



THE ROUGH GUIDE to the music of

Mali



To my mind, Mali is the crown jewel of West Africa ... though I only really ended up there by chance, and the luck of being in the right place at the right time. With a few weeks off from university in Togo, and heading away from the coastal belt, I made my way through the forested plateau region, up to the north of the country, and over the border to Burkino Faso, cloaked in a haze from the Harmattan dust. Outside a bus station in Bobo Dioulasso, I noticed a sign that said, 'Bus leaving for Mopti', and, recognizing the name as a town in Mali, decided to buy a ticket. It was the best decision I ever made, as Mali has had by far the greatest impact on me of any place I have visited. Noting my first impressions, I wrote, 'When light surfaced, there was a vast, magnificent backdrop. In the searing heat of the day, we reached Mopti with its narrow, sandy streets, lined with Sudanese-style houses with zigzag steps leading

to flat rooftops. The glassy waters of the River Niger were perfectly still, interrupted only by the silhouette of black pirogues waiting to be loaded for their journey upstream. Dry, arid and landlocked though it is, the landscape is formidable.'

But without a doubt, for me the greatest discovery – with little previous knowledge at the time – was the music, which seemed to infiltrate every aspect of society and was present on every street and in markets, restaurants, hotels and people's homes at each turn. In Togo, where the development of its own music scene was stifled by the oppressive regime of Général Gnassingbé Eyadéma, ghetto blasters blared Congolese soukous, Ivoirien *zougou* and Western pop, but in Mali it was evident from the start that the country had its own very distinct musical identity, of which it was highly

proud. Furthermore, it was clear that home-grown music took pride of place – voices such as Boubacar Traore, Kandia Kouyate, Djeneba Seck and Ali Farka Toure were some of the first I heard from local record players.

Of course, I later discovered that Malian music has a vast international following and is a force to be reckoned with in the world music scene. But what was it that gave it such presence? And why is music so intrinsic to society there?

This can largely be attributed to the fact that Mali has an ancient musical heritage and, while today there are countless variants and subcategories, they are firmly and proudly rooted in history.

The lineage of professional musicians and orators known as *jeliya* dates back hundreds of years to

the founding of the Mande empire. As commentators, advisers to their patrons and safe-keepers of an ancient tradition, *jelis* perform an extremely important role in society and their profession is closely guarded. The class is endogamous and surnames are caste-based, so certain names are held predominantly by *jelis*, including Kouyate, Kante, Diabate, Tounkara and Sissoko.

Particularly prestigious traditional instruments include the *ngoni* (a three- to five-stringed lute), which is the main instrument of the Bamana *jelis* of central Mali; the *balafon*, a type of xylophone whose homeland is Guinea; and the *kora*, which is thought to have come from the Mandinka kingdom (parts of present-day Guinea-Bissau and Senegal) and whose sound is often compared to the harp.

Crown jewel of West Africa

Mali

beautifully preserved
musical dynasty



The three main Mande languages are Maninka (western Mali and eastern Guinea), Bamana (central Mali) and Mandinka (the Gambia, southern Senegal and Guinea-Bissau). Artists representing Maninka *jeli* music on this album include Toumani Diabate, Kandia Kouyate, Habib Koité and Keletigui Diabate.

The Bamana people are known to have resisted Islam, and their music reflects a history of separateness. The sound is quite different – it is bluesier, and prefers a five-note minor scale to the seven-note scale used in Maninka music. Bassekou Kouyate celebrates the Bamana *jeli* style, also drawn upon by artists such as Boubacar Traore and Rokia Traore (both non-*jeli* musicians).

With independence, and the quest to define a strong national identity, dance bands were

encouraged to draw on Mande traditions and include elements of the music in their repertoires. When Moussa Traore – Mali's second president – came to power, he discouraged the influence of Cuban dance music and many of the old dance bands reformed as part of the roots revival. One of these bands was the Super Rail Band du Buffet Hôtel de la Gare, which launched the careers of Mory Kante and Salif Keita. Their rival band, Les Ambassadeurs du Motel (who went on to become Les Ambassadeurs Internationales) developed an eclectic, more experimental style, playing popular songs imported from Cuba, Senegal and France.

Another genre drawn from ancient tradition is *Wassoulou*, from the southern region of Wasulu. Here, musicians call themselves *kono*, meaning 'songbirds'. They are free to be musicians out of

choice and this is what separates them from those elsewhere in the country. *Wassoulou* draws from the sacred hunter's music, and the sound is characterized by the *kamelengoni* (hunter's harp) and *djembe* (framed drum, which originated in Wasulu). Women are the true stars of *Wassoulou* music, and there is surely no finer testimony to this than the great Oumou Sangare.

Representing the non-*jeli* and non-Mande strand of Malian music on this compilation are the late, great desert bluesman Ali Farka Toure and his protégé, Afel Bocoum – both came from Niafunke, on the banks of the River Niger, and both were heavily influenced by the music surrounding their home town in the north.

An attempt to cover every strain of Malian music in such a short space – from the beautifully

preserved *jeli* tradition and the dance bands that flourished with independence, to the rocking desert blues of groups like Tinariwen and the ancient music of Mali's hunter societies – is a near impossible task. There is plenty more to say and this merely scratches the surface ... but one thing is certain: I never imagined that a chance detour to Mali would unravel a cultural and musical goldmine.

BASSEKOU KOUYATE & NGONI BA – Bassekou Kouyate is from the region of Ségou in south-central Mali. He is one of the best-known and –loved *ngoni* players in the country and has collaborated with myriad musicians, both abroad and on home turf. Born into the traditional *jeli* lineage, his mother was a praise singer (*jelimusow*) and his brothers exceptional *ngoni* players. At the age of 19, he moved to Bamako,

Bassekou Kouyate



Ali Farka Touré



Habib Koité



Amadou & Mariam



Issa Bagayogo



where he met Toumani Diabate. By the late 1980s, Bassekou was part of Toumani's trio and they recorded their first albums together, *Songhai* and *Djelika*. Bassekou married the singer Amy Sacko and they are greatly sought after for the traditional Sunday wedding parties (*sumu*) that happen in the streets of Bamako. Bassekou has now put together his own band, Ngoni ba (the big *ngoni*) – Mali's first *ngoni* quartet. In July 2007, he recorded his debut album *Segu Blue*.

ALI FARKA TOURÉ & TOUMANI DIABATE – This track sees the collaboration of two of Mali's greatest musicians, Ali Farka Toure (guitar) and Toumani Diabate (*kora*). Taken from the World Circuit album *In The Heart Of The Moon*, it was recorded using a mobile studio in the Hotel Mandé, on the banks of the River Niger in Bamako. Producer Nick Gold says of the recording, 'I'd be so completely absorbed by the music. We needed absolute quiet in the room while they were recording, since the *kora* is such a very quiet instrument. A song would end and you'd realize you'd been holding your breath, hypnotized.'

HABIB KOITÉ & BAMADA – 'Mali Ba' is from Habib Koité's 2007 album *Afriki*, and is a tribute to his homeland, which he compares to a great bull that will never be sacrificed: 'Take care, good son of Mali; take care of this bull; take care of your Great Mali.' The album as a whole reaches out to the younger generation, imploring them to preserve their traditions and recognize the positive aspects of life in Africa. He says, 'Even though Mali is poor,

we still have good quality of life. You can walk outside and smile and someone will smile back.'

AMADOU & MARIAM – Amadou and Mariam met in 1977 at the Institute for the Blind in Bamako. Amadou had been a guitarist in Les Ambassadeurs – one of the most popular bands of the time – and Mariam was a singer at weddings and traditional festivals. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities for them in Mali, they moved to Abidjan in 1986, where they made a series of cassette-only releases. These cassettes made them stars back home in Mali and led them to Paris, where the records they made reached the ears of producer extraordinaire, Manu Chao. A meeting was arranged between them in a Paris studio and Chao offered to produce their next album. *Dimanche À Bamako* was the result.

ISSA BAGAYOGO – known on home soil as 'Techno Issa', Issa Bagayogo draws mainly on the ancient Wasulu hunting music, which he combines with modern pop and techno beats to create a thoroughly modern sound, while at the same time staying true to the traditions from which he draws. On 'Kalan Nege', the sounds of the *ngoni*, the *balafon* and Issa's rhythmic vocals are set against a repeating keyboard riff. The track is taken from *Tassoumakan (Voice Of Fire)*, Issa's third release for Six Degrees.

OUMOU SANGARE – Oumou's roots are in the Wasulu region of Mali. The Wassoulou style of music (just to be clear: 'Wasulu' is the region, whereas 'Wassoulou' refers to the style of music)

developed in Bamako but aligned with this region. It draws heavily from ancient traditions and female singers have always been considered its great stars. The singers are predominantly judged by their ability with words rather than just the strength of their voices. Luckily for Oumou, she has enormous talent for both. Her voice is soaring, her stage presence unforgettable, and she is also a fearless spokesperson for women's rights.

AFEL BOCOUM – Afel Bocoum's career in music started at the age of 13, when he went to join his uncle and mentor, Ali Farka Toure, in the latter's group, Asco. In the 1980s, Afel formed his own group, Alkibar (meaning 'Messenger of the Great River' in Sonrai) but the collaboration between these two musicians lasted some thirty years. *Alkibar*, Afel's first album, really showed him as a supremely talented artist in his own right. His unique style comes to the fore with his playing of the *njarka* or *njurkle* (one-stringed fiddle and lute), six-chord solos and gentle, hypnotic style. 'Ali Farka', taken from the 2006 album *Niger*, is a tribute to the man Afel affectionately called 'the boss'. He sings, 'All that is left to us now is to benefit from life as we can. My life's best friend is going, leaving me disturbed.'

ROKIA TRAORE – Rokia Traore belongs to the Bamana ethnic group, which adheres to an endogamous caste system whereby, traditionally, musicians (*jeliya*) are born into the profession. Though Rokia is not a hereditary griot (*jelimusow*), she was exposed to a rich musical environment from a very early age and influenced by her

experiences travelling abroad. The daughter of a Malian diplomat, she spent her childhood moving around the world tapping into different countries, cultures and music.

VIEUX FARKA TOURÉ FEAT ALI FARKA TOURÉ – Son of the late Ali Farka Touré, Vieux grew up both in Bamako and Niafunke, and was deeply influenced by the music of his father. At first, his father forbade him to play music – he wanted him to become a soldier instead. But, in 1999, against his father's wishes, he enrolled at the National Arts Institute in Bamako, where his talent flourished. It was during this period that Toumani Diabate took notice of him and encouraged Ali Farka to accept his son's chosen path. He finally agreed, his approval reflected in the fact that his final recordings are on Vieux's album, this being one of them.

KANDIA KOUYATE – Kandia Kouyate is a *jelimusow* (griot), born in Kita in 1958 to a lineage of *ngara* (master musicians). Her voice has become a national treasure in Mali and she is sometimes referred to as '*la dangereuse*', as she is known to make cutting criticisms of society. 'San Barana' is taken from her 2002 album *Biriko* and speaks of the sadness women endure living as co-wives. She sings, 'Living as co-wives in a marriage is not easy. But our parents had to endure this tradition and we have to live with it and accept it.' Unfortunately, since having a stroke Kandia no longer records today, due to bad health.

BABANI KONE – Babani Kone is one of the great stars of the *sumu* scene, though her recordings do no justice to the sound of her live voice. Because of this, Babani is less well known outside of Mali (but is a national treasure at home). She sings in the traditional *jelimusow* style of Kandia Kouyate, although her recorded sound is more pop-oriented.

LES AMBASSADEURS INTERNATIONALES – Originally called Les Ambassadeurs du Motel, the band formed in Bamako in 1971, and rivalled the other major dance band of the time, Super Rail Band du Buffet Hôtel de la Gare. In 1973, in response to Mory Kante joining and taking over as lead singer, Salif Keita left the Super Rail Band and joined Les Ambassadeurs with guitarist Kante Manfila. This created an even greater rivalry between the bands and an uproar among his fans.

BOUBACAR TRAORE – Nicknamed 'Kar Kar', because when he played football as a young boy his peers would shout, 'Kari, kari' ('Dribble, dribble'), Boubacar Traore is one of my personal favourites from Mali. When I first heard one of his songs playing from someone's home in Mopti, I knocked on their door to ask who was singing, and immediately set off to buy one of his cassettes from a vendor outside. I'm far from alone in my admiration. Speaking of his friend, the late Ali Farka Toure said, 'If the maximum is five, I give ten to Kar Kar.'

TINARIWEN – Tinariwen come from the Adrar des Iforas region of northeast Mali and their leader, Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, is credited with creating the modern, rock style of Tamashek music. The band formed in 1979 and developed their music in military camps set up in Libya by Colonel Gaddafi

to train Tamashek men how to fight. This track is taken from their 2004 album *Amassakoul*, which led them to worldwide acclaim.

KELETIGUI DIABATE – Keletigui Diabate is a master of the Mande *balafon* (xylophone), one of West Africa's oldest instruments. A founder member of Les Ambassadeurs, he has been a huge contributor to Malian music over more than forty years. This track is taken from his first album, *Sandiya*, on which he collaborates with Toumani Diabate, Habib Koité, Djelimady Tounkara and his son, Fassery.

Marisa Lassman has a background in languages and foreign literature. A lifelong curiosity led her to West Africa, where her experiences prompted her to enrol on a postgraduate degree in African Studies at SOAS, focusing on literature, anthropology and music. She joined World Music Network in 2006 to work on the production of the Rough Guide music series, and now works freelance while running her family publishing business in London. Marisa also compiled Think Global: Women Of Africa. (mlassman@hotmail.com).

The Joliba Trust works towards sustainable development in rural communities in Mali. Please visit their website www.jolibatrust.org.uk

Oumou Sangare

Afel Bocoum

Rokia Traore

Vieux Farka Toure

Tinariwen



- 01 **BASSEKOU KOUYATE & NGONI BA FEAT ZOUMANA TERETA** Bala
from the album **SEGU BLUE** (OH007)
[Bassekou Kouyate] pub World Circuit Music. Licensed from Out Here Records www.outhere.de
- 02 **ALI FARKA TOURÉ & TOUMANI DIABATÉ** Simbo
from the album **IN THE HEART OF THE MOON** (WCD072)
[Ali Farka Toure/Toumani Diabate] pub World Circuit Music/Rykomatic Ltd [p] 2005 World Circuit Ltd. Licensed from World Circuit www.worldcircuit.co.uk
- 03 **HABIB KOITÉ & BAMADA** Mali Ba
from the album **SHITSURUSHIMA** (JAB39)
[Habib Koité] pub Contre Jour [c] 2007 Cumbancha LLC/Contre Jour Belgium [p] Contre Jour. Licensed from Cumbancha www.habibkoite.com/www.cumbancha.com/www.contrejour.com
- 04 **AMADOU & MARIAM** La Réalité
from the album **DIMANCHE À BAMAKO**
[Amadou Bagayoko]pub Reva Sons/Sony ATV [p] 2004 All Other under exclusive licence to Because Music. Licensed from Because Music www.amadou-mariam.com
- 05 **ISSA BAGAYOGO** Kalan Nege
from the album **TASSOUMAKAN** (657036 1103-2)
[Issa Bagayogo/Yves Wernet/Mama Sissoko] pub Mali Music (Sacem)/Six Degrees Music (ASCAP). Licensed from Wrasse Records www.wrasserecords.com
- 06 **OUMOU SANGARE** Baba
from the album **OUMOU** (WCD067)
[Oumou Sangare] pub World Circuit Music [p] World Circuit 2006. Licensed from World Circuit www.worldcircuit.co.uk
- 07 **AFEL BOCOUM** Ali Farka
from the album **NIGER** (CJ017)
[Afel Bocoum; arr Alkibar] pub Contre-Jour [p] & [c] 2006 Contre-Jour. Licensed from Contre-Jour www.contrejour.com
- 08 **ROKIA TRAORE** Kanan Neni
from the album **WANITA** (LBLC2574)
[Rokia Traore] pub Label Bleu. Licensed from Label Bleu www.label-bleu.com
- 09 **VIEUX FARKA TOURÉ FEAT ALI FARKA TOURÉ** Tabara
from the album **VIEUX FARKA TOURE** (468065)
[Vieux Farka Toure/Ali Farka Toure] pub World Circuit. Licensed from Modiba Productions www.modiba.net
- 10 **KANDIA KOUYATE** San Barana
from the album **BIRIKO** (STCD1095)
[Kandia Kouyate] pub Sterns [p] & [c] 2002 Sterns. Licensed from Sterns www.sternsmusic.com
- 11 **BABANI KONE** Djeli Baba
from the album **SANOU DJALA** (STCD1085)
[Fatoumata Konédite Babani] pub Sterns [p] & [c] 1998 Sterns. Licensed from Sterns www.sterns.com
- 12 **LES AMBASSADEURS INTERNATIONALES**
Mouso Gnaleden
from the album **LES AMBASSADEURS INTERNATIONALES FEATURING SALIF KEITA** (ROUN5053)
[Les Ambassadeurs Internationales] pub Rounder Records Corp [p] 1992. Licensed from Rounder Records Corp www.rounder.com
- 13 **BOUBACAR TRAORE** Mouso Teke Soma Ye
from the album **JE CHANTERAI POUR TOI** (46803-2) the original soundtrack to the Jacques Sarasin film [Boubacar Traore] pub Marabi Productions [p] & [c] 2002 Marabi Productions. Licensed from Marabi Productions www.marabi.net
- 14 **TINARIWEN** Arawan
from the album **AMASSAKOUL** (IRL014)
[Alhousseini Abdoulahi] pub Emma Productions/Tribal Union. Licensed from Independent Records Ltd www.independentrecordsltd.com
- 15 **KELETIGUI DIABATE** Summertime In Bamako
from the album **SANDIYA** (CJ012)
[trad] [p] & [c] 2004 Contre-Jour. Licensed from Contre-Jour www.contrejour.com

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