



*Photo: Brantley Gutierrez / Courtesy of Shore Fire Media*

# IBRAHIM MAALOUF AND ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO CELEBRATE



# THE RETURN OF THE ‘QUEEN OF SHEBA’

Ibrahim Maalouf and Angélique Kidjo reinvent the Solomon-Sheba legend as a cross-cultural story with contemporary resonance on *Queen of Sheba*.

By [George de Stefano](#) / 1 August 2022



## **QUEEN OF SHEBA**

IBRAHIM MAALOUF AND  
ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO

Mister Ibé  
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**T**he legend of the Queen of Sheba’s encounter with King Solomon in Jerusalem appears in the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, the Quran, Ethiopian literature, and Yoruba lore. The meeting of the African and Hebrew sovereigns inspired composers like George Handel, Charles Gounod, and Ottorino Respighi. It has been the subject of films like King Vidor’s *Solomon and Sheba* (with Yul Brynner and, improbably, Gina Lollobrigida) and a 1995 TV film with Jimmy Smits and Halle Berry. There have been too many paintings, books, and scholarly works about the event—

which lies more in the realm of myth than historical fact—to list. The Solomon and Sheba story went through various elaborations as it passed from Jews to Arabs to Abyssinia and sub-Saharan Africa. In the best-known Hebrew version, the queen came from a land distant from Jerusalem, possibly territory in Ethiopia and Yemen. However, the historical identity of the queen is an enigma, and the location of the Sheba (or Saba) mentioned in Hebrew scriptures is uncertain.

*Queen of Sheba*, a seven-part suite composed by the Lebanese-French trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf and sung by [Angélique Kidjo](#), the genre-bending African diva born in Benin and now based in Brooklyn, reinvents the Solomon and Sheba legend as an encounter between Africa and the white, Judeo-Christian world. The queen is known in Hebrew as Malkat Šəbā', but Kidjo uses her Ethiopian and Arabic names, Makeda and Balkis. In most artistic representations, the queen is depicted as dark-skinned, based on the description in the “Song of Solomon”: “I am black and comely.” That’s how she describes herself in Kidjo’s lyrics, which are in the Yoruba language, not the singer’s native Fon.



In the Hebrew legend, the queen (who is not named) travels to Jerusalem to meet Solomon after hearing stories about his wealth and wisdom. More intrigued by his reputation for wisdom than his riches, she poses subtle and difficult questions to him. She is awestruck by his answers; according to the Old Testament, she says to Solomon, “Your wisdom and your prosperity go far beyond the report which I had of them. Happy are your wives, happy these courtiers of yours who wait on you every day and hear your wisdom!” After exchanging gifts with the king, the Queen of Sheba leaves Jerusalem and returns to her homeland.

Kidjo’s reinvention of the legend turns Makeda’s questions into challenges. In the suite’s first part, “Ahan” (The Tongue), Kidjo’s queen, singing assertively against an insistent ostinato, calls Solomon “the most powerful of white men” and wonders, “But where does that power come from?”

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*No, it’s not the blows, it’s not the chains  
No, it’s not the guns, it’s not the chains  
Nor the cannons that are armed  
It is quite simply with your words  
Your pretty words, your poetry.*

Solomon is the progenitor of the “whole generations that have come from the West” with pretty words and poetry. “Waving a Bible,” they “will now subjugate what’s mine”. “Oh, most powerful white men / They’ll justify their crimes in the name of mercy.” But Makeda also has the power of words, which she wields over Solomon and men. Although “everything separates us now” because of conquest and enslavement, the queen still wants “to believe in ultimate redemption”.

The following six sections of *Queen of Sheba* present the relationship between the two rulers as a mix of attraction and repulsion, patriarchal oppression, and female resistance.

Makeda/Balkis poses riddles to Solomon, matches wits with him, mocks the vanity and arrogance of a king “who thinks that the world owes him all,” and acknowledges her love for him. Redemption comes via the myth that Solomon and the queen had a son, Menilek, who founded the royal Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopia, which ended in 1974 with the deposing of

Emperor Haile Selassie I. “Menelik Is the symbol of our intertwined hands / Menelik Like the intertwining of our cultures / Menelik / Cross-bred child who one day shall sing of a New World.” And yet, her being the “Queen of the South” hasn’t kept her life “from being an eternal battle / For, though I was born a princess / I was born a woman before all else.”

Maalouf and Kidjo conceived *Queen of Sheba* when they first met in New York City in 2018. They recorded the suite after performing it in concert halls and festivals in the United States and Europe, and the preparation has paid off splendidly. *Queen of Sheba* blends the musical cultures of its creators with grace, beauty, and grandeur. Maalouf composed and arranged the music, which he and Kidjo perform with a small group (guitar, bass, drums, electric piano) and a full orchestra. Born in Lebanon and raised in Paris, Maalouf has won acclaim and an international following with an original and distinctive style based on European classical music, jazz, and the Arabic maqam tradition. His quarter-tone trumpet enables him to play the notes between notes (half-sharps and half-flats) characteristic of Arabic melodies (*maqamat*) that cannot be played on standard trumpets. He not only can hit notes outside well-tempered Western tuning; with his keening melodies, rapid-fire flurries, and soaring cadenzas, he reaches thrilling heights of expression.

Kidjo, a premier exponent of contemporary West African music since the early 1990s, grew up listening to a wide range of genres. Her style, which she calls unclassifiable, draws on traditional Beninese folk music, Congolese rumba, Cameroonian makossa, soul, jazz, and funk. She has a robust, flexible voice with a clear tone and deploys it superbly throughout *Queen of Sheba*. On “Omidje” (Tears), Kidjo fully uses her instrument, taking birdlike flights in her soprano range and dipping low into her alto. She’s one commanding queen.

There are some significant differences between West African and Arab music, particularly rhythmic. Arab music is not polyrhythmic; its rhythms are organized around cycles of beats and pauses. In Arab music, each instrument ornaments the melody or melodies rather than a merging of different beats and tones formed by polyrhythm and harmony. Maalouf’s writing

and arranging on Queen of Sheba deftly bridges Africa and the Middle East, with some orchestral pop and rock in the mix. The fusion of cultures and styles is organic, balanced, and thoroughly captivating.

**RATING** 9

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### RESOURCES AROUND THE WEB

Ibrahim Maalouf: Official Site

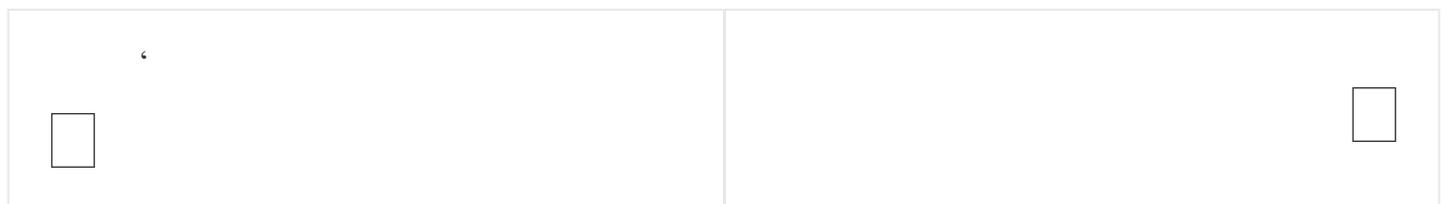
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