

Baaba Maal

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 100 mins, no interval.

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Oumar Saleh talks to the legendary Senegalese singer Baaba Maal ahead of his first Hall performance in over 20 years.

For Baaba Maal, there was no need to rush his first album in seven years. With COVID preventing him from partaking in studio sessions with long-time collaborator & producer Johan Hugo, the innovative musician instead experimented with found sounds and acoustic riffs in his native Senegal. 'I told Johan and everyone else involved that there was no pressure,' he recalls. 'Let's just have some fun, and we'll have songs ready by the end of lockdown.' During that time, Maal and Hugo exchanged beats, lyrics, and ideas, with the former concluding that 'this might turn into an album for after the pandemic.'

That album became *Being*, a seven-track odyssey many have hailed as Maal's most compelling work in some time. In stark contrast to the dreamy desert blues serenaded across 2016's *The Traveller*, *Being* is a shimmering, boundary-pushing record that amplifies Maal's soaring vocals with its blend of frenetic electro-pop and West African instruments like the ngoni, the kora (a 21-string cross between a lute and a harp), and the sabar (a Senegalese drum shaped like a lopsided hourglass).

With the way it blurs indigenous folk with futuristic soundscapes, Maal reckons that the album's composition is a way of conveying the album's theme of honouring cultures whilst using technology as a tool for empowerment. '*Being* has two different journeys: one to the future with the way we use electronics in the album, and one to the past in the way I brought some elements from when I started my career,' Maal explains. 'I'd like to think that this record is trying to connect our access to modern technology with those times when I was making simple melodies with my friends.'

It's fitting that *Being* begins with 'Yerimayo Celebration', a triumphant number in which Maal pays homage to his upbringing and the fishermen of Podor — his hometown in northern Senegal. Driven by stretched-out synths, ngoni twangs, and the pulsating percussion of Mamadou Sarr, the album's intro commemorates the festivities that take place every year amongst the various fishermen of differing tribes surrounding the Senegal River. To Maal, 'Yerimayo Celebration' is a way of connecting his community to their roots. 'Even if they migrate to Europe or the US, they're still connected to their community through this celebration,' he explains. 'I didn't understand it until I began travelling abroad, but you're forever linked, wherever in the world you may be.'

If it wasn't for the encouragement of his mother and childhood friend (and local griot) Mansour Seck, Maal would've been netting tuna and trout from the Senegal River rather than cementing himself as a global icon. Born in 1953 to the Fulani fisherman's caste, Maal was destined to follow in his father's footsteps, but instead chose to study music in Dakar and Paris prior to embarking on a two-year musical pilgrimage across western Africa with Seck. Inspired by a raft of genres including soul, jazz, reggae, and

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the blues, the duo eventually formed the band Daande Lenol in the late '80s, cooking a rich aural stew that became the bedrock to Maal's renowned sonic trademarks.

In the 30-plus years since, he's garnered worldwide acclaim for his solo work that doubles as an outlet for his fascination with technology and has honed his craft with the likes of Brian Eno, U2, Damon Albarn's Africa Express, Mumford & Sons, and Malawi-British jazz fusion trio The Very Best (of which Hugo is a part of). More recently, Maal gained a younger legion of fans through his link-up with Oscar-winning composer Ludwig Göransson on *Black Panther* and its sequel *Wakanda Forever*, telling the Independent earlier this year that he envisions a 'door which is open for Africa' through the Marvel films' dazzling Afrofuturism.

Despite an enduring fascination with technology, Maal elegantly showcases his connection to nature and his Fulani roots in *Being's* tranquil closer 'Casamance Nights'. Named after the river that flows through southern Senegal from the Atlantic, the meditative nine-minute epic was recorded in open air, with slow kora plucks gliding over chirping crickets that immediately transport you aboard a boat wading on the Casamance itself. 'The day was finishing and nightfall started, and all I could hear was the sounds of the environment around me,' Maal says, recounting how the simplicity of 'Casamance Nights' brought a feeling of nostalgia to him. 'I was reminded of when I used to write and sing songs by the river, where you can hear the goats bleating and millet being pounded amongst the sounds by the water. It's quiet outside, and that's when you truly listen to nature.'

After nearly two decades away, Maal makes his long-awaited return at the Barbican to perform the electro-spirituals and hypnotic African blues that defines *Being*. Joining him will be Seck, who he 'had to bring with [him] to perform their shared story and culture', and talking drum virtuoso Massamba Diop, who also worked with Maal on the *Black Panther* and *Wakanda Forever* scores. Keen to share their collective energy to the audience, Maal promises a euphoric set tonight. 'There will be some surprises, but the crowd better be ready to interact with us and dance while we jam!'

Performers

Baaba Maal vocals, guitar

Mansour Seck vocals, guitar

Mamadou Sarr percussion (conga's djembe, calabash)

Mah Koudia bass guitar

Dialikeba (Papis) Sissoko keys

Cheikh Ndoye electric guitar & ngoni

Alioune Diouf drums

Massamba Diop talking drums

Ndiaga Mbaye percussion

Kick Horns

Tim Sanders tenor sax

Dave Liddell trombone

Ryan Quigley trumpet