

ANGELIQUE KIDJO

Biography

In an expansive career marked as much by extraordinary musical achievement as passionate advocacy and philanthropy for her homeland of Africa, Angelique Kidjo has found many ways to celebrate the rich, enlightening truth about the continent's women beyond the media spotlight.

On ***Eve***, her highly anticipated Savoy Records debut named for her own mother as well as the mythical "mother of all living," the Benin-born, two-time Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter builds on this ever-evolving legacy with a 13-track, three interlude set of melodically rich, rhythmically powerful expressions of female empowerment. These songs become all the more intimate and emotionally urgent with Kidjo's dynamic collaborations with traditional women's choirs from Kenya and various cities and villages in Benin. The singer and her newfound native vocalists sing in a wide array of native Beninese languages, including Fon (Kidjo's first language), Yoruba, Goun, and Mina.

"***Eve*** is an album of remembrance of African women I grew up with and a testament to the pride and strength that hide behind the smile that masks everyday troubles," says Kidjo, whose accolades include a 20 year discography, thousands of concerts around the world and being named "Africa's premier diva" (Time Magazine) and "the undisputed Queen of African Music" (Daily Telegraph). "They exuded a positivity and grace in a time of hardship. These songs bring me back to the women I shared my life with, including my mother, grandmother and cousins."

"I've spoken for many years about the beauty of African women, and I don't need to talk anymore about it because on this recording I am letting the voices of the women show their beauty to the world," she adds. "My goal is to offer a perspective on Africa that is different from the miserable one so many people seem to accept as fact. My home continent has become a magnet for many negative perceptions about women, and ***Eve*** is all about showcasing the positivity they bring to their villages, cities, culture and the world."

As a Goodwill Ambassador with UNICEF since 2002, Kidjo—named one of the Top 100 Most Inspiring Women in the World by The Guardian--has traveled to many countries in Africa. Two trips in particular played a role in inspiring the ***Eve*** project. The first was a 2007 jaunt to visit women from Darfur in a refugee camp in Chad as part of an eight woman delegation from UK based Oxfam. "The purpose was for us to go talk to these women who are invisible in the face of the media," Kidjo says. "Those women taught me humility and forgiveness and embodied the strength to overcome hardship. They were in horrifying circumstances, but they were not dwelling on the negative or crying. They had lost husbands and their children had lost fathers, but they maintained their dignity."

In August 2012, Kidjo traveled to Kenya with UNICEF and CNN to film a documentary on stunting, which is the acute malnutrition from 0 to 2 years that irreversibly affects the future mental and physical development of many children in the world, especially in Africa. It prevents them from studying correctly and working, which in turn affects the country's economy. The singer visited the Samburu region in the North of Kenya. When she entered the small village of Merti, she met with a group of women who were part of a community center advocating for better nutrition. They welcomed her with a beautiful chant that she captured on her iPhone. Kidjo was so inspired by the passion and strength of their voices that she created "M'Baamba" (which became the opening track on ***Eve***) around the magical iPhone sample of their voices.

"At the time, I was starting to write songs for a new album about the empowerment of women, but that experience nailed the importance of it for me," says Kidjo, who had recently released her live album *Spirit Rising*, the soundtrack to her recent PBS Special Performance concert. "The sense of bonding I experienced with these women gave me the desire to expand the idea and work with other choirs of African women to create ***Eve***. Through my many trips to Africa, I have seen that women are the backbone of the continent and that empowering them would be the key to a lasting change."

Kidjo, whose star-studded 2008 recording *Djin Djin* won a Grammy for Best Contemporary World Music Album and whose last studio recording *Oyo* was nominated in the same category, has enjoyed a long history of crossover collaborations with greats from the jazz and pop worlds—including Carlos Santana, Bono, John Legend, Josh Groban, Peter Gabriel, Branford Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Roy Hargrove and Alicia Keys. In 2015, Kidjo was honored with a second Grammy Award for her 2014 album “EVE” in the ‘World Music’ category.

Helping the singer fulfill her vision on *Eve* are a host of exciting prominent newcomers to her musical circle, including guitarist and keyboardist Rostam Batmanglij from Vampire Weekend (who appears on “Bomba” and “Hello”); legendary pianist Dr. John, who adds his New Orleans magic to “Kulumbu”; The Kronos Quartet, bringing their classical flair to the simple choir and percussion arrangement of “Ebile”; and the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra, heightening the dramatic impact of the folk influenced “Awalole,” a piece about the young generation of women who will one day become the future leaders of the continent—facing the responsibility of mankind while respecting human rights. The traditional Congolese song “Bana” features the soulful, weathered vocals of a Kidjo’s mother Yvonne (known by the family by her middle name “Eve”), the mother of ten children who put the singer on stage for the first time at age six.

Kidjo laid the musical foundation of the album in New York with an ensemble of top session musicians—guitarist and longtime collaborator Dominic James, guitarist (and fellow Benin native) Lionel Loueke, drummer Steve Jordan, bass great Christian McBride and Senegalese percussionist Magatte Sow—under the guidance of producer Patrick Dillett, a longtime collaborator of David Byrne whose credits include *They Might Be Giants* and *Fatboy Slim*. The singer had also recorded percussionists from the Beninise Gangbe Brass Band, who had previously contributed their intricate grooves and large collection of traditional drums to *Djin Djin*, at French director Luc Besson’s studio in Normandy.

Kidjo then travelled to Benin, traveling long days from North to South and back, armed with a Roland B26 six track field recorder, to record the sweet rhythmic harmonies and chants of the traditional women choirs. She sojourned everywhere from Cotonou (Kidjo’s hometown) and Ouidah (her father’s village) to Porto Novo, Godomey (her mom’s village) and Manigri, a village from the North with amazing polyphonies where she had recorded some of the elements of her 1996 album *Fifa*; she met the same women there. She came back to New York to work with Dillet on assembling all the musical elements of *Eve*.

“I knew where I wanted to go and that we had a limited amount of time in each place,” Kidjo says. “We’d wrap around 11 or noon so they could go back to their work. They all dressed up very nice and came outside to participate. Often, we would gather under a tree. I brought the songs and played them for each group so they could learn them and understand what I wanted them to do. Their first reactions were laughter, like ‘How in the world do you expect us to sing this?’ You are something else. I told them, ‘I know I am crazy but you’re going to sing it. They would laugh every time they couldn’t get it right, and their laughter was infectious and helped us eventually get everything down perfectly.”

Each track on *Eve* touches on different aspects of the experience of womanhood in Africa, as seen through the artistic eyes of Kidjo. With its Kenyan voices and hypnotic Congolese guitar, she sings words on “M’Baamba” that translate to “Hands in hands, we’re able to create a chain of sisterhood.” The high energy, afrobeat driven “Shango Wa” is about Shango, the Yoruba God of thunder that is both a man and a woman; he dresses like a woman during ceremonies showing that a man has a feminine part and a woman a manly part. The idea is that we are not so different. The moody and seductive “Eva,” featuring vocals by Nigerian singer ASA, is a song about the friendship between women. After the breathless chant interlude “Agbade,” the high spirited “Bomba” (whose title references the African dress, the “boubou”) is about the fact that African women, even the poorest ones, have a special elegance and pride. The track features the intertwining riffs of guitarists Rostam Batmaglij and Dominic James, plus a bluesy organ solo by Bernie Worrell of Funkadelic fame.

Inspired by a Hausa melody, the soaring, highly danceable “Hello” features Angelique’s Yoruba lyrics translating to a wedding of love that is not forced (like those so frequent in traditional societies)—a beautiful thing that brings joy and laughter to many. The sparsely arranged, vocal and guitar driven “Blewu” is a song composed by the late Togolese singer Bella Bellow, who was Kidjo’s role model when she grew up; in essence, in the Ewe language of Ghana and Togo, it is a “thank you” to people for joining us in gathering and give our best wishes for the future. “Kamoushou” is a reggae tinged groove performed with the chattering and chanting women of (Kidjo’s mother) Yvonne’s village. It calls upon Oro, the careful God of the wind, who will help resolve the conflicts and blow away troubles. Dr. John adds unique flavor to a traditional Beninese rhythm on “Kulumbu,” the name of the dove of peace. As Kidjo says, “Let’s learn to worship love and friendship. Let’s fall in love with love again!”

After the hypnotic interlude “Kletedjan,” “Ebile,” about the woman being the anchor of humanity even though we bear the names of our fathers, soars with the Kronos Quartet enhancing the guttural voices of the choir. After the orchestra-enhanced “Awalole” and the traditional Congolese song “Bana” is “Orisha,” the exotic, brass fired funk/soul tribute to the pantheon of traditional Yoruba gods. These deities should never be used to praise hate and violence but tolerance and understanding. A final interlude, “Wayi,” precedes Eve’s grand finale, a mystical and spiritual rumination of “Cauri,” which addresses the idea of forced marriages. As Kidjo says, “Why would we crush the dreams of young girls by marrying them to older men they don’t know? Money and family alliances are not good reason enough to force anyone to marry. The song is their declaration of independence.”

Kidjo brings to the meticulous and exciting process of creating **Eve** a deep, colorful history of advocacy on behalf of African women. Along with Mary Louise Cohen and John R. Phillips, Kidjo founded The Batonga Foundation, which gives girls a secondary school and higher education so that they can take the lead in changing Africa. The foundation is doing this by granting scholarships, building secondary schools, increasing enrollment, improving teaching standards, providing school supplies, supporting mentor programs, exploring alternative education models and advocating for community awareness of the value of education for girls.

The singer is releasing **Eve** in conjunction with the release of **Spirit Rising: My Life, My Music**, an autobiography written with Rachel Wenrick and published by Harper Collins. With a foreword by Bishop Desmond Tutu and a preface from Alicia Keys, the book chronicles Kidjo’s rise from a childhood where her voice was censored by the Communist regime to a visionary artist and activist who made her dreams a reality—and how she is inspiring others all around the world to do the same. The telling of Kidjo’s dramatic rise ties in perfectly with the female empowerment themes that make **Eve** an epic achievement in her career.

“**Eve** is dedicated to the women of Africa, to their resilience and their beauty,” says Kidjo. “What I discovered along this journey is that these women find joy in being mothers and wives and also in being financially independent, running businesses in markets and finding ways to feed their kids. So let us celebrate the beauty and humanity of women, respect them fully and find no comfort in humiliating them or making them feel inferior. What I enjoyed most about creating **Eve** was the women giving me the authority and strength to continue speaking about justice, love, empathy and compassion. As an artist, this is all about me inspiring myself and others to find the strength to love and find solutions to our problems. As long as we are strong, we will move forward with dignity.”

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