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WORLD MUSIC REVIEW

Angélique Kidjo turns Royce aisles into an exuberant dance floor

The Beninese singer exudes such energy that the audience can't help but get to its feet.

By Don Heckman
Special to The Times

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Angélique Kidjo now owns Royce Hall. Or at least she should after the take-no-prisoners performance she gave Wednesday. Filling the room with a dynamic charisma that would surely have given Barack Obama pause, she was in full command from the moment she stepped on stage. Nearly two hours later, with the audience on its feet and the stage filled with dancing celebrants, Kidjo was still in charge.

A year ago, when she opened for Josh Groban at Staples Center, her brief set brought some in-person energy to the cavernous arena. But the relative intimacy of Royce provided the perfect environment for a performer whose stock-in-trade is musical and personal connection.

UCLA Live Director David Sefton set the parameters for the evening with an introduction in which he ebulliently pointed out that dancing in the aisles was no longer forbidden; that it was, instead, mandatory. Despite Kidjo's high-powered dance moves, however, the crowd still seemed reluctant to follow Sefton's mandate and Kidjo's example. But when she sparked "Djin Djin," the title track from her latest album, with shouts of encouragement, a few brave souls began to make their way to the front of the theater, and many others soon joined them.

From that point on it was a Beninese/American dance party. A good portion of the program was drawn from "Djin Djin," which just won the contemporary world music Grammy, including "Papa," "Arouna" and "Mama Golo Papa," as well as Kidjo's startlingly effective version of the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter."

Songs typically reached from the Benin rhythms of her homeland to embrace a seamless array of elements from funk, blues, rock and jazz. Kidjo's stylistic diversity, energized by the rich emotionalism of her voice, brought it all alive.

The program roared to a close with an audience singalong on "Afirika" followed by Kidjo's jaunt through the aisles, and the all-join-in on-stage dancing on "Tumba" and the encore "Batonga."

Kidjo interspersed her musical selections with comments about peace, brotherhood and the perils of religious differences -- which had all the more impact because of the sense of sheer togetherness communicated through her music.

Opening act Dengue Fever featured Cambodian singer Chhom Nimol backed by relatively bland American rock.

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