

Cheikh Ibra Fam: A Journey Rooted in Song, Spirit, and Heritage

Cheikh Ibrahima Ousmane Fame, later known to the world as Cheikh Ibra Fam, spent his early days in Mbour, Senegal, a coastal town known for its serene beauty. For Cheikh, Mbour was more than a birthplace; it was a symbol of the connection between roots and renewal, a place he would carry in his heart as he journeyed through life.

Growing up, Cheikh was no stranger to change. His father, the director of Senegal's Customs Office, frequently relocated the family, taking them to cities like Dakar, Thies, Rufisque, and Kaolack. These moves exposed young Cheikh to the vibrant cultural tapestry of Senegal. Amid these transitions, Cheikh found solace in music. From the age of seven, he joined *Kourels*—traditional Senegalese choirs known for their spiritual melodies. These gatherings became his first classroom, teaching him the rhythms and tones that would one day define his career. While his peers played soccer, Cheikh immersed himself in the world of melody and spiritual poetry.

A Household of Creativity

Cheikh's childhood home was a hub of artistic expression. His father, an amateur poet and storyteller, and his mother, a painter and fashion designer, nurtured his creativity. Music was ever-present, from the soulful crooning of Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye and Aretha Franklin to the Afro-Cuban rhythms of Orchestra Aragón and Johnny Pacheco. But it was his uncle Coly Cisse, a celebrated guitarist who performed with Senegalese legend Youssou N'Dour, who ignited his passion for performance.

When the power went out, the dreadlocked Coly would sit outside with his guitar, captivating the family with Bob Marley covers and soulful improvisations. A young Cheikh would sit in awe, soaking in every note, not imagining that one day he would write original songs with his uncle.

The Call of Music

Music called to Cheikh early, but it wasn't an easy path. As a teenager, he would sing in the bathroom, experimenting with melodies. His mother, recognizing his talent, encouraged him to take it seriously. With her support, he wrote his first song, "Djo Dja," a playful tale of a capricious woman. Without his father's knowledge, he recorded the song and later played it for him. His father, impressed

by the talent he hadn't seen before, became Cheikh's biggest supporter, funding his music lessons and helping him build a home studio.

By 2006, Cheikh released his debut album under the stage name "Freestyle." Touring schools across Senegal, he began to build a fan base, and his songs earned significant radio play, but his journey was not without hurdles. When a music journalist gave one of Cheikh's songs a harsh review, rather than discouraging him, it pushed Cheikh to refine his craft, turning adversity into motivation.

Finding His Identity

Cheikh's early music was heavily influenced by American hip-hop, but his natural stage presence and sweet voice led him to be invited to join one of Senegal's most iconic and legendary bands, Orchestra Baobab. His time with Baobab was transformative. Touring the world with the group, he came to embrace his African heritage more deeply. "Baobab taught me to dress African, sing in my mother tongues Wolof and Bambara, and to take pride in where I come from," Cheikh recalls. This realization marked a turning point. His music began to blend traditional African rhythms with modern sounds, creating a style uniquely his own.

Music as a Mirror of Society

Cheikh's songs are more than melodies—they are messages. As a follower of the Baye Fall tradition, a Muslim spiritual brotherhood focused on tolerance and peace, he incorporates his faith into his music. His 2012 song "Midadi" calls for love and understanding, while "Jerejef," from his 2022 album *Peace in Africa*, pays tribute to the revered Senegalese leader Serigne Touba.

But Cheikh doesn't shy away from addressing pressing social issues. His song "Shabida," which premiered on the collection *Café International* released by Putumayo in January 2025 and to be featured on his upcoming album, confront the migration crisis, a phenomenon that sees Africa's youth risking everything for uncertain futures abroad. His music is a call to action, urging leaders to create opportunities that keep Africa's talent at home.

A Legacy in the Making

Cheikh's career is marked by milestones that reflect his dedication to both art and humanity. He performed with Orchestra Baobab for six years, gracing stages worldwide, including a poignant performance in Jerusalem. In 2023, he was awarded the Charles Cros Academy prize for his song "Cosaan," a tribute his African

roots. And in 2024, he collaborated with Christine Salem to produce *Niama*, a musical commemorating the abolition of slavery on Reunion Island.

Looking Ahead

Now living on Reunion Island, Cheikh continues to evolve as an artist. Inspired by his late mentor Issa Sissokho of Orchestra Baobab, he has taken up the tenor saxophone, aiming to honor his memory. He dreams of expanding music education in Senegal, where young musicians often lack resources to explore genres like jazz, despite Africa's deep connection to the style. The acclaimed US record label Cumbancha will release Cheikh's sophomore album, *Adouna* (Life) in October 2025. The album's first official single, "Xam Xam" will come out on April 10, 2025, and will launch a year of touring and promotion in the lead up to the fall release.

Cheikh Ibra Fam's story is one of resilience, self-discovery, and a commitment to using music as a force for good. Through his songs, he reminds us of the power of heritage, the necessity of love, and the courage to confront the challenges of our time. Cheikh's true mission lies in connecting people. "It's not about me," he says. "It's about the messages in my songs—love, tolerance, understanding, and justice."

For more information, music samples, or to arrange interviews, contact:

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Photos, music videos, lyrics and more available at www.cumbancha.com/cif