

Son of Senegal

Senegal native Pathe Jassi is one of Detroit's most highly respected musicians. His Motor City roots run deep, preceding his emigration to the United States. Whether playing jazz and funk as a sideman or performing world music as leader of his own Pathe Jassi Trio, Jassi is placing an indelible stamp on the sound of Detroit.

*Pathe Jassi Trio
Sunday brunch every week
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Right after Pathe Jassi plays a bass line, just as he sings the first phrase of an original composition in his native language, Wolof, it begins to sink in. At that moment, you begin to feel him.

Never mind that you can't understand the lyrics. Jassi's passion and charisma are undeniable. Melody and energy radiate from his body as he performs. You can feel that he deeply loves music—and that needs no translation.

Since moving to Detroit in 2001, the 43-year-old member of the Mandinka ethnic group has become one of the city's most highly respected musicians. As first-call bass player for jazz and world music titans like John Arnold, Sean Blackman and Lola Morales, and more recently as leader of his own Pathe Jassi Trio, Jassi is a musical force to be reckoned with.

Musically, Jassi loves to blend the styles that are dearest to him—jazz, funk, hip-hop and Mbalax, the dominant rhythm in Senegalese music. Most often he sings in Wolof, but every once in a while he'll throw out some French, Portuguese, or even a little English. In conversation, Jassi is a lot like his bass playing—down to earth, but animated and full of life.

In whatever language he chooses to sing, his lyrics often have a common theme. "My message is like other messages that have been here for a long time. That is only peace and love," he says. "The small space that you have in your circle, create the peace there."

Jassi began playing music at age 12 while staying at his uncle's house on the island of



Photo by Cybelle Codish

Bijagos in Guinea-Bissau. Young Jassi and his friends from school began to get together every Saturday to create music. Jassi stretched a cow's hide over a barrel to build his own drum, even fashioning a foot pedal with two pieces of wood and a bedspring. He later learned to play guitar before settling on the bass as his main instrument.

As a teenager coming up in the '80s, Jassi cut his teeth playing funk and R&B for tourists in the hotels of Senegal's capital, Dakar. "Michael Jackson, Kool and The Gang, Earth, Wind and Fire, Lionel Richie, James Brown, Marvin Gaye—you name it, we played all the songs," he says. "I didn't have a clue about the lyrics, but it sounds so good."

And he could feel the soul. "I'm so fortunate to live in Detroit, because what I love so much is soul music," Jassi states.

Jassi's Motor City connection began many years before he moved to the United States. Late Detroit jazz saxophonist Sam Sanders led several tours to Africa and eventually settled in Senegal with his wife Viola. The couple informally adopted Jassi, who often speaks of Sanders as his father.

"I was trying to go to Berklee College of Music [a prestigious institution in Boston], but at

the time I didn't have the money to even visit America." A friend told Jassi that there was an American looking for a serious bass player.

After an audition, Sanders took the young bassist under his wing. "At the time [Sanders] didn't go anywhere. He was always there [at home] with his saxophone, and I was always there next to him

with my bass."

This was Jassi's Berklee. Over time, Sanders taught Jassi how to read music, and coached him on music theory.

Later Jassi toured with some of the African continent's most important musicians. He has performed with the great Senegalese guitarist Baaba Maal, and his first U.S. tour was with Burkina Faso's Cheikh Lo. Playing with his favorite African musician, Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour, was "a dream come true."

But now Jassi aspires to be up front like his former employers. "My musical goal is to be in front of thousands and thousands of people and play music for them," Jassi smiles. "I love being on the big stage."

Eventually Jassi would like to play more music steeped in traditional African sounds. He one day hopes to compose a symphony for an orchestra of African instruments and to record tech-no using Senegalese rhythms.

"My thing in the United States wasn't going for the American dream, and go back home," Jassi insists. "I came to Detroit because of music. I love music. Music is what makes me happy. That's what gives me life. I know people can understand that. God made me for music." **B**