

Empathy through the arts

Portland's Parfait Bassale, a musician from West Africa, has a unique style of music and storytelling aimed at inspiring a better understanding of others

BY EMILY GREEN
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Parfait Bassale is a local singer, songwriter and rap artist who, when he's not at his day job, produces music out of the basement of his Northeast Portland home.

While virtually unknown in the U.S., he's become popular in Africa in recent years, with several of his original tracks getting regular radio play across Senegal, Niger and Togo.

With years of practice and study, Parfait has learned to artfully trigger emotional response through his skillful manipulation of lyrics and sound.

But to truly understand and appreciate Parfait's music is to understand and appreciate the man himself.

Those close to him say the two are indistinguishable from each other — that he is a truly authentic artist.

Parfait's melodious journey begins long before he mastered the guitar and began to compose his unique soulful blend of blues, pop, reggae and hip-hop.

It began when he was about 12 years old and was introduced to the poetic beats of French rap.

The French colonized much of West Africa in the mid-19th century, and while most conquered nations regained their independence in 1960, French remains the official language in many areas.

Thus, while the influx of immigrants to France that followed decolonization came from culturally diverse countries, French was a language many already shared.

It was the early 1990s, and African immigrants in French ghettos were creating rhythmic prose as their vehicle for decrying colonialism and the discrimination they were met with in Europe.

Themes of cultural identity and societal ills echoed throughout their politically charged album tracks.

"It was just powerful," Parfait said. "It was the music of my generation."

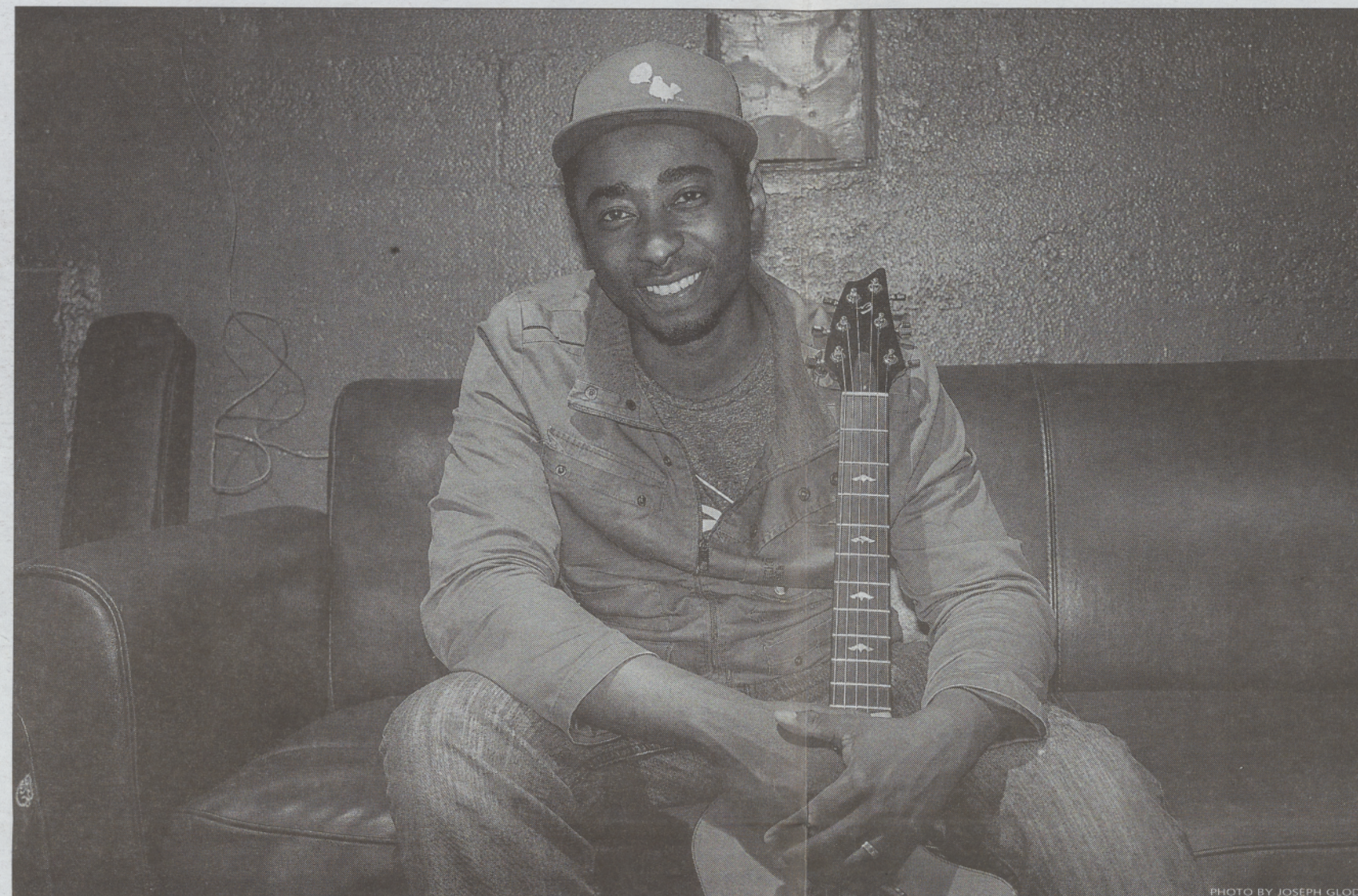


PHOTO BY JOSEPH GLODE

At the time, Parfait was a boy living more than 2,000 miles away in Dakar, the coastal capital city of Senegal.

Radio stations across the small West African nation often played French rap, and he would listen intently.

Like many French rap icons, he too liked to vent his frustrations in written prose. He also knew what it felt like to be an outlier, often facing discrimination at school.

Theirs was an art form that resonated with him deeply.

While business and formal education were still conducted in French, most West Africans spoke their native languages at home and in the streets.

Parfait was originally from Benin, a nation on Africa's North Central Atlantic coast. Not long after his birth in 1981, his family moved to the larger inland nation of Niger, where Parfait spent seven years of his childhood. He quickly picked up the native language, Zerma, from playing with neighborhood children. At home, his family spoke his mother's native language, Mina. At school, he was taught in French.

When his family moved to Senegal, it was the third time he had a new native language to learn.

This time, he relied primarily on his French to communicate with his peers, but he spoke it with a funny foreign accent.

The other kids, who all spoke Wolof in the halls at school and on the streets, would say of him, "This is just a gnack."

It was the term used for immigrants from places such as Benin, the Ivory Coast and Togo. Loosely translated, it means "the savages."

Parfait couldn't remember living in Benin, but it was a label he carried with him regardless, and

sometimes the label was all that others saw.

"It was a loaded term," Parfait said. He remembers trying to make sense of what he called the man-to-man cruelty and micro-aggressions he was experiencing.

"We're all Africans. We've all been colonized by the French," he said. "Why would we have ways of characterizing each other?"

As hip-hop culture spread across the West, rap artists began popping up in Senegal, as well. Some groups rhymed in French, but most used their native language, Wolof, as a way to re-appropriate the genre.

"One of the greatest paradoxes of the introduction of hip-hop music in Senegal is that unlike the United States, where it originated, or Europe, it was the privileged class that first adopted and promoted its lifestyle," according to an article on Music in Africa Foundation's website.

Parfait described his family as "lower middle class," by African standards.

His father, Joseph Bassale, was an air-traffic safety engineer moving up the ranks at his company. It was when Parfait was 9 that his father was promoted to a position that took the family to Dakar, Senegal, where his employer's headquarters were located.

Dakar's metropolitan area has a population of more than 2 million. While rural areas of Africa might have fewer amenities, this city was built with modern infrastructure.

There they lived in a four-bedroom, two-bathroom flat, and like most urban Senegalese homes, it was equipped with a telephone line, running water and electricity.

Parfait's parents drove a Peugeot 504, and unless times were tight, they had cable TV, his

window into the West.

Every couple of years, the Bassale family flew back to Benin for vacation.

Aside from the discrimination he faced as an immigrant, Parfait's childhood was a happy one. He often spent his afternoons playing soccer in the streets with neighborhood kids. At home, he adored the family dog, Wolfart.

They had two mango trees in the front yard that he liked to climb. He would sit among the branches, tearing the skin from the mango with his teeth so he could eat the fruit fresh off the tree.

While 95 percent of Senegal is Muslim, Parfait's family was among the Christian minority. His mother, Josephine Bassale, sang in the church choir.

"One of the beautiful things about Senegal and other parts of the world was the relationship between the religious communities was really harmonious," he said. "During Christian holidays, Christians will bring food to their neighbors who are Muslim, and vice versa."

As a teenager, he wore sagging jeans and oversized T-shirts. High schoolers in Dakar sported Timberland boots and the latest Air Jordans, trends they picked up from Western media.

Parfait found friendship with two classmates who were also the sons of expatriates, Aziz Fall and Wally N'diaye.

When the boys were about 14, like many other teens in Senegal, they formed a rap group. What set them apart was that they rapped in French, a language they all knew well.

They would practice their rhymes together on the weekends, in the bedrooms and courtyards at

their homes. After scribbling lyrics in pencil on notepads, they'd recite them to instrumental tracks from more prominent artists.

This pastime was so popular that a handful of local music stores specialized in the instrumental-only cassette tapes they would use for their background beats.

The three friends began to perform at afterschool events and became known at school as the rappers.

Their teachers and parents encouraged them to focus on their studies, but their classmates cheered them on.

They called themselves Sixth Sense. Parfait laughs at the name now. "Sixth Sense — yeah, we thought we had so much to share," he joked.

He remembers a song they wrote titled "Le Poids des Noirs," which he said means "the burden of the black people."

"In that song, we talked about some of the social challenges we were still seeing, like poverty, and trying to expand it to what we researched and heard about in other places — in America," he said. "We were trying to make a connection between that experience all across the world, and how that weight can still be felt."

Parfait's parents often scolded him for writing songs when he was supposed to be doing homework.

"Very early on, I had to start doing it in hiding," Parfait said. "My parents were starting to see it as in the way of my studies."

Both of Parfait's parents were college educated, and they stressed the value of an education to their children. While finances were limited at times, Parfait's parents kept their four children



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARFAIT BASSALE



PHOTO COURTESY OF RUBICON

Left: Parfait Bassale, of Portland, blends French and English in his music, which aims to bring people from different backgrounds together. He began his music career as a teenager in Senegal. Top: High school friends Aziz Fall (left) and Wally N'diaye (center) and Parfait (right) formed as the rap group Sixth Sense. Above: His first visit to Haiti was in 2010. He has since returned to teach an empathy workshop for schoolteachers using music.

enrolled in private schools.

In West Africa, Parfait said, the public schools are not bad, but because of political unrest, there could be long periods of time when the teachers were on strike.

"That's weeks and months of students not being able to go to school," he said. "And then the government can invalidate the entire academic year."

Local colleges and universities had the same problem, so when Parfait's older brother, Jules Bassale, graduated from high school, he traveled to the United States on a student visa to attend Portland State University.

Jules remembers, shortly before he left for college, being impressed when Parfait's rap group was the opening act for big-name Senegalese rap group Daara J.

"It was a big deal," Jules said.

For Parfait, it was a surreal teenage moment: He couldn't believe he was singing through his idols' microphone.

In 1999, Sixth Sense was recognized as one of the most promising new music groups in Senegal, making it to the "final five" portion of a national competition that culminated with a concert where the winner was chosen from the top five groups. They didn't win, but it was an achievement Parfait is proud of.

A year later, Aziz and Wally were no longer pursuing music, so Parfait decided to join his brother in Oregon.

His parents told him they could pay for the first couple of quarters at Portland State University,

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