

## An Evening with Bombino: A Joyful Cacophony

by Max Newman



If you are looking for a combination of pure emotional power and stylistically blended sonic bliss, look no further than Bombino, one of Africa's brightest musical stars.

The talented songwriting virtuoso, who recently became the first ever Grammy-nominated artist from Niger, will be wowing audiences this Wednesday, October 11 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Tickets are available [online](#).

Bombino graciously agreed to answer questions about his upcoming performance and musical philosophy via email.

Bombino was born into a Tuareg settlement near Agadez, Niger, in 1980 — the Tuareg are an ethnic group based primarily in Niger and Mali in Africa's Sahara region. As a Tuareg musician, the feeling of pride and responsibility he has for his people is instantly clear. "In our culture musicians have a very important role. We carry with us our traditions to pass on, but also we do act as the voice of the people, to talk about the good and bad things going on in the world. Governments will target musicians in times of conflict because we inspire people to come together and to feel united. So this carries a great power in our society."

Bombino's music is based around traditional Tuareg musical structures, featuring intense, beautifully hypnotic melodic repetition. However, a big piece of Bombino's musical style is genre blending, especially when it comes to Tuareg music and more traditional western sounds. "When there is something familiar and also something new and different, I think that is the most exciting for people. They can feel an instant connection but also a curiosity."

Some of this musical diffusion, Bombino says, has come from over a decade of world touring. “I have brought more styles into my music, reggae for example. Some years ago we began to play what we call Tuareggae as part of our shows, a mix of Tuareg rhythms and reggae.”

Writing in this unique style comes naturally to Bombino. “Honestly I do not think about it very much. I play my guitar all the time and often a new riff will just come out and I will develop it until it becomes the foundation of a new song.” David Wrench, the producer of Bombino’s latest album, has also talked at length about this gift. “He goes with what he’s feeling at the time [in the studio] and it’s a much more instinctive way of recording. He’s drawing from his memory of hundreds of songs he’s written. He pulls what he feels is right from that well of his own work and the history of his culture.”

The lyrics of his music are deep. Having experienced significant political turmoil in his life — he was forced to flee Niger in 1990 and again in 2007 — and his lyrics reflect these experiences. He often discusses the Tuareg people’s plight, but he also wants to make sure that his words impact as many people as possible.

“I draw a lot on my life experiences in writing my lyrics but usually I do not write in a personal way, but more in a general way. I write songs about themes that can be understood by all humanity — friendship, love, community, the importance of culture, honesty, and hard work. I want my songs to have a meaning that can be appreciated by anyone.”

Wednesday’s performance will feature songs from Bombino’s latest studio album, *Sahel*. Released in September, it’s perhaps the guitarist’s finest recording to date. Produced by the experienced Welshman David Wrench, *Sahel* is a blissful and powerful psychedelic journey through Tuareg music in its most personal, Bombino-y form.

While it promises to be an electric performance by the guitarist, Bombino also emphasizes the importance of the crowd. “A concert is a shared experience between the performers and the audience. We use the energy of the audience as our fuel and we give that energy back to the audience through the music. I want to bring joy to the people in the room and make them dance and forget their problems, if only for a short time.”

And joy is exactly what the audience will get from this one-of-a-kind performance. It will be powerful in its message, musically enriching, and chock-full of energy.

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