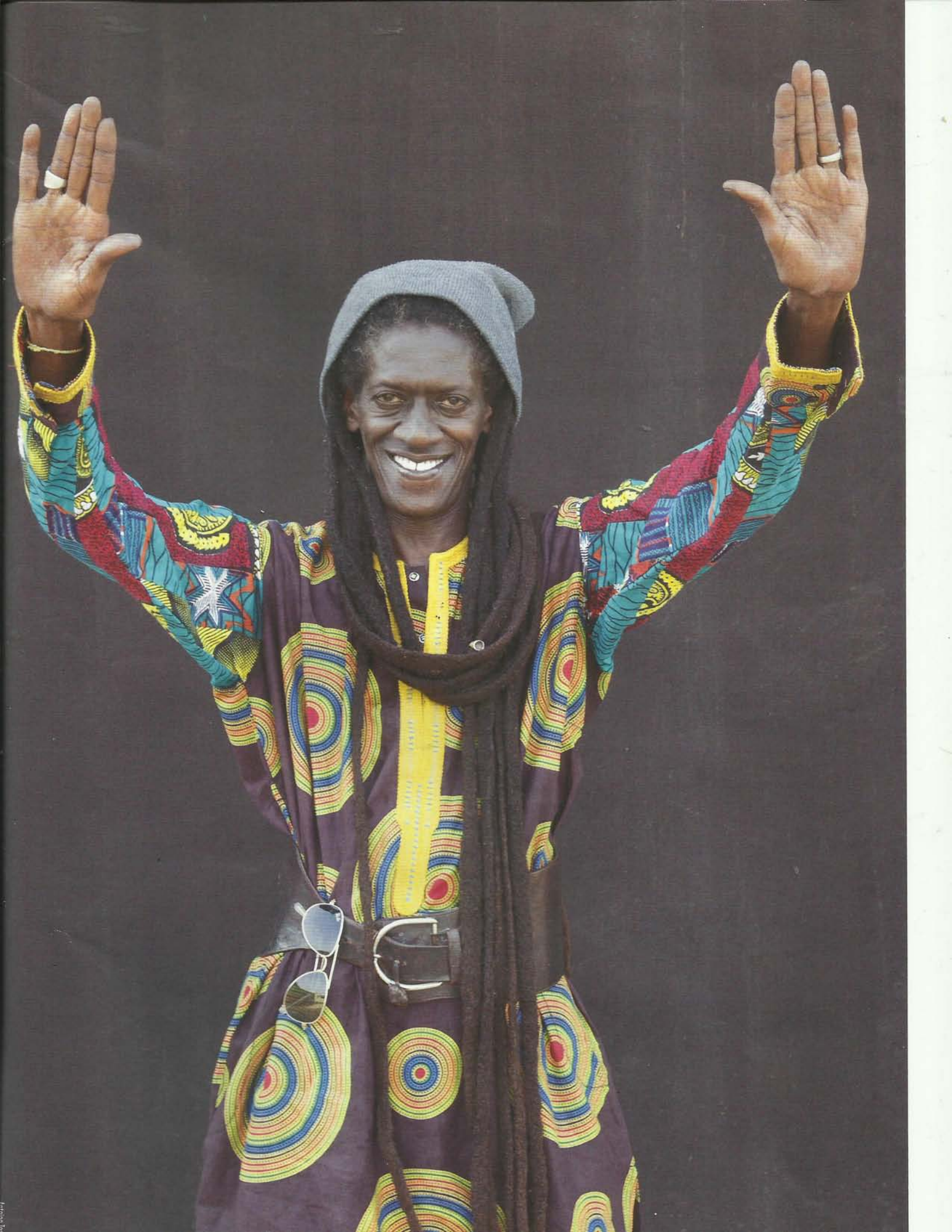
**Peter Culshaw** catches up the Senegalese veteran at home in Dakar and chats to the singer about his spiritual antidote to hardline Islam

**C**heikh Lô is on the terrace of his house in the suburbs of Dakar, with a fabulous view over the city's rooftops. "And that is the Cheikh Lô bus stop" he indicates below, clearly amused, "on Cheikh Lô Road." I ask if that's official. "*Mais oui*. Usually you have to die to get such accolades – I am happy I have not had to die first." It must, I suggest, be handy if he is out for the night and has to remember the right bus stop to get off on. He laughs, but it's fair to say Cheikh Lô doesn't do buses – he is one of the most successful of Senegal's older artists, especially in Europe. He's nearly 60 and full of life, and his new album, *Balbalou*, a Top of the World this issue and his first album since 2010's *Jamm*, is about to be released on an unsuspecting world.

Cheikh starts dancing on the rooftop terrace, and launches into an *acapella* version of James Brown's 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World', serenading Flavia Coelho, the Brazilian singer who is guesting on his album, with the lines from the song 'but it would be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.' Afterwards he reminisces about seeing James Brown in 1974 in Dakar, and how Brown rearranged the way he thought about music. Cheikh was actually born in Burkina Faso before his family came to Dakar in 1978. "My music is as much funk as *mbalax*," he says, referring to the dominant pop rhythm of Senegal, whose best-known exponent is Youssou N'Dour, the superstar who produced Cheikh's debut album, *Né La Thiass*. As for following Youssou into politics, he says "I left school ▶









at 14, I'm just a musician, not a businessman or a politician. I support Youssou as a musician, he's a good singer, but in politics, I'm not supporting anyone, I'm independent." You sense he is a wily character, a survivor in the sometimes treacherous world of Dakar politics.

His house, where we are treated to a massive lunch, is a substantial one without being flashy – big enough for his family and his studio, where he does his initial demos. There are numerous photos on the walls of his recently deceased *marabout*, his spiritual guide. He is a follower, as all Cheikh Lô fans know, of the Baye Fall sect, one of the Sufi Mouride brotherhoods founded by the visionary anti-colonialist leader Cheikh Amadou Bamba in the late 19th century. Lô was born into a family of Mourides but found himself drawn more to "the tolerance" of Bamba's first disciple Cheikh Ibrahima Fall, founder of the Baye Fall, who are known for their work ethic, colourful patchwork clothes and dreadlocked hair. He is often mistaken for a Rastafarian. Asked to describe the Baye Fall philosophy in a few words Cheikh says "work as if you will never die. Pray as if you will die tomorrow."

He launches *Balbalou* the next night at Just 4 U, a boutique Dakar nightclub with his band and guests (pictured right) Flavia Coelho and Fixi, a superb French accordionist who has been known to experiment with hip-hop fusions. The album is getting the kind of backing rare in these cash-strapped and internet piracy times. Cheikh's band was flown to Sweden where they worked with engineer/producer Andreas Unge, overdubs were added in Paris, and for the launch they have flown out not just *Songlines*, but top journalists from likes of *Le Monde* and French TV and radio, not to mention a video team, who produced a top quality, glossy video for the catchiest tune on the album 'Degg Gui'.

There is a sense that after the recent tough times in the music business, the new payment models, like streaming, may be turning a corner. The level of commitment to the album, as Cheikh puts it, "shows everyone believes in this one."

In truth, at the Just 4 U launch the band seemed hesitant with the new material and the sound was terrible. This was underlined when we caught the great Orchestra Baobab playing with a near perfect sound in another nightclub at 4am, who couldn't have been more tight and well-seasoned. No matter, the band gelled with the new material by the time they got to Europe and appeared on what remains the key music TV show in the UK, *Later... with Jools Holland*. More importantly, the album itself, Cheikh's fifth, is up there with his best recordings.

The album is a typically adventurous mix of styles, such as 'Degg Gui' with its vocal contribution in Brazilian Portuguese from Coelho (her own reggae-soaked debut *Mundo Meu* was reviewed in #108). The album is laid-back and glossily produced. Previously, Cheikh had been on the revered world music label World Circuit (home of the Buena Vista Social Club as well as Orchestra Baobab) but this is on a newer Parisian label called Chapter Two, run by Romain Germa and part of Wagram, one of the biggest independent labels in Europe.





Cheikh is keen to emphasise that the split from World Circuit (who released the previous trio of his albums) was amicable.

'Degg Gui' is about people who speak too much, while another standout is 'Doyal Naniou' with supreme Malian diva Oumou Sangaré guesting, is a diatribe against African *coups d'états*: "We must be able to have democratic elections and votes, and drive off those who try to claim power through force." The title-track 'Balbalou' is a mystical funk workout featuring the jazz trumpet of Lebanon's Ibrahim Maalouf. The track's theme is the evils of boasting, an "old story, a crazy story" that Cheikh adapted. The stones boast, so God creates iron. Iron boasts, so God creates fire. A strong man boasts, so God creates woman. A woman boasts so God creates a child.

When the child boasts God creates sleep, and so on, in a sort of spiritual shaggy dog story. The track represents something of a new departure for the album in what Cheikh calls its "Afro-jazz" flavour. The album as a whole manages to be both majestic and cool, with Cheikh's distinctively warm, relaxed vocals, as ever, at its core.

Cheikh Lô's return is timely in another sense – in that the Baye Fall are about as opposite from the fanatical death-cult of ISIS as it's possible to get. The Baye Fall are not averse to smoking dope and don't feel they have to necessarily go to the mosque or Mecca. They do repeated Sufi *zikr* chants in groups or on their own. He mentions the shared Christian/Muslim cemeteries in Dakar and the existence of monasteries like Keur Moussa outside Dakar (a great place to hear Gregorian chants accompanied by *koras*, by the way)



Bernard Benoit

"Hard to imagine people who want to ban music, isn't it?"

as examples of the tolerance he stands for. Of course, there are problems in Senegal, with corruption and poverty paramount, but the strength of the Sufi traditions in Senegal seem, for now, indomitable. Cheikh's life-affirming music is a much-needed counterpoint in the Islamic world to the fanaticism that we are confronted with daily

in the media. "Hard to imagine people who want to ban music, isn't it?" says Cheikh, and listening to him singing for sheer pleasure on his rooftop in Dakar, you can only agree. ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Balbalou* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue, see p59 and track 1 on the covermount CD

+ **DATES** Cheikh Lô and his band play at WOMAD Charlton Park on the Open Air and BBC Radio 3 Charlie Gillett stages, on July 25 & 26

