

Geography Lessons

By Kevin C. Madigan

Angélique Kidjo—*Djin Djin* (Razor & Tie)



Angélique Kpasseloko Hinto Hounsinou Kango Manta Zogbin Kidjo is no novice. Hailing from the Petah tribe in Benin, West Africa, she launched her career during the 1980s in the flourishing Afro-Caribbean music scene of Paris and has been making albums ever since with increasing success. Her first release with Razor and Tie is a spirited stew of thriving rhythms and euphoric anthems.

The foundation of the album, as in much of the music from Africa, lies in the percussion. On this record, the work of two men from Benin—Crespin Kpitiki and Benoit Avihoe—forms the rhythmic base on which all the other musicians perform, with marvelous results.

Kidjo, who sings in French, English and her native tongue, Fon, is joined by collaborators with clout, among them: Alicia Keys, Peter Gabriel, Joss Stone, Carlos Santana and Branford Marsalis. Her choice of material is as solid as her choice of musicians. She covers the Jagger / Richards chestnut “Gimme Shelter” as well as Sade’s “Pearls.” She even pulls off a unique take on Ravel’s “Bolero.” But her main goal is to remain true to her roots in Benin, while introducing an international perspective.

Rodrigo y Gabriela—*Rodrigo y Gabriela* (ATO)

These two fiery guitar players met in Mexico City and are now based in Ireland where, they felt, their unconventional approach to contemporary acoustic guitar music would stand a better chance of being accepted. Their first love was, oddly, heavy metal. But the sound of Rodrigo Sanchez and Gabriela Quintero evolved, through busking on Dublin’s streets, to its current state, which encompasses musical styles as diverse as world, rock, classical and traditional Latin.

Quintero doubles as quasi-percussionist, frequently pounding her guitar with fingers or fist, as in the fierce cascading rumble “Tamacun,” named after a crocodile handler. On the accompanying DVD she offers a fascinating tutorial on the tricks of the trade. Her partner, Sanchez, is a picker of extraordinary dexterity, able to play with consummate skill and obvious enjoyment.

The Hungarian gypsy violinist Roby Lakatos, the only outside musician on the project, takes a wild turn on the passionate “Ixtapa,” a tune dedicated to the Mexican coastal town where they once lived. The album was recorded live, with minimal overdubs, giving it a raw, aggressive edge but retaining the subtle spirit of acoustic music.



Stephen Marley—*Mind Control* (Universal Republic)



The second son of the late, great Bob Marley is, unsurprisingly, brimming with talent and musical acumen. Surprising, though, is that *Mind Control* is his first solo effort. Now 34 years old, Marley has been overseeing the burgeoning career of his younger brother, Damian “Jr. Gong” Marley, as well as running the Jamaican family’s imprint, Tuff Gong Records.

Damian shows up here on the single “The Traffic Jam,” where the two brothers indulge in a patois scat backed by nothing but a beatbox. The effect is electrifying. In fact, this album, chock full of good songs, showcases Marley’s preference for musical variety: The infectious, samba-driven “Let Her Dance” may well become a club hit this summer. “Hey Baby” (adapted from a song Marley used to sing to his children) introduces Brooklyn rapper Mos Def. “Chase Dem” reverts to a more traditional reggae rhythm and message: “Chase dem / Run dem politicians / When I see them I get cold.”

The soulful “Inna Di Red” (with help from Ben Harper) ends the record with a lovely chorus sung by little kids. Somewhere Bob Marley is smiling.

Worthy of Mention: Dougie MacLean *Inside The Thunder* (Blix Street): the Scottish troubadour continues his long, solid career with a splendid new set. Misha Piatigorsky *Uncommon Circumstance* (Misha Music): Young Moscow-born jazz pianist, composer and arranger gives established players a run for their money. Antibalas *Security* (Anti-): This multi-ethnic band plays intense, horn-driven Afrobeat. Mesmerizing.

Kevin C. Madigan writes about music and other artistic matters from his home in Atlanta.