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## Keb' Mo' at SFJAZZ

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*by Wanda Sabir*



[1]When I met Keb' Mo' in 2004, it was at Delancey Street in San Francisco at a preview screening of "Lightning in a Bottle" and the release of his own "Peace: Back by Popular Demand." I don't know if it was the 100th year anniversary of the blues, but certainly the 2004 production honored the blues' African and African American legacy in its impressive artist lineup, which featured a powerful rhythm section of which Keb' Mo' was an integral part.

I hadn't known the handsome Keb' Mo' (birth name Kevin Moore) prior to this introduction, but he made an impression – his "Peace, Back by Popular Demand" my personal soundtrack and many of my fans' too. I recall driving to the Maafa Ritual a few years ago blasting it with the windows down to stay awake to the beach and on the way back to Oakland, singing: "Someday We'll All Be Free," ("What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love And Understanding" and Keb' Mo's classic remix of "Wake Up Everybody," perfect at 3:30 a.m. cruising up Geary Boulevard and down Fulton to Oak feeling like Whoopie Goldberg in "Corrina, Corrina" – blowing at the traffic signals' green.

I also didn't know Solomon Burke, who is performing with Keb' Mo' and his band this Saturday, Nov. 21, 8 p.m., for SFJAZZ at the Paramount Theatre in San Francisco until "Lightning in a Bottle," but then enlightenment doesn't have a timeline. Whether it's 2004 or 2009, there's always time to meet a fine artist or, in this case, artists.

Keb' Mo', who says he grew up in Compton surrounded by blues – a name he doesn't particularly care for, the blues often associated with sad stories and hard luck lives – didn't really come into the music until his 30s. Blues is a mature music. It's an adult language, seeped in suffering, something artists who didn't travel through the Atlantic triangle and along the way lose not just a language and a history but access to the richness – a heritage everyone else seems to have access to except its rightful heirs and owners – can't seem to feel even if their music makes us pat our feet or sing along, even if they too have suffered and perhaps share ancient blood ties. This is what Senegalese by way of Mali musician Habib Koité told me, and he has jammed with Taj Mahal and the late Ali Farka Touré, who doesn't agree.

Keb' Mo' sounded relaxed when we spoke for almost an hour on the phone a couple of days prior to his gig this weekend. He was in a contemplative mood and went deep along metaphysical charts – not uncharted, just somewhat unexpected, but hey air signs are like that and as an official twin I can go in a lot of directions all at once, so I was happy to be invited.

Just out with a new album, on his own label, Yolabelle International (look at the logo on the CD – it's really cool), "Live and Mo'" features six live tracks and four studio. The artist tells stories which reflect the American social and cultural landscape. Take for instance "Government Cheese," referencing the orange blocks or cheese bricks, bigger than Legos but just right for adding an edition onto one's house. The cheese, along with powered milk and farina kept and keeps many children from starving. Afghanistan is not the only place where this government drops bags of groceries on poor communities. The good thing about these government handouts though is that in America they are not laced with explosives.

On his "A Brand New America" one is reminded of the song "America the Beautiful" – all the potential we almost forgot during the horrendous Bush years. Keb' Mo' said he hadn't noticed themes when putting the record together, but in retrospect agreed that in an uncanny way it did have that intentional coherence which marks all of his projects thus far.

"It's my first release on my label and I am stepping out into the world," Keb' Mo' says with a smile in his voice. "I looked into the cosmos and it said, 'It's Yo-labelle.' I don't know why I want to have my own label, that's why I put one out, to see. It's not that I have been treated badly. I am grateful for everything that has come to me. I finished my contract at Sony, and when I finished the music industry had changed and there was nothing to keep me there. I had offers from other labels ...

"I have two albums I am working on and I am feeling my way through the next part of my life, so I went over how does that look to me. I am looking for clarity. I am going toward clarity, away from vagueness.

"In the universe, you have to be clear about what you want to get what you want." The artist spoke of issues he hadn't dealt with which he felt he needed to take care of now. He spoke of taking a hiatus and going inward: writing, meditating, taking care of his health and thinking about the next 42 years – he plans to live, minimally for 100 years. When he spoke of calling the spirits of departed souls, I was reminded of his character in "Possum" in John Sayles' "Honeydripper" (2007) starring Danny Glover.

Possum is a ghost who is only visible to Sonny (Gary Clark Jr.) encouraging him to find his voice and then sing. I was really disappointed when at the Monterey Jazz Festival's 50th Anniversary year in 2006 where the Honeydripper Band performed and John Sayles gave a talk which featured clips among them a special one with Ruth Brown, who died that year, and Keb' Mo' wasn't there.



[2]"I never really thought about the album 'Live & Mo'" the way you speak about it until now," he said. "I went through my live performances and looked for high quality work and things I wanted to share. So for the album to have a theme to it was completely unintentional. Judging from your comment, it does have a theme to it: political, social overtones to it.

"Government Cheese' is about welfare cheese; 'Brand New America' is a song of hope. It's the way I see America, you know? It's the opportunity I see before us, the country we can be. These are the times, we are the people and the dream is alive. I thought Obama ran too early, but 'if not now, when?'" He then begins to riff on the lyrics of the song. This particular song includes the voices of the Agape Children's Choir. Extremely apropos.

"This is our time; we are the people. This country – whatever has been snatched out of our hands that we have no control over – is our own doing. We are the people and the dream is alive and the ability to dream – everything starts with a dream. Our dreams are important. George Bush was a big part of founding this new paradigm – this was his gift to us. From the mountains and valleys, from the desert to the sea – that's everyone, a brand new America, calling to me.

"If it weren't for his bumbling/stumbling mistakes (I am not certain which word Keb' Mo' used but both work). The words, No Child Left Behind (etc.), took on a new meaning. It's our time to usher in health care for everyone, peace, not war. This is the time we can create that, right now. I wrote that for people here, so maybe this piece can wake up the mind to that dream, to that feeling.

"Every lyric in that song was carefully crafted. We all have a story. We are the people. I haven't pushed the song or promoted it. I guess I'm a little shy because it means so much to me, 'A Brand New America.'" (Enjoy the video, below.)

"I'm not as young as you think," the artist tells me. "I just turned 58. Blues comes from where it comes from. It is a huge part of what I do, but I am having trouble with the stigma attached to it. It's kind of sad it was called the blues. Maybe it should have been called something else, because it is so much more than just 'the blues.'

"As you stated yourself, I'm a storytelling, talking truth, calling forth souls and making them heal. I'm a metaphysical guy more than a blues guy, you know? I use the blues as my transport – I use the music as an evolution of myself and hopefully as an evolution of others to spread that truth. Being born in Southern California, being a blues guy, that kind of came later on, in my 30s when I started to be exposed – I'd been exposed, but I started to hear it."

Keb' Mo' played with Jefferson Airplane violinist Papa John Creach when he was 21, appearing on four albums, yet it was his stint with Monk Higgins, Bobby "Blue" Bland's producer's Whodunit Band, which was his entre into the hardcore blues genre. He also jammed with Albert Collins and

Big Joe Turner, where he certainly polished and refined his chops, later joining a vocal group called the Rose Brothers and gigging around L.A.

But I think it was his role in the play, "Rabbit Foot" (1990), where the musician, actor, singer played a Delta Bluesman and later in his role in the docudrama, "Can't You Hear the Wind Howl?" (1997), narrated by Danny Glover, where he played Robert Johnson (1911-38), the bluesman who was offered the deal of a lifetime, that Keb' Mo' came into his own incarnation. It's said Johnson took the deal and so did Keb' Mo', changing his name and all – something about those esoteric decisions: They really rocket one's career. Keb' Mo's was already sailing and he landed in the saddle and he's been riding ever since, seemingly without reins or stirrups.

His 1994 release of the self-titled "Keb' Mo'" with two Robert Johnson covers, "Come on in My Kitchen" and "Kind Hearted Woman Blues," was a natural progression and made folks sit up and take notice. His scoring of the Martin Scorsese miniseries, "The Blues," a highly contested miniseries around here for the West Coast artists left out, was another notch in the belt. We debated fiercely here in the San Francisco Bay Area this omission with the director and/or his representatives at a special screening. He was joined on the panel by Ronnie Stewart, Bay Area Blues Society Caravan of All-Stars, and resident historian.

It's a good thing Black folks are telling the story too – important people like Ronnie and Amiri Baraka with his classics, "Blues People" and "Black Music," and fine artists like painter James Gayles, whose "Bay Area Blues Artists" exhibition and catalog featuring Bobby Blue Bland, Big Mama Thornton, King Oliver and others document this period and the San Francisco Bay Area, specifically Oakland and the greater East Bay, like Richmond and Russell City's ignored and overlooked blues legacy.

Keb' Mo's 1996 release, "Just Like You," garnered his first Grammy and featured 12 songs full of Delta rhythms and included as guest artists Bonnie Raitt and Jackson Browne on his "Just Like You," easily a cult classic – it's all over the web. One can even find ring tones. I was also surprised to find "Perpetual Blues Machine" on this album too. It's on the new release "Keb' Mo' Live & Mo'." Really cool stuff.

I have to get a copy of all his Grammy award winning albums. I also wasn't aware that Dr. Dre is a Compton native too. I wonder if the two men know each other? And the last wow is that my mother might have met Keb' Mo' as Kevin Moore when they both worked for A&M Records in Beverly Hills before A&M was bought out by Seagram's – Keb' Mo' long gone when this happened.

This music video of "Just Like You" reminds one of the Michael Jackson music video – "We Are the World," which has people morphing into each other. Keb' Mo' takes photographs and posts them in what becomes a collage. (This video too is posted below.)

Catch the wonderful artist, Keb' Mo', a handsome, beautiful Black man whose work is just as lovely as he is, this weekend, Saturday, Nov. 21, 8 p.m., at Oakland's historic Paramount Theatre on Broadway at 20th Street. Visit [www.sfjazz.org](http://www.sfjazz.org) <sup>[3]</sup>. The weather is certainly not inviting presently, but once you get inside the theatre, which is across the street from the 19th Street BART (come up at 20th), Keb' Mo' and special guest Solomon Burke will make you forget whatever you thought was more important than being in the house with them.

Check out this song, which talks a little about growing up in Compton: "More than One Way Home." (See below.)

It's a grooving tune, Keb' Mo' playing slide guitar, wearing sunglasses and his pork pie hat. Don't ever believe that there is only one answer to the important question or that the answers are all sold out or deposited in someone else's account. Perhaps when I get a moment I will have time to transcribe the rest of this wonderful interview, but as time is of the essence, I wanted to get this filed before he's gone and you missed him and are mad at me (smile).

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[www.wandaspicks.com](http://www.wandaspicks.com) <sup>[5]</sup> for an expanded version of Wanda's Picks, her blog, photos and Wanda's Picks Radio. Her shows are streamed live Wednesdays at 6-7 a.m. and Fridays at 8-10 a.m. and archived on the [Afrikan Sistahs' Media Network](#) <sup>[6]</sup>.

[Keb' Mo' – Just Like You \(Official Music Video\)](#) <sup>[7]</sup> – [For more of the funniest videos, click here](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[Keb' Mo' – More Than One Way Home \(Official Music Video\)](#) <sup>[9]</sup> – [Funny home videos are a click away](#) <sup>[8]</sup>



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[3] [www.sfjazz.org](http://www.sfjazz.org): <http://www.sfjazz.org>

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[7] [Keb' Mo' – Just Like You \(Official Music Video\)](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/sy-10889432/keb_mo_just_like_you_official_music_video/): [http://www.metacafe.com/watch/sy-10889432/keb\\_mo\\_just\\_like\\_you\\_official\\_music\\_video/](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/sy-10889432/keb_mo_just_like_you_official_music_video/)

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[10] Image: [http://www.addtoany.com/share\\_save?](http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?linkurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sfbayview.com%2F2009%2Fkeb%25e2%2580%2599-mo%25e2%2580%2599-at-sfjazz%2F&linkname=Keb%E2%80%99%20Mo%E2%80%99%20at%20SFJAZZ)

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