

Mali singer Awa Sangho returns to Trinidad for Pan African concert, Monday July 31st, bringing songs of hope and strength.

Growing up with her grandmother in the Saharan Country-Mali, Awa Sangho has used her voice in song to represent the voiceless. Instead of projecting strife plagued by poverty and economic challenges, Awa uses her songs to encourage upliftment and strength despite the odds.



“My politics is always music,” Awa said, speaking from California in the United States. “Mali is a beautiful country. Even with all the politics, we as artistes have to do our part, to remind people that they have the last word, that people have the power. It’s getting better though. People are marching when they are not happy.”

Perhaps Awa’s strength comes from her ancestry as she is the descendant of two empires – the Songhai of Dire and Mande. The Songhai Empire was one part of three empires that once ruled the trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt, and commodities in West Africa. While the Mande people were known as the ‘language people’ as they spoke various languages.

Her songs project pride and honour but she hopes the Mali women understand that her songs should also encourage them to be strong within. “Back there, it is not easy but women are very brave. Some give up, some don’t. I’m not giving up,” she said. “We have to fight up for women’s rights and girls’ education.”

Awa comes to Trinidad as the headline act for the Pan African Concert – Shikamoo Sandra, hosted by the Emancipation Support Committee on July 31 at the Queen’s Park Savannah. The concert has been a staple of the Emancipation observances, with each year presenting some of the best acts from the African continent. This year, the concert celebrates the ESC’s 25th Anniversary, and celebrates the life and work of Singing Sandra.

Awa is supported by a local cast of strong women talent. Marvellous Marva, Tigress, Kareen Asche, Makeda Darius and Alana Sinnette. Stephen Marcelle, calypsonian and former Young King, is the lone male in the show.

But Awa’s visit here will not be her first. She came to Trinidad to perform three years ago. Back then she promised to stay longer to enjoy Trinidad’s warmth and food. “When I come to Trinidad, I feel like home. Somehow, we are related,” she said.

While Mali may be across the water, there is a connection with Trinidad found through our common held traditional beliefs such as respect for elders or simply our style of cooking.

The audience can expect to be not only wooed by Awa's golden voice but with her dance, as she will be joined by our own local Wasafoli dance troupe. She met them briefly during her last visit and said the connection, is more in the message. "The song and dance have meanings. I have found a similarity with the Wasafoli dancers and I enjoyed our connection on stage. I am looking forward to reuniting with them next week," she said.



From an early age, Awa sang children and traditional songs, blues and popular songs played on the radio. During her school years, she auditioned at the Ensemble Koteba of Abidjan, a renowned musical production company on the Ivory Coast. Here she began an apprenticeship in acting and dance.

Awa eventually travelled the world with the legendary group Ensemble Koteba, and the women-led band 'Les Go de Koteba' of which she co-founded in 1993. She performed with the group in Europe, Bordeaux, Paris, Avignon, the US and as well as Niger and Togo in Africa.

In 2011, Awa moved to New York to explore her talents which propelled her to immediate success. Soon after her relocation, her first solo recording titled 'Alataye Tougnyaye' meaning The Truth Belongs to God (Motema) was unveiled.

"In the US, I am touring, I am working, I am making a contribution to the world through music and dance. But I go back and forth to Mali, to get more inspiration and blessings," she said.

Since she has been singing for the past 30 years, Awa has become renowned as multitalented artiste. Listeners would identify her style as jazzy, or rhythm and blues or trademark African-centric. Instruments like ngoni, kora, balafon, dun-dun, and n'djarka are also essential in reflecting the West African identity in her music.

Although she loves her country very much, she is not blind to its many challenges. Awa uses her music as positive notes above the often sadness and distress, as she shares her personal journey of discovery, faith and appreciation to the world.

The FREE concert takes place on the day before Emancipation and promises to bring an enlightening, joyous moment to the celebrations.

Follow the Emancipation Support Committee on Facebook for events and lectures that seek to enlighten the African spirit.