

MUNTU VALDO – FULL BIOGRAPHY

Muntu Valdo belongs to the Sawa community who populate the length of Cameroon's coastline along the Gulf of Guinea. His father is from the small village of Dibombari, 30km west of Douala, his mother from the Malimba Islands out in the Atlantic Ocean, famous for their oysters.

Muntu then is a Sawa, a child of the coast, a child of the mangroves and of the water, a child whose birth was hailed and blessed by the « Miengu » (mermaids) who are known to protect or destruct people and populations depending on their humour. Eighty kilometres east of Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon and its most densely populated city, is the town of Edea. It's here, inside his grandmother's small house perched on the banks of Cameroon's longest river, The Sanaga that Muntu was born. As a young boy his nickname was Muutu (from "Muut'esucudu" which translates as "good student"), because of the exceptional ease with which he could memorise and recite stories and legends. With time Muutu will become Muntu.

It was at the age of 8yrs old, sat under a huge mango tree in the 'Cité Verte' of Yaoundé that Muntu played his first notes on an old, three-stringed guitar made of plasterboard and fishing wire. These enormous trees, which transform patches of wasteland into shady clearings perfect for football, were Muntu's favourite hangout and would fuel his two passions: football and guitar. At this stage of the early eighties, television had yet to arrive in Cameroon and cinema and videos were a luxury reserved only for the few. Radio and newspapers were the only medias readily available and for many kids in the working class quarters of Yaoundé, much of their time was spent wandering the streets looking for mischief. It is Muntu's love for music and sport that would help keep him out of trouble and prevent him getting up to no good.

With Muntu's adolescence came the arrival of the television and Internet. During this period his passion for music was cultivated via school concerts and competitions and his enthusiasm for football fired by the success of the "Indomitable Lions" and of Roger Milla, the most famous African footballer of all time! In Douala and Yaoundé, this era also heralded a rapid mushrooming of shantytowns, as more and more people began to leave their villages looking for a more prosperous life in the city. Both cities began to expose an increasingly fractured urbanism, their vast colonial avenues, now riddled with pot holes, rubbing shoulders with alternately dust ridden or mud entrenched

(depending on the season) roads, markets and working class quarters. The absence of public transport and traffic lights, the endless traffic jams and clouds of fumes pumped into the air by battered old cars and moto-taxis, a constant honking of horns mixed with the overlapping beats of music booming out from the multiple bars lining the streets, all came together to create a chaotic yet exuberant and eccentric ambiance.

It's the early nineties and Muntu, the oldest of four brothers is preparing to start university, lucky yet again to escape the fate of the majority of young Cameroonians who can't afford to continue their studies and inevitably end up unemployed and often in trouble. It's amidst a climate of huge incertitude, punctuated by political upheavals and shaken by the winds of a democracy imposed by the old colonial powers of the West, that we find Muntu, studying Law at the University of Yaoundé . Across Africa, nations, who had lived under the oppressive regime of dictators and unique party systems, left to do as they pleased for over 30 years, were crying out for democracy. In Yaoundé student marches and demonstrations took over the city, but were quickly and violently repressed by the state. Some died and many were injured, including Muntu, who was severely beaten by the military. Bed ridden for several weeks, Muntu returned to live with his parents in Douala. They forbade him from returning to university, which they believed had nearly cost him his life. After a year spent recovering from his injuries and giving the odd after school lesson to kids here and there, Muntu secretly went back to university in Douala. He threw himself into the study of linguistics and history, notably that of Africa and ancient Egypt.

This period played a key role in Muntu's musical development. His vast readings enabled him to discover the many spiritual masters who still guide him today, transforming him from the child "Muutu" that he was, into the man "Muntu" that he is today. From Cheik Anta Diop to Kwame Nkrumah, via Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Gandhi, Jesus Christ, Ari-Krishna, Mahomet, Omram Aï vanov, Mohamed Ali or Thomas Sankara, Muntu started to build the illusive, calm, nonchalant and meditative personality that defines him today. During this period, whilst playing with the Douala University Orchestra, he also met the musician Eko Roosevelt who took him on as guitarist in his Big Band. This new opportunity gave Muntu his first experience as a professional musician, enabling him to tour and to accompany many of Cameroon's top vocalists including Bé bé Manga, André -Marie Tala, Annie Disco, Beko Sadey to name but a few.

In 1998 having spent three years under the direction of Eko Roosevelt, Muntu Valdo decides to create his own group, the "Muntu Band", later named "Mulema" (the heart) in homage to the harmonious and regular rhythm of the heart beat. He starts to perform regular concerts as well as frequently going into studio to record. In 2000 the Cooperation Française organise a national tour, giving Muntu the chance to perform in Cameroon's eight major cities. The same year, one of Cameroon's best sound engineers, Gilbert Moodio plays an old recording of one of Muntu's concerts to a French producer working in Cameroon. One week later Moodio organises the meeting: its 7pm, dusk is engulfing the equator and Muntu sings Di Sibi, an emotionally captivating ballad. The producer is seduced and a new chapter begins for Muntu Valdo as he heads for Europe.

October 3rd 2001, it's almost 1am when the Camair flight touches down on the runway at Charles de Gaulle airport. Thus its under the starry skies of Paris, with temperatures well below 10°C, that Muntu takes his first steps on European soil.

Paris and the area of Belleville become his new home. A creature of the night, he quickly meets other young musicians and adopts the areas and Oberkampf and Chatelet, as his favourite hangouts, wandering from bar to bar, guitar on his back and harmonica in his pocket, playing in various jam sessions and concerts. During the first few years, Muntu Valdo finds his way onto the stage of almost every bar or club in Paris, often alone, sometimes with his trio or full group, and every so often accompanying other musicians.

Gradually establishing himself, his collaborations become increasing impressive playing with and sharing the stage with international stars such as Manu Dibango, Alpha Blondy, Ali Farka Touré, Lokua Kanza, Cheick Tidiane Seck, Tony Allen, Rido Bayonne, Etienne Mbappe, Stephane & Lionel Belmondo or Richard Bona, to name just a few. On hearing his demos, Manu Dibango was seduced by Muntu's soaring melodies, inventive harmonies and insightful lyrics and was one of the driving forces behind encouraging him to produce his debut album. Boosted by this support, Muntu manages to clinch the financial support of the Sacem for the release, in 2005, of his first album "Gods and Devils - Moiye Na Muititi". The album resonates with a sensual, and spiritual music, both delicate and powerful, a synthesis of Muntu's many musical influences. But rather than hybridism, Muntu prefers the concept of reconciliation: blues, bossa

nova, jazz, afro-cuban, soul, funk, all have their origins rooted deep in the heart of Africa. The quality of this album, as well as his spellbinding live shows enable him to travel across Africa, Europe and Asia playing in prestigious festivals and concert halls from The Queen Elisabeth Hall (London) to New Morning (Paris), Womad (Carceres, Charlton Park, Singapour) to Thé â tre de la Petite Reine (Tbilisi), The Sage (Newcastle), Festival Plein Sud & Festival Africolor (France), Fespam (Congo), as well as tours in France, Cameroon, Uk, and Ireland.

In January 2008, a new adventure beckons for the prince of SawaBlues, as he changes country yet again. This time he chooses London, attracted by the city's dynamic cultural scene, perfect for cultivating fresh ideas and new material. This change heralds the beginning of a brand new project for Muntu, a second major turning point in his career and a chance to take a fresh new look at his originality and that of a whole new generation of young Africans.

"I moved to London and soon started working with live music producers Serious Ltd. Performances followed at some of the UKs largest festivals (Womad, London Jazz Festival, Africa Express, Musicport, Belfast International Festival, Africa Oye, to name a few) and venues (Barbican, The Sage Gateshead, Bridgewater Hall, Birmingham Symphony Hall, to name a few) playing alongside a huge variety of musicians including Richard Bona, Chucho Valdez, Naturally 7, Raul Midon, Staff Benda Bilili, Lionel Loueke, Ben L'oncle Soul, Nneka, Lucinda Williams, Manu Dibango, Denis Rollings and Alasdair Roberts.

In 2011 Warner Jazz released my second album, The One The Many. During the release period I toured extensively across the UK including supporting Lady Smith Black Mambazo on their 30-date UK tour and embarking on my own tour supported by Arts Council's Black Routes programme.

In 2012 I was commissioned to produce a live performance bringing together musicians from across Central and West Africa to be presented during Festival 2012's BT River of Music for the Olympic games. The concert was a huge success and saw musicians from 12 different countries performing for the very first time in the Uk. The likes of Annie-Flore Batchielilis, Mounira Mitchala, Lulendo, Acimo, Corry Denguemo and Amen Viana all proudly came together to perform alongside the Maria Fidelis Choir in a one-off extravaganza that also resulted in the release of the single '5 circles of Humanity'.

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