

» Oran Etkin

BAND STORY

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The music that Oran Etkin creates with his Group Kelenia is an aural reflection of the new global landscape, painted by a young clarinetist and saxophonist born in a small town in Israel, now living in New York and leading a band comprised of Malian and American musicians. Etkin's distinctive sound is honest and unforced, infused with the constant presence of ancient influences –reverberations from the Malian Empire and the ages-old cry of the Jewish prayer. At the same time it resonates with an urban vibe and the energy of the modern New York jazz scene. "I love the contrast of old and new: of a tradition that has evolved over centuries and the creative individual expression of one man playing his own approach, in his own way, against that tradition and toward it," states Etkin.

"Kelenia" is Etkin's debut recording for Motema Music as well as the name of his working band, comprised of Balla Kouyate on balafon, Makane Kouyate on calabash and vocals and bassist Joe Sanders. The CD also features guest appearances by vocalist Abdoulaye Diabate, percussionist Mohamed 'Joh' Sidi Camara, a string section on one track, and Grammy™ Award winning artists Lionel Loueke and John Benitez. The resulting collection of eleven tracks pays true testament to the essence of "Kelenia," which is the Bambara word for love between people who are different from each other.

Etkin's path to the creation of "Kelenia" took him from his native Israel to Boston, back to study and perform in the Middle East, and then through Mali, Haiti, and finally to the vibrant cultural melting pot of New York. Among his earliest musical influences was Louis Armstrong, whose work led the pre-teen Etkin to immerse himself in the work of Basie, Ellington and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. "I was into the melodies," is how Etkin explains the music's allure. "I went down to New Orleans a few times as a child, and played with Tuba Fats –one of the last remaining members of the original Olympia Brass Band, founding member of the Rebirth Brass Band, and father to all street musicians," he recalls. "I learned a lot by playing and hanging with him."



Back in Boston, at the young age of 14, Etkin began to study with the musician who has perhaps had the greatest influence on him as a jazz player, George Garzone.



STATS

VISITS	PLAYS
1,844	26
STREAMS	DOWNLOADED
26	0

FEATURED SONGS

- 1  [Yekeke](#)
- 2  [Not A Waltz](#)

“ George is kind of like my musical papa.” states Etkin. “ He’ s part of a trio called The Fringe, and they pretty much just play free, in an amazing lyrical, energetic, emotional, and honest way that is also at times humorous –you can’ t forget to have a sense of humor! Their model of true improvisation and true connection as a band is what inspired me when I created Group Kelenia --originally as a trio, with me, Balla and Makane, which expanded on the improvisatory aspects of African music.”

Etkin’ s first wind instrument was the saxophone, but as his musical education progressed, he expanded his musical prowess to the clarinet. As he entered college, he decided to pursue his undergraduate degree at Brandeis University in classical clarinet and composition, spending one year at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem, where he also studied Arabic music. He later got his Masters from Manhattan School of Music, studying with Dave Liebman and David Krakauer, but Etkin reflects “ I am very grateful that I studied classically in my undergrad years, while continuing to study jazz with Garzone and Banacos outside any ‘jazz school’ setting”.

As the various musical flavors that Etkin savored began to blend into his own distinctive style, a serendipitous episode added the music of Africa to the mix. “ I had to fulfill a PE requirement, so I randomly took a dance class,” remembers Etkin. “ The teacher was Mohamed ‘Joh’ Sidi Camara –a great dancer and choreographer, but also a great percussionist from Mali. I knew nothing about African music at the time, but when Joh learned that I played sax, he asked me to join a band he was just starting. I eventually went to Africa with Joh, where we stayed with his mother, who is a respected Griot and a friend of the Chief of Griots of all of Mali. I was honored to get to play for the Chief of Griots, and I also played with a lot of other great musicians when I was there, such as Toumani Diabate and the Super Rail Band.”

The day before he left for Mali, Etkin met balafon player Balla Kouyate, who had just arrived in the US from Mali and who Oran describes as “ a master of his own traditions, but also very open to other approaches.” That openness is obvious from Kouyate’ s work with Group Kelenia, as well as from his work with such diverse musicians as Yo Yo Ma, Ben Harper and Susan McKeown. When Etkin relocated to New York in 2002, and set out to form his own group, he recruited Balla as well as Makane Kouyate, later adding bassist Joe Sanders to enhance the warmth of the group’ s sound and expand the compositional possibilities.

Sanders was recommended by guitarist Lionel Loueke, with whom Etkin has been playing in various configurations since 2003. Etkin and Loueke were drawn to each other through

a common interest in creating new music out of a deep grounding in African styles. Loueke was the perfect choice to add rhythmic and harmonic resonance to several tracks on “Kelenia.” Another frequent musical collaborator of Etkin’s, Malian singer/guitarist Abdoulaye Diabate, was also invited to add his “huge and beautiful vocal sound” to the CD’s original title track as well as to Etkin’s interpretation of the traditional “Yekeke.”

The rhythms of Africa pulse through Etkin’s musical adventures outside of “Kelenia” as well. He is a member of the Mandingo Ambassadors, founded by guitarist Mamady Kouyate, formerly the lead guitarist in the seminal Afropop band, Bembeya Jazz. Influences of his work with Haitian musicians Djakout Mizik, with whom he has toured throughout the US, Canada and Haiti as well as his work with Wyclef Jean have also come to affect Etkin’s style of playing and composition.

Etkin stands out amongst a small handful of musicians bringing the clarinet and bass-clarinet into a new prominence. “The dark woody nature of the clarinet’s sound feels very natural, human and vocal to me” he explains. “I have always tried to make my horn sound like a human voice, and a natural, honest one at that. I love listening to the singing of cantors in the synagogue and try to capture a little bit of that deep sorrow in my sound. When I was living in Jerusalem, I also fell in love with the sound of the Arab Moazin singing the call to prayer from the mosques, with a similar tinge.”

All of these experiences have come together in perfect synergy to shape who Oran Etkin is at his core. The musical reflection of that synergy, “Kelenia,” is an intensely personal and brilliantly collaborative debut.

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The New York Times featured this excellent review of Kelenia:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/07/arts/music/07play.html>

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