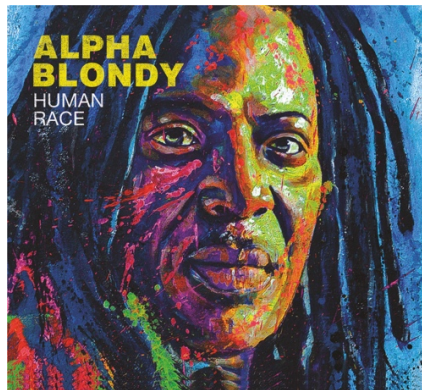


Alpha Blondy



He's the best-known French-speaking reggae singer, but that doesn't stop him also expressing himself in the language of his roots, Dioula, as well as the language of Bob Marley, English.

A range of spices that colour an art, and especially a message, which is good, as its purpose is to speak to as many people as possible.

"It's useful to speak all three languages and record with other artists; there's a desire for universality, as well as illustrating the title, Human Race. It's not because there are differences in how we express ourselves that we're not all equal. The human race is wonderful, and instead of being distracted by a minority of shit-stirrers, we should focus on the rest, the majority. Because they bring hope and because human beings are not fundamentally bad. They're good. This is the main issue in today's world. And if we glorify them, as creatures of God, then we're glorifying Him, too. It's the human race I'm singing about in Human Race without any distinction..."

Alongside Alpha Blondy, we find Youssou N'Dour who sings in Wolof on "Oté-Fê", "He's a brother and a model of success as a musician. The title is important; it means: They don't want. They don't want the Africans to unite, because if they do, it will be much harder to pillage our raw materials..." Fally Ipupa, who sings in Lingala on "Kanou", "It means Love, quite simply, history tells us that the too frequent quarrels between lovers kill passion..." and Angélique Kidjo in Mina on "Alphaman Redemption", "It's an excerpt from Ecclesiastes, meaning: the Bible..."

Reuniting rather than dividing was already a cry which featured in his eighth album, SOS Guerre Tribale (SOS Tribal War), which came out in 1993, denouncing the desire to separate society into opposing ethnic groups, as well as on a more recent record, Mystic Power, released twenty years later with this song with its symbolic title, "Réconciliation". So sharing has long been a key word in Alpha Blondy's work.

On the circuit for almost forty years, he began playing in the second half of the 1970s in the United States and recorded his first hits the following decade in Côte d'Ivoire: "Cocody Rock", "Apartheid Is Nazism", "Jérusalem"... With almost twenty studio albums to his credit, Alpha Blondy has been touring the world since then and primarily defends a certain vision of music. That of a magical interlude that lets us point out the evils of our time to build a better one. Moreover, the day Alpha Blondy became a singer, he changed his name: Seydou Koné opted for a new surname that's synonymous with a new life.

He's a link in the chain that started with Bob Marley and continued with Burning Spear. "What triggered my love for reggae is Burning Spear, who I was fortunate enough to see live. I'd already listened to Marley, but when I heard Burning Spear with his guttural voice that reminded me of African songs, I felt like I was listening to someone from back home singing along with a modern sound system. It made me want to transcribe my emotions, my revolt, the precarious condition of my people through this music. A music full

of protest, very demanding. I needed a musical style that could at least waken the conscience of my brothers in Africa, of my brothers from the diaspora in the ghetto. And above all, try to raise awareness of politics back home. That's what led me to espouse this musical genre."

Bob Marley arrived with poignant lyrics denouncing the system that exploited the poor, in Jamaica but elsewhere, too. And though his message was immediately shared, forty years before social networks existed, it's precisely because poverty has no colour but a single recurring cause: the selfishness of people with power.

The first title of this new album by Alpha Blondy confirms the perceptible engagement in his repertoire: "Political Brouhaha" denounces politics and electoral promises. "They prevent you and me from thinking. They fill us with promises that they will never keep, as if they just want to make a career for themselves. I think politicians are in the wrong role. The people expect miracles from them, but these promises bind only those who believe in them. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a solution!"

Another song called "Nos hôpitaux" (Our hospitals) describes a catastrophic situation, that of the medical equipment of a whole continent. "It's a nightmare, and at the same time, a wake-up call. African politicians who care for the welfare and happiness of their people need to consider their health. Our hospitals are just as much a place to die as slaughterhouses. There's a lot of work to be done, and this is certainly one of the essential points that will help get Africa on track. There's money available; if they wanted to, they could fix it."

It's not the first time that Alpha Blondy has spoken out. In the early 1980s, the country was still governed by a single party, that of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, President from 1960 to 1993. There was no multiparty system, and his music was like a rallying point for the opposition. His song "Brigadier Sabari", which denounces police violence, has even become a hymn.

And although he moderated his epithets because of the trouble they caused, it was very evident that his music had turned anti-establishment. "Expressing yourself always serves a purpose. I'm not a politician, but I have the right to speak."

But beyond all this noise and all these promises, there's a universal language, that of faith, addressed here in a song called "Les Païens" (The Pagans). "My mother was Muslim, my father Christian, but there is only one God. It's written in the Qur'an: Let no one divide you. It's aimed at Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. And today, what do we see? Division. I wanted to come back to this one God. We must conform to the precepts of this God who unites us. He is a God of love, not a God of division. The only real truth today is God's love."

Those who are already familiar with the artist's discography won't be surprised by this confirmation of his faith: Jah Glory (Glory to God) claimed the title of his first record, while Jerusalem the holy city was the name of his fourth. Spirituality has always been very much present in him.

The two occasions that liven up the song list won't surprise those who follow him, such an exercise having almost become instinctive. This time, we have "Whole Lotta Love" by Led Zeppelin and "I came to tell you I'm leaving" by Serge Gainsbourg. "Led Zep is indeed a group we listen to on the tour bus, so we thought: why not? Even though we grew up with Otis Redding and Johnny Hallyday, we love English rock. Serge Gainsbourg, because I've always loved and really appreciated him. I was lucky enough to meet him at Printemps de Bourges in 1987, and I remember our heated debates about reggae..."

As commander of African groove, as he's often portrayed, Alpha Blondy is only about love and peace. At 65 years old and wearing it well, he's not ready to retire yet. "I would have liked to sing romantic songs, but my ghetto origins wouldn't let me. Instead, giving and receiving love is what drives me, in my music as well as in my life. And as long as God gives me strength, I'll be there." Let's hope it never ends.

CHRISTIAN EUDELIN