

Listed as one of the Top 100 Most Inspiring Women in the World by *The Guardian* (UK), Grammy Award-winner Angélique Kidjo has gained international recognition for her dynamic and uplifting music. Born in Benin, she has collaborated with Alicia Keys, Bono, Branford Marsalis,

Herbie Hancock, Santana, among others. Ms. Kidjo also distinguishes herself as an advocate for children welfare, both as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF and through her own charity, the Batonga Foundation. In 2011, she received the insignia of Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters.

Trophée des Arts 2012 Angélique Kidjo



Established in 1992, the *Trophée des Arts* is awarded each year to a distinguished artist or cultural icon who has exemplified our organization's mission of French-American friendship and cross-cultural exchange.

Angélique Kidjo packs one high-energy personality. The petite powerhouse from Benin, West Africa is so full of fun and passion, so able to channel joy and melancholy, so taut with musical muscle, so bubbly one moment and deadly serious about human rights the next. She's too vital to warrant the dusty hyperbole of "legend" status and yet, few singers who've come to fame under the banner of "world music" have come so far.

Is there any other artist who is working so hard to redefine that marketing label?

In the past, Kidjo has argued that the world music handle tends to ghettoize artists like herself. Lately, it's as if she has been going out of her way to remind us that—beyond any ethnic or geographic differences—we all come from the same musical planet.

"I would just say that all music should be labeled 'world music,'" she explained recently. "Or is there any Martian music out there? (South African singer) Miriam Makeba told me once that she thought the label 'world music' was a politically correct way of saying 'third world music' and she may have been right."

Kidjo was covering Jimi Hendrix and George Gershwin back in the '90s, around the same time she started stirring grooves of the Americas—funk, blues, Brazil, and Cuba—into her own sophisticated Afro-pop sound. But with her last couple of recordings, the Grammy nominated *Oyo* (2010), and her live concert CD/DVD *Spirit Rising* (2012, both on Razor & Tie), she has set some new standards for crossovers and collaborations.

Beyond the presence of all-star guests like Bono, Josh Groban, jazz greats Branford Marsalis and Dianne Reeves, Kidjo has chosen to reinvent The Rolling Stones's "Gimme Shelter," Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up," and even (Maurice) Ravel's "Bolero"—with Marsalis's sax snaking through the melody, all with her own musical palette.

You sense she's very deliberate in trying to communicate with a wider audience. Nobody can inspire a more infectious African chant, and Kidjo sings in a handful of African tongues, including Fon from her father's side and Yoruba from her mother. But these days she also sings more than ever in English.

Part of it came from reflections on her own upbringing. Early on, Kidjo was a fan of James Brown, Otis Redding, Gershwin, Hendrix, and Santana, along with the icons of African music, including the late Miriam Makeba, who became Kidjo's biggest beacon of hope (Makeba's beautiful ballad "Malaika" is now Kidjo's signature song).

"*Oyo* was a tribute to the music of my childhood after the death of my dad. My parents exposed me to music from all over the world, on top of the traditional music I would hear at every ceremony. I haven't just sung more in English but in Hindi and French too. But whatever language I use, I feel it always sounds like me as I use African arrangements of those classics."

Clearly, her curiosity is at play in exploring fresh musical territory.

"I love travelling from one musical world to the next. For instance, I have sung my song 'Afirika' just as a duet with Christian McBride on upright bass but also with the 110 musicians of the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra. Life is too short to be doing the same thing all the time."

Packed with onstage charisma and trained as a professional dancer, Kidjo brings expert qualifications to building new musical bridges...She has moved beyond stunning vocal displays and impossible-to-ignore hip-shaking grooves to plumb social issues in her songs with a depth of purpose that's hard to ignore.

It's Kidjo's second career as an activist that has brought her connections with the likes of Bono and Oprah. She has been a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF for a decade, and also campaigns to fight hunger, to raise awareness of AIDS, and more. Her own Batonga Foundation works to school women in Africa. Helping to forward women's rights has been a key focus of her work.

From first-hand experience, Kidjo knows what oppression can involve.

Her departure from Benin as a teenager reads like the plot of a thriller movie. She was on the cusp of a performance career, but at that time in the tiny West African nation of Benin (then known as Dahomey) it was a given that a young woman with such ambitions had to sleep with the reigning dictator to win the right to have her own career. To avoid that event, her father had her smuggled out of the country on an unscheduled night flight to Paris.

During Kidjo's musical studies in Paris, she met her husband Jean Hebrail, the French musician who has gone on to co-produce much of her music. As Kidjo became a toast of the African music scene in Paris, she would also connect with Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, who helped make Bob Marley a global star years earlier.

For much of the past decade, Kidjo and Hebrail have been based in New York, making frequent visits to Benin and Paris apart from the demands of her touring (he chose to opt out of the tours years ago). Now that her daughter Naima is a student at Yale University, Kidjo says "home is where I feel like being," but she still loves to take in the music scene in New York.

With 10 albums on several labels, she has sung to crowds of 400,000 plus at one European event organized by Quincy Jones, and her *Spirit Rising* DVD was programmed and released by PBS across the U.S. Call her a legend in the making.

You might wonder how she finds the energy to fire up those grooves every night.

"You want to know the secret? It's a lot of sleep!"

By Roger Levesque for the *Edmonton Journal* and edited by FIAF.

Angélique Kidjo Key Dates

1960 Born on July 14 in Ouidah, a small harbour town on the coast of Benin, Africa.

1983 Moves to Paris and studies at CIM, a reputable Jazz school where she meets husband and collaborator Jean Hebrail.

1991 Signs with Island Records founder Chris Blackwell. Release of *Logozo*, which reaches Number 1 on the Billboard World Music chart.

1994 Release of *Ayé*, and first Grammy nomination for the song "Agolo."

1996 Release of *Fifa*.

1998 Release of *Oremi*.

2002 Release of *Black Ivory Soul*, recorded between New York and Salvador de Bahia. Becomes a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador.

2004 Release of *Oyaya!*

2007 Release of *Djin Djin*. Receives the Antonio Carlos Jobim Award at the Festival International de Jazz de Montreal.

2008 Receives a Grammy Award for Best Contemporary World Music album, a NAACP Image Award for Outstanding World Music album for *Djin Djin*, the level of Commander of Benin's national order of merit, and an honorary degree of "Doctor of Music" from the Berklee College of Music. Founds The Batonga Foundation to support secondary school and higher education for girls in Africa.

2009 Receives the 2009 Celebrating Women Award from the New York Women's Foundation.

2010 Release of *Oyo*.

2011 Receives the Insignia of Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters of the French Republic.

2012 Release of *Angélique Kidjo: Spirit Rising*. Receives a Champions of the Earth Award in the Aspiration & Action category from the United Nations.

