

ANGELIQUE KIDJO

“Her spirit is irrepressible, and she brings life to everything she touches.” – Peter Gabriel

The Grammy winner (Best World Music Album), much-celebrated singer, composer, and performer began in the Beninese port village of Cotonou, where she launched her career at the age of six. The political turmoil in her country led her to relocate to Paris, the capital of world music, and then ultimately to New York City, where she now resides. Her striking voice, stage presence and her fluency in multiple cultures and languages won respect from her peers and expanded her following across national borders. It also earned her access to humanitarians who sensed the passion in the words of her songs, resulting in her long-term dedication to global charity work.

Kidjo has traveled far and mesmerized audiences on countless stages, speaking out on behalf of the children in her capacity as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador. Now with **DJIN DJIN** and the return to her musical roots, Kidjo has truly closed the circle in her life as she brings international artists to the musical world of her native country.

As a child, Kidjo was mesmerized by an iconic album cover of Jimi Hendrix, which led her to follow the African roots of music from the United States, Brazil and the Caribbean. The results were the Grammy-nominated trilogy of albums, **OREMI**, **BLACK IVORY SOUL** and **OYAYA**. With **DJIN DJIN** (pronounced “gin gin”), Angelique Kidjo returns to the soul of Benin – and, for the first time, shares it with a cast of all-star guests, in a marriage of cultures that has significance far beyond music alone. Inspired by the traditions and culture of Kidjo’s native Benin in West Africa, the title of the album refers to the sound of the bell that greets the beginning of a new day for Africa.

The diversity represented by Alicia Keys, Peter Gabriel, Josh Groban, Carlos Santana, Joss Stone, Branford Marsalis, producer Tony Visconti, and the others who contribute to **DJIN DJIN** speaks to the lesson of this project: For all the differences in the music of our time, the river of Africa flows through it all.

The key was to build **DJIN DJIN** on a Beninese foundation. The heartbeat, then, comes from percussionists Crespin Kpitiki and Benoit Avihoue, both members of Benin’s Gangbé Brass Band. Details of their country’s rhythmic heritage, specific in some cases to individual villages, feed the rhythms they lay down throughout the album.

To this mix Kidjo welcomes players whose backgrounds complement the idea of **DJIN DJIN**: drummer Pogie Bell, known for his work with Erykah Badu and Chaka Khan; funk keyboard wizard Amp Fiddler, whose credits include Prince and George Clinton; Larry Campbell, whose multi-instrumental work has adorned the music of Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, and Paul Simon; Senegalese bass giant Habib Faye, a fixture with Youssou N’Dour; guitarists Lionel Loueke, from jazz legend Herbie Hancock’s band; Romero Lubambo, a Brazilian wonder whose credits include Diana Krall and Dianne Reeves; Joao Mota, from Guinea-Bissau and kora master Mamadou Diabate.

Each player is a virtuoso but, more important, is open to taking creative chances. “It was important to me that all of these great musicians come with me back to my roots,” Kidjo says. “I’ve never compromised those roots because I know my identity, and I’ve learned that in order to give through music, you have to position yourself among other individuals who may be from different cultures and background and then find ways to discover that we’re actually not different at all.”

Kidjo set some of the new material on **DJIN DJIN** into the languages of Benin, Nigeria, and Togo. She has written and sung extensively in French and English as well, but for this mission the lyrics came to her from further back in her history. The title track, “Djin Djin,” is a reminder to live each fleeting moment as fully as possible. Her songs embrace the joys and sorrows of life: the magic of birth (“Salala”), the uniqueness of each person even on this crowded planet (“Arouna”), the temptations of violence (“Mama Golo Papa”), the healing and learning potential of music (“Awan N’La”), the lessons offered as youth yields to age (“Sedjedo”) and isolation deepens in modern society (“Emma”).

But Kidjo doesn’t hold back her anger, expressed here toward wealthy classes enslaved by love of money (“Senamou (C’Est L’amour)”). She also looks forward to the day when leaving Africa to seek fortune far from home won’t be the only solution for a desperate youth (“AE AE”). On her rendition of Sade’s “Pearls,” she extols women who are strong, yet suppressed and unable to escape the pain of existence. On another cover, a brilliant a cappella arrangement of Ravel’s *Bolero* entitled “Lonlon”, she illuminates the bridge that stretches from European classical music to the wellspring of northern Africa. And on “Gimme Shelter,” Kidjo transforms the Stones classic into an exuberant pan-national performance that nonetheless translates into a warning.

“This song means a lot to me,” she says. “Look at what’s going on: Fire is burning in our streets. Terrorists, in the name of God, are coming to destroy what we’ve worked for. If you don’t give shelter to the people who most need it, if you don’t treat them as your brothers and sisters, then what hope do we have?”

The contributions of stellar guest artists illuminate Kidjo’s concept. By finding a place for their distinctive talents within the marriage of African and Western influences, **DJIN DJIN** celebrates the beauty of diversity as well as the unity of cultures that Kidjo achieves through her music.

These giants include **Peter Gabriel** on “Salala” (“He’s done so much for African music; in fact, there’s something African in his way of singing, moving, and writing his songs”); **Alicia Keys** on “Djin Djin” (“When she heard the Beninese drums in the studio, she said, ‘Wow, this is hip-hop!’ She understood it perfectly – and she sang so beautifully”); **Joss Stone** on “Gimme Shelter” (“We’re friends, so when I played her what we were doing in the studio, and she insisted on being a part of it, I was so happy that we could make this happen”); **Josh Groban** on “Pearls” (“He sings so effortlessly,” Kidjo says, “and yet you know that it isn’t easy to sing at that level of virtuosity”); **Ziggy Marley** on “Sedjedo” (“He understands so well the connections between the music of Jamaica and the rhythm of Africa – especially the *gogbaboun* rhythm that comes from my village”), **Carlos Santana** on “Pearls” (“He’s not only a guitar player: With his guitar he sings, he dances, he swings, he cries – and he has huge respect for Africa”); **Branford Marsalis** on “Djin Djin” (“He’s my brother! When he plays,

you never know what you're going to hear or where his wonderful ideas will take the music"); and **Amadou and Mariam** on "Senamou" ("We go so far back as friends; it was a special blessing and a gift to have them on the album.")

Producer Tony Visconti (David Bowie, Morrissey) helps to bring each track on **DJIN DJIN** to full sonic bloom. Recorded at Electric Lady Studio in New York, with participants gathered in a studio made intimate by carpets, couches, and home-like accoutrements, these performances testify to the power of music to simultaneously unify and free those who make it and hear it.

"When we had finished our recording, we were all so sad because we had come together as a family, all within just two weeks," Kidjo recalls. "Music brings us together, but after the music is over, you go back to your home, to your neighborhood, knowing that you can make a difference. You have to be proud of who you are. Whether you were born in America or Africa, you can celebrate life."

Kidjo's point is as simple as it is profound: The celebration only begins with **DJIN DJIN** and will last as long as you want it to after that.