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Youssou N'Dour's voice of Africa
 Artist has something to say about his music, war and peace

By **DANNY HOOLEY**, Staff Writer

Youssou N'Dour had just flown into the United States one night last week, and early the next morning he began a day of phone interviews with American journalists. He didn't mind.

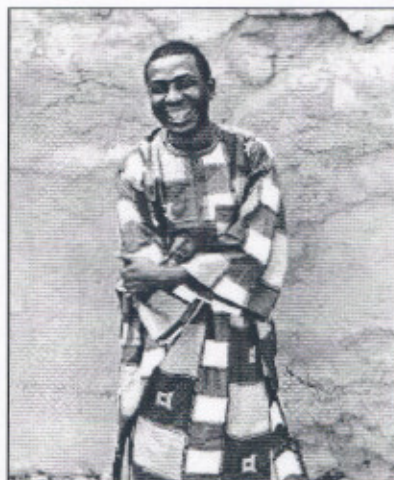
"I'm happy to talk to people because, I think, I really want to explain, you know, my music," he said.

N'Dour, the great Senegalese singer, inventor of the Afro-Cuban-inspired mbalax style who came to international prominence in the 1980s (due in large part to an association with friend, fan and fellow human rights champion Peter Gabriel) wants to explain more than just his music.

N'Dour canceled a U.S. tour after the 9/11 attacks because of international travel problems. Less than two years later, he canceled another U.S. tour.

Both cancellations included shows at the N.C. Museum of Art. In a statement to the press last year, N'Dour said, "As a matter of conscience, I question the United States government's apparent intention to commence war in Iraq. I believe that coming to America at this time would be perceived by many parts of the world -- rightly or wrongly -- as support for this policy, and that, as a consequence, it is inappropriate to perform in the U.S. at this juncture."

Later that year, he did come to the United States for a few shows, and this time



Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour is excited to talk to people and deliver his message.

Info

Who: Youssou N'Dour.

When: Tonight at 8, rain or shine.

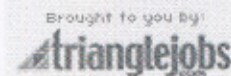
Where: Joseph M. Bryan Jr. Theater, N.C. Museum of Art park, 2110 Blue Ridge Road, Raleigh.

Cost: \$20, \$5 ages 2-12.

Note: Picnics, blankets and low

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around, he is performing in Raleigh -- tonight at 8 at the museum amphitheater.

When asked about the stand he took against the war last year, N'Dour, who speaks fluent but flawed English, struggled for a second to find the right words.

"I wanted to assume my responsibility and tell people I want peace," he said. "At the same time, I was really representing the voice of Africa, to say a lot of young people doesn't need war, they need more support to balance the world, because of poverty and AIDS and a lot of things that I think people doesn't think about."

In his statement last year, N'Dour promised to return in better times. While he does not consider the situation in Iraq to be better in terms of bloodshed, he said that his decision to play in the United States now came from his conclusion that staying away amounted to silence.

"I have little regret in just staying at home and saying, 'OK, this is bad,'" he said. "And sometimes, if you have possibility to talk to people, to join people, to deliver message."

N'Dour, a Sufi Muslim, lives in Dakar, where he grew up. His new album, "Egypt," is a tribute to Sufi teachers throughout history, as well as a musical blend of West and North African music.

"When I was young, my father was listening to [the great Egyptian singer] Um Kulthum a lot," he said. "I was really touched by the music and her voice."

N'Dour said he conceived "Egypt" during a Ramadan celebration that preceded 9/11 -- which is important, because the album is rightly taken as a political statement. He said that, initially, he wanted to work with an orchestra from Egypt so that he could try different instruments and talk about Islam to all Muslims.

His voice takes on unmistakable pleasure when he talks about the Festival of Sacred World Music in Morocco, where he performed with Egypt's 22-member Fathy Salama Orchestra -- many of whom play on his new album -- and seven musicians from his longtime Super Etoile de Dakar band.

He said that Morocco was like starting his career all over again.

sitting chairs permitted.

More info: 715-5923, ncartmuseum.org; Ticketmaster, 834-4000.

A selected discography

"The Lion" (Virgin, 1989) ***

Co-produced by Peter Gabriel, this record made N'Dour more accessible to a Western audience and established him as a great humanitarian and social progressive.

"Joko (The Link)" (Nonesuch, 2000) *** 1/2

The raw beauty of his voice and lush production combine for a melodically beautiful, elegantly funky highlight of N'Dour's career.

"Nothing's in Vain (Coono du reer)" (Nonesuch, 2002) ****

"Nothing's in Vain" mostly forgoes the electronic textures of N'Dour's post-Gabriel "world music" period for a pared-down but very full sound. Koras, flutes, acoustic guitars and percussion dart around each other subtly, always doing something interesting. The singing is gorgeous, of course.

"The Rough Guide to Youssou N'Dour & Etoile de Dakar" (World Music Network, 2002) ****

This collection of early '80s material documents an exciting time of invention -- of mbalax, which modernized traditional Senegalese music and made it funkier. It's as thrilling as hearing '70s punk, or "The Indestructible Beat of Soweto" or Elvis' "The Sun Sessions" or early James Brown for the first time. Essential.

"7 Seconds: The Best of Youssou N'Dour" (Columbia/Legacy 2004) *** 1/2

Leaning toward the funky and upbeat, and hitting some of the right Western collaborations (the title cut, with Neneh Cherry, is a blast), this makes an excellent basic guide to an international star. You'll never hear a better version of "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da." *

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"I can't wait to tour around the world with this concept. It was really expensive," he chuckled.

For this tour, N'Dour is playing his classic material with his regular group and said he hopes to tour worldwide with the Fathy Salama Orchestra next year. He hinted that a DVD of a performance with the orchestra may be in the works.

Bouna Ndiaye, host of WNCU-FM's "Bonjour Africa" radio program, is helping to promote tonight's show. Ndiaye, 52, is also from Senegal and is a Muslim, as is 96 percent of the country's population. He said that reviews of "Egypt" from critics in Senegal have been mixed.

"Of course, they know Youssou N'Dour as someone who brings a lot of dance music," he said. "People love him very much in Senegal. But I think that album is not really -- based on the critics -- he's not really bringing people what they expected to get."

Ndiaye said he would make up his own mind.

"He is great," he said. "You cannot have better than that. He is very professional. He is very consistent. And I think he has been doing a very good job."

Like N'Dour, Ndiaye speaks of Senegal as a place of harmony and tolerance. Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade met with Pope John Paul II in May and announced his intention to organize an Islamic-Christian summit in Dakar next year.

"Senegal is a country where you don't have any racial problems or religious problems," Ndiaye said. "We are very, let's say, open-minded."

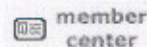
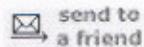
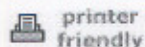
Ndiaye declined to offer an opinion about the war in Iraq, or N'Dour's stand against it.

"Youssou N'Dour is an icon, and he has the power to say what he wants to say," he said. "I have no particular feelings about that. I am here for a career, and that's all that matters to me. But the world, itself, is against the war."

N'Dour said that, with his new album, he not only wanted to show the tolerant, peace-loving face of Islam but its diversity as well.

"What I really want is to show the world how things are happening in Senegal, in Africa," he said. "Because a lot of people think Islam is religion for Arab people. I say, 'No, Islam is worldwide religion. It is also religion for black people in West Africa. I don't know if a lot of people know about it.'"

Staff writer Danny Hooley can be reached at 836-4953 or dhooley@newsobserver.com.



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Youssou N'Dour's voice of Africa

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