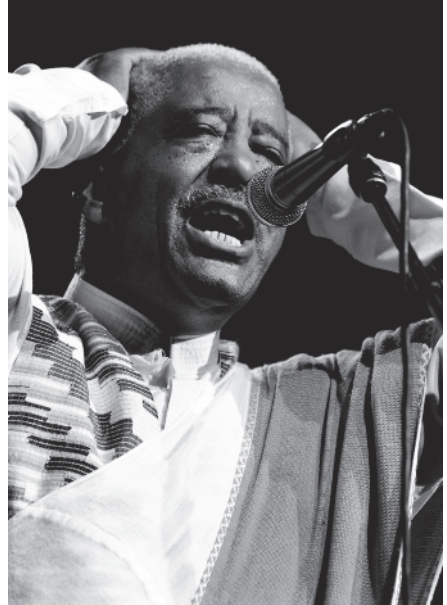


Friday, November 4, 2016, 8pm  
Zellerbach Hall



## Afropop Spectacular featuring Trio Da Kali and Mahmoud Ahmed

*Tonight's performance will include one intermission.*

**Trio Da Kali** is a group of outstanding musicians from the Mande culture of southern Mali, artists who come from a long line of distinguished *griots* (hereditary musicians). Consisting of voice, *ngoni* (a West African string instrument), and *balafon* (a kind of wooden xylophone), the trio brings a contemporary twist to ancient and neglected music.

European performance credits include the BBC Proms, the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, and

the London Jazz Festival. Following a collaboration with the Kronos Quartet in 2014, David Harrington (of Kronos) described the experience as “one of the most beautiful collaborations Kronos has had in our first 40 years.”

**Hawa Kasse Mady Diabaté**, daughter of the legendary Kasse Mady Diabaté, is the singer of the trio, possessing one of the finest *griot* voices in Mali and often compared to Mahalia Jackson. At home, Hawa performs mainly on the wed-

ding circuit, singing at parties held on the streets of Bamako (the main context in which most musicians in Mali make a living). The most distinctive feature of the trio is the *balafon*, and Lassana Diabaté, formerly of Afrocubism and Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, is one of Mali's most accomplished players on this instrument. Its cascading lines, rippling and percussive riffs, and buzzing gourd resonators are a familiar element in many Malian ensembles, but here, for the first time, the *balafon* is the lead instrument. The youngest member of the trio is bass *ngoni* player Mamadou Kouyaté, the eldest son of the renowned Bassekou Kouyaté. Only in his early 20s, he is one of Mali's most creative young musicians.

Trio Da Kali take its name from one of the oldest and most iconic praise songs in the *griot* repertoire. "Da kali" means "to swear an oath"—in this case, it is the *griots'* pledge to maintain their art. Trio Da Kali was created with support from the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

"It's the quaver that makes the Ethiopian singer Mahmoud Ahmed's voice so arresting. He seizes on a note, brief or sustained, and makes its pitch tremble as if its urgency could barely be contained. It's a show of controlled intensity, and in the course of a song, it happens again and again, making each phrase leap out anew: with sorrow, with anticipation, with a plea" (*New York Times*).

In Ethiopia, the word "eskeusta" roughly translates as "ecstasy"; more specifically, it is a shaking sensation that begins at one's shoulders, quivering down the spine and into the legs and feet. Of all the great male vocalists that Ethiopia has produced (and there have been quite a few), none is able to create "eskeusta" better than Mahmoud Ahmed.

For over 40 years Mahmoud has deftly combined the traditional Amharic music of Ethiopia (essentially a five-note scale that features jazz-style singing offset by complex circular rhythm patterns that give the music a distinct Indian feel) with pop and jazz, yielding some of the most adventurous, passionate, ear-opening,

downright surrealistic sounds ever heard. In fact, until you've heard his sweeping multi-octave voice in full workout, words hardly do it justice. As with the late great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mahmoud simply has to be heard to be believed and appreciated.

Mahmoud Ahmed has been a star in Ethiopia almost since the day he began recording. His swooping vocals, complemented by the free-wheeling jazziness of the Ibx Band (with whom he recorded his masterpiece, "Ere Mela Mela"), are very different from what normally is lumped into the broad expression "Afropop." The rhythms are repetitive and intense, not too dissimilar from, say, Fela—just a little less hard. But it's Mahmoud's voice—swirling high notes that sound as if they're chasing one another, impeccable tone and phrasing—that is the distinguishing feature. By singing in this style he has attempted to fuse the past and present. He is not an elitist when it comes to singing older Ethiopian music, but rather he hears the similarities in Ethiopian pop that have thrived over time and is keen to bring these elements together in his music.

As the Western critical attention to Afropop centered on the music of sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopian artists like Mahmoud, Hirut Bekele, Ali Birra, and Alemayehu Eshete were less likely to receive coverage in the music press. Recently, younger performers such as Aster Aweke (who emigrated to the United States in the mid-1980s) and Netsanet Mellesse have received more attention, opening the door for those inclined to explore the music that influenced these artists. And for those so inclined that means becoming familiar with brilliant and demanding artists like Mahmoud Ahmed. He has been featured consistently in the award-winning Ethiopiques series of compilation recordings from Buda Musique, and has four separate installments devoted exclusively to his catalog of works (not to mention his singles that appear intermittently on other volumes). Ethiopiques Vol. 26 features Mahmoud fronting Ethiopia's Imperial Bodyguard Band between 1972 and 1974; it includes all the sides he recorded with them in chronological order.