

OMAR SOSA AND SECKOU KEITA

In the summer of 2012, piano virtuoso Omar Sosa and kora maestro Seckou Keita were invited to perform together in London by their mutual friend, the drummer Marque Gilmore. “Seckou arrived just before the gig, took out his kora and started playing,” Omar remembers, “and I clicked with him like we had been playing together all our lives.”

Seckou loved Omar for his “high level of musical spirituality.” Omar saw in Seckou a rare ability to blend, collaborate, but never lose his identity. Both men started their careers as drummers, so the melodies grooved. By the end of the night, the inevitable “hey man, let’s do a record” had been voiced. By the end of the year, they had begun work on their debut *Transparent Water*, which was released in 2017. Songlines called it ‘beautiful, rhapsodic and sometimes spiritual.’ For World Music Central it was a ‘sumptuous ride...mesmerizing, evocative and sophisticated.’

According to Omar, the connection was ancestral. Born and raised in Camaguey, Cuba’s oldest most sophisticated city after La Havana, Omar has always considered his homeland to be a province of Africa. Seckou Keita grew up in Casamance, the southernmost province of Senegal. His mother’s family had been *griots* (hereditary bards) and kora players for three centuries. His father was a Keita, a descendant of the great Sunjata Keita, founder of the medieval empire of Mali.

Omar began playing percussion and marimba at the age of eight, and only took up the piano due to the lack of marimbas in La Havana. Seckou started learning the kora at the age of 7, tutored by his grandfather, the formidable Jali Kemo Cissokho, before becoming the clan percussionist. They both became citizens of the world as soon as adulthood and opportunity allowed –Seckou moved to the UK and Omar has lived in Ecuador, Barcelona, Paris and San Francisco –but never lost sight of their musical, cultural and spiritual roots. Omar’s visceral devotion to the saints or *orishas* of the Afro-Cuban religion known as Santería is matched by Seckou’s Islamic faith.

Both Omar and Seckou have become master collaborationists, in the best sense of the word, open-minded yet culturally self-secure, generous yet exacting. Omar’s characteristically inventive and percussive pianos tyle has intermingled with a kaleidoscopic rollcall of artists including Julio Barretto, Trilok Gurtu, John Santos, Tim Eriksen, El Housseine Kili, Dhafer Youssef and Paquito D’Riveira (the complete list is ten times as long). He has composed symphonies, soundtracks, and released over 40 albums, seven of which were nominated for Grammys or Latin Grammys. Their names read like the way-markers of a spiritual quest: *Across The Divide* (2008), *Mulatos* (2005), *Eggún: The Afri-Lectric Experience* (2013), *Aguas* (2018), *An East African Journey* (2021).

Seckou was named BBC Radio 2 Folk Musician of the Year in 2019, a startling choice for such a blue-blooded British institution. In a career spanning almost thirty years he has collaborated with Francis Fuster, Baka Beyond, Martin Simpson, Mamady Keita, Trio AKA and The Lost Words

project. The two albums he has released with Welsh harpist Catrin Finch-Clychau Dibon (2013) and SOAR (2018) -have reaped Best Album awards in Songlines, fRoots and topped the Dutch charts and European World Music charts. In 2019, he produced the world's first ever anthology of kora music notations.

In the summer of 2020, during the brief easing of lockdown restrictions, Seckou, Omar and Venezuelan percussionist Gustavo Ovalles travelled to the island of Menorca to start work on their second album. They already had a title: SUBA, a Mandinka word meaning 'sunrise'. Their ancestral connection had been fortified by the 85gigs the trio performed all over the world in 2017 and 2018. The musical bond has grown deeper, more structured and meaningful.

SUBA is a hymn to hope, to a new dawn of tolerance and change in a post-pandemic world, a visceral reiteration of humanity's perennial prayer for peace, hope and unity.