

NEW YORK'S AFRICAN RHYTHM

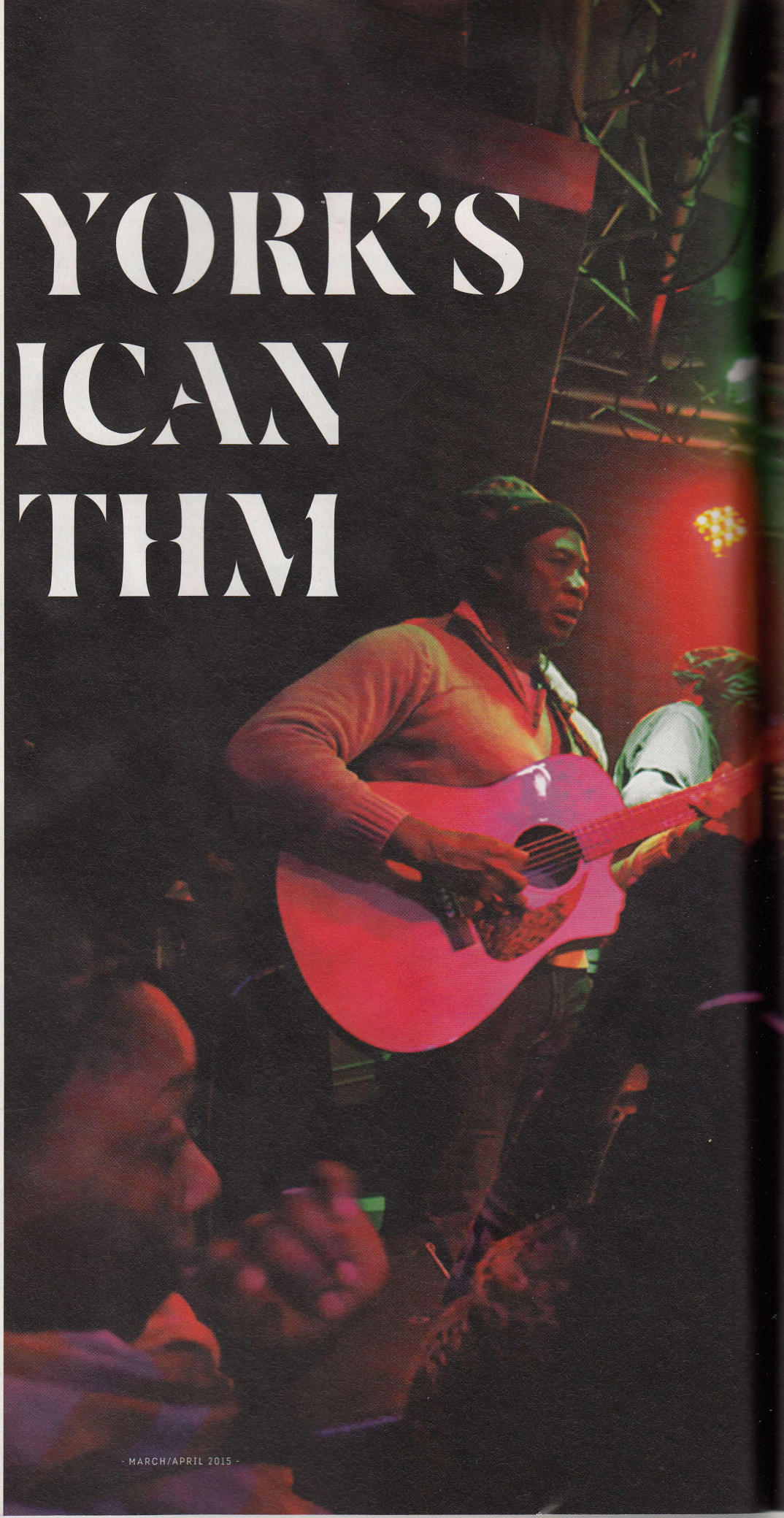
FRESH VIBES WITH AFRICAN ROOTS ARE MAKING THEIR MARK ON THE MUSIC SCENE IN THE BIG APPLE. MUSIC SCRIBE WILL SIMPSON FOLLOWED THE BEAT

IT HARDLY needs stating that Harlem in the northern section of New York City's borough of Manhattan is an area steeped in musical history. During the 20th century it served as a nexus point in the rise of jazz, not to mention the development of doo-wop, soul, funk and later R&B and hip hop. No music nerd's tour is complete without a pilgrimage to the iconic Apollo Theater on 125th Street, the scene of performances by every major figure in black American music - from Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong to Aretha Franklin, James Brown and Jay Z.

But times change. Patterns of immigration and the shifting demographics of neighbourhoods has meant there is a new sound jostling for position amongst those established genres. A small but vibrant scene is developing that encompasses several clubs, a number of artists, musicians, DJs and an annual festival that celebrates the original source of all those musical tributaries - Africa.

We spend a day with New York music promoter Abdel Ouedraogo, popular DJ Gerard Koala and musician Isaac Katalay - each revealing how they share their African culture with communities in The Big Apple. →

Photography: Oskar Landi







"HARLEM IS ONE OF THE BLACK CAPITALS OF THE WORLD BUT TO ME MUSIC DOESN'T HAVE A COLOUR"



THE PROMOTER

Abdel Ouedraogo is a busy man. The Burkinabé owns two venues in Harlem - The Shrine and Silvana - the latter named after his wife, as well as curating an annual African music festival. But he started off as a musician himself:

"I was originally a percussionist. I actually used to build the instruments myself - djembes, koras and guitars."

These days crafting wood takes a back seat to the business of music. The Shrine and Silvana promote not just African, but blues, jazz, soul and other 'world' musics. "That is very important to me," he explains. "Both clubs have a very mixed crowd. Harlem is one of the black capitals of the world but to me music doesn't have a colour. New York is a cosmopolitan city and it's great to see that reflected in our clubs."

It's a philosophy he extends to the Mafrika festival, which in 2014 expanded to a two-day event - a free concert in Marcus Garvey Park between 120th and 124th streets, and a one day 'music marathon' across a number of Harlem venues.

For Abdel, Mafrika is the highlight of the year. "It's a weekend you see all the different African communities coming out and engaging with each other. You have the Burkinabé community, Malian community, Ghanaian community, Nigerian community... This is what music is all about - taking your culture and sharing it with the city and by extension the whole world."



SPIN DOCTOR

Clockwise from left DJ Gerard Koala with some of his vinyls; revellers at The Shrine in Harlem; a mural at The Shrine of Nigerian Afrobeats pioneer Fela Kuti (1938-1997)



“WE HEAR MORE AND MORE AFRICAN MUSIC IN THE STREETS”

THE DJ

“There are a lot of us now in New York,” says Gerard Koala, a Burkinabé who emigrated to the United States back in 2004 and who – rather controversially – gave himself the stage name ‘DJ Khadafi’. “But I like to think I am a little bit different.”

The number of DJs playing African music in Harlem is definitely increasing, but there aren’t many like Koala who manage to sing, mix and MC all at the same time. “There are some who play better than me, but I think by doing all three I reflect the real African culture. People seem to love it anyway!”

Koala plays music from ‘west, south and central Africa’ all over the city. “I play The Shrine and Silvana a lot and the Zulu club. I also do a lot of African weddings and baby naming ceremonies. I even get invitations to play at African cultural evenings at colleges.”

He senses that the city’s African scene is gathering momentum. “Usually round here it’s very easy to hear hip hop or R&B and you will definitely hear Hispanic music in the Bronx. But more and more you are hearing African music in the streets too. We are getting the opportunity to be heard and I think that is significant.”

THE MUSICIAN

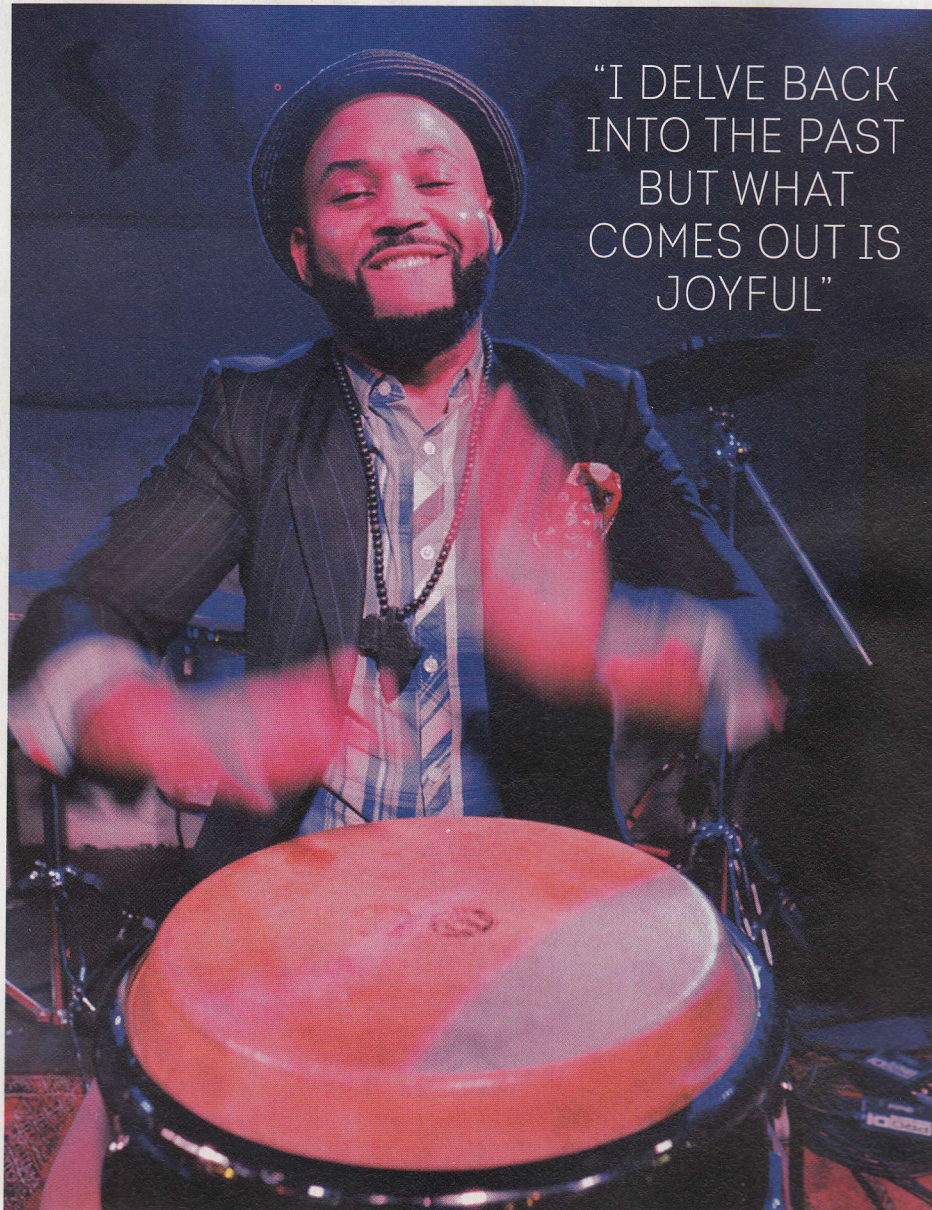
Isaac Katalay is a man on a mission: to represent the country of his birth – the Democratic Republic of the Congo – through his music. It's been an ambition since arriving in New York in the mid 90s. "I started playing in churches and other bands but I always had the vision of starting my own group," he explains. "As a child I'd ask questions, I'd be thinking 'how can I explain my people's stories?' I was looking at the difficulties my people find at being able to express themselves in a society where Africans are talented but their stories aren't heard in mainstream culture."

Isaac studied International Criminal Justice at the City University of New

York, honing the analytical skills he has brought to the group he's named the 'Life Long Project'.

"It is a lifelong project," he emphasises. "The point is to express the contribution of Congolese people in world history. Music like Afro Cuban, samba – all the music that makes the world dance has Congolese roots."

Isaac's music – a mixture of gospel and traditional Congolese – is unafraid to confront the Congo's history. "I do delve back into the past but what comes out is joyful. That's the reason I entitled my debut album *The Paradox*. I see the darkness, I embrace the traditions but hopefully I've created something that is positive and looks to the future."



"I DELVE BACK INTO THE PAST BUT WHAT COMES OUT IS JOYFUL"

FR **Le son africain de New York**
La scène musicale new-yorkaise commence à vibrer au son de racines africaines. Le chroniqueur musical Will Simpson s'est laissé entraîner

Les migrations et l'évolution démographique ont apporté de nouveaux sons dans la Grosse Pomme. Une petite scène dynamique, composée de boîtes, artistes, musiciens, DJ et d'un festival annuel, rend hommage à la source de tous ces courants musicaux : l'Afrique.

LE MUSICIEN

Isaac Katalay est investi d'une mission : représenter son pays natal, la République démocratique du Congo, à travers sa musique.

C'est un travail de longue haleine, depuis son arrivée au milieu des années 90. « Je veux exprimer la contribution du peuple congolais à l'Histoire. La musique afro-cubaine, la samba – et toutes les tendances qui font danser le monde – ont des racines congolaises. » Alliant gospel et rythmes congolais traditionnels, la musique d'Isaac donne une image positive de l'histoire et des traditions du Congo.

LE DJ

Gerard Koala, Burkinabè immigré aux États-Unis en 2004, fait partie des DJ qui jouent de la musique africaine à Harlem. Chanteur, mixeur et rappeur, il joue de la musique d'Afrique occidentale, australe et centrale.

Il sent que la scène africaine new-yorkaise prend de l'ampleur. « On entend de plus en plus de musique africaine dans les rues. On a l'occasion de se faire entendre... »

LE PROMOTEUR

Abdel Ouedraogo est burkinabè. Il est propriétaire de deux établissements à Harlem et organise un festival annuel de musique africaine. Chez lui, on joue de la musique africaine mais aussi du blues, du jazz, de la soul, etc. « À mes yeux, la musique n'a pas de couleur. » Une philosophie qu'embrasse le festival Mafrika, étendu à deux jours en 2014 : un concert gratuit à Marcus Garvey Park et un « marathon de la musique » d'une journée dans différents lieux de Harlem.

NL **Het Afrikaanse ritme van New York**
Nieuwe invloeden met 'roots' in Afrika beginnen zich te verspreiden in het muziekwereldje van New York. Muziekjournalist Will Simpson volgde het ritme

Als gevolg van immigratie en demografische verschuivingen klinkt er steeds vaker een nieuw geluid in de Big Apple. Er bloeit een klein levendig wereldje rond verschillende clubs, artiesten, muzikanten, dj's en een jaarlijks festival waarmee de oorsprong van deze muzikale afgeleiden wordt gevierd: Afrika.

DE MUZIKANT

Isaac Katalay is op een belangrijke missie: hij wil zijn geboorteland, de Democratische Republiek Congo, laten doorklinken in zijn muziek.

Dat is zijn ambitie al sinds hij halfweg de jaren '90 in New York aankwam. "Waar het mij om gaat is de bijdrage van de Congolezen aan de wereldgeschiedenis tot uiting te brengen. Muziek zoals Afro-Cubaans, samba – alle muziek die de wereld aanzet tot dansen – heeft Congolese wortels." Isaacs muziek is een mengeling van gospel en traditionele Congolese muziek, waarin de geschiedenis en de tradities van Congo worden gevierd.

DE DJ

Gerard Koala, een Burkinees die in 2004 naar de Verenigde Staten verhuisde, is een van de dj's die Afrikaanse muziek spelen in Harlem. Maar hij zingt, mixt en mc't tegelijkertijd. Hij speelt muziek uit het westen en zuiden van Afrika en uit Centraal-Afrika.

Koala voelt dat het belang van de Afrikaanse invloeden in de stad toeneemt. "Je hoort steeds vaker Afrikaanse muziek op straat. We krijgen vandaag de dag een echte kans om gehoord te worden."

DE PROMOTOR

Abdel Ouedraogo is een Burkinees met twee clubs in Harlem en organisator van een jaarlijks Afrikaans muziekfestival.

In zijn clubs promoot hij niet alleen Afrikaanse muziek, maar ook blues, jazz, soul en andere muzieksoorten. "Voor mij heeft muziek geen kleur." Het is een filosofie die hij ook toepast op het Mafrika-festival, een gratis concert in Marcus Garvey Park dat sinds 2014 twee dagen in beslag neemt, en eendaagse 'muziekmarathons' op diverse plaatsen in Harlem.