

MEETING WITH THE MAYOR By Tony Vacca

So much of my music and the work I've done on the Senegal-America Project is about the interconnectedness of people, and the power of generosity. So I really shouldn't be surprised that these are the major elements in the story of how we all wound up at a Senegalese-style gala reception, thrown in our honor by the mayors of Pikine and Guinaw Rail. Pikine and Guinaw Rail are two neighborhoods in Dakar; they are the Brooklyn of Senegal's capital city of Dakar, and just like Brooklyn they are rough places to live, made beautiful by the resilience and character of the people who live there. But getting back to the gala; when I say gala, I mean gala African style, complete with dancers, drummers, singers, speechifying in four languages, and general good-time, multi-culti mayhem.

As usual, this story is all about how we are even more connected to one another than we could possibly imagine, and how what we do can actually have an effect far beyond our customary sphere of influence.

Now, it's almost impossible to actually start at the beginning of this story. I mean, I can't really tell where the beginning begins. So I'm just going to pick a place in this story, let's just say it's somewhere near the beginning of things that seem of immediate importance to what happened.

Back in 1995, I met Massamba Diop on the stage of the famous Iron Horse Concert Hall. I was opening the concert for the world-renowned Senegalese singer, Baaba Maal, and of course Massamba is the famous tama drummer in that band. I became friends with Massamba and Baaba at this first concert. Looking back and knowing what I now know about these two extraordinary people, I'd say the attraction was simply our shared, long-term commitment to the music and our mutual interest in the power of music to unite and energize people. That's what it is to this day. My friendship with Massamba really began to grow when I visited with him and Baaba Maal in Senegal in 1996. I began to study the tama with him, doing lessons and practice sessions pretty constantly throughout that month-long trip. At the end of that trip I was invited by Baaba to play with his band at several concerts, and on their "Live to the Nation" television show. All this was made possible by Massamba's generosity in teaching me so much of what he knows about the tama drum, and then making sure I was hip to how the band operated. Of course I responded by putting in plenty of hard work on the tama, and from that moment on we were together in this strange brotherhood of the drum.

Massamba and I began to organize US tours that year, and are currently doing our 16th! There's no easy way to describe our friendship other than to say that we have playfully and mutually adopted each other into our families.

In 1998 I received a grant to take my band, World Rhythms Ensemble, to Senegal to record and perform there. During that trip I met an exceptional group of young men who had formed a group called Gokh-bi System. They had created a mix of sound that included traditional Senegalese instruments, music, and dance, and then added to that a street-wise, Hip-Hop and poetic spoken word thing that they called “Ekonting Rap.”

They knocked on Massamba’s door, came on in, and introduced themselves by saying that they came there to play their music for us. I loved what they did, and a few months later I brought the band and their manager to America for the first of four tours. Each time the whole band stayed at my house, sometimes at the same time that Massamba was there. It was definitely an up-close-and-personal kind of thing, so we got to be pretty good friends. The manager of that group was Pape Bathie Pouye. (Pronounced “Pop Boch Pwee.”) Pape had a vision, and some considerable knowledge to back it up, and he just wouldn’t let anything stop him and the group from making a name for themselves in America and the world. And so they did.

So because of Massamba’s long time friendship with Baaba Maal, the three of us got to meet, and have become friends. From Massamba’s generosity and genuine love of the music, and from my work to learn some of the music of his world, Massamba and I are now tight and lifelong friends. Because Massamba lived in the same neighborhood as Gokh-bi System, I met up with them and with Pape. From Pape’s several tours in America he met up with his wife, and they now live with their daughter, Siga, right here in Northampton, Massachusetts.

So as this current trip began to become a reality, I was talking with Massamba and with Pape about how to make this a successful and challenging experience for such a diverse group of teachers, musicians, artists, and for the filmmaker who was going to document our work. Pape was reflecting on his long-term connection to, and affection for, the Northampton community. He thought it would be a cool thing if the mayor of Northampton would acknowledge this connection between us, to the communities of Pikine and Guinaw Rail, by writing an official letter to the mayors. Well, Northampton’s Mayor Higgins wrote a letter that elegantly and sincerely captured the vibe of everyone that has played a part in this journey, and she made it clear that she gets the importance of projects like this. The words of her letter were more than enough, but she added all the colorful seals and ribbons of her office, and the letter became a bridge of welcome and appreciation between our communities and peoples. You can see a copy of the letter on our Senegal-America Project website at http://Senegal-Americaproject.org/days10_12.htm

When Pape read the letter he knew what he wanted to do. He informed the mayors of Pikine and Guinaw Rail that we wanted to present them with this letter, and together they created a welcome that none of us will ever forget. Mayor Daour Niang Ndaiye of Pikine hosted the event, and as we arrived at his office

his assistant greeted us. The assistant took us on a brief tour of the facilities, making sure to introduce us to staff and officials all along the way. As we returned to the courtyard, there was now a full drum ensemble that included four tama drummers (no doubt in honor of their famous tama brother Massamba Diop). They had also invited Pikine resident and co-master of the tama drum, Assane Thiam. To have these two indisputable giants of the tama drum in one place just lit up the atmosphere. These are two Hall-of Fame musicians among the other great players on this day, all who were here on our behalf. The music they played was seriously rocking the house, and the entire neighborhood, too. It was a wave of welcoming energy that needed no translation. We got it. We clapped along with their rhythms; we stole a few moments to dance to the music, and acknowledged our appreciation of their amazing sound.

Just as that music began to ease up, another drum ensemble, this time with a complete compliment of dancers and singers, exploded into their own songs of welcome. So again we joined in, because there was just no way we could “politely” walk by. This is participatory music, and we all knew it, so we did what had to be done. Among the many new faces in the crowd and in the bands, were some of the teachers and friends that came to work with us at our home base in Toubab Dialaw. They had all played some part in our journey. There was Ndongo Diop on his sabar, and his wife was there among the dancers. There was Ousmane, our djembe instructor, Pape Bathie Pouye who had instigated this whole reception, Massamba Diop who set so much of the Senegal-America Project into motion, and then there were so many other artists and dignitaries from this part of Dakar that they are too numerous to be able to name here.

Finally, somehow, we moved toward the gathering of people, and we were guided to the front of the crowd, where there was a long table. The mayor and other dignitaries were there, and they asked us to join them. Several people from both delegations spoke, and although most of what was said was translated, you really didn’t need a translator to know that this was a serious love-fest. It was obvious to all that there were real and lasting friendships behind the connections of our group to theirs. The Senegal-America Project is just that; something that can only come from all of us working together for all the right reasons to make significant and personal connections between the peoples of our two countries.

Everyone who spoke had something significant to say, and every time the musicians heard something they thought was especially tasty, they’d play a very cool drum phrase, and sometimes a singer would pipe in or the dancers would give us a little taste of their extraordinary skills. Just when it seemed the event was coming to a close, an artist came forward with a partially finished canvas. He had painted the words Northampton, USA, Pikine, Senegal, Guinaw Rail in different colors, and was now inviting each of us to sign or add to this creation. One by one we each did just that, and as the canvas got more crowded with signatures, it also became more colorful, more intense, more amazing...kind of like humanity.

Yeah, the word love-fest seems to be just about right for this whole trip. And there was as much a sense of community among our group as there was between us and our Senegalese friends. When I concluded my remarks by reading Mayor Higgin's letter, and then by offering a Wolof blessing that Massamba had taught me years before, it was clear that we had all come a long way to this common ground. It was equally clear that we had all rediscovered a very simple and obvious truth; that this is how we are at our best, working, creating, envisioning and bringing to reality the things that were dreams only yesterday. Everyone's help was necessary, everyone's contribution mattered, and we all could see that we should always work together like this because either we work together, or we fall apart... And while some of these very thoughts were drifting through my mind, I was also right there, as the dancers danced, the drummers drummed, and the singers sang from the depths of their souls. We were all together in Suunugal...in our one big boat.