

***Iniké Baba* by Kahlil Cummings and Balandugu Kan:
A Timeless Tribute to the Ancestors of the Spirit of the Drum**

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Among its many musical triumphs, the groundbreaking album release of *Iniké Baba* (2011) reified the narrative authority of the djembe drum—reminding us of the sacred role these complex instruments embody as emotive chronicles of history, current events, community, culture, art, and tradition. The drums speak in West Africa and its diaspora in the Americas, and *Iniké Baba* (meaning “thank you father”) encourages audiences to listen, learn, and venerate the spirit of the Ancestors immortalized through sound. Today, at the dawn of 2015 as Master Percussionist Kahlil Cummings and Balandugu Kan celebrate the fourth-anniversary debut of this musical gem, the album’s seven original tracks, including, “Iniké Baba,” “Soko,” “Dibon,” “Djaa,” “Tnomadan,” “Balandugu Kan,” and “Kele m’Se” continue to blaze a melodious trail through the minds, hearts, and souls of blessed listeners.

To label *Iniké Baba* as a CD minimizes the transcendental quality of this sonic masterpiece. The compilation might better be described as a psychic journey, a sensorial voyage that enraptures listeners and traverses temporal and geographic borders from Guinea to the Americas and back, unearthing lessons from the past to hone tools for the future. Being fully present is the ultimate way to experience the album. Let your eyelids become heavy, press *play*, and surrender to “Soko’s” resonant swell and fetch of rhythms. Glide with these waves of sound ... feel the bubbly chimes of the belafone kiss your face and slide down your cheeks like multicolored raindrops. You’ll soon hear the insistent trill of the Gjeli Muso singers vocalizing praise to Djembefola Fadouba Oularé and Musa Mamady Keïta. And suddenly, without warning, the earth below will shake with a thunderous rush of drums talking.

The djembe has stories to tell, and although many remain unwritten, these stories still run through the veins of Africa and her descendants. A handful will sound familiar; *Iniké Baba* is ripe with beats and phrases and moments that evoke memories of Cuba, Colombia, Venezuela, or Brasil. Wherever diaspora touched, beauty also bloomed from tremendous loss and pain, like a brilliant rose that has pushed through the cracks in the concrete. Some are stories we once knew while others were stolen centuries ago when African drums were banned in the United States. Nevertheless they are our stories to reclaim and remember, and to keep alive through music and dance. *Iniké Baba* sets us on the path...

The traditional Manding musical ensemble Balandugu Kan was founded by Master Drummer Mamady Keïta in Conakry, Guinea, and named after Balandugu, the small village where Keïta was born. Having studied djembe under his tutelage for over a decade, Keïta’s gifted young African-American protégé Kahlil Cummings went on to establish the Los Angeles-based branch

of the group. Featuring a powerhouse team of prolific core musicians, including Nakeiltha “Nikki” Campbell, Evan Greer, Andrew Kemble, Karamo Susso, and Bongo Sidibé, the California and Conakry ensembles cultivate and honor Balandugu Kan’s rich musical lineage through spellbinding performances, innovative recordings, and unparalleled collaborations.

Viewed through a the panoramic lens of Black History in retrospect, the organic evolution of Balandugu Kan as an artistic cohort nourished by kinship ties among its group members and a lifetime of circulatory migrations across the Atlantic might be understood as an act of transformative exchange and cultural heritage preservation. These artists engage revolutionary performances of Black survival that evoke—and poignantly resist—five hundred years of forced transatlantic passages between West Africa and the Americas.

Furthermore, beyond *Iniké Baba*’s categorical merit as a bountiful, enduring archive of time-honored Malinke orchestrations, the U.S. album release in 2011 unveiled a dynamic layering of raw rhythm, instrumentals and vocals that proved powerful enough to detonate and reshape American/Western musical sensibilities. What makes this project uniquely spectacular are the subtle, inimitable nuances captured in each song. The album was performed outside in the open air and recorded live in Conakry, and later mixed and mastered in Los Angeles by Grammy award-winning artist-producers Alberto López and Joel Soyffer. On the opening track “Iniké Baba,” the audible chirping birds in the background add an ethereal quality to the musical arrangement. As composer, djembe soloist, and artistic director, Cummings subsequently garnered hard-earned accolades for the album’s brilliant execution and is widely acknowledged as the first African-American to have journeyed to Africa to write and record a traditional West African album. The aesthetic genius of *Iniké Baba* represents just one facet of his prowess as a composer and percussionist. With deep archives of embodied knowledge, his transnational creative vision, a voracious appetite for learning, and a supportive team of mentors, Cummings is about to produce a series of musical texts that may hold the key to uniting diverse genres of West African-derived musical traditions throughout the African diaspora in the Americas.

Finally, the motif of Ancestor reverence permeates *Iniké Baba* to the core, setting the album apart from its contemporaries in the World Music genre as an unparalleled contribution structured around a unifying concept that makes this work both timely, and timeless. In fact, each musical composition and exquisite Malinke orchestration was conceived and executed in deep gratitude and reverence to the teachers, elders, *babas*, and spiritual mentors that have nurtured Cummings’ personal and artistic evolution. He notes that these revered teachers and elders were all present during the recording sessions. Mamady Keïta and world-renowned Djembefola Famadou Konaté attended the CD release party in July 2011, and sanctioned the production of the album. Cummings explains that this musical gift is not only dedicated to his esteemed elders, but “...to the Ancestors who blessed us with this music and drum culture, this way of life. *Iniké Baba* is a tribute to the Ancestors of the spirit of the drum.”