

MUSIC REVIEW

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World of talent on display in Kidjo's rollicking show

By Tristram Lozaw, Globe Correspondent | March 24, 2008

Three songs into her set Friday, Angelique Kidjo felt her audience had been sitting too long. "You've seen me more than anyone else in this country," she quipped. "You know the rules." That's all it took. The crowd filled the aisles, and later the stage, dancing away as though the venue was the backyard at a house party. The charismatic showmanship of the singer from Benin proved irresistible, with the diminutive powerhouse leading her hip, hyperactive band through a 15-song, 100-minute dance bash that drew from the "Djin Djin" CD.

"Djin Djin," Kidjo's Grammy-winning release with all-star guests, is a tropical, Afro-pop crossover with an easy, polished, theatrical appeal. Indeed, when Josh Groban sings on a cover of Sade's "Pearls," the song seems a Broadway tryout. Happily, Friday's show didn't play like "Djin Djin: The Musical," leaning instead toward Kidjo's beefier Afrocentric strengths, mining her West African roots and adding an urban power surge traceable to her current base of Brooklyn. A syncopated take on the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" still replaced the song's menace with over-baked funky beats. But "Sedjedo," reggae-lite on the album, was earthy and upbeat, jacked up by the rhythms of Kidjo's sharp quintet of West African and Brazilian musicians as a chorus of tribal harmonies floated over top.

Kidjo's silky voice, clear and soaring, led the frenetic celebration through "Arouna," an Africa-meets-Middle-East slink, and "Mama Golo Papa," carrying Kidjo's message of one God of "love, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance." The rhythms were insistent even on the slow dance of "Iemanja" and guitar ballad "Malaika."

The dance party hit another level when Kidjo jumped into the audience to plead for compassion in "Afrika" and peaked when several dozen fans were invited onstage for "Agolo" and an extended "Tumba," during which percussionist Ibrahim Diagne helped a long procession of fans shake their stuff center stage. The night ended with the sweet guitar and soft bossa nova of "Emma," Kidjo sending us home with a lullaby to help ease us back into the modern, non-dancing world. ■