

## Speakers:

**Usen Esiet** is a writer, curator and creative producer from Lagos in New York. His work—which spans across the digital and physical—is defined by a celebration of creativity in service to humanity. At the United Nations, where he has served for the last decade, USEN has collaborated with an array of creative talent to produce numerous award-winning brand activations, content series and global campaigns in pursuit of a better world. USEN serves his local and global community by providing a platform for contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora to thrive at HAUSEN. He has also served on the Young Collectors Council at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

**Malick Koly** is a Harlem-based artist. Born in Abidjan, he has lived across Africa, Europe and North America. He is currently developing 'Algo Rhythm, the Drum Corpus', a film in collaboration with curator and writer Simon Njami and artist and poet Saul Williams, co curator Diallo Simon-Ponte, & director Derek Matar. Koly is interested in using the drum as a corpus for expansion and its origins pre transcontinental passage.

**Derek Matar** is a director and cinematographer based in New York City. With a keen eye for visual storytelling, Derek has crafted a diverse portfolio that spans narrative, commercial and documentary work. Alongside Malick Koly, he is currently developing 'Algo Rhythm, the Drum Corpus', a film in collaboration with curator and writer Simon Njami and artist and poet Saul Williams. He is passionate about working on motion-picture film and the preservation of the medium.

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** is a writer and curator currently working at Gagosian Gallery. Since starting there in 2021, he has supported exhibitions for artists including Derrick Adams, Cy Gavin, Lauren Halsey, Rick Lowe, Deana Lawson, Tyler Mitchell, and Amanda Williams among others. He curated Home as Corpus for Head of State by Taofeek Abijako and worked as a curatorial assistant on Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech at the Brooklyn Museum, Cowboy by Helmut Lang at Hannah Traore Gallery, and the 2023 Yale Photography MFA show Blueprint at Amanita Gallery. His bylines include Apollon Journal, Just Smile Magazine, Jupiter Magazine, and Studio Museum Magazine.

**Usen Esiet** Let's give another round of applause to Malik, (applause) who's brought us here today, so we can have this conversation. I'll just ask at the outset, just so that we can hear each other, and mostly these three amazing people, if we don't mind, just keep the chatter to a minimum, please. Relying on everyone else to kind of hold everyone accountable.

You can also come closer, right? It's an intimate gathering. I will try my best to speak as loudly as possible.

If you can't hear me or hear anyone, feel free to speak up.

My name is Usen. I'm a curator, and I'm very honored to be moderating this conversation today. Of course we have Malik Koly, Derek Matar who directed the video and Diallo Simon Ponte, who's a collaborator on this project. When Malik mentioned this work to me several weeks ago, one of the things I found most fascinating was that he was looking at it through the lens of anthropology and musicology, and maybe even more specifically, ethnomusicology, and honoring that approach that he's taking, I'm going to be using a kind of anthropological and ethnomusicological framework as the jumping off point for the conversation, and we'll let it flow.

There are some questions that I would love to ask all three of them here, and we'll open it up afterwards, for folks who have questions. Don't mind the formal setting, I'm a little bit of a curatorial nerd, so I always have some text that I will refer to.

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** We're here for it.

**Usen Esiet** So I'll just jump right in. This is a book by Robert Plant Armstrong, he's an anthropologist, one of the things that he talks about that I find really interesting is this idea of the aesthetics of energy, and for anthropologists, aesthetics is best defined as theory or study of form, incarnating feeling, right? And I'm kind of curious, maybe each of you can share from your perspectives as the artist, as a collaborator and as director, what kind of feeling were you trying to emanate through this particular iteration of this work?

Anyone can jump right in.

**Derek Matar** Well, I mean, the first conversation we had in terms of aesthetics was pretty quick, and it was that we were going to shoot it on film, and there was really no way around that. So obviously there's some logistical concerns, but there is some sort of understanding that, you know, in such intense heat, there's something that does land on the negative strip, you know. So when

you're dealing with 100 degrees, 100% humidity, does that have some impact on the image? I mean, I've never researched it, but maybe I also don't really care to find out.. the older cameras, you know, they hold up a lot better than some of the newer ones in the heat, so I think it was all the more reason to just keep shooting and shooting. And you know, when we're dealing with a type of media that is finite, that will roll out eventually, that does sort of play into the energy at stake. Everybody knows that when Malik does his performances two, three times, and that's it. And if it's not there, if the energy is not there, then we have to move on.

**Malick Koly** Yeah, it's interesting, because I went to Derek fully knowing he works in film. I saw this other video he had worked on called *Moon Child*, and it really struck me, and it was actually shot right around here in Chinatown. And, yeah, I spoke to him because I was like, my father used to make films in, you know, on film, because at the time, there was nothing else, and part of his vision was... because he had mostly grown up in France, and it was like everything was about a homecoming, but a homecoming from the perspective of somebody who's also been treated as like, not, not an outsider, so to speak, because he was quite well versed. First of all, he spoke all his native languages.

**Usen Esiet** Which were?

**Malick Koly** His mother was Malian and his father was Guerze from the South of Guinea, and he spoke both languages perfectly, but he was sent away because it was colonization time, and he had to go away. But every time he came home, he was like this needs to be captured, but it needs to be captured in the lens of somebody who's directing, somebody who's from here, and the opportunities he got to do that were when he was also able to hire people who had a different lens, so quite literally, people who were shooting weren't from Ivory Coast, and he was directing them.

When I went to Derek, I was like: *"hey, we're gonna go to Ivory Coast, It's gonna be hot as shit. It's gonna be different if we're gonna do it."* And he was like, *"let's do it."*, and...we did it. And he surpassed my expectations. It was a peripatetic journey to say the least.

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** I also want to just say first, thank you all, you know, thank you Usen for moderating this. Thank you Baldassarre, who's in the back.

I also think experimentation is very present in the aesthetics of a note, and in the sound. And what we presented today was also very archival and very researched as well. Some of the footage was footage that Malik's father had shot. He was a filmmaker, playwright and director and such, and so this project is very much about map making, particularly because Malik grew up and was in and around the traditional drum set, like traditional drums, but the drum set is an American entity.

And so for him to be here and be playing the drum set, what does it mean to hold that diaspora of the drum? So here, how can we think about those histories and imbue which into the notes, which the sonic, which to imbue into the visuals? And so that was their research and their trip back to Ivory Coast was about. It's like, how are we thinking about these histories in the visual esthetics, and holding it also at the same time with the sonic register of what we're trying to do?

**Usen Esiet** that's interesting. I mean, now maybe thinking about the drum and the drum set. Is it maybe a perfect segue? JH Kwabena Nketia, who's one of the most prominent scholars on African music. He's passed now, but still he is. One of the things he said is that in many African societies, the emphasis on percussive instruments finds its highest expression in the use of membranophones, drums with parchment heads, right? And these drums, of course, they serve like, I mean, if you listen to what Saul Williams was saying, right, he made mention to what some of the uses of the drum, and the sound that the drums, you know, emanate or create, kind of are used for this certain ritual, certain moments, right?

I'm West African myself, from Nigeria, and understanding how music, sound, sonic... How integral it is to our culture. But even beyond the musical use, drums in traditional African context, also often have a symbolic and representational purpose. So I'm kind of curious for you, what does the drum and the drum set symbolize or represent in your work, and maybe specifically in this work?

**Malick Koly** Yeah, well, it's this very weird thing where there are certain liberties that surround my journey. And part of it is that I grew up going to the theater. My father writing these plays, right? But my father revived this theater called *Kotiba*, which kind of like died-ish, but nobody was really daring to take it over. And he was like, "*I'm just gonna do it.*". And basically, it sort of merges contemporary settings, so for example urban settings, with tradition, right? So you can play a traditional song, but it can very much mirror your daily life in an urban setting, as opposed to, like: "oh, ceremony, and we're going back to the village..." it was like, No. We're in Abidjan, which is the capital of Ivory Coast, and this is what we're gonna do in relationship to a kid who's playing soccer, or in relationship with a woman who's like, I don't want to be polygamist, like I just want one man...

(laughter).

But what I mean is like, we're going to adapt this to modern day, as opposed to sort of going full on traditional. And so when he starts working on this theater, there's was a merging that needed to happen.. there's was a tribute to be paid. Because there's some old folks from the village is gonna come to see this play, these people from France are gonna come to see this play, and he needed all of

them to be happy... And it's like, okay, well... we have traditional drums, and we're gonna have a regular band also.

So while the plays were happening, you couldn't see the band.. you would see the actors and you would hear the music, but the music was being played live. And so my first introduction to that kind of theater is through seeing the drum set juxtaposed with traditional drums too. But I was always driven towards the drums, and for a long time I thought it was a coincidence, and then later I was like, Okay, wait... So, Dad studied sociology and psychology, and there was always a component of modernism in what he did. so I see those drums and I admire everything they're doing, but I like that modern iteration, like this modern thing just looks fucking crazy to me. And this guy's doing different things with his limbs like, where one guy's like, playing one thing and this other guy's playing another and I'm like, I want to be Superman as well, I want to do all those things at once! So I thought, how can I mirror that? And then my father bought me a drum set, and then that's kind of how that started. But then he told me, if you're going to do this, you have to understand where it comes from. And he said : *"this comes from America, and somewhere in your journey, you have to go there if you want to do this seriously, and you're going to have to learn where that lineage comes from, which is a black American lineage"*

So, as a black body addressing the drums, there was a certain amount of adaptation that I had to do when I moved here, and to be accepted in that realm. But a lot of humbling had to happen, because I'm not the first to try this. There's a bunch of older drummers, older drum set players, who have played funk rock and different iterations of modern music, so to speak, but they came with an ego. They were like, *"I'm African, I know where the drum comes from"* I'm gonna do this and it's like, Aaahh, no. As in, you can do what you do, and you can do it great, but there's a lineage that exists post-passage that you have to honor before you can bridge that gap. And I guess all of what I've ever done, all of what I've ever tried to do with this instrument, is essentially just like, trying to get the respect of these elders, because I felt approved when I was younger, you know, because I grew up next to the greatest djembe players, the greatest dun-dun players came out of Koteba. Like, there was this cycle happening. But then when I go back, these younger guys who were the sons of the players, who were in my father's Theater Company, are, like, *"you've been in the States, you don't know what we're fucking doing, so you have to learn everything again."* And that was a humbling moment, but it has to be clear, and I think this is something that most people have to understand: *Jazz*, as a culture, as an entity, is American, and America refuses it because it's not white, that's why. But the purist art form that comes from America's struggle, America's melting pot, is jazz music, and the drum set comes from America, right in Congo Square.

**Usen Esiet** You said something. I want to kind of pick up on.. this idea of adaptation. I think what you've together created today is symbolic of that, and the kind of adaptation that you have

put forth for all of us and also for yourselves, requires collaborative effort. And I'm aware that collaboration is considerably enhanced when those engaged share similar artistic values.

And I'm kind of curious, maybe from you, Diallo and Derek, what are some of the artistic values that you were, maybe even subconsciously carrying with you, or even kind of more consciously reflecting on, as you were bringing together this collaborative effort?

*Derek Matar* Even the footage in this state now is an adaptation, because we didn't really go there to shoot this. We went to shoot two different music videos that kind of went up in flames. So the question was, not only, what do we do with the footage, but why are we so drawn to it? And, you know, why do we still, I mean, we put so much blood, sweat and tears and maybe a little bit more into the project, and to have nothing just didn't really make any sense. So me and Malik started looking at the footage, and the first thing we noticed was there's so much drumming, and Malik doesn't really... I mean, he played today, but at the time he was really casting away the drum set, and he wasn't playing the drums a lot, and he was recording music with a lot of people that are in here tonight, and not playing the drums. So my biggest question was, as we were looking at everything, was what happened? And so when he started to dig a little bit deeper, that's when this sort of sense of collaboration came.

We talked with Saul Williams, and he had a lot of incredible things to say, and Diallo was also a great bridge, putting that all together. And also, you know, making sense of the footage, but also making sense of this whole thing at large.

*Diallo Simon-Ponte* I mean, for me, my practice is also very invested in memory and the preservation of these stories. Malik and I didn't meet in that context, we met and we have partied a lot since, but we've often, like, you know, gravitated towards, I think, this spiritual practice of research, and the way that we live is also living through sound and living through history. There's this Guinean guitarist that I love to go see at this spot in Brooklyn called Barbez. And I've been around there in the past two and a half years maybe over 30 times. There's a Guinean guitarist who comes every day from New Haven, Connecticut, and plays with the band, but the band is always changing as well.

But he was part of the Guinean Jazz National, this really celebrated Guinean ensemble that was created particularly after Guinea won its independence from France. The government was like—"What is this sound?"—and wanted to subsidize the sound of liberation. What does that look like? So he's been playing in Park Slope in Brooklyn for all these years, and I finally stumbled upon him, and I wanted Malik to come for a long time. We finally went for the first time together last week. And Malik is like, this man knows my father. He's like, he called my father before he passed as well. Like you said, there's a lot of serendipity, but our lives ended up becoming gravitational

because there is a love of memories, a love of celebrating the ancestors that are alive, a love of music, a love of literature, a love of all of this shit.

*Derek Matar* I also think that there's something to be said about him returning to where he's from after so long, and it really not being what you remember...

*Malick Koly* Yeah, you know, Abidjan is a very....it's weird. New York feels like home. I've been here for like, eight, almost nine years, and it feels so much like home. But then, there was a point in time where I was like, there's a static here.. in dead moments, you're like, in your apartment and you're chilling and you're not doing anything with anyone, but there's this static here that just exists.

And I was like, I know that feeling from somewhere... and, Abidjan is like that. It really is. Because the thing about Abidjan is that it's a microcosm where, like, when I guess conversation ends, it gets cut off in very odd ways, right? So you have Senegalese who remain. You have Malians who remain. You have Guineans who remain. And it's not like.... because when you go to Senegal, they can properly trace how long they've been there. If you go to Guinea they can probably as well but, like, Ivory Coast is really a mishmash. And so you have 32 different ethnicities that are there bubbling, and everybody is hustling and trying to... whatever, but it's that same feeling here, you know, you meet people from where you're from, and then you meet somebody from another place and New York always felt like that.

So I guess going home, I was like, whoa.. I'm older now, and I'm gonna go, and it's gonna be great. I guess I'm gonna go into this story. Now, this is, this is happening. We're going there.

So we have a producer, who's supposed to pick us up at the airport. "P-R-O-D-U-C-E-R"

(laughter) Well, first of all, he argued. He argued. He argued about the film..remember this?

(laughter) and Derek is like, *"so we're gonna buy the film in the States, and come with the equipment from the States. This is what the budget is."* My man's is, like, *"no, there's Kodak here."* I'm like, *"It's Kodak digital. Brother, it's not film. My father used to shoot on film. There's no film here, please."*

Like, don't do this to us.. And the producer says *"Nah, y'all gotta look at the budget again..."* So Derek goes in scrambles. This is the 26th of March, it was three days before we had to fly to Ivory Coast! It was really bad. And then this man is like, No, we got blah, blah, blah, blah. We get there. Man's is not at the airport. So we go into this interrogation room....

*Derek Matar* Yeah, they took our passport.

(Laughter)

**Malick Koly** They took our passports! So I'm walking in there having to be like, "*I'm the son of Souleymane Koly, bro.*" And you know what he says to me?? he's like, "*where have you been?*" ... this whole time? I was going to school! "*Where have your brothers' been?*"

You know that the military back there, they have the color, they have the guns. The guns are right there! But I'm like, it's unloaded Derek. It's unloaded.

**Derek Matar** I come out with my glasses, and I'm like, ready to, like, hit the scene and, like, they fog up like crazy. I'm like, will they ever give us our passports back?

(laughter)

**Malick Koly** Eventually they give the passports back, because I tell them, I'm like, this is an emotional thing for me, I'm here to make this happen. And they're like "*Okay, take the passports*"

**Derek Matar** And we paid them under the table.

(laughter)

**Malick Koly** We did. We absolutely did.

So we get out. The producer still is not showing up, by the way. He finally shows up. And we're like, "*Oh, hey!*" and he tells us "*Oh, this is where your hotel is.*" And in my head, I'm like, wait... last Civil War, the guy that got flushed out and got in a lot of trouble was picked up at this hotel. This can't be a good hotel! We get in.... no electricity.

**Derek Matar** So you're saying it wasn't? Because you were telling me it was a great hotel!

(laughter)

You said you and your dad used to come here for breakfast!

**Malick Koly** We used to have crepes there, but the guy was like, it's not the vibe no more... When we get there, the driver's telling me, this hotel is not the vibe any more. So we end up going there, lights go completely out. And this is the first big struggle we have, because it's like, okay, we have all this film. We have all the equipment... There's no light.. So you have to understand that all this footage that Derek shot under this unique condition, I mean, like, quite physically. And then I had to pretty much translate for him, the American Crew, and the Ivorian crew. The producer disappeared, and it was just an emotional nightmare.



So part of the reason why I come back to America, and I'm like, man, I think I fulfilled my journey with the drums, and I can't really do it anymore. It's because this was... and this was my birthday week! It was the worst night of my life. I was crryying, like a fucking child.

*Derek Matar* I had a full on mental.... I've never had a mental breakdown before, I actually had a mental breakdown. I punched the wall.

*Malick Koly* I was crying. Derek was just like, "*bro, we need to leave, we're out.*" And I'm just crying. and then the next day we shoot 15 hours of footage after two hours of sleep.

*Usen Esiet* I wanted to ask you, West Africa, very specifically, is like a portal. You have to go in, and it does a thing to you, and especially from a production point of view. I'm saying this as someone who's had to also manage production in West Africa. I will save those stories for later... I'm kind of curious for you, what was that like in Abidjan? Take us through some of what you experience, and how you were able to still deliver?

*Derek Matar* The crew we had was really incredible. They were really unbelievable. So nice to us, so kind. And you know, even though the infrastructure is not really there, you have tons of smart people who are incredibly capable and can do incredible things. It's just the equipment's not really there. So, you know, it was kind of a little bit of a back and forth of, like, you know, what can we work with? What are we going to be without? What can we make do with? And, you know, that was a constant struggle. The crew was so pleasant, and everybody was so nice, and everybody had the best, like, can do attitude.

The best part of all the struggles was shooting when the camera would roll and we would be so happy to just have something in the can. And, you know, that's a beautiful part about shooting on the film is like, you know, it's gonna look even better than you can imagine. But on top of that, it's preserved forever. So like, no matter what happens during the day, you're gonna walk away with a can that, you know, unless somebody throws it off a cliff...

*Malick Koly* The French tried to fucking do that to us at the airport.

*Derek Matar* You're gonna have that forever. When we talk about memory, that's something that's preserved forever, that we can always recall. And, you know, that's kind of the best part. And you know, even though there is no film infrastructure there, it was cool to also bring that there for people to see for the first time. And everybody was super hyped. And they were, they were really happy to just, you know, have all of us working together and shooting places a lot of which, like, haven't been shot since his dad was there.

**Malick Koly** I would also add to it that, for instance, like in jazz music, you make the best out of what you have. Like, this is the greatest drum set I've ever owned, yeah, but I've played on some of the worst shit ever. And I think part of my chops also come from that. And I think Derek being so incredible is the reason why this footage looks the way it looks, because he felt the way it felt when he was shooting it. Also the equipment, because when everything is perfect, it ends up looking crisp, and it ends up looking great, and it's aesthetically pleasing, and we're all happy, and all that, but I think to be under duress, to be in conditions that he's never been before, it's brought something else out of him. I've seen his work prior and post Abidjan, and it's incredible, but there's a certain attachment we both have when we look at this footage. I think there's something there.

**Derek Matar** It's kind of like, I mean, a lot of what we've displayed today is completely just raw, right off the roll, and it's the first time, like, where I had footage where, you know, maybe the focus is out, exposure is off, maybe it looks like shit, but I still kind of like it and I'm attached to the idea of what we were trying to do with it, and I think that's part of this exploration with this piece is sort of, you know, accepting the past and, kind of just trying to reason with what we can do with it now.

**Malick Koly** I kind of want Diallo to speak about our conversation in Paris. With Simon (Njami) and Saul (Williams)

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** Ok well.... I mean, we were just in Paris for Fashion Week...

**Malick Koly** Was that what we were there for?

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** As well, but we were also there to meet particularly with one of the curators that is working on this, Simon Njami. He's, like a very, very storied curator, was good friends with Okwui (Enwezor) and the famous curator who curated the Ivory Coast Pavillion at this year's Venice Biennale, but also was just in this Louis Vuitton commercial that Air Afrique, and Saul Williams came. And, you know, these are also legends of their craft.

So we met close to Alexandre Dumas Station, so I felt there was a lot of contemporary black history I was falling into. Malik was late...(laughter) and so I walked into the most established library I've ever seen in my life. This was at Simon's apartment. And to hear both of them. and the relationship between, curator and writer, poet and stuff, and how they arrived at these definitions of the sub, because also, this was very much a project of self-definition.

And, you know, they spoke about the decades arc in which it took them to define themselves as a writer, or as a curator. And Simone actually showed me his business card that said "*Simon Djami,*

*a man with no job.*” I mean, to paint his persona, he’s like, one of those old heads that is an asshole, but also brilliantly wise, like, holds the witch and all that shit.

But, you know, it was really beautiful to riff into, and bring your lineage into it, and to hear how they celebrated.. and particularly Simon, how he remembered Malick’s father, but also what they expected of Malick and what they demanded of him, and the demands that he wanted to put forth for yourself. And so it was beautiful to bear witness to that, and be in that room where so much was being posited.

I work at an art gallery, and I’m a curator, and I’ve always thought about exhibitions from this very literary standpoint, and thinking about how, like, a show can be a paragraph of sorts, how a painting and sculpture can be punctuation.. And Simon was like, you know, it can also be a verb. And it was the first time I’d heard someone interject it in that way! But this whole feels like it is verbs, and it is active as well. You know, as you were thinking through the films, and we were talking about the script and the cuts as well, its like...what could propel the next scene? and what could, like, activate it? For me, walking away from that meaning of listening to Saul, listening to Simon and listening to Malick as well, and allowing everything to stew. It was like, what actions.... how are we going to be celebrating history and embedded in history? It will be one of those stories that I’ll hold very dear and near to my heart. So that’s my summation of Paris.

**Usen Esiet** I’m curious. There’s a question I want to ask you, but maybe before you said this was a project of self identification?

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** Of self definition.

**Usen Esiet** Can you expand on that? Like, when you say that, what do you mean?

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** I mean, I think that is really for you Malick..

**Malick Koly** Well, remember towards the end of the conversation, Simon asks me this thing... that kind of fucked up.

(controversy)

Naaah Simon is not a nice person. And he will tell you he’s not a nice person.

I think he asked me, “*are you trying to kill your father?*”. But it’s funny, because then when Saul sends the file, it’s like the son of and he says it too! And it’s this thing where, for about 10 years, which is when my father passed, everywhere I’ve gone, it’s always been that I’m the son of him. And

I mean, he raised me to be next. And although I have other siblings, I'm the only one who went into art. And for a long time, it was just like, I'm working so hard, and everywhere I go, you can't... you just say I'm my father's son, which is a pride don't get me wrong. But on the 10th year, I'm I'm kind of getting where I need to be, and I just can't have that anymore, but I can't say it out loud, right? And Simon forces it out of me, because he's like, I'm the son of too, and I was 'a son of' for such a long time, and it's almost like I've had to kill off my father. But when he first said it out loud we're both, like, *"come on, man.. you can't say shit like that out loud."* And that was about the 10th thing he said that was off the goddamn rails. And It was just like.. maybe so. But I'm trying to send him off for me, not necessarily for everybody else, because his archive is out there. It's still shown, and people can experience it however they want. But for me, it's making peace, but it's also paying tribute.. you know, because again, whatever I'm gonna do next, I embody Souleyman Koly. I mean, like my mother, to this day. She's like, boy, you look too much like your father, you moved too much. She's like, you need to chill out. And I'm like, Well...he raised me.

Saul riffed off of that, you know, because him and I, we've known each other for maybe six, seven years. But the first time we actually got to make something of ours, was in Venice, at the Biennale. You know, he showed up at the Ivory Coast Pavilion, and he was like, *"let's go!"* And I was like, *"obbb, okay, all right, it's how it's gonna be."* And then after he was like, *"we must do something."* And this is kind of what it is now. And then Derek joined in on the call.

You should speak about that, because we FaceTime them...

*Derek Matar* Well, I was waiting for about two hours....but I mean, the call went really well, and I think it was good to just feel like we were all on the same page, no matter where we were. I mean, they were in Paris, I was here, and, you know, we all kind of had something that we were ready to align with.

*Usen Esiet* That's amazing.

I'll give you the last question. I want to read something.

So, Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, he once referred to your father, Souleyman Koly,

*Diallo Simon-Ponte* Wait, I didnt know that

*Malick Koly* Wait wait, hold on... I didnt know this!

*Usen Esiet* This is why you gotta do your research.

**Malick Koly** Hold on repeat. Repeat

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** Wole Soyinka?

**Usen Esiet** Refers to your father, as *“heir to a heritage that evolved independently of European forms, but one that is also conscious of, and responsive to, artistic signposts in other cultures which led creatively to the enhancement of one's own tradition.”*

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** Wow

**Usen Esiet** Right. You are, of course now you said, son of. And I'm curious why... and I'm also thinking about something interesting that Saul said about post modern, contemporary music, I'm curious, why is it important for you to expand the horizons of the African operatic tradition that your father really gave birth to?

**Diallo Simon-Ponte** Great question, great question.

**Malick Koly** That shit is crazy. Whenever I discover a new archive in relationship to Dad, it's just like, it kind of fucks me up a little bit, but anywho...

So.. I grew up in a household where, like, you see something, and there's a desire to take it further. And all of the mentors I ended up working for and playing for when I was sort of like merging with this post contemporary art form that is jazz, in America, I was always pushed to look for the next thing. So it's not that I'm necessarily bored with just what is, because clearly I have this other indie rock thing that's just like, have fun with that.. But like, there's always this desire to push things further. How can we do more? How can we enhance what already is?

And for me, it's like, okay, well, Dad merged urban settings with traditional settings, but still, the traditional settings are still intact, and the urban settings are what they are within that time frame and whatnot. And I guess, what can I do then? Like, how do I take this further? And the way to take this further is the research I ended up doing with the Fondation Donwahi in Ivory Coast for pretty much two years, back and forth between New York City and Abidjan and reconnecting with these traditional drummers.

It's basically like, Okay, well... there are traditional rhythms for deaths, births, circumcisions, all sorts of events, right? But they're like classical pieces. And these guys are virtuosos because they've learned how to play their instruments as a language and approach them as a language. So whatever

they say, whether they're cussing you out, whether they're saying hello, they can just play that. But they never necessarily think of it as like, *"oohhh, I can just cuss you out and just play that right now as part of, like, an improvisational piece."* And I guess the addition, or the perspective I could bring, it's like, this is what people did post passage. They came here and they were like, heyyo! no more birth ceremonies, no more circumcision ceremonies, necessarily as intact as they were back home. We must adapt to wherever the fuck is going here. So then I'm like, I've been able to kind of learn that lineage... I'll bring it back.

So for three months, first, they were like, *"Well... you grew up in America. Now you're like, American, you're all cute and shit. So you must show us that you know how to do what we do."* So for three months, I had to go to births, deaths, all the shit, and we had to play together. Not only did I have to play, but then whenever I was fumbling because my technique was off or whatever, they're like, *"Aaahhhh, you slowing down now! you're slowing down!"* and I was like, okay, so I must practice. So for three months, it was really like getting up to speed with them and being able to, like...independence, right? The art of doing different things with different limbs, do whatever they were doing with each instrument on all of this, all at once. Once that clocked in, they were more receptive to me, being like, *"hey.. so like, what if we just stripped down this traditional piece and sort of just, like, try something new?"* Like, *"how about we just fucking, like.... Dude, you're mad at me right now, just fucking play that emotion, I'm begging you to just be mad at me."* And for three months we did that, and the last three months, once we created those pieces, we just went off the rails. We just got free. And so post-contemporary music to me, in that sense, is like... we are traditional beings, we're tapped into our traditions, but we're creating sounds that have never been heard. However, there's one mission. When we play this shit, Auntie must dance. If she's not dancing, we're doing something wrong.

(laughter)

And once we got to that, the reason we were able to be like, *"Okay, we did something here"* is because everywhere, every rural setting, we took it to, it worked. And then there's one shot that I don't think we included. I was warming up for one scene, for one of the music videos that isn't really out yet. And I started playing, and my step grandmother has Alzheimers. They put stuff in her ears so she wouldn't trip up while I was playing. Because there's a scene, maybe you guys have seen it online, or whatever. It's an empty pool. I mean, the empty pool with the drums and I'm playing, and what's what I'm seeing while I'm playing is my step grandmother coming out of her bedroom with the fucking shit in her ears, still, and dancing, and she has Alzheimer's! she's dancing to me! And I'm having this emotional moment, and Derek captures it. This motherfucker is zooming in on my face, crying, and that's one of those moments where it's like, okay, we're doing something.. and ultimately.. and this is something that I've discussed with the foundation, it was

like, I'm not exporting this. I'm not interested in taking it into a western context where people will be like, this is world music, which is why Saul asks, "*what's world music? Like, what are we talking about here?*" It's this thing where I will take the modern iteration solo and take it places. And if anybody's interested in seeing the full thing with the traditional drummers, come home, we're going to be in Abidjan in December. Come there, you'll see it there where it's meant to be.

Usen Esiet Amazing. I think that's a perfect place To leave it. Thank you.

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