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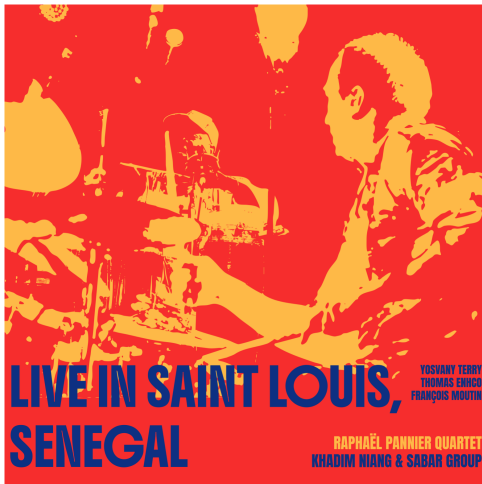
French drummer-composer Raphaël Pannier blends jazz and sabar in a historic collaboration with Senegalese master drummer Khadim Niang

Out November 7, 2025 on Miguel Zenón's Miel Music, *Live in Saint Louis, Senegal* captures Pannier's quartet with Yosvany Terry, Thomas Enhco and François Moutin sharing the stage with an eight-piece ensemble of West African sabar drummers

"[Pannier is] an imaginative colorist and a master of textures whose light touch on the drum kit brings to mind the delicate brushstrokes of an impressionistic painter." – Ed Enright, DownBeat

"Whether conversationally swinging [or] leading the band through mutable machinations... Pannier proves impressive. His technique is second to none, he feels music with both firmness and pliancy, and he shapes every arc—large or small—with dynamic intention(s)." – Dan Bilawsky, All About Jazz

Senegalese master drummer Doudou N'Diaye Rose was one of the most renowned and influential musicians in the world by the time of his death in 2015. Named a "living human treasure" by UNESCO in 2006, N'Diaye Rose spawned a musical dynasty in West Africa, collaborated with fellow icons including Miles Davis, Peter Gabriel, Dizzy Gillespie and the Rolling Stones, and impacted artists from a range of genres and disciplines across the globe.



French drummer and composer **Raphaël Pannier** was just three years old when N'Diaye Rose's music first reached his impressionable young ears. The Senegalese master was featured in a television documentary that so captivated Pannier that his parents hurried to record the program on VHS. He now points to that experience as the day that he became a drummer. "I watched that video all day, every day," Pannier recalls. "It's been my passion since then."

Naturally, Pannier dreamed of one day traveling to Senegal and connecting with modern purveyors of N'Diaye Rose's sabar tradition. The desire simmered as he moved to the US for a decade, studying at Berklee and the Manhattan School of Music and forging musical collaborations with the likes of Miguel Zenón, Aaron Goldberg, Bob James, Steve Wilson, Chad Lefkowitz-Brown and Manuel Valera. Since returning to Paris in 2020, he has worked extensively with guitarist Biréli Lagrène and pianists Baptiste Trotignon and Thomas Enhco.

At the same time, he continued to express his desire to reach West Africa. "When you have a dream," he explains, "you want to share it as much as you can." That paid off when he was introduced to the director of Senegal's Saint Louis International Jazz Festival, the largest jazz festival on the continent, leading to an invite. Pannier made the trek alone in May 2023 with the hope that he might find a sabar master willing to fuse jazz with the country's deep-rooted traditions. Fortunately his search led him to **Khadim Niang**, the region's most respected master and a member of N'Diaye Rose's group from 1997-1999, in whom he found an eager collaborator.

The dream came true a year later, as Pannier's quartet joined Niang's Sabar Group on stage at the Saint-Louis Festival on May 19, 2024. The groundbreaking meld of musical traditions was achieved via an intense, seven-day residency in Senegal in which the jazz and sabar musicians worked diligently through 12-hour days of give and take to bridge their cultural divide. The unique convergence marked a landmark in two musical traditions: the first time jazz and sabar musicians have merged their sound worlds, the first time the Senegalese drums have been performed with piano, all through a rare meeting of minds, crafting compositions together and discovering new pathways and concepts for their two cultures to merge.

The historic results are captured vividly on ***Live in Saint Louis, Senegal***, out **November 7, 2025** via Zenón's **Miel Music** label – the first live recording in the 33-year history of the festival. The spirited concert finds Pannier joined by Cuban saxophonist **Yosvany Terry**, pianist **Thomas Enhco** and bassist **François Moutin** along with Niang and his ensemble of eight percussionists: his second in command, **Mouhamed Niang**; elder **Cheikh Ndiaye Baba**; **Abdou Salam Sy**, **Bathie Gueye**, **Fallou Gueye**, and Khadim's two sons, **Papa Madiodio Niang** and **Yoro Niang**. The album was mixed by renowned engineer **Dominique Borde** at the personal studio of composer and songwriter **Éric Serra** – the same team that helped create *Djabote*, N'Diaye Rose's sole recording, in 1991.

The first thing that Pannier learned from his interactions with Niang is that sabar is a much deeper and richer concept than even he had understood. The word refers to a style of group drumming, to the family of eight drums employed in that tradition, and to the dance that is inseparable from the music. But far beyond that, the word "sabar" refers to a language spoken by the drums, used to communicate from one village to another but also between individuals; it also has a spiritual dimension, a means for communicating with spirits or ancestors, a kind of prayer. It is also a healing tradition for believers, and a soundtrack for social events from celebrations to ceremonies to wrestling matches. The tradition is carried on through the Griots, those storytellers and historians whose methods could be words or music or dance.

"It's very important to understand that sabar is something that you see every day in Senegal," Pannier describes. "It pulses through their culture, their language, their way of thinking and their way of living. Their relationship to this music and to rhythm is on a level that is difficult for Occidental people to understand. The Griots are born with the idea in mind that their role in life is to pass on and to practice this craft."

For the year leading up to the performance, Pannier and Niang embarked on a long-distance collaboration, the sabar master sending various rhythms and the jazz drummer experimenting with harmonies and melodies on top of them. "Xalat Bou Set," which translates as "the Holy Spirit," is one such joint creation. "Sine Saloum" is inspired by a traditional Yoruba melody, linking Terry's culture to its African roots and featuring the saxophonist on shekere. "Hommage à Doudou N'Diaye Rose," written by Niang as a tribute from one master to another, is a particularly rigorous composition, so Pannier decided to feature the drummers alone – until the excitement of the concert inspired him and Moutin to improvise in response to the through-composed piece.

There are also three reimagined jazz classics on the album: Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman," John Coltrane's "Naima" – paired with rhythms for Senegalese wedding ceremonies, in keeping with its ode to Trane's first wife – and, somewhat surprisingly, the Dave Brubeck chestnut "Take Five." For the jaded jazz musician the latter choice may seem hackneyed, but it was Niang's one demand on agreeing to the collaboration. "It was part of the contract," laughs Pannier. "Khadim wanted to teach the concept of odd meter to his guys. Sabar is so linked with dance that they find it challenging to encounter rhythms that they can't dance to."

Like the best musical and personal interactions, the experience left all parties changed in some way. For Pannier, the drummer says, "It pushed me to see music differently. They don't understand the concept of practicing music because the border between what is life and what is art barely exists. It totally changed my vision and made me think of my work in a much more complete way."

Raphaël Pannier

Born in Paris in 1990, Raphaël Pannier is a French drummer, composer, bandleader and educator whose work bridges jazz traditions with contemporary and global influences. After studying classical percussion and jazz in Paris, he attended Berklee College of Music in Boston and pursued a Master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music. From 2014 to 2020, Pannier lived and worked in New York, performing and touring with a wide range of artists including Chad Lefkowitz-Brown, Steve Wilson, Bob James, Marcos Valle, Emil Afrasiyab, and Manuel Valera. In 2019 he recorded *Faune*, his first album as a leader, with Miguel Zenón, Aaron Goldberg and François Moutin. The following year he received a grant from the French-American Cultural Exchange Foundation to record his second album with Miguel Zenón, *Letter to a Friend* – an adventurous blend of jazz and electronic music co-produced with German electro pioneer Martin Gretschnmann (aka Acid Pauli). Returning to Paris in 2020, Pannier quickly became a sought-after collaborator in the European jazz scene, regularly performing with artists such as Biréli Lagrène, Baptiste Trotignon, Thomas Enhco, Antonio Lizana, and Manel Fortià, while also teaching on the faculty of the American School of Modern Music.

Raphaël Pannier Quartet / Khadim Niang & Sabar Group – *Live in Saint Louis, Senegal*

Miel Music – Recorded May 15 & 19, 2024

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