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## On His Way Around the World, One of Vox Sambou's First Stops is New Jersey

### Transcript

Story by Christopher Benincasa

Christopher Benincasa (CB):

Hi, I'm Chris Benincasa and you're listening to The Jersey Arts Podcast. Wednesday, [April 13th](#), Vox Sambou and his band will take the stage at The Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts. He writes and performs in Haitian, French, English, Spanish, [and](#) Portuguese, and his music focuses on the traditional rhythms of Haiti, mixed with elements of Afrobeat, jazz, reggae, [and](#) [hip hop](#). Vox Sambou is currently, and it seems usually, touring the world. We spoke with him shortly after he arrived in [the US](#), after a visit with family in Haiti. I started our conversation by asking him about the song you are hearing right now, African Diaspora.

CB:

(Singing).

CB:

What can you tell us about this song? It was the first track you shared with me. What are some of the ideas that went into it and what was your experience composing it and recording it?

Vox Sambou (VS):

Yes. The African Diaspora track, it was my first meeting with the African continent. In 2011, I was invited by the Canadian Consulates of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, and while collaborating with musician of Didier Awadi, which is a pioneer of hip-hop in West Africa. And that's how we came about to make that song. After the regular rehearsal, we were just jamming and then we start creating, and that's what this song came about. From Dakar, and then we went to Bamako at [inaudible 00:02:19] this is where it was recorded. And I was really touched by the fact that they took me as if I was Senegalese when I was in Dakar. And that song is basically to create that bridge and to own my identity as an African in the diaspora.

CB:

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I love this track and I loved how you opened your NPR Tiny Desk Concert with it. Why is this song and the subject of the African diaspora important to you?

VS:

It is very important. I think our identity is super important. I think if somebody doesn't know yourself, there's no way you can move forward. And I feel like one of the aspects in the Caribbean, we forget where we come from. And that's why in the beginning of the song, I'm talking about Brazil, I'm talking about Trinidad, [San Andrés 00:03:07], Colombia, Haiti, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, because we are the African diaspora. That's what it's so important to me to try to basically to create that bridge from the sons of Africans that live outside of the continent. If you think about it, if you live in Haiti, you want to go to Martinique or Guadeloupe, it's super hard to travel. You have to go to Miami or it's once a week. If you go to Trinidad, that is the same thing. And I feel like culturally, with the music, we can try to make that bridge that connects us.

CB:

Your hometown is Limbé, Haiti. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

VS:

Do you have time? Limbé is in the north side of Haiti, very close to Cap-Haïtien, very close to Vertières and around 70,000 people, but unofficially. And it's really one of the most important place in the Haitian Revolution. Thinking about it, the last battle of the Haitian Revolution happened in November 1803, and the general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his soldiers met on November 2nd, in Limbé, in the location where it is used now as my primary school called [L'Ecole Lepévédic 00:04:38]. And that's where they planned the last battle, really. Limbé, we have a lot of agriculture, like plantains, like café and basically a lot of agriculture and most of the economy, it's the women that take care of it. For example, if you go to the market, in the center, you'd find 95% of the people working there, they're all women.

VS:

Nowadays, they're even more present. They're carrying a lot of stuff and for me, it's very inspiring, and I just got back from there. Before I go, I always feel, oh my God, my country's dying. Oh, what can I do? And you get there, you see the people, they have so much energy. They have so much love and they work so much in communion in the community and that's what Limbé is. It's the place that I find, every time I go there, I find complete peace and love at the same time.

CB:

Okay. And here is a song of yours called Ô Haïti.

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CB:

(Singing)

VS:

Ô Haïti was produced by Euphrates, it's a Iraqi band producers from Montreal. And it's the first track of my first album called Lakay. It was an introduction of Vox Sambou and at the same time, what I like to speak about. The second verse, I'm talking about, I always believe in peace. That's the only way out. I'm always expressing the fact that there's a lot of Haitians living in Haiti and they don't know what's going to happen when they leave. They are forced to leave their home. And then they are forced to stay where they are living and nostalgic at the same time.

CB:

Some music is meant to be listened to anywhere. Some music is meant to be experienced live. How do you prefer people to hear your music?

VS:

For me, it's an experience. I'm really about the live aspect of the show. I think even when we are in the studio and recording, and we really let the energy flows. I think that's what I'm more comfortable about. I think that's where we are more vulnerable. And I feel like, and at the same time, this is where we are our best. It's really the live aspect. That's why I always tell people if you listen to the show itself on a CD, but for me, it's the live aspect, because there are so many elements because it's not just my voice. It's not just the Vox Sambou coming, it's everybody, it's all the musicians putting their heart and soul at it and expressing their own art. It's not just about one individual, it's really the full band coming together at once.

VS:

When we're on stage, for every time we go on stage, we feel like people are celebrating us. And that's why we don't take it for granted. We feel like we have to share a message of our community. Basically, Vox Sambou is the face, it's my head, but it's really, it's the full band. Everybody give 100% all the time, all the time. That's why I cannot take, any time, all the credit for what we've been doing. Everybody's putting equally the same effort to make the band what it is right now.

CB:

Which kind of music or genre was your first love?

VS:

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My first love with music, I remember when I was a child, on my street, there's this guy who was walking with some sort of radio stereo, but the [inaudible 00:09:25] was super bad and it was playing this song, like (Singing) And then I'm listening, super slow. And then I was like, "Whose music is that?" And he told me it's Gregory Isaacs, you know our French accent, but it's Greg Isaacs. He was playing Night Nurse. And later I understood what that meant, but my parents always played Haitian music and my mom always sing to additional Haitian songs since I was a kid. But I was like, "Wow, this is different. I want to know what it is." And I later, I discovered Bob Marley, the reggae music and Haitian music for sure. But that was really my first reaction. I was like, wow. And as an adolescent, that's all we do. We play soccer on the street and interpret music that we hear on the radio. But without the idea, oh, one day I want to be a musician, which was never a part of it.

CB:

You are a founding member of the hip-hop collective, Nomadic Massive and your music in general has a lot of hip-hop influences. Being from [The East Coast of the US](#), I'm always interested when artists from other countries embrace hip-hop. How did your relationship with hip-hop develop?

VS:

Oh, my God. Hip-hop mean everything to me, from my experience in Haiti, understand I'm coming from this countryside. When I was a child, going to Port-au-Prince, the capital city at 12 years old to go to secondary school in a Catholic school, that's where my parent wanted to take me. As an outsider, that's the first time I felt, oh my God, I'm not home. Luckily, I met this guy from the north side as well. He was doing rap music. And he basically tell me, if you can do poetry and you place it on the beat, at the time it was rap. We didn't know the culture of hip-hop. It was rap. And literally, I start speaking with him. We get to be friends and that really helped me from there on and then I start writing. All he was talking was very positive messages, like social content, how to be proud of yourself.

VS:

When I had the opportunity to move to Canada and I meet other artists there at the hip-hop symposium at the University of Concordia, and we create that band called Nomadic Massive. Of course, everybody was doing hip-hop, even though I wanted to do reggae music, but I had to blend in. So hip-hop opened a new world for me, I meet basically people from South America, from Cuba, from Brazil. When I become the director of the youth center, I kept contact with these people. Every Black History Month, I would hire them to come and speak with our youth and what hip-hop meant and not just what you see on TV, what it is meaning in the community. So for me, hip-hop is everything.

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Okay. So what can your audience at the Grunin Center for the Arts expect to experience at your show this coming Wednesday?

VS:

One thing I really love, it's not just always about being on stage, people watching you, for me, it's very important to engage with the people and we do it in a togetherness aspect. It's okay, you don't have to stand up and dance, you can sit down, but understand, we are in this moment together because the person could decide to be anywhere else. They could stay at home, but they come to see, to discover what you come to bring. And then for me, the most important thing for me, is try to connect and then look, this is what we can do to together. Of course, I'm singing in different languages. I'm singing in Haitian or in Portuguese and things like that, but I try to do my best to try to explain the theme, the music that we are doing to try to connect.

CB:

Okay. Vox Sambou, thank you very much for doing the podcast.

VS:

Oh, thank you so much, Christopher.

CB:

Vox Sambou and his band are performing Wednesday, April 13th at The Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts. For more information, visit [grunincenter.org](http://grunincenter.org). That's G-R-U-N-I-Ncenter.org. And for more info about the arts in New Jersey, visit [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com).

CB:

(Singing)

CB:

If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com). The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride, New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. This show is created in partnership with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted and produced by Chris Benincasa, executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. I'm Chris Benincasa for The Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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